



Development Research in Flux and in Demand: The Future of *Progress in Development Studies*

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I. A Note of Appreciation

We want to start this commentary with a praise for our outgoing Editor-in-chief Dr Catherine Locke. Catherine stepped in and took on stewardship of *Progress in Development Studies (PIDS)* at a time of great uncertainty for the journal. She devoted time and energy far beyond the call of duty to secure its survival and redefine its strategic direction. We have all worked closely with Catherine over the past years and witnessed her unwavering devotion to the journal, emerging in equal parts from a deepfelt responsibility for *PIDS'* future and admirable commitment to the field of Development Studies. As well as competently handling submissions and publication proposals, Catherine has been a stout and vocal supporter of early career researchers and authors from all over the world with a particular focus on building an inclusive journal.

Catherine now passes the torch on to us, an editorial team comprising Antonio A. R. Ioris, Jessica Omukuti, Maren Duvendack and Adam Moe Fejerskov who will assume the role of Editor-in-chief. Catherine's stewardship of *PIDS* has been dedicated to a professionalization of the journal's editorial work, including putting in place solid

procedures of peer-reviewing and day-to-day editorial tasks, sound communication with our publisher and a crucial rebuilding of the 'brand' supporting in enhancing *PIDS'* impact. We build on her efforts and start to engage in innovative considerations of what the journal may look like over the next few years. We will make sure to carry Catherine's example and values with us as we continue to develop *PIDS* and its scholarship.

II. A World in Distress

Our editorial team assumes stewardship of *PIDS* at a time of monumental, cross-scalar challenges for the world we live in. As we write this, the 2023 progress report on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been published in preparation for the summer's High Level Political Forum, and it makes for bleak reading. Just 12% of the progress on SDGs is on track and on course to meet the 2030 deadline. For every third SDG, developments have either stalled or gone into reverse: hunger has reverted to levels seen in 2005, and almost 600 million people are expected to live in extreme poverty by 2030 unless immediate action, politically and financially, is taken.

Reasons for these setbacks can be attributed not only to geopolitical disputes and major socio-political asymmetries but also to the interconnectedness and mutually reinforcing nature of crises the world is facing today. Some setbacks are more abrupt than others, but they all exacerbate existing inequalities. Russia's war in Ukraine reflects not just a critical juncture for European countries but comes with detrimental consequences for countries and people everywhere. Renewed disputes over resources and territories further securitize the basis of development trends and have somewhat invigorated a belief in the importance of alliances and more equal political relations across North–South and East–West divides, even if this is sometimes driven by simplistic dichotomies between apparent democracies and autocracies and self-centred analyses of the politico-economic order.

Other crises appear less sudden and are more a result of systemic traits and the vested interests of a growth-based economic system that fundamentally ignores environmental impacts and undermines social justice. This includes current disconcerting anxieties around debt (e.g., debt-service costs are the highest item on national budgets in many African countries, largely rendering investments in social sectors difficult), insecure food systems, inadequate investment in water, sanitation, health care and education, climate and ecological degradation, dispossession and precarization.

Perhaps that is why calls to 'build back better' induce a sensation of resignation in many: Can the institutions, ideas and interests that fostered crises for most people while producing value for the few really be depended upon for any true reconstruction? The partial economic integration that lies in global supply chains, as an example, never saw gains shared equitably by everyone involved. Although calls to build back better evoke pictures of common or even collectivist plans of both systematic and inclusive reconstruction, the reality seems to be one of exclusionary policies and politics that tend to privilege those already in power.

III. Development Research in Flux

The first question that often comes to mind in discussions of the state and future of Development Studies is what exactly it is in the first place. EADI, the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes, uses a broad definition in their accreditation process, seeing Development Studies as a field of study that 'seeks to understand the interplay between social, economic, political, technological, ecological, cultural, and gendered aspects of societal change at the local, national, regional, and global levels'¹. An easy critique would be to say that it, thus, incorporates everything, and this might have some truth to it, but a broad categorization nonetheless lets us recognize how Development Studies does not form a discipline but a multi- and interdisciplinary field of study that should, first of all, seriously reassess the basis and presuppositions of contemporary socio-economic and politico-ecological trends.

