

## Inspiring action to reduce poverty



**Simon Maxwell**

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**N**ew issues crowd on to the development agenda. The need for international collaboration grows greater. The time available to respond grows shorter. Think food prices, or oil, or natural disasters in fragile states. A think tank that aspires to be influential on the international stage needs to work in new ways, on new topics, with new partners, and to a new timescale.

In planning our own future, we have identified three big challenges, which we call the three ‘Cs’: coverage, capacities and communication.

Coverage. This has been a continuing theme at ODI, as we grapple with the question ‘What’s next in international development?’ The main issues are now well-established in the world and in our work: the impact of China on the manufacturing prospects for poor countries; the management of a new phase of globalisation; the increasing overlap between development and foreign policy; the growing importance of global and regional ‘public goods’, especially in relation to climate change; and the implications of all these for global institutions and global aid.

This new development agenda requires an approach that links sectoral and topic-specific programmes. For example, in grappling with reform of the international system, researchers need to work at the interface of development and humanitarian interventions, and the institutions that support them. Similarly, a concerted focus on the MDGs requires not only social sector expertise, but also an understanding of the essential underpinning of pro-poor growth – in agriculture, manufacturing and services, in rural areas and urban.

The scale and history of ODI’s work, its programmatic range and its multidisciplinary expertise, make it well-equipped to lead cross-cutting research and policy engagement around the new agenda. Directors of Programmes take personal responsibility for major themes, working across the Institute with all ODI programme teams to mobilise research and policy advice around cutting edge issues. The business con-

tribution to growth and development has been a highlight of our work over the past year, to be followed by concerted work around the MDGs, the future of aid and the management of risk. Articles on these themes by our Directors of Programmes are featured in our Annual Report 2008, as personal and institutional manifestos to move ODI and the research debate forward.

The second challenge is about capacities: not only our own, but also, and more importantly, those of research institutes and think tanks in developing countries. There are a growing number of these, patchy, of course, in geography and sometimes resources, but nevertheless performing many of the functions taken on in earlier times by counterparts in industrialised countries.

The third challenge is about communication. In a previous age, the ‘unit of production’ was the book, the research report or the article in an academic journal, supplemented by the occasional briefing paper and public meeting. Today, we still produce books and research reports, and proudly manage two refereed journals, *Development Policy Review* and *Disasters*. But the internet has changed the way we communicate, and the proliferation of media outlets has changed the way we engage with audiences. We have found we need to be brief and much, much faster. The two-page opinion or the five-paragraph blog, turned around in just a few hours, is an essential vehicle for policy influence. In the future, technology is likely to challenge even further the expert status of the researcher. It will require us to assume a different kind of role in facilitating new knowledge networks.

These challenges are more acute in a think tank like ODI than they might be in a traditional university department or research institute. We have always insisted that research quality is the foundation of our work at ODI – and continue to do so. However, it has also been the case that our researchers need the right skills for the think tank environment. We succeed because our staff are good story-tellers and expert communicators, great networkers,

### Overseas Development Institute

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focused on practical change, and highly sensitive to political and policy processes. Furthermore, and unlike think tank staff working on purely domestic issues, our ODI policy entrepreneurs are mostly concerned with multinational and multistakeholder policy processes, on issues like trade or international finance. They work with partners around the world. Just as airlines work together in code-sharing alliances, the model we have developed at ODI is one we call 'policy code-sharing'.

Our primary focus remains unchanged in the new environment. It remains our purpose to reduce poverty, not just study it. We aim to inspire and inform policy and practice that lead to the reduction of poverty and the alleviation of suffering in developing countries.

What we do recognise, however, is that if we want to deliver change, we will need even stronger partnerships with like-minded institutions in both the developed and developing worlds. We are fortunate to have long-term funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to help build new partnerships, and have been learning about the challenges of working together in genuine collaboration. The Forum on the Future of Aid and our recent programme of work on the G8 in Japan are examples of what will surely become a common way of working for ODI. Partnership will also run through our many long-term research programmes, as it does, for example, for the Chronic Poverty Research Centre. ODI will certainly play a part in facilitating

south-south learning and policy engagement.

It is also clear that our programmatic coverage will change, as it always does, but possibly in less evolutionary ways than before. We will need to determine what is appropriate for a think tank based in London, rather than, say, Lagos or Luzon, to contribute. Our unique contribution needs to be crystal clear.

Finally, we will look for new ways to combine research rigour with rapid reaction, preserving an authoritative voice while simultaneously speaking out in time to be useful, by email, in print or over the airwaves. Our blog is increasingly active as a platform for discussion. See also our Wikipedia and Facebook pages.

These changes are incremental but run deep. The management challenge – the institutional challenge – will be to remain global in our vision, analytical in our work, focused on change, collaborative in our approach and agile in responding to new problems and new opportunities.

ODI will be 50 years old in 2010. Its founders would hardly recognise it. But they would be pleased to know that its essential character and founding passion have both been preserved.

Written by Simon Maxwell, ODI Director ([s.maxwell@odi.org.uk](mailto:s.maxwell@odi.org.uk)). This piece is drawn from his [Overview for the ODI Annual Report 2008](#).



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