I had a genuine 'I told you so' moment in 1999 in Seattle. The government had been very nice to the NGOs, they had opened up the doors on the first day there and we had three Ministers, Michael Meacher, Clare Short and Stephen Byers in a nice little line. It was a good day because it was the day that Joseph Stiglitz had launched one of his first pre-emptive attacks on the International Monetary Fund, criticising a lot of what they did and saying what a complete failure conditionality had been in terms of adjustment. It had taken ten years of campaigning and of criticising adjustment to get to that point and in the nasty, cheeky fashion that us NGOs have, I stuck up my hand and said, 'look, it took us ten years to convince you of the weaknesses of conditionality, can we just cut to the chase on trade liberalisation and put it to one side now, since that does not work either?' They all looked and smirked and did not say much, so I can genuinely say, 'I told him so'. That was fun.

When I received the invitation to come and talk today, I had also seen that The Economist was running an essay competition in association with Shell which wants you to write a two thousand word essay on the subject of whether we need nature. My initial reaction when I see things like that is 'Doh!'. When I saw the title of the meeting series today, 'Does evidence matter?' I had a very similar reaction. I had two thoughts about it, one was, 'what a stupid question' and the other was an academic response which is 'well, maybe we need more research to find out'. I am slightly suspicious of the theme as well because there is a kind of implicit rationalist discourse, implying that you either want to use evidence or you do not and that you are either rational or you are emotional. As we all know, reality is a lot more murky than that.

I want to share with you a snippet in a science magazine about some of the latest neurological research on how the brain makes decisions. The interesting thing was that the article was indicating that at the very earliest stages of going through the process of making a choice, what your brain does is guess how you will feel about it after you have made a certain decision, one way or another. So as a message to all those draconian scientists, I thought this was absolutely fascinating, because it means that at the very outset, the prior stage of research, however scientific and organised you might be, there is a subjective process going on.

This also slightly pre-empted one of my conclusions which I am going to drive home which is that, if there is one lesson I have come across through all the work that we have done and all the advocacy campaigns that we have run, the most striking one is that change is not a rational policy process. Both Justin Forsyth and I have sat around whilst innumerable policy-officers have crunched numbers and created great long shopping lists of change that they would like to happen and then sent them to Whitehall and wondered why nothing ever did. There is a wonderful thing about statistics, which is that if you say to someone that you saw seventeen elephants flying over your house this morning they will stop and look, whereas if you just say that you saw an elephant flying today they will think you are a lunatic. Once you apply a figure, a number to something, it is extraordinary how you can catch their attention. So always be suspicious of statistics - all statistics.

As an interesting context to the debate that we are in at the moment, there is this fantastic term that emerged a couple of years into the first Labour administration (which I think came out of the Treasury) when all of a sudden people started talking about 'evidence-based policy' - which made you ask what on earth they were basing it on before.

So yes, evidence matters, but what is interesting is the degree to which the world is run at the moment on the basis of very little evidence and an awful lot of assumptions. One need only leaf through the critical literature on the benefits and circumstances of trade liberalisation and then reflect on the fact that the motor of policy in the global economy is one of progressive trade liberalisation, which will apparently at some future point deliver us into a state of market utopia. Similarly with capital liberalisation, which is built into membership of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and also the assumed benefits of Foreign Direct Investment, despite the fact that there is a very healthy debate going on at the moment about whether this is a form of investment or actually a form of extraction. And with that I will give you a slightly different advertising plug: yes, Simon Maxwell was right that we do have a thing called the 'alternative mansion house speech' which will be about trade and will be very interesting. I will leave some invitations at the front here which you are welcome to take away.

Perhaps a slightly more important project we have coming out later this year is an alternative to the annual World Bank and IMF reports. Our report will be called the 'Real World Economic Outlook' and it will go into some of these questions in some detail.
Just as a couple of examples about the extraordinary way in which evidence gets used when it is in the hands of powerful institutions: I do not know if anyone remembers, but it was either the 1997 or 1998 World Development Report in which the World Bank trumpeted this private sector survey that it had done which was included in the back of the Report. They had disaggregated the results into seven or eight regions and in about eighty to ninety percent of the responses, the major concern of small and medium size businesses in developing countries was a lack of public investment. In almost all incidences, the lowest order concern was regulation. When you came to the summary of recommendations and conclusions in the World Development Report (you can guess what I am going to say), they were bizarrely inverted and all of a sudden regulation was heavy and onerous and needed to be swept away throughout the developing world, and heavy public investment to support the sectors was a dangerous and dodgy subsidy. From the earliest days of the debt campaign, there was a marvellous little quote that we brought out from the IMF research department (remembering that this was the basis upon which entire strategies and adjustment processes were based) where the IMF admitted to themselves that forecasts for these developing countries were 'not particularly accurate' - but of course that never stopped them knowing what they should do.

