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Urbanising futures and sustainability: ODS sponsored plenary panel discussion, DSA 2022

The ODS-sponsored opening plenary of the Development Studies Association Conference, 2022, focused on the challenges of sustainability in a world that is increasingly urbanized. Chaired by Christoph Linder (Dean of the Bartlett, UCL), the speakers included Jo Beall (Professor Emeritus, London School of Economics and Political Sciences), Aromar Revi (Director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements [IIHS]) and William E. Rees (Professor Emeritus, University of British Columbia).

Development: urbanization, conflict, and the future: Jo Beall LSE Cities, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom

It is a great pleasure and honor to participate in this plenary panel at a conference which promises to be critical for debates on development and the future of development studies (which I argue has until quite recently failed to engage adequately with issues of urbanization). In our current context, we must revisit not only the relationship between development and cities but also consider the impact of conflict and war on this relationship. There were three main issues which informed my thinking when preparing for this plenary. First, the fact that the world has changed since development – as a Western-led project that originated in the mid-20th century – was first conceived. Second, I think development studies as a field, in some ways, is at a crossroads and we need to understand how it can continue to be relevant in the context of the 21st century. Third, the relationship between urbanization and development has not yet been adequately theorized, certainly from the perspective of the multi-disciplinary field of development studies.

In this discussion, I will begin by considering the field of international development and how we might assess progress and its continued salience. I then look at urbanization before I focus on cities and conflict, which I believe will be unavoidable as we reframe development studies for the next quarter century in a global context dominated by the shadow of war.

I would like to specify here that development means change, usually understood as progress. In the context of development studies, it has acquired a variety of meanings: historical process, social objective, discourse, policy and practice. I think the driving question of development studies for much of its life has been, why is development uneven? In other words, why do some countries and some people become wealthy while others remain poor? As a project or practice, development can be seen as a conscious enterprise to address this uneven development and to improve the human condition in the context of fallout from economic growth.

When looking at this, I have always taken my cue from Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, who theorized development as a project aimed at ameliorating the conditions wrought by capitalist transformation (Cowen & Shenton, 1995, p. 29). Critically, they bring together the process of development with the intent of development, tracing it back to the 19th century and the notion of trusteeship (where the role of government is to protect the welfare of its citizens in the context of social change). For urbanists – for example, Edwin Chadwick and the Victorian sanitation

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revolution – this concept would have informed their thinking. The process of industrialization and urbanization in Victorian England led to a number of social problems that were then addressed by deliberate interventions to improve the living standards of workers. The impact on the urban environment of London is still there for us to see. Cowen and Shenton (ibid.) extended this notion of trusteeship to explain the international development project, originating in the post-war era, as comprising a process of social change and deliberate interventions mainly western-led to ameliorate the social misery arising from development (Cowen & Shenton, 1996, p. 5). Gillian Hart (2010) builds on their work to look at this relationship between ongoing processes, which are historically contingent, and the intentionality of development. She calls this 'little d' development – the processes – and 'big D' development – the interventions. In an excellent paper from 2019, David Lewis (2019) questions the continued salience of this way of looking at development, wondering if the distinction between 'big D' and 'little d' development has been stretched too far and whether (in the changing landscape of 21st century development) it is still relevant.

Lewis's critique has very much informed my approach to urbanization and conflict, which in my view are critical elements to understanding 'little d' development in the 21st century. I think it is important to recognize that in terms of 'big D' development – what the World Bank is doing, what the UN is doing, and what many bilateral organizations are doing in terms of deliberative interventions – scant regard has been paid to urbanization until very recently. Conflict has been something that has been left to the field of international relations (except in the form of humanitarianism, reconstruction and a kind of mopping up of the problems left by political engagement at a global level).

