Conference Call for Papers

Section of Development Sociology and Social Anthropology (ESSA) of the German Sociological Association (DGS)

with the participation of the GAE (Working Group Geographical Development Theories)

June 09-11, 2027

University of Passau

Development Under Attack

Development is globally under attack. Geopolitical rivalries, nationalist and authoritarian politics, militarization, and fiscal pressures are reshaping international cooperation. Multilateral institutions face growing pressure, while severe cuts to development budgets threaten established programs and partnerships in development cooperation as well as academia with severe regional repercussions on poverty reduction, food security and global social inequality (OECD, 2025). Across the institutional landscape of the Global North, development is increasingly reframed in terms of security, migration control, and economic competitiveness, thereby narrowing its broader political and normative scope. Amid shrinking budgets and multiple uncertainties about the future, public and political discourses increasingly question the legitimacy and effectiveness of international cooperation and challenge the principles of global solidarity and justice.

These struggles extend into universities and research institutions themselves raising fundamental concerns about what and whose knowledge is recognized, which research agendas are supported, and under what conditions critical scholarship and collaboration on global inequality can still be produced and taught. Internal contestations within Development Studies over development as a deeply contradictory political project—particularly between technocratic approaches and critical, postcolonial, and decolonial scholarship foregrounding unequal power relations and colonial continuities (e.g. Meagher, 2025)—are not new. Against this backdrop, Mercer (2026, p.2) has recently asked if "we are witnessing the death of development geography as a major sub-field of the discipline?" These internal disciplinary debates are being fueled more and more by an external threat that risks dismantling development studies' institutional and intellectual foundations and raise important questions about the professional formation of students and their future roles within the field.

How can the relevance of development and the plurality of the lived realities of development and of unequal social change across the world be emphatically reaffirmed—perhaps precisely in these challenging times, and in the face of an increasingly pessimistic outlook on the future? How should academia position itself in this context? Or, to put it the other way around: "How can development remake itself for today's world" (Sutoris & Pradhan, 2025)?

The conference seeks to examine what is under attack, by whom and with what consequences? What possibilities emerge for alternative understandings and practices of development and its scholarship?

Panel Topics

We welcome theoretical, empirical, historical and comparative contributions addressing, but not limited to, the following themes:

International cooperation, global power shifts and the political economy of aid

- How do donor priorities reflect geopolitical interests, migration governance, security and economic objectives?
- How do local discourses address changes in the development architecture?
- How do emerging development actors and South-South cooperation reshape established North-South relations?
- What forms of alliance-building between academic institutions, researchers, and social movements can be observed?

Uneven development and spatial consequences

- What are the consequences of budget cuts and programme withdrawals for recipient countries, communities, social groups and people's everyday lives?
- What new geographies of dependency, vulnerability, resistance and resilience emerge?
- How do anti-colonial, decolonial and post-development perspectives illuminate contemporary struggles?

Development Studies programmes, universities and academic freedom

- How do students of Development Studies perceive the structural and discursive ruptures of the field?
- How do changing funding and political priorities affect teaching programmes and research?
- What are the leverages for reciprocal research partnerships?

Resistance, Alternatives and Conceptual/Epistemological Reappraisals

- What counter movements and alternatives do we observe?
- How are 'shared worlds' imagined and global futures (re-politicized) and what is the role of development academia?
- How can we reclaim conceptual agency and make the case for critical development scholarship?

In addition, we are interested in perspectives and findings from current research in times of attack. Submissions on emerging topics both within and beyond the scope of this conference call are highly welcome. We explicitly invite early-career scholars to present approaches and results from their research.

Contributions and Submissions Guideline

Please submit:

- An abstract of (max.) 300 words, outlining the paper's argument, theoretical/empirical approach and contribution.
- A short biographical note.
- Name, institutional affiliation and contact email address.

Submission deadline: **10.01.2027**. Accepted submissions will be announced by end of January 2027

Submission email: dua@uni-passau.de

We are very much looking forward to hosting you for this conference at the University of Passau,

Prof. Martina Padmanabhan, Dr. Christian Ungruhe, Dr. Judith Ehlert (Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia) & Prof. Gerhard Rainer & Team (Chair of Human Geography)

References:

Meagher, K. Decolonizing Development Studies: Rejecting or Repurposing the Master's Tools?. *European Journal of Development Research* 37, 407–420 (2025). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-024-00686-1

Mercer, C. (2026). Development geography I: Decomposing development geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, *0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325261448505

OECD (2025), "Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term", *OECD Policy Briefs*, No. 26, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/8c530629-en

Sutoris, P. & Pradhan U. (2025) *Reimagining Development. Bold Directions Towards a Thriving World*. London: Hurst.