Another marvellous example of the inversion of the role of evidence in policy formulation is in the build up to the new trade round, there was a heavy lobby from the NGO sector that at the very least, before embarking on a new round, there should be a social and environmental impact assessment of the consequences of the last round. The reaction from civil servants and others at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was the analogy that trade liberalisation is a bit like riding a bike: if you go too slowly you are going to fall off. Think about that, because what if, while riding that bike, you happen to have a blindfold on and you are in the middle of heavy traffic. Without the evidence-base, without having looked at how things went before, you could be in a very sticky situation.

That brings me to the debate which is hot and active at the moment, which is whether globalisation brings us all together and closes gaps between rich and poor or whether it does exactly the opposite. According to Professor Robert Wade, there are about eight ways of summing this up at the moment, seven of which say that things are getting worse and one of which says that things are not quite so bad. I wonder which one The Economist and its various cohorts and policy advocates like to quote most often. Change is not a rational policy process.

There are also other problems when one considers the role of evidence in some of the big historical events, for example the issue of tobacco and safety, or nuclear power versus renewable energy sources. There are major issues about the suppression of evidence and what that means. Interestingly, when you consider the role of evidence in what I think is one of the most important issues of our time, climate change, we have actually achieved a global consensus on the need for a precautionary principle, where the absence of conclusive evidence should not be seen as grounds for inaction. So straight away, we are in a highly contingent situation where we are acting within uncertainty and insecurity and yet having to make decisions about policy proposals and the allocation of resources etc. Yet when we come to the issue of the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), nowhere has there been a systematic mapping of the likely impacts of global warming and climate change on the pursuit of and achievability of the MDGs. Because we do not have the resources to do this in a very comprehensive way ourselves, we have attempted to address this in a report with a Bangladeshi partner organisation Becas called 'The End of Development? Global Warming, Disasters and the End of Human Progress', to say that evidence is lacking and that one of the things that we can do is to play the role of a catalyst to those with bigger resources and more cash, to encourage them to go away and look at this in a more substantive way. There is already enough evidence around to make us consider quite seriously the possibility that climate change makes the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals even more laughable that it is already.

I want to talk briefly about a couple of examples of campaigns that we have done and the role that evidence played in some of those and then I will finish with an adhoc, mildly disorganised list of lessons learnt over the past few years whilst working on these various issues.

At Christian Aid several years ago we launched a campaign to get supermarkets to adopt codes of conduct on the sorting of their products from developing countries. The role that evidence played in this was that we gathered as much intelligence on the sector as we could. We had a number of partner organisations and our staff went out into the field and carried out a form of investigative journalism about abuses of safety regulations etc. We produced a series of reports, starting with one entitled 'The Global Supermarket'. What happened as a consequence of that was that Clare Short got excited about it and helped to set up the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI); most of the supermarkets did adopt voluntary codes; there is a new and ongoing thing called 'Race to the Top' which is organised and chaired by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and it has become pretty much a permanent advocacy feature.

What is interesting in looking at the relative success or failure of this campaign was that the impact was greatest during the first year when we put a lot of evidence in front of the noses of the supermarkets. When we shifted - or perhaps slipped - into the role of positive engagement for years two and three, it was remarkable how things slowed down and how the allocation of resources within the supermarkets, towards ensuring that the whole
produce supply chain was monitored and evaluated and kept in good order, really slipped by. So the interesting thing there was that the role of evidence in terms supporting the advocacy goals and keeping things moving forward was relatively unsustained.

In terms of the kind of evidence used, where the supermarkets were concerned, first of all there was the mapping required to see what power and control the multiple major retailers had and a process of charting their ascendance to their capture of the British retail market and their control of the supply chain and of their control of growers. That required some secondary and some primary research, some insider brown envelopes here and there and the occasional conversation in a coffee bar and it also involved us commissioning research from partner organisations in some of the areas where plantations were supplying the products.

An anecdote which just occurs to me is that in terms of cultural impact on the debate, perhaps the more powerful and important effect was when a documentary was done by BBC2 in the 'Modern Times' series about the sourcing of mange-tout from Zimbabwe for Tescos which caused an uproar. The maker and director of that film (who I later collaborated with in making a TV advertisement for the debt campaign) was invited to speak at some Anthropology departments at various universities around the country, where they said 'do you realise you have done in an hour what we have failed to do in twenty years in terms of making these issues matter'. That was an interesting reflection.

The debt campaign is something which many people will be very familiar with here. The campaign involved lots of number crunching, lots of duals with statistics between the agencies and the Bank and the IMF, lots of personal testimony, extremely complex number crunching which led many people in the agencies in the early days to think that we could never run a successful high-profile, public and policy-oriented advocacy campaign on the issue when you are dealing with the niceties of net present value etc., but when the campaigners got hold of it and boiled it down to a proposition that debt kills babies, it is remarkable what progress we did have.