At *PIDS*, we want to engage with scholarship that is reflexive and critical towards the very notion of development and the study of processes of development vis-à-vis the affirmation of an exclusionary, Westernized modernity. That means we provide room for interpretations, more so than delineate what development and Development Studies are about. Some scholars may look 'inwards' to argue that development is not a rupture from colonialism or that development institutions are 'Columbusing' social change through hegemonic and homogenizing categories of practice—others may be less institutionally inclined and instead focus on issues of economic growth, food systems, education or social inclusion without caring much for the ecosystem of aid, private property relations and the rationale of decision-making. Both of these points, we believe, are valid and necessary to democratically progress knowledge on questions of development.

A comprehensive understanding of Development Studies does not mean we

cannot identify weaknesses or important avenues of change necessary to produce knowledge that is inclusive and reflective of the global scope of development itself. Current efforts to decolonize the academy are crucial in challenging the unequal relations of power embedded in research, teaching, methodologies or partnerships. Growing attention to questions of representation, solidarity, diversifying curricula or theorizing from the majority world are all crucial parts of recognizing the historicity of processes of knowledge creation and reproduction in our field. Processes that are critically important to a field such as Development Studies, where knowledge has real-life impacts and the potential to shape the world we live in. Similar questions of relationality apply to research partnerships between Northern and Southern institutions and researchers that are fortunately increasing but often remain highly unequal. Inequalities that pertain to who leads them, who controls funding, whose interpretations of knowledge and scholarship are most influential and who benefits most from them.

While the field of Development Studies is facing challenges that may appear almost existential due to the persistence of subordination, exploitation and rent-extraction trends, we must pursue the necessary radical changes from a standpoint of their future potential. As everyone working on inequality knows very well, influence and (interpretive) power do not come in infinite volumes. If new voices are to be heard, some of those already in power will have to give up some degrees of influence. What may appear to be existential crises to some could also be seen as productive avenues for expanding, improving and innovating upon the many themes that take the attention of researchers in Development Studies, whilst diversifying the voices that are heard and toning down some of those that have traditionally spoken the loudest. To be set free is not only to lose identity but also to construct new ones.

IV. Development Research in Demand and the Future of *PIDS*

In a field in flux, one could question the role of a ‘traditional’ peer-reviewed development studies journal with editors based in Western European countries. Academic journals and the practices, norms and routines they reproduce must be scrutinized in the same way that we critically reflect and engage with in our wider field of study. Journals and their editorial teams, we believe, have a responsibility to confront forms of epistemic injustice, ensuring that historically non-dominant narratives and voices gain ground and have tangible academic and more-than-academic impact.

This poses a fundamental challenge to the institution of peer-reviewing, as just one example where editorial rules, attitudes and practices of our highly institutionalized research structures permeate systematic inequities between researchers and forms of knowledge. Peer-reviewing often forms a strong process of socialization of a discipline or a field—norms that are likely reproducing hermeneutic biases or testimonial inequities, clearly defining insides and outsides, and thus centres and peripheries. All journals have a responsibility to question their current and historical practices of reproducing forms of knowledge production, not least when they are Eurocentric.

At *PIDS*, we are concerned with the identity, values and contribution of the journal, beyond insular institutionalized technologies such as numeric impact factors that reduce and streamline research. We see our comprehensive scope as part of embracing a diversity of knowledges, a wide spectrum of methodological perspectives and grounded voices. A journal of ‘Development Studies’ may seem narrow in its disciplinary tracks. Yet, that is not the case for us. Our name does carry a certain legacy, and there might come a time when we revisit even that, but we see ourselves as embracing a plurality of voices on the questions of development and its positive and negative outcomes.

Albeit, with one delineating point: Work in our field must never merely view development as a-political, a-historical or non-geographical. Development Studies, then, must be critical, always questioning the institutions, policies, responsibilities and practices that have brought the world to this point. We have an obligation not just to explore what it takes to achieve the SDGs but also to question what the creation of global normative frameworks does to development, whose interests they further or whose imaginaries of progress they represent.

What binds us together, without doubt, is a belief in the dire necessity of development and progress, demanding attention to the systemic causes of inequality and socio-ecological

exploitation. Development Studies must be about imagining another world.

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Note

1. See EADI's webpage: <https://www.eadi.org/development-studies/definition-of-development-studies>.