

DevNet 2026 Sessions – Call for Abstracts



THEMATIC CLUSTER ONE

Geopolitical Shifts: Regional and global dynamics of aid funding

1.1. Development lost and found

Despite decades of evidence that international development assistance achieves the best results through community-led, participatory programs, the development sector continues to invest aid money in providing objects – equipment, buildings, technologies – that communities have not asked for, do not need, or cannot use. These are the ‘lost objects of development’. They are scattered across the world, mouldering remnants of failed development programs and unwise aid investments. These objects tell stories of development investments that did not go as they should – what lessons can they teach us? With the development sector undergoing a historic transformation, this is an opportune moment to draw attention to the mistakes of the past and convene conversations about how to make use of this transformative moment to shift the norms in aid delivery.

This session invites contributions that explore both what has been lost in the past and whether such losses might help us find something different. We invite proposals for presentations that engage creatively with the theme of ‘development lost and found’, whether to share stories of loss or to celebrate moments of generative change. We welcome contributions from the scholarly to the poetic, the cathartic to the hopeful. Or simply join the session on the day to share your stories, anecdotes and reflections as we chart a course through the bumpy landscape of development’s ‘lost and found’.

Keywords: aid investment, development practice, learning, storytelling

Session convenor/s: Katharine McKinnon and Polly Stupples, Victoria University of Wellington. **Corresponding email:** katharine.mckinnon@vuw.ac.nz

1.2. Holy smoke! Dispelling the haze surrounding religion and development

The Pacific is overwhelmingly religious. Asia is awash with diverse religious traditions. New Zealand, however, is perhaps the most religiously illiterate society on earth. New Zealanders frequently imagine themselves as resolutely secular. And yet religion and spirituality play profound roles even here, shaping cultural, political, and ethical practices among diverse communities. It is, after all, impossible to imagine the New Zealand development and NGO sector apart from historical religious legacies and their contemporary reverberations.

This session invites reflections on how religious and secular dynamics play out in development, humanitarian, and charitable processes. The session seeks to cast luminous clarity on the complex entanglements between religion and development in Aotearoa and around the world.

Keywords: religion, secularity, development, humanitarianism, charity, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Pacific, Asia, NGOs, (not) smoking.

Session convenor/s: Philip Fountain, Victoria University of Wellington.

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1.3. China in the Pacific Islands: Geopolitical shifts, development pathways, and Island agency

This session examines China's expanding and multifaceted presence in the Pacific Islands amid intensifying geopolitical competition. It invites contributions that explore diverse forms of Chinese engagement—including trade, investment, infrastructure development, fisheries, diplomacy, security cooperation, climate partnerships, and people-to-people exchanges—and their influence on the development trajectories of Pacific Island countries.

Key themes could include:

- The evolution and characteristics of China's economic, diplomatic, and strategic footprint in the region.
- The impacts of Chinese involvement on sustainable development priorities, infrastructure, climate resilience, and governance in Pacific Island states.
- The perceptions, interactions, and agency of Pacific Island governments and communities in response to China's growing role.
- China's engagement with traditional partners such as New Zealand and Australia, and the implications for regional architecture and development cooperation.

The session seeks to convene scholars and practitioners from China, Pacific Island countries, and the broader international community to foster balanced, evidence-based, and locally grounded dialogue. It aims to deepen understanding of how geopolitical shifts are reshaping development possibilities in the Pacific. The session particularly welcomes in-depth conversations on rebalancing development cooperation in the Pacific region.

Keywords: China-Pacific relations, geopolitical shifts, island agency, development cooperation, Pacific Islands, climate change

Session convenor/s: Yunhan Zhu, Massey University.

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1.4. The changing nature of humanitarianism: neutrality in an increasingly political world

Humanitarian action has long been founded on the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, with assistance provided solely on the basis of need. These principles emerged within a rules-based international order that assumed a degree of global solidarity and shared responsibility for responding to a crisis. Today, however, that foundation is under increasing pressure. Escalating humanitarian need, declining aid budgets, geopolitical competition, and the weakening of multilateral institutions are reshaping the humanitarian landscape. At the same time, many donor governments are increasingly aligning aid with national interest, regional security, and strategic priorities. For New Zealand, this raises an important tension: while humanitarian need is

global, foreign policy and development priorities are becoming increasingly focused on the Pacific and our immediate region.

