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On Finland's Development Policy Today: Questions and Reflections

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[Edited opening remarks and introduction to the FSDR Policy Dialogue 2024 on "Finland's Development Policy for Today: Past Lessons, Future Visions", 21 October 2024]

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Welcome to this year's Policy Dialogue of the Finnish Society for Development Research (FSDR – Kehitystutkimuksen seura). It is inspiring to see that this event has generated much interest, with more than a hundred registered participants.

This suggests that Finland's multi-sectoral development community is not small; in fact, we are many. Many of us in Finland, along with our broader constituencies, partners, and beneficiaries locally and internationally, are directly impacted by the policy decisions made in Helsinki.

Those of us gathered here are stakeholders in Finnish development policy. However, a substantial group of us has not had the opportunity to participate in discussions and decision-making processes

affecting our work. The FSDR Policy Dialogue aims to fill this gap by providing an open space for every development actor – from academic researchers to policymakers and civil society activists – to voice our analyses, opinions, and sentiments, and to co-create strategies and visions for Finland’s relationship with the world, especially developing countries.

I am thankful to our invited panelists and resource persons for enthusiastically confirming their participation in our gathering to discuss a topical issue: “Finland’s Development Policy for Today: Past Lessons, Future Visions.” The title is framed to encourage constructive discussion, addressing the topic from a historical perspective. We are not only having a multi-sectoral dialogue with representatives from different development sectors but also an inter-generational dialogue to reflect on the evolution of Finnish development policy through the decades.

While our knee-jerk reaction to recent news about Finnish development policy might be to question the government, particularly the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, in the spirit of meaningful dialogue, we should be asking questions of each other. This suggests that the government must also have questions for development actors and stakeholders in parliament, NGOs, and academia.

Of course, we are all curious about the incumbent Government Programme’s austerity measures announced at the beginning of 2024. These billion-euro budget reductions will affect multilateral cooperation, humanitarian assistance, development policy loans and investments, support for NGOs and civil society, as well as climate financing. There appears to be a paradigm shift happening in Finland, a longtime, reputable donor country. We ask: what’s happening, what happened, what will happen, and what should happen?

In development research, we are deeply concerned about significant state cuts to activities that contribute to research-based policymaking. It is also worrisome that a significant function in

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development policy, notably 'development communication', seems to have been defunded. In our academic field, we value development communication not only for its importance in information dissemination but also for its role in consciousness-raising.

As we prepare for this event, members of the Finnish Society for Development Research have articulated several questions for our panelists and participants to reflect on.

Why should Finland have a sense of global responsibility at this point in world history? Some may say that the answer lies in our shared humanity and the interconnectedness of our world. Finland's commitment to global development is a moral obligation, a support to the principle of global justice and solidarity, as well as a strategic necessity for Finland and the international community of nations.

Historically and geographically, Finland has been part of the so-called Nordic consensus in development cooperation, known for its solidarity and commitment to human rights. Is Finland breaking away from this Nordic consensus?

Our discussion today will also delve into the current and near-future restructuring plans for Finnish development policy. What are the main rationales for these changes? What's the government's 'theory of change,' or development pathway, by means of austerity measures?

For those involved in development education, one pressing concern is how we can make the field attractive to youth and students, especially given the apparent decline in interest even among longstanding donor countries. Engaging the young and next generation is vital for the sustainability of our development efforts and profession.

The implications of cuts in development aid and cooperation, including state support to NGOs, are profound. What does this mean for Finland's image and relations as a developed country? We must also consider the concrete suggestions from development NGOs about financing and how Finnish civil society organizations envision Finland's role in global development.

The ideology of the party in power significantly shapes Finland's development policy. To what extent does incumbency in government influence our approach? This question is particularly relevant as we witness the prioritization of corporate business and national security concerns over development.

The ongoing parliamentary debate about reforming the Academy of Finland, with a proposed provision to consider national security and international obligations, raises important questions. How will this affect the governance of development cooperation and the roles of universities and civil society in promoting Finland's development policy priorities?

Related to the seeming securitization of development, we also would like to hear comments from the panelists about the state of 'development finance' and 'financing for development' in Finland – particularly, the increasing role of the private sector, and the appropriateness of utilizing ODA in support of the war in Ukraine.

We know that we only have limited time today. So, we invite you all to continue the dialogue during the Development Days conference in Helsinki on 27-28 February 2025 with the theme "Development Transitions: Amidst Waste, Wars, and Maldevelopment."

Finally, we invite you to join the Finnish Society for Development Research as a member. We are not exclusive to academics but also open to development practitioners and activists.

Again, welcome!

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