DPU hosts roundtable discussion on the changing landscape of international development with Bartlett alumni

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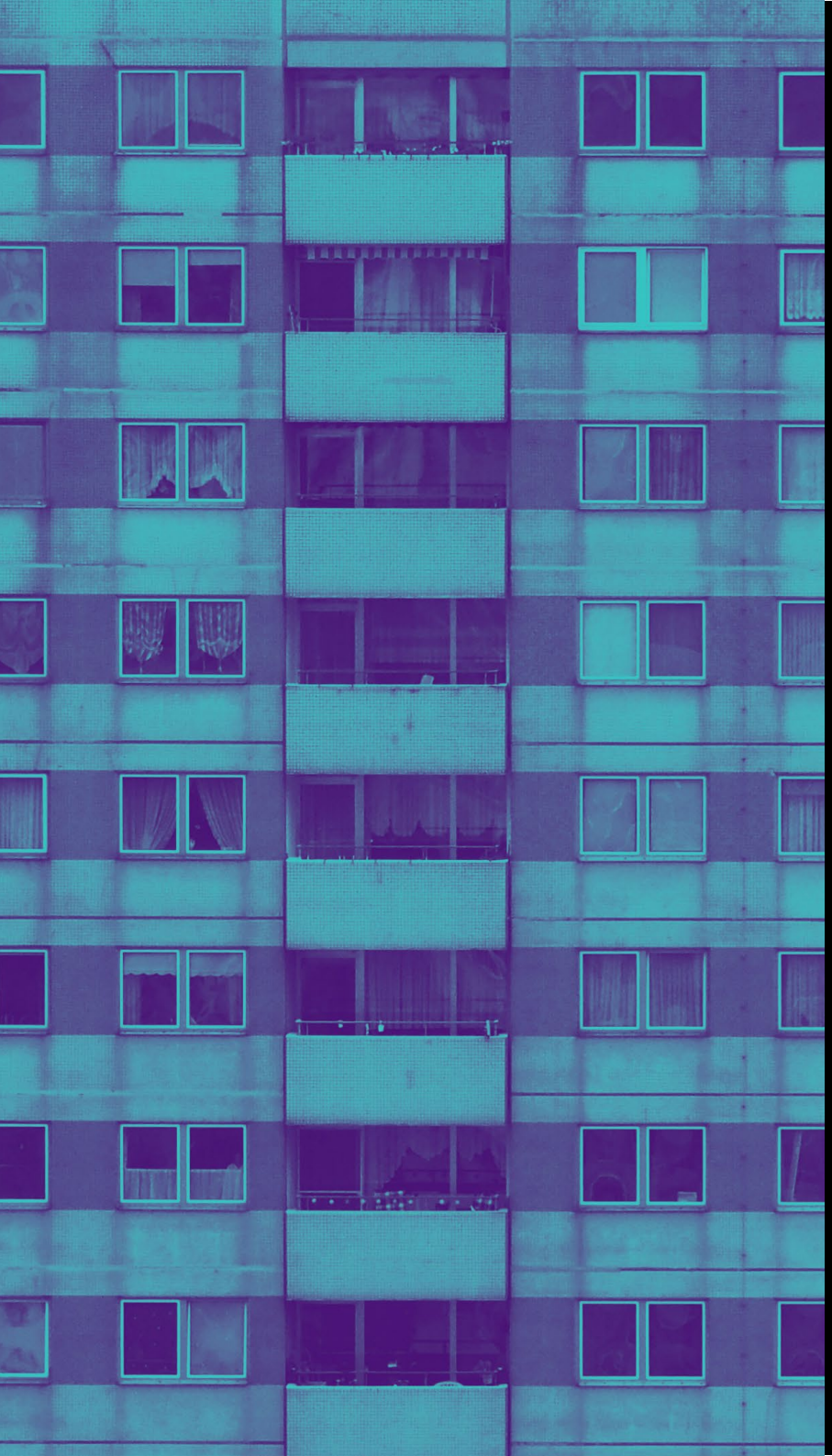
The Bartlett
Development Planning Unit



Nobody expected 2025 to be an important year in the history of international development. Until a few months ago, most eyes were on 2030: the target year to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, when we look back, it is very likely that 2025 will stand out as a watershed moment.

This is because in 2025, the USA shut down the world's largest bilateral agency, USAID, threatened to withdraw from major international organizations, and declared that it no longer subscribed to internationally agreed development goals. It is hard to overstate the significance of these events. The cuts to USAID alone are expected to result in 14 million more avoidable deaths in the next five years, and that is without factoring in the impact of the agency on other metrics, such as quality of life.

To make matters worse, in the months that followed, other major donors including the UK, France, Netherlands, and Belgium, announced 20-40% reductions in their overseas development assistance (ODA), often citing the need to prioritise defense spending. These cuts come as geopolitical and global economic context are exacerbating needs: trade-wars and economic uncertainty is expected to hit the worlds' poorest countries hardest and rates of conflict continue to rise by many different measures.

In this context, on June 23rd, the DPU hosted a group of DPU and IGP alumni working in bilateral, multilateral, NGO and local government organisations to discuss the changing landscape of international development. To facilitate a frank and open exchange, the conversation was held 'off the record'. As such, the insights from the three main areas of discussion are summarised below in an annonymised format. The event was designed as the first in a series of discussions on the work of Bartlett staff and alumni in the international development sector, supported by Barbara Lipietz (Bartlett Vice Dean International).

Session 1

What has happened, and where is it going?

The international development sector is a complex ecosystem involving many actors operating under different pressures. Nonetheless, all workshop participants emphasised that the pervasive sense of uncertainty in the sector, related to changes in bilateral and multilateral aid, alongside major geopolitical shifts undermining the multi-lateral system and globally agreed development goals such as the SDGs. Civil society organisations use the acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) to describe the context.

