Global Challenges and the Challenge of Development: What future for the development project?

Call for Papers

Workshop, University of Bristol, June 21-22, 2017

Co-hosted by the Global Insecurities Centre and the International Development Research Group of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law

In 2016, the UK government announced a new £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) following its 2015 spending review and giving the Research Councils UK (RCUK) a key managing role. As the RCUK says on its website, the GCRF “forms part of the UK’s Official Development Assistance commitment, to support cutting-edge research which addresses the problems faced by developing countries”. The GCRF is being monitored by the OECD. Based on OECD criteria, research will be eligible for funding if it aims to “promote the welfare and economic development of a country or countries on the DAC list of ODA recipients”, is “designed to address a development need”, and is focused on “developing country problems”. After announcing some initial ‘priority areas’ when the GCRF was launched and following consultation with stakeholders, RCUK now describe its vision as being to “create new knowledge and drive innovation” in five “challenge areas”, namely: secure and resilient food systems supported by sustainable agriculture; sustainable health and well being; inclusive and equitable quality education; clean air, water and sanitation; renewable energy and materials. At the same time, the GCRF supports research that builds: sustainable livelihoods supported by strong foundations for inclusive economic growth and innovation; resilience and action on short-term environmental shocks and long-term environmental change; and sustainable cities and communities. In addition, research is encouraged which enables: understanding and effective response to forced displacement and multiple refugee crises; a reduction in conflict and promote peace, justice and humanitarian action; and a reduction in poverty and inequality, including gender inequalities. As with the initial priority areas, all of the above are articulated with close reference to UK Aid Strategy and the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Since the new funding stream was announced, UK universities have mobilised the full force of their research infrastructure to ‘chase the money’. Meetings have been called to brainstorm possible research bids. Seminars have been held to discuss different elements of the SDGs and from Vice-Chancellors downwards pressure has been placed on academics to apply. Indeed, the way in which UK universities have responded, the ever-close and seemingly unquestioned relationship between government agendas and university scholarship, and what this says about the changing nature of the university today, is worthy of study in its own right.

In reality, development scholars will adopt different positions towards the GCRF and what it represents. Some will embrace it and apply and others will not – no doubt all with ‘good’ intellectual and ethical justification for their particular stance. However,
what we can be certain of is that within the development field – scholars and practitioner alike – there will be no universal assumption that ‘development’ as imagined by the GCRF and the actors which lie behind it is a ‘good thing’, or even ethical. On the contrary, there will be much debate about this. Indeed, this is precisely the kind of expertise development scholars bring to the table. Put it another way, amongst UK development scholars, as opposed to some university managers and those who work for them, there is no consensus that the GCRF is where the ‘intellectual zeitgeist’ lies. For many, the GCRF sums up all which is wrong both with ‘development’ as a field of study and practice, and the kind of institutions UK universities are becoming.

Against this backdrop, it is important that the underlying assumptions of the GCRF, the language of the call, and its implied approaches are subject to critical scrutiny. As any development scholar will tell you, phrases like inclusive growth and resilient systems have a history and are not value neutral. Moreover, the notion that one can sensibly or legitimately speak of ‘developing country problems’ – as a homogeneous sub-set of countries with problems distinct from their so-called developed counterparts – is riddled with assumptions and open to question. (And as a matter of fact, there is an illustrious pedigree of writing highlighting the politics of ‘dividing the world by words’.) Equally, the assumptions which lie behind UK Aid Strategy, which in many respects looks very tired, along with the logic and implications of the SDGs, are themselves worthy of analysis, not forgetting the question of alternatives to what the GCRF uncritically and unquestionably calls ‘development’.

A non-exhaustive list of research areas scholars might like to consider in respect of this call is therefore as follows:

- The underlying assumptions and implications of UK Aid Strategy and the SDGs as a foundation for ‘development’, including the nature of development being conceived;
- How we understand the shift politically from the MDGs to the SDGs;
- Discourse analysis in relation to the GCRF call itself and its priority areas (or the history of activity in these areas to date);
- The bureaucratic politics of the GCRF call inside government and the funding councils and the response of UK universities, including what it tells us about the changing nature of the university;
- Critical assessments of development as a field of study and practice, including the relationship between official donors and academia;
- An ethnography of ‘capacity building’ in so-called developing countries; and
- Alternatives to mainstream models of development or, perhaps more helpfully, reflections on the nature of human flourishing and how to realise it in diverse settings.
While there may be ways in which the questions being raised here can find a place in the GCRF, it is not usually the case in government or official donor-backed development research that approaches which raise question about the very paradigm within which development agencies are operating are welcomed. However, it is essential that such research is done – even if it does not bring in the money that UK universities are competing with each other for.

**Next steps:**

Following our call for expressions of interest in the summer, scholars wishing to take part are now invited to submit a 500-word abstract for considerations by the organisers. Abstract Deadline: January 20, 2017.

Abstracts will be used as the basis for an application to a leading development journal for a special issue.

Decision on papers accepted: February 3, 2017  
Application for journal special issue: February 24, 2017  
Paper deadline: June 2, 2017  
Workshop: June 21-22, 2017

Please circulate this call widely. PhD students welcome to apply.

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