Against that background, let me say something about how the world has changed. Initially, development was based on an assumption of peace. It was set up as a project of international development in the post-colonial and post-war contexts, and it was assumed that if conflict continued, it would be cold. That has changed. We are now living under the shadow of war. In addition to Ukraine, there are at least 30 active conflicts around the world, and more than one-fifth of the world's population are affected by armed conflict. By 2030, two-thirds of the world's poorest will be living in fragile and conflict-affected countries. As a result of these conflicts forced migration has reached unprecedented levels, with the UNHCR estimating that over 100 million people are people of concern due to forced migration. This is a very different context from the one that informed the development project 75 years ago. We can no longer operate as if we are in enduring peace or, as Francis Fukuyama put it 'at the end of history' (Fukuyama, 1989). Neo-liberal democracy did not sustain and, in some places, perhaps never materialized.

One could argue that this situation of pervasive conflict is the remit of international relations and not development studies, which has economic development and poverty reduction as its clarion call. However, if that is the case, we must ask if development studies has been successful on its own terms. Since 2000, the existing high levels of absolute poverty have indeed come down. Whether or not the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) were directly responsible is not material here. The fact is that this constitutes undeniable progress and development success. So, using this measure can we say that development has succeeded? Is it a necessary enterprise any longer?

The argument against this is that the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest shows no signs of subsiding. The era of globalization has given rise to increased inequalities; this is the case everywhere but notably between people in low-income and lower middle-income countries. We cannot, therefore, really say 'job done'. According to Andy Sumner (2016) the answer is a definite no. He argues that the location of global poverty has changed, moving from low-income countries to middle-income countries and the result is that the world's poorest are now concentrated in about 10 population dense countries. This has reopened debates on the distributional dimensions of development, which have given rise to new problematics. Given that uneven development has been a major preoccupation of development studies, we can assert that the field is not yet dead. However, the debates would be enriched by looking at the evolving relationships between cities and their

hinterlands, both in their national and global contexts, thus focusing a new lens on uneven development.

If we also consider developments of power and politics, the 21st century has altered the world stage significantly. Not only has armed conflict remained as a leading cause of poverty and deprivation in the world, but the rise of China as a global force has shifted the balance of power eastwards. The world is becoming more polycentric, with new economic and political alliances being forged. The fact that the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) have remained neutral in relation to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an interesting case in point. Western development aid is in decline. In Canada, Australia, France and the United Kingdom, international development agencies are in or have been reabsorbed into departments of foreign affairs. Spending on aid is more closely linked to domestic priorities than ever before, particularly in relation to trade and public security. In 2022, the Swedish government restricted funds to development cooperation and redirected them to refugee reception in Sweden. In this changed world, does this put in question the continued relevance of 'big D' development as a western-led global project, or has China and the BRICS taken over? In relation to cities, there is an argument to say that this may well be the case.

I would argue that urbanization is a late comer to development studies. The relationship between urbanization as a focus and development studies as an interdisciplinary field has always been uneasy. Despite having written a book entitled *Cities and Development* (Beall & Fox, 2009) and seeing it in its much improved second edition by Sean Fox and Goodfellow (2016), we still have not proclaimed the last word on development studies and urbanization; particularly in theoretical and conceptual terms. Individual disciplines like geography have engaged. The economists have looked at the positive effects of cities on innovation and productivity. Development studies per se however, has not paid sufficient attention to the 'little d' development processes of urbanization and urban population growth; and 'big D' development interventions have very much been ameliorative. In relation to conflict the focus is humanitarianism. In relation to development, it has been on reconstruction.

Development has belatedly focused on urban poverty, but not conceptually on how a world of urbanization has fundamentally changed the premise of much of 20th century development. The influence of Michael Lipton's 'urban bias' thesis (Lipton, 1977), reinforced by the political analysis of Robert Bates (1988), argued that development was distorted towards urban areas and that rural development should be the focus. More recently, Diana Mitlin (2004) has shown through her analysis of World Bank poverty papers at the beginning of this century that the emphasis remains on rural areas, with a poor understanding of the characteristics and drivers of urban poverty. Progress has thus been very slow, but there is now a perceptible shift towards taking urbanization seriously. Persuasive reassessments of the 'urban bias' thesis by Jones and Corbridge (2010) in particular, helped shift attitudes. The evident growth of world urbanization and populations has also been an important impetus. There are now more serious concerns about the fact that two-thirds of the world's population will be living in cities by 2050.