This session explores what these shifts mean for humanitarian practice. Can humanitarian organisations uphold universal principles in an increasingly fragmented and multipolar world? How do humanitarian actors remain neutral while advocating for populations affected by conflict, displacement, and disaster? As traditional multilateral mechanisms come under strain, what new forms of collaboration, coalition-building, and collective advocacy are emerging? Bringing together practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, the discussion will examine how humanitarian organisations are adapting to a rapidly changing operating environment while remaining grounded in humanitarian principles. Using New Zealand's humanitarian sector as a practical case study within wider global trends, the session invites participants to consider a more fundamental question: is humanitarian action simply a crisis response service—an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff—or does it represent a broader moral philosophy founded on universal human dignity and solidarity? If the latter, can that philosophy endure in an increasingly fragmented world where multilateralism is weakening, and national interests increasingly shape international engagement, or does it risk becoming a relic of the post-war rules-based order?

Keywords: humanitarianism, foreign policy, aid, crisis.

Session convenor/s: Sam London, Council for International Development.

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1.5. Geo-political changes: How do they affect faith-based development NGOs?

As co-funding for NGOs by governments in OECD countries is cut back, participants in this session will reflect on the resulting threats *and* opportunities. Caritas Aotearoa convenes this panel and invites contributions that could reflect on questions such as:

1. If co-funding from the New Zealand government gets cut, what are the threats and opportunities that emerge, specifically, for faith-based development NGOs in Aotearoa and the wider Pacific region?
2. If OECD member states re-direct co-funding of development programmes towards development programmes by NGOs that more explicitly support these states' perceived national (geopolitical and commercial) objectives in recipient countries, how can faith-based development NGOs respond in ways that (continue to) express the objectives of the NGOs and their local partners?
3. Arguably, for the last two or three decades, faith-based NGOs and secular NGOs have “competed” for co-funding by the OECD governments in terms of professionalisation: project planning, theory-of-change, reporting on impact, etc. Today, as governments’ co-funding decreases, should faith-based development NGOs begin to highlight their differences with secular NGOs? E.g. working with local partnerships that are well-established, based on trust and shared spirituality, embedded in wider religious institutional frameworks?
4. In a global context, as OECD member states reduce their budgets for international development, the proportion of Chinese budgets towards international development becomes relatively more visible and important. What are the opportunities for faith-based development NGOs in China’s growing importance in international development?

Keywords: faith-based development NGOs, funding, secular versus faith-based networks, China and faith-based NGOs.

Session convenor/s: Gerard Prinsen, Caritas Aotearoa.

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1.6. The shifting geopolitics of development

This session invites submissions on the broad theme of Cluster 2, ‘Geopolitical shifts: Regional and global dynamics of aid funding.’ The international aid and development sector is undergoing rapid change as shifting US foreign policy signals a turning point in global geopolitics. Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) contributions are dropping dramatically across the OECD, and the role of aid and development as a tool of ‘soft power’ is being called into question. This session invites presentations that explore the unfolding changes taking place to aid and development in the Asia-Pacific region. What do these shifts mean for our region and the way the development sector operates? How can states, multilateral institutions, civil society, and communities negotiate responsibility, care, and justice in uneven development landscapes? What are the social, economic and environmental implications of this? If geopolitical policy is turning away from aid and development, are different spaces opening up for the work of addressing global inequalities, eliminating poverty, and supporting wellbeing and livelihoods across international boundaries? How are we to understand the changes in play from the vantage point of Aotearoa and the Pacific, and how can development actors and universities respond? We welcome contributions from scholars, practitioners and policy makers that draw on their insights and experiences of how the shifting geopolitics of aid is reshaping the development sector.

Keywords: development policy, practice, funding, geopolitics, power, Aotearoa, Pacific

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THEMATIC CLUSTER TWO

Mauri ora: Health and wellbeing of people, land and ocean

2.1. Extractivism and beyond: anti-extractivist organising and post-extractivist futures

The extraction of raw materials for export at scale (extractivism) is a modern phenomenon foundational to the functioning of global capitalism, contemporary geopolitics, and the distribution of wealth and power in the world economy. The uneven processes of development generated by extractivism in Oceania – from the colonial extraction of copra, sandalwood and phosphate through to industrial fisheries, logging and mining today – have long given rise to anti-extractivist organising and the search for transformative alternatives. Similar dynamics can be observed across the Global South, most notably in Africa and Latin America, where anti-extractivist movements have gained significant ground over the last decade. Despite this, for many Southern governments, the promises linked to extractivist-led development remain alluring. This has been encouraged by, among other factors, the recent emphasis on so-called ‘critical minerals’ – minerals deemed central to advancing green transitions and increasingly to national defence and security.

This session invites a broad range of contributions that examine the relationship between extractivism and development in and beyond Oceania, with a particular interest in papers that: investigate how extractivism impacts the health and well-being of people, land and ocean; explore the possibilities for and constraints to anti-extractivist organising and resistance; and/or theorise and reach towards post-extractivist futures (however conceived). In advancing their arguments, presenters would ideally centre local knowledge, Indigenous worldviews, and/or community-led responses. A focus on any natural resource or resources is welcome, alongside

both empirically grounded material and more theoretically oriented contributions. Submissions are encouraged from scholars, activists and advocates alike.

