Universität Zürichᵁᶻᴴ

Geographisches Institut
Politische Geographie

Master thesis topic:

Critical Development Studies

Almost since its beginning, the philosophy of international development cooperation, as well as the various policies and practices implemented for its realization, have been subjected to sustained critique. The practice of development cooperation itself has undergone a series of transformations since the 1950s, with new approaches being introduced at least every decade. There has been an interesting sedimentation of critique and counter-critique that can be traced through the discourses and practices of different organisations, initiatives and projects. Some of the major points of critique over the years have included:

- The way development aid is being delivered and evaluated
- The efficiency, sustainability and different formats of project and program
- Implementation
- The neo-colonialism of development aid, which supposedly makes less developed
- countries dependent on western countries
- The "de-politicising" effect, or a-political aspirations, of development interventions
- The instrumentalisation of ideas and practices of participation, empowerment, etc.

MA thesis topics in this field will engage with particular aspects of development critique by focusing on one specific sub-question. Below are a sample of possible topics, but students are welcome to propose specific topics within this frame and discuss options with the **contact person:**
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1. Development Policy in Switzerland: A critical debate
The Swiss Foreign Ministry (EDA) is currently revising its development policy strategy for the next years (2021-2024: https://www.eda.admin.ch/IZA2021-2024). Overall, the EDA maintains that the new strategy should acknowledge the self-interests of Switzerland in a better ways than previously, improve its effectiveness and coherence. The new strategy proposes a stronger geographical and thematic focus, and in particular, a stronger link between development and migration policy as well as a stronger collaboration between public and private actors. This new strategy is highly controversial, and is heavily criticized by many non-governmental development actors. This Master Thesis will review the debate, identify key actors involved in the public debate, scrutinize the different arguments put forward in favor and against the new strategy, and locate this debate within longer-term political controversies around development in Switzerland. The proposed thesis will involve:

- Discourse analysis of media reports, policy documents, political statements, etc.
- Selected interviews with key actors in the field of Swiss development cooperation (EDA, NGOs, alliance sud, etc.), and potentially, some political actors.

Language: German or English

2. The Politics of Development Projects

Theses within this subtopic critically investigate the practice of development in a particular organization or long-standing project o such central concepts as participation, social inclusion, gender, disaster response or resource management. The Master theses will explore how a specific concept or approach is implemented in practice. This raises questions, such as: why and how did a particular topic or "buzzword" come on the agenda of the organization or project? How was it operationalized to be implemented in practice? How were the problem, the beneficiaries and the goals of the project framed and evaluated? How was the project received and talked about in the implementation context? How did the organization respond to internal and external criticism of its project? Through studying archived documents (project reports, organizational newsletters, working papers) and interviewing former and present staff, project beneficiaries and development mediators, the thesis will produce a critical "ethnography" of a particular project in practice. This will be the basis for a feedback and exchange with the organization itself.

Theses in this topic require an internship in a development organization and field work outside of Switzerland in a specific project.

Partner organisation: Our unit has established good relations with HELVETAS, but students are encouraged to develop their own contacts and networks as well.

Language: English