

# Strategic Plan (2022-2027)

**August 2022**

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## 1 Background

Together we face an increasingly fragile and uncertain future. If the experience of the last two plus years has taught us anything, it is that societal challenges are global, systemic and have consequences for us all. Addressing the causes and consequences of poverty and hunger, climate justice, shrinking civil society space, disasters, violent conflict and gender inequality are international development concerns of direct relevance and consequence to us all. The shared salience of these issues highlights a blurring of boundaries, undermines comfortable dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and reinforces the urgency of decolonising the ways in which we describe and analyse the world, understand how best to address challenges and organise ourselves to act in effective ways.

For international development researchers, practitioners and policy makers, recognising the ubiquity of these shared challenges comes with an understanding that inter-related social, economic and political processes do not impact everyone in the same way. Patterns of vulnerability and resilience differ across blurring but still salient boundaries, both between and within countries, communities and households, with life-altering and life-threatening consequences for the most vulnerable. It is against this background that the Development Studies Association of Ireland (DSAI) comes together to provide shared space for development researchers, practitioners and policy makers based in and/or associated with Ireland to engage, exchange and debate in order to support a better future for all. Together, we aim to support a dynamic and proactive development community producing critical and challenging perspectives on development.

DSAI was formed in 2012 as an independent national association representing development studies in Ireland. Established as an unincorporated association, DSAI is governed by an elected steering committee whose powers and duties are set out in a written constitution. DSAI is a network of individual international development scholars, practitioners and policy makers from across the higher education, governmental and non-governmental organisation and policy sectors that comes together to achieve a concentration of learning, reflection, knowledge exchange and influencing that no one Irish institution or organisation can achieve alone. DSAI is supported by contributions from members and from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Irish Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) and NGOs.<sup>1</sup> DSAI has a well-established and broad system of alliances across the international development sector in Ireland and runs key strategic public events each year, including an annual conference, a summer school and numerous study group seminars. These meet the needs of DSAI members and the broader international development community by providing a space for research dissemination and high-quality debate on key issues in development studies theory and practice.

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<sup>1</sup> NGOs and HEIs that have supported DSAI financially through institutional contributions and / or with core administrative support in recent years have included Christian Aid, Comhlámh, Concern, GOAL, Oxfam Ireland, Plan Ireland, Self Help Africa, Trócaire and Sightsavers on the NGO side and University of Limerick, Atlantic Technological University (includes GMIT), Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, Technological University of the Shannon (includes LIT), South-East Technological University (includes WIT), Technological University of Dublin, University College Cork and National University of Ireland, Galway from HEIs. Many other NGOs and HEIs have collaborated in joint events and / or have been actively represented in our structures and activities.

## 2 DSAI Vision, Mission and Values

**Our Vision** is the creation of a vibrant and innovative development studies community, which focuses on cutting edge research, contributing to the reduction of poverty, inequality and vulnerability in the world.

**Our Mission** is to provide a national platform, which provides an open and participatory space for dialogue between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, who have an interest in, or are working in the area of international development. We achieve this by supporting cohesion and capacity-building in the development studies sector; Promoting strategic alliances and partnerships to grow the development studies sector; Harnessing research which supports and promotes coherent evidence-based development policy and practice aimed at the reduction of global poverty, the enhancement of all forms of equality and respect for human rights.

Through dialogue and engagement we strive to live up to **our values**, which include a shared commitment to integral human development within planetary limits, poverty reduction and attainment of UN sustainable development goals, being inclusive, reflexive and self-critical in our approach to learning and being supportive of debate, difference and the respectful exchange of views. We also believe that development research should be southern driven, respectful of individuals and communities, support the empowerment of women and other excluded groups in setting and implementing the agenda through participatory approaches without unduly raising expectations, that development researchers should adopt a ‘do no harm’ approach working in partnership with communities and agencies, respecting their independence and the integrity of the research and adherence to ethical guidelines targeting the practical needs of social action and transformation.

## 3 Strategic Objectives for the next five years

DSAI has identified five core strategic objectives for the coming five years. Objectives 1-3 capture the core pillars of DSAI’s work in the Irish development sector, namely to operate as Ireland’s primary platform for bringing together development researchers, practitioners and policy makers in support of enhancing evidence-based approaches to international development. Objective 4 addresses the need to future strengthen DSAI structures, while Objective 5 commits DSAI to taking a more systematic approach to collaborations with other Irish and international development related networks. These strategic objectives are summarised in the Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Summary of DSAI Strategic Objectives (2022-2027)**

<b>Objective 1:</b> Maximising the impact of development research	<b>Objective 2:</b> Creating opportunities for learning, critical reflection and dialogue	<b>Objective 3:</b> Influencing development policy and practice through formal and informal means
<b>Objective 4:</b> Strengthening DSAI organisational structures		
<b>Objective 5:</b> Maximising opportunities for collaboration with other development related networks		