Keywords: Extraction, post-extractivist futures, social movements, well-being

Session convenor/s: Glenn Banks, Massey University and Ben Radley, University of Bath.

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2.2. Weaving better Pacific health futures: systems, strands, and stories

Health in the Pacific is shaped by complex and interconnected forces, including colonial legacies, climate change, migration, environmental change, changing disease patterns, and persistent inequities in access to care. At the same time, Pacific communities continue to draw on rich knowledge traditions, cultural strengths, and collective approaches to wellbeing that offer important lessons for development practice and health system transformation.

This session invites contributions that explore the diverse pathways through which health and wellbeing are understood, experienced, and advanced across Pacific contexts. A particular emphasis is placed on health systems, including service delivery, governance, workforce development, financing, policy, and system reform. However, the session welcomes a broad range of health-related perspectives and methodologies and will explore research and knowledges that move beyond narrow or siloed understandings of health, and which examine the relationships between systems, people and the environment, and which centre Indigenous and local knowledge systems; and highlight community-led responses to contemporary health challenges. By bringing together systems perspectives, lived experiences, and diverse narratives from across the Pacific, this session aims to facilitate conversation on how more equitable, resilient, and culturally grounded health futures can be imagined and realised. Through sharing the strands and stories of change, we seek to deepen understanding of what flourishing health and wellbeing can mean in Pacific contexts.

Keywords: Pacific health, health systems, resilience, wellbeing

Session convenor/s: Sharon McLennan, Victoria University of Wellington.

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2.3. Rebalancing tourism for people, place and prosperity: new perspectives on tourism and development

Tourism is frequently promoted as a pathway to economic development, yet its impacts extend far beyond economic growth. Across the Pacific and other regions of the Global South, tourism is increasingly shaped by climate change, labour mobility, environmental pressures, Indigenous aspirations, and changing models of governance. These shifts invite renewed consideration of how tourism can contribute to more just, resilient and sustainable futures.

This session explores tourism as a site for reworking development practice by examining how tourism affects, and is affected by, the wellbeing of people, communities and environments. We welcome contributions that investigate tourism through relational and place-based approaches, including Indigenous perspectives, community wellbeing, labour mobility, migration, climate adaptation, environmental stewardship, regenerative tourism, and alternative measures of prosperity beyond GDP. Papers may present empirical research, conceptual contributions or practitioner perspectives. The session aims to foster discussion about how tourism can better support flourishing communities while strengthening reciprocal relationships between people, land and ocean. By bringing together diverse perspectives, the session contributes to conversations about rebalancing development in ways that prioritise equity, wellbeing and ecological sustainability."

Key words: tourism; wellbeing; development; communities; climate; environment

Session convenor/s: Regina Scheyvens, Massey University

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2.4 Climate, justice and food: Transforming livelihoods

Climate change is impacting food systems across the Asia-Pacific through more frequent extreme weather events, rising oceans, declining soil fertility, and increasing environmental uncertainty. These interconnected challenges threaten food and nutritional security, rural livelihoods, and the wellbeing of communities, with disproportionate impacts on women, Indigenous peoples, and ethnic minority groups. Prevailing approaches to rural livelihoods and climate adaptation often privilege productivity and economic efficiency, overlooking the interconnected dimensions of ecological health, social equity, gender, cultural values, and community wellbeing.

This session opens up conversations about how we move beyond productivity-driven models and establish more inclusive, restorative, and justice-oriented approaches to livelihood development and climate adaptation that advance gender equality, empower marginalised communities, and restore reciprocal relationships among people, land, and food systems. Contributions could explore such questions as: How do we integrate scientific knowledge with Indigenous and local knowledge systems to strengthen resilience? Is it possible to transform our agri-food systems in ways that build equity, improve resilience, and foster environmental health? How can climate adaptation do more to respond to place-based opportunities and challenges, building on existing community assets and capacities? Bringing together diverse perspectives on resilience, equity, and sustainability, the session contributes to contemporary debates on reimagining development pathways in an era of accelerating climate change.

Keywords: climate change, sustainability, food systems, agriculture, fisheries, livelihood

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2.5 Development for wellbeing of land, people and oceans

This session invites submissions on the themes that explore the deep interdependence of people and environment, and foreground *Mauri ora* (the flourishing of life) in development spaces and places. The session aims to explore how human health and wellbeing are inseparable from the vitality of land, waters, and oceans, particularly in contexts shaped by colonial legacies, capitalist logics, climate change, environmental degradation and forced migration.