There is now recognition that the 'little d' development process is characterized by inexorable urban growth, but the question posed is whether this is being taken up by 'big D' development (e.g. via international development agencies)? In the 2009 World Development Report, the World Bank looked at the economic differences between rural and urban areas – which is still not quite there in terms of grasping the nettle of cities. Neither is *Our Common Agenda*, the new UN vision for the next 25 years, looking at cities in any serious way. Some bilaterals are shifting, however. For example, the United Kingdom's funding for development research has prioritized health, followed by research on urban issues. This shows they are doing the research to cautiously see if it is a possible focus for development intervention. Significant here is the multi-million investment in the African Cities Research Centre at Manchester University with a wide array of partners across the continent. There are therefore signs of change. One has to wonder however, given the vast

investment in cities, infrastructure and urban development across South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa by China, whether the Western dominated development project has maybe missed the boat.

Conflict and war are more and more relevant, as we re-frame international development and development studies for the 21st century. As noted, 'big D' development was a Marshall Plan of sorts for the immediate post-colonial world. It is a plan founded on the assumption of continued peace, which has not been the case in reality. As Mary Kaldor (2006) pointed out, wars have continued; civil wars, cross-border skirmishes, low-intensity conflicts and then spectacular violence through acts of terror, all of which increasingly characterize our world. We now have the much larger shadow of global insecurity across the cities of Europe, and beyond into what was once peaceful Western ground (Kaldor & Sassen, 2020).

Conflict itself is endemic to social life. It is important grist to the development mill. Gillian Hart's (2010) original framing of the 'big d'-'little D' relationship is that of a dialectic, in the sense of it being the opposition of contradictory or opposing forces. This conceptualization has allowed for opposition, for the struggle for alternative forms of development and informs much development thinking and action, including that deriving from southern theory approaches and from social movements. Mostly, conflict is resolved and moved out of through non-violent means. Elsewhere in relation to cities and conflict, I have referred to this as 'regenerative conflict', where protest and direct action can result in engagement and even positive change (Beall et al., 2013). Violence, however, can also be endemic and when it worsens it is an obstacle to development. It is an obstacle to the functioning of cities, which are engines of economic development, the site of livelihoods for the majority of people in many countries (Beall, 2006). Violent conflict destroys the benefits and the positive elements of development: economic assets, social capital, human lives, not to mention the environment.

I would argue that we have to reframe our thinking on international development in terms of the 'little d' development process, it is increasingly underpinned by violent conflict in historically contingent and very worrisome ways. We have to rethink how 'big D' development engages with that. I would argue that, with regard both to cities and to conflict 'big D' development has responded as a nursemaid to international relations. The agencies have come in with the band-aids, reconstructing infrastructure, engaging in humanitarian assistance (all of which are necessary and I am not minimising the necessity of either). However, re-theorizing that relationship between 'little d' analysis and 'big D' intervention has not yet happened. I think it is an area for fruitful theorization as a precursor to action, as we take the notion of development studies into the next quarter of the 21st century. It is an endeavour to improve our analysis by taking into account urbanization and conflict as the key historically contingent processes we are facing, and as we look at what appropriate 'big D' development interventions for the future might look like.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Jo Beall is an urban development specialist, Professor Emeritus and distinguished Policy Fellow in LSE Cities, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Formerly, she directed the Development Studies Institute at LSE, was Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Cape Town and on the executive board of the British Council as Director of Education and Cultural Engagement. She has worked on urban poverty, and the social and gender dimensions of city life. Her recent and current research covers urban services and city governance, in the context of fragile and conflict-affected states.

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