## 4 Key expected actions in support of these objectives

### Objective 1: Maximising the impact of development research

#### Key Expected Actions

- Successful delivery of DSAI annual conference each year with relevant annual thematic focus
- Continuation of DSAI Peer Reviewed Working Paper series
- Support to early career researchers (including post-graduate and recently graduated students) through enhanced networking opportunities, research methods workshops and supportive peer review (working papers etc)
- Further explore pan-European development research networks

### Objective 2: Creating opportunities for learning, critical reflection and dialogue

#### Key Expected Actions

- Strengthening of DSAI study groups to ensure core focus on key development themes including poverty & hunger, climate justice, shrinking civil society space, disasters and violent conflict and gender inequality and promotion of study group sessions that incorporate / encourage critical reflection and pedagogical approaches.
- Maintain an active programme of study group seminars, summer schools and other learning events
- Based on COVID learning experience, maximise the possibilities of hybrid approaches to learning events – particularly with respect to the annual conference, while providing opportunities for in-person networking / exchange in both formal and informal settings

### Objective 3: Influencing development policy and practice through formal and informal means

#### Key Expected Actions

- Maximising opportunities for convening stakeholders from across the Irish development sector on development research and learning themes
- Production of concise member authored DSAI policy briefs
- Generate DSAI website debate around research/policy/practice through online ‘opinion pieces’ (including use of thematic calls)
- Share teaching and learning materials via web and other dissemination channels
- Webcasting and podcasting for more DSAI events
- Enhanced on-line communications/dissemination (on-line updates, monthly mailshot, member database, social media/engagement analytics, encouraging/enhancing dialogue, and enhanced audio-visual content across platforms)
- Piloting of outcome harvesting approach to capture current and future influencing of development policy and practice

#### **Objective 4: Strengthening DSAI organisational structures**

##### **Key Expected Actions**

- Review and Updating of the DSAI Constitution
- Build relationships across HEIs through institutional support
- Assessment of immediate staffing requirements with a view to increasing organisational capacity where needed and financially possible
- Agree new or extend existing hosting arrangement beyond current two-year cycle
- Strengthen succession planning for DSAI Steering Committee
- Map available options to provide a more stable organisational basis for DSAI in the medium term and agreement on next steps
- Conduct mid-term review of progress against DSAI's strategic objectives in 2024, with the possibility of adaptation at that time.

#### **Objective 5: Maximising opportunities for collaboration with development related networks**

##### **Expected Actions**

**Ireland:** Sub-group formed to act as a locus point for high level engagement with other development and civil society related networks in the sector. ToR to include a focus of identification of opportunities for strategic collaboration and co-operation moving forward.

**European Union:** Continue talks for hosting of EADI conference in 2026 or thereafter.

**International:** Strategically select invited speakers to DSAI Annual Conferences to support strengthened international awareness of and links with DSAI (as part of annual conference planning); Study Groups continue to organically engage with other development networks. Re-engage with DSA UK to develop mutually beneficial bilateral engagements.

## **5 Key Assumptions and Risks**

Several key assumptions underpin this strategic plan, with attendant risks. These include:

- Maintenance of organisational stability over the bulk of the strategic planning period
- Continued willingness of scholars and practitioners to engage in the work of DSAI on a voluntary basis, particularly in the work of the steering committee and as study group convenors
- The financial resource base of DSAI remains stable and, where expansion is proposed, that additional resources can be mobilised to support this expansion

DSAI's Steering Committee will regularly review the on-going applicability of these key assumptions as part of its risk management processes. The planned 2024 mid-term review will also provide an opportunity to take stock and to assess the continued reasonableness of these assumptions.

## 6 Concluding remarks

No strategic plan can accurately predict the future. At best, the process of reflection and analysis associated with putting a strategic plan together provides an opportunity for key stakeholders to stand back from the pressure of day to day activities to reconsider the *raison d'être* of the organisation, the extent to which it is achieving its mission, what can be done better or more effectively moving forward and to make choices on what to focus on in the coming years.

DSAI's strategic planning processes has reconfirmed the importance of the association to the Irish development sector, the strong commitment of many involved in the association to its aims and objectives while also identifying opportunities for further enhancement and strengthening. Setting out a strategic plan of this nature represents a statement of future intent; the association recognises that we face an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world and that even in the best of circumstances, adaptation in the face of emerging trends and realities will be both necessary and desirable. Nonetheless, we are confident that the strategic objectives as set out in this plan provide a firm basis upon which to proceed in a manner that will strengthen the ability of the Irish development sector to capitalise on new evidence, research, learning and reflection to enhance development policy and practice and ultimately to support improved development outcomes.