Contributions could engage with a range of themes and perspectives, and address questions such as the following: How can we reimagine development pathways that are holistic, restorative, and grounded in reciprocal relationships between people, land, and ocean? What kinds of practices and approaches help us move beyond siloed practices in health, development, migration, and environmental governance, and advance integrated and relational approaches? What kinds of indicators and metrics move us beyond narrow concerns with economic growth to consider ecological health, cultural continuity, and collective care? Can development support *mauri ora*, and how do we make this happen?

Keywords: wellbeing, care, climate, health, environment

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THEMATIC CLUSTER THREE

Decolonising development: Rethinking development theory, policy and practice

3.1. Reimagining climate resilience through African-led knowledge systems: Decolonising sustainability and development practice

Climate change continues to disproportionately affect African communities despite their limited contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, many climate adaptation and development interventions remain heavily influenced by externally driven frameworks that often overlook local knowledge, indigenous practices, and community priorities.

This session explores how African-led knowledge systems can contribute to more equitable, effective, and sustainable climate resilience strategies. The session will examine the intersection of climate justice, Indigenous knowledge, sustainability, and development practice, highlighting examples of locally driven adaptation, environmental stewardship, and community resilience. Participants will discuss how development actors, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can move beyond traditional top-down approaches toward models that recognise African agency, local expertise, and context-specific solutions. Through interactive dialogue and case-sharing, the session will encourage critical reflection on what decolonising climate and development practice means in practical terms and how it can strengthen resilience, sustainability, and inclusive development outcomes across Africa and other regions facing similar challenges. This session is designed to encourage interdisciplinary dialogue among researchers, practitioners, policymakers, students, and community leaders. The format can include short presentations, facilitated discussions, and participant reflections to promote knowledge exchange and practical learning across different regional contexts.

Keywords: Climate justice, decolonising development, Indigenous knowledge, sustainability, climate resilience, community-led adaptation, African development, environmental governance

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3.2. Education and decolonial futures: rethinking knowledge and development

Much of the scholarship on decolonising development has focused on aid, governance, institutions, and Indigenous rights. Less attention has been paid to education as the institution/process through which citizens are formed and, consequently, through which development futures are imagined and enacted. This session takes the premise that development is shaped by people; people are (powerfully) shaped by education; and efforts to decolonise development must therefore engage critically with how education systems produce knowledge, citizenship, and social values.

This session invites contributions that examine the intersections of education and development. We are particularly interested in papers that explore how educational institutions, curricula, pedagogies, and research practices are changing in response to the project of decolonising knowledge. We also welcome contributions that investigate how Indigenous, local, and community-based knowledges are being recognised, revitalised, or integrated within education systems, amidst increased international student and academic mobility and the implications of these processes for more equitable and culturally grounded development pathways.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge systems, decolonising curricula, internationalisation of higher education, global knowledge hierarchies, education-for-nation building, education and development

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3.3 Sharing stories, weaving voices: shaping lives and practice

The narration and framing of stories profoundly shape development understandings and development practice. Stories can generate hope, transmit intergenerational knowledge, invigorate possible futures, elevate diverse voices, prompt deep connection and empathy, and some stories reinforce exclusionary power dynamics. Working with communities often involves learning through stories and different forms of ‘translation’ across lifeworlds and visions for the future. In addition, storytelling and story-sharing are often used as research methods, sometimes involving visual approaches like photography, participatory filmmaking, or mapping. This session invites work that explores the role of storying, narrative, and community histories in advancing community-led development, participatory research, and socially just development practice. Among other themes, contributions could explore how storytelling enables communities to identify priorities, preserve local knowledge, strengthen cultural identity, and shape development agendas on their own terms. We welcome presentations exploring participatory methods, oral histories, intergenerational storytelling, creative and Indigenous methodologies, community archives, or other approaches that foreground local voices and lived experience.

Key words: community-led development, storytelling, intergenerational connection, participatory practice

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3.4. Decolonising and rethinking development theory, policy and practice

This session invites papers and presentations that grapple with the challenges of decolonising development, offer critical reflections, or stories of hope and optimism. Contributions could engage with a range of themes and perspectives, and address questions such as the following: How can Indigenous knowledge systems and Te Tiriti o Waitangi provide critical foundations for rethinking development theory, policy, and practice? What are the ethical, political, and practical challenges that development practitioners and academics face in attempts to ‘decolonise’ development? Why is there persistent resistance to decolonisation, and how can we revitalise interest in decolonising practices? What kinds of commitments are possible within our existing institutions, funding regimes, and knowledge production? What kind of practices and approaches are working to challenge dominant development paradigms and open up more just, plural, and grounded futures?

Key words: decolonising, practice, policy, Indigenous, Te Tiriti

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