These are battles over statistics which we are still having with the Bank and the Fund and these are ongoing. There is a lot of lobbying still. What happened as a consequence of the campaign was some successful cancellation; a new movement, the Jubilee Campaign, which still has active campaigns in about sixty countries around the world, many of which have taken on a life of their own and formed new coalitions; new attitudes and a new awareness that debt is not a straightforward economic issue (which was the standard response we would get from people in the early days), but is highly political and the solutions to it are likewise. I would say that the successes of the campaign have been moderate and the jury is still out on that. The role of evidence well presented was to win specific concessions, to make this point that the debt was politically defined.

Something of a slightly different nature was a campaign (again, at Christian Aid) which succeeded in getting an issue to be talked about for the first time amongst a particular community, was about the impact or likely impact of the introduction of genetically modified (GM) crops into agriculture and with them, the introduction of a whole set of market relationships which have very specific impacts on rural and farming populations. Evidence played a role again. It was a mixture of pointing out where there was not evidence and more evidence was needed, and using the accumulated evidence and what was already known about what worked to support rural populations to deal with hunger and poverty. The result was a huge public attitude change. The introduction of genetically modified crops has been slowed down to allow more time for evidence to accumulate and again a new coalition was formed out of it. In terms of success, again I would say that the jury is very much out. There has been a great deal of success in terms of getting the issue debated and making it clear that a lot more evidence is needed and in a perverse way, perhaps the biggest success was in terms of putting the hunger debate back centre-stage.

Extraordinarily, the reason that this became an issue was because the bio-technology companies themselves (Monsanto in particular) started using extremely emotional appeals in their advertising without any reference whatsoever to debates about hunger and poverty or about access to food and what actually works, saying that wringing your hands about world hunger will not help but food bio-technology will. They started the debate themselves and they had no evidence base from which they were working when they did that. Subsequently a lot of evidence which has emerged about the real experience of GM crops in the field has exposed both the weakness of the product and the need for a lot more evidence.

Bringing us up to date is an example which is more UK focused. We produced a report as part of our 'localism campaign' called 'Ghost Town Britain' looking at the decline of local economies the length and breadth of Britain, the hollowing out of small, independent retail sectors (everything from banking through to retail to the closure of post offices) and what this means for sustainability and the creation of food deserts and banking deserts for marginalised communities in this country. This campaign is based on evidence from a mixture of primary research, including a lot of nifty graphs and a few surveys to gauge how people think about it, and has led to a parliamentary campaign for a new Bill about local communities' sustainability, which is something which is in progress and ongoing.
I will round up with my slightly adhoc and rapid list of conclusions that all this points me towards.

I reiterate that if you are in the change game, change is not a rational policy process, by any means. Interestingly, in terms of how people operate when they are in the major institutions, I observe that the higher you advance through an institutional setting the more deeply you have to internalise its propaganda.

I would say also that evidence is rarely, if ever, conclusive and that we have to act as a permanent condition in a state of imperfect knowledge and insecurity, not knowing the full outcome of our actions. In fact there will always be unpredicted emergent consequences, but this is no reason for not doing anything.

I would say that where lots of these issues are concerned, be it climate change, be it bio-technology, that absence of evidence of harm is not evidence of absence of harm. Part of the reason for that is that the accumulation of evidence is a function of your ability to pay for and accumulate research, so if you are in a situation within a large institutional setting with assumed power and dominance already, the chances are that you can generate a larger body of evidence to substantiate your case and this kind of evidence will almost always be tendentious. If you are in a situation where you cannot stand up and say something without fifty five-year university projects behind you backing up your case, that will always favour the status quo.

An observation, which I have borrowed from Ian Wilson's book 'Concilliance' is about why I think it is necessary for us to wave the danger flag very early on with a lot of these issues, which is that in many of these issues a false positive diagnosis might be an inconvenience, but a false negative diagnosis can be a catastrophe and a lethal one.

Another observation (from studying ideology and discourse analysis) is that evidence is always sotred into a web of discourse and power and interest. This for me finally knocks on the head the old draconian notion of rationalist science and rationalist discourse.

Finally I want to show you a picture of this gentleman from a global investment company (whose name I will not mention). They had been sitting one day in an advertising meeting thinking about how the company could pitch its services and they thought, 'I know, we will show what a nice bunch of guys we are and that you can really trust us'. So they got their men in suits to go out into the open with a beach ball with a picture of the world on it and thought that they would show people the new face of corporate social responsibility. So here is the picture of our gentleman kicking the world into touch! These guys do not worry about the evidence base too much. This is so much the case that the Investment Chronicle could give an award to another investment company that advertises its services on this evidence base: ‘an introduction to spread betting’. So I think, all things considered, we do pretty well by comparison.

Well, that is my opener. Thank you for listening.