Many warned that this climate threatens hard-won gains in international development, as actors are forced to shift towards short-term, cost-driven approaches. This trend risks reversing progress in areas such as peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and resilience. Many also warned that intersecting crises—especially climate change, inequalities and displacement—are reinforcing each other in ways that exacerbate fragility and cannot be addressed through narrow or reactive programming.

A second major theme was a noticeable shift from traditional aid relationships toward regional alliances and trade-based cooperation. Several participants observed that bilateral donors are increasingly aligning development efforts with commercial and strategic interests, resulting in a more fragmented global aid architecture. This evolving dynamic risks further marginalising multilateral collaboration, particularly around key areas such as development finance reform. Concerns were raised that these shifts could deepen existing inequalities, with grassroots organisations—especially those focused on gender equality—already facing disproportionate cuts.

Despite these challenges, there was also cautious optimism about the potential for positive change. Some noted the emergence of more flexible, locally-led development approaches and growing leadership from subnational governments and local civil society, which could signal a shift away from hierarchical donor-recipient models toward more equitable, collaborative systems.

Moreover, many agreed that the future of the sector will depend significantly on how non-traditional donors and private actors assert their influence. There was extensive discussion on the expanding role of the private sector in particular, with the rise of blended finance and multi-stakeholder partnerships described as both promising and problematic: promising in terms of potential resources, but problematic in terms of maintaining accountability, ensuring equity, and aligning with long-term development goals—especially in fragile or conflict-affected settings.

Session 2

Navigating change

Many participants stressed that their organisations are facing strategic pressure to adjust the language of their work, particularly in key sectors such as gender and climate change. Aligning with prevailing economic and security discourses can be an effective way to engage influential stakeholders, and a parallel was drawn between the current situation and the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, which similarly challenged development actors to adapt to shifting donor agendas.

At the same time, there was widespread emphasis on the need to hold firm to core principles, and the role of building strategic alliances across sectors and collaborating with diverse actors in bridging those gaps. Many participants stressed that current funding gaps are already resulting in people being left behind, with critical interventions being scaled back or abandoned. To counteract this trend, many agreed that development strategies must prioritize the most at-risk groups, uphold accountability and transparency, and ensure that local actors are engaged as full and equal partners—not simply as implementers of externally designed programs.

Reflecting on the skills that they had learnt through their MSc programmes at the DPU/Bartlett, participants highlighted the importance of operationalising core development principles —such as participation, equity, and inclusion—even under conditions of extreme pressure. In fast-paced or politically constrained environments, these values do not automatically translate into practice and must be intentionally designed into programs through structured processes, clear intent, and demonstrable outcomes.

The ability to work across disciplines and sectors, as well as the political literacy to navigate differing priorities without losing sight of long-term development goals, were also seen as essential in today's complex environment. This includes understanding how issues like gender, health, violence prevention, and education intersect, and being able to design interventions that address multiple challenges simultaneously.

Participants further stressed the importance of using both quantitative and qualitative data to make the case for inclusive and effective development interventions. Indeed, field-based research and case studies, often facilitated by academic institutions or local partnerships, were recognised as powerful tools for shaping agendas and influencing policy discussions.

Finally, the conversation highlighted the growing precarity of the development job market, particularly for recent graduates facing shrinking traditional opportunities and the automation of entry-level roles through AI. To navigate this evolving landscape, graduates must be adaptable, able to work across disciplines and geographies, and grounded in strong practical skills—including political analysis, strategic communication, and stakeholder engagement. Programs like the DPU were praised for providing real-world exposure, but participants highlighted that as new actors from the Global South reshape the development finance landscape, students must also be equipped to understand and influence these shifts.

Session 3

The role of the university in focus

Participants emphasized that universities—especially institutions like the DPU/ Bartlett—hold a vital role in reimagining and reshaping the development infrastructure in an increasingly polarized, digital public sphere. This role spans knowledge creation, communication and engagement with public debates, and training of future practioners.

With respect to knowledge creation, declining donor funding is threatening many local data collection systems. Universities were called upon to support rebuilding these local data ecosystems through equitable partnerships with local institutions, prioritizing locally driven and politically empowering data practices. Concurrently, bridging the gap between research and practice through co-produced research was underscored as vital, ensuring findings are timely, actionable, and oriented toward real-world policy impact. Many also highlighted the role of universities as spaces for critical reflection and principled engagement and urged universities to embrace their responsibility as spaces of resistance more intentionally.

Communication was also highlighted as key. Many orgnisations struggle to 'know what they know', with evidence from the field not filtering properly into policy. Universities were urged to move beyond traditional academic outputs and engage with digital platforms, which are increasingly dominated by misleading narratives about development. At the same time, it was acknowledged that many academics feel increasingly disempowered to participate in public discourse and calls were made for greater decentralization in university communications and academic freedom to enable more agile and critical public engagement.

With respect to teaching, many highlighted the importance of existing practices at the DPU/Bartlett of embedding ethics, equity, and justice at the core of teaching and practice – essential skills for preparing students to navigate dilemmas, resist harmful compromises, and uphold core values amid pressure. Suggestions on practical efforts to further prepare current students for working in the development sector included: integrating honest portrayals of the challenges and contradictions they may encounter working in the sector; development of interpersonal and trust-building abilities, especially for working with trauma-affected populations; and communication and storytelling skills to bridge ideological divides with diverse stakeholders in government and the private sector.

Acknowledgements

The roundtable discussion was organized by Alexandra Panman, Daniel Oviedo, and Barbara Lipietz, with logistical support from Mingyuan Li). We would like to extend our profound thanks to our colleagues and alumni partners for sharing their time and valuable insights to the conversation.