

The Global South as laboratory? The politics of experimentation and intervention in contemporary global development

Convener:

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The Global South has long been practiced as a laboratory for the West, from forced border demarcation by colonial rulers to experimentation with western medicine or curriculum to heal and educate “the poor”. Today, we are witnessing a resurgence of this laboratory-logic and related approaches, with development itself increasingly centering on forms of experimentation, trialling and testing new interventions, policies or methodologies, always looking for ‘what works’. Private foundations and celebrity organizations experiment with new technology or social engineering when they invent and introduce new toilets, condoms or medical instruments to villages. NGOs test the implications of delivering cash directly to beneficiaries, observing the social and human consequences only as they unfold. Meanwhile, development economists conduct randomized controlled trials, systematically review, and report on such experiments to identify ‘best practices’ and ‘ideal interventions’. Altogether conceiving experimentation as vehicles for social, cultural, and economic transformation, and failure only as another opportunity to learn and try again.

The aim of this panel is to critically explore the consequences of practicing the Global South as an open space for experimentation by asking how these aspirations influence and structure human life and relations in the developing world. It welcomes papers from across the broad array of disciplines engaged in development research to discuss and contest the discourses and practices of these laboratory-logics. Relevant papers may concern specific development interventions by different actors, and not only western ones but also from other parts of the Global South, including China or other middle-income countries who are likewise engaged in these endeavours. But papers may also deal with broader questions of legitimacy, expertise, accountability or democracy in contemporary cases of development interventions.