

What is the future for global development?

13-14 April 2026 | The University of Manchester, UK

Fresh assaults on overseas aid, trade relationships and the liberal international order during 2025 have led some commentators to proclaim 'The End of Development'. This dismantling of development cooperation, and wider rules of international engagement, has generated new urgency around global dynamics that were already re-shaping global development. These stretch well-beyond declining levels of aid to include increased levels of superpower rivalry and geopolitical fragmentation; new patterns of globalisation; collective action failures around the climate emergency, as well as health and migration; the rise of authoritarian politics; and heightened levels of conflict between as well as within states. All carry profound implications for the future of global development, for how development should be conceptualised and for how social and environmental justice can be promoted at the current juncture. Recent debates around global development futures have tended to adopt the language of 'poly-crisis' and 'catastrophe', unsurprisingly given the destabilising nature of recent events and rising levels of human suffering. However, such framings tend to obscure the systemic nature of some current dynamics, the problematic nature of the world order that is currently being displaced and the opportunities to rethink development that the current moment offers.

The conference is organised around three main themes:

1. The new geopolitics of global d/Development

The international project of Development was embedded within a western-led world order that has been visibly fraying for most of the twenty-first century, not least because the 'rise of the East' has shifted global patterns of wealth and power whilst a series of military misadventures and financial crises has undermined the legitimacy of the 'liberal' international order. Where some see this as a crisis for development, others see opportunities for global development to be renewed in more legitimate forms under global South leadership. In this theme we ask the following questions:

- Has the liberal international order now been fully displaced by a new global (dis)order? How should the current moment be conceptualised: for example, what value is there in new framings such as 'geopolitical fragmentation', the 'Second Cold War' and 'state-capitalist geopolitics', and how can they inform development thinking?
- How is geopolitical fragmentation shaping new patterns of globalisation, including around global and regional value chains, and what implications does this have for development prospects in the global south?
- Do these trends signal the death knell for 'global development' or do they herald new forms of interconnectedness and 'polytunities'?
- In the context of heightened rivalry between the United States and China, what role are middle powers, including BRICS+, now playing in shaping governance, development and security in the global South?
- Does this moment offer more or less policy autonomy for global South countries? How can they navigate this emerging world order in pursuit of autonomous development objectives, including the structural transformation of their economies?
- What are the emerging implications of these dynamics for specific dimensions of development, including finance, climate change governance, green energy transitions, trade, finance and technological advances? For example:
 - If powerful states now view and pursue the twin digital and green energy transitions through the lens of national sovereignty, what implications does this have for how these transitions will be governed? And with what impacts on and within global South countries?
 - How do the geopolitics of development manifest in cities and regions?

2. The global development architecture in polycrisis: adapting or dead?

Since 2015 the mainstream institutions that underpinned international development cooperation – from multilateral and bilateral aid agencies to international and local NGOs – have been increasingly side-lined. The global goals and organising principles that dominated the UN General Assembly in 2015, such as the SDGs and ‘leave no one behind’, have slipped from view and cuts to aid have received very little public pushback in OECD countries. Commitments at successive COPs to reduce global emissions and support climate adaptation in the global South have not been met. An institutional architecture that assumed nations would cooperate has failed to accommodate the ‘nation-first’ ethics of some great and middle powers that are increasingly setting the agenda. Where do things go from here? Amidst this change we welcome contributions and provocations that discuss this question and/or bring new ideas and innovative approaches within and across this architecture of development cooperation, among diverse actors, organisations and institutions. In this theme we ask:

- How is development cooperation related to contemporary geopolitical rivalry? Development was central to geopolitical rivalry during the Cold War but the dismantling of USAID and precipitous decline in western ODA budgets raises the question of how development is used by governments in the North Atlantic in pursuit of geopolitical objectives?
- What is the current state and future landscape of global development cooperation, not just north-south but also south-south and new collaborative global approaches such as Global Public Investment?
- What are the possibilities for new coalitions of pro-development countries to emerge, particularly those involving southern leadership? What values might underpin such efforts?
- With 2030 approaching, where next for the SDGs? Do China’s eight ‘bottom-lines’ signal an alternative, more fragmented approach to the setting of global goals? What will it take to re-engage global publics with global development agendas?
- What other forms of finance for development should replace declining levels of foreign aid? Can increased domestic revenue mobilisation fill the gap? What role can private finance and philanthropy play?
- Is a new and narrower humanitarian agenda replacing broader developmental goals and, if so, with what repercussions?

3. Thinking from a global development perspective: potential and pitfalls

Major shifts in the global development landscape are being debated by academics, policymakers and civil society actors. However, development is ultimately experienced, lived, and contested by ordinary people in specific places and on the terrain of everyday life. It remains an open question what major geoeconomic shifts and new development paradigms mean for development as situated processes of social, economic, and political change. This poses a significant challenge for development researchers who must navigate the relationship between the general and the particular, the global and local, and the structural and everyday in their work. Moreover, Development Studies is at the forefront of calls for a ‘new geopolitics of knowledge production’, one that foregrounds global South over global North perspectives and directly addresses longstanding inequalities in how knowledge about development and development narratives are produced. This theme invites methodological and case study contributions that explore the ‘grounding’ of global development and reflect back on the wider contextual changes identified above, specifically:

- How development researchers are connecting local to global and global to local (e.g. relational comparisons across the global South and North, urban and regional development/strategic coupling, development-as-practice, conjunctural analysis, complex systems thinking)
- Research on everyday life, social reproduction, and labour (collaborative ethnography/co-creation approaches, patchwork ethnography, digital methods)
- How decolonial and justice-centred methodologies can provide new insights into the place-based grounding of global development
- How development researchers and development studies institutes can forge more equitable approaches to development research and knowledge production at this juncture

Guidance for Participants

This conference provides the opportunity for development researchers, policy actors and practitioners to come together to discuss these challenges and opportunities that arise from the current moment and to debate what they mean for the future of global development. This will be a face-to-face conference with attendance limited to help ensure in-depth examination of the issues at hand. Each of the three main themes will be represented by plenary speakers and parallel sessions, with a closing plenary session to bring the related themes together.

We are inviting proposals for papers, **not** for panels. To maximise the opportunity for focused discussions **we will only be accepting a relatively small number of papers all of which will talk directly to the themes and questions identified above.**

For example:

- We are keen to receive proposals for papers that include recent research findings but only where they emphasise and enable direct reflections on these trends.
- We are open to theoretical and/or agenda-setting papers that reflect on the changing context for global development and development cooperation and propose new ways forward.
- We're keen to attract insights from those working within development policy and practice who have been confronting these new dynamics in their professional work and wish to reflect on this experience.
- In certain circumstances, we will accept proposals to present work that has already been published if we judge that this can help advance the debates we are engaging with here.
- Finally, a poster session will also be arranged to capture 'work-in-progress' that relates to these themes, including from postgraduate students.
- Only one paper per participant will be accepted.

Please use the following form to submit your proposal. Please make sure that you identify which **theme** your paper fits most closely with and whether you are proposing a **paper or poster** contribution.

The deadline for proposals to be submitted is 3 December 2025.

Successful candidates will be informed in January 2026.

The conference will be free to attend and we have a limited number of bursaries available for speakers who have their papers accepted.

[Submit your proposal here.](#)

