250 PhD Graduates at ISS
Published on the occasion of the 250th PhD graduation at ISS on 10 March 2023.
I. Interviews

IN CONVERSATION WITH Prof. Arjun Bedi

The past, present and future of ISS research

I realised it’s about the problem you study, not the discipline you use.

With 25 PhDs supervised to completion, Professor Arjun Bedi is well-placed as the Deputy Rector of Research. Among other tasks, along with the Research Degrees Committee, he is responsible for the operation and the success of the ISS PhD programme.

Understanding the present and envisioning the future

Arjun joined ISS in 2000 and was trained as a development economist, but over time, development studies found him. The institute offers a heady mix of unparalleled internationalism and diverse perspectives and the potential to conduct cross-disciplinary research, which is core to his vision.

‘Development is a very applied field and I think one of the limitations is that there isn’t enough quantitative training that takes place. We collect a lot of statistics and data but we need to be better aware of how to use this information. There is a view that development studies is a “soft” field, but this is misguided. There is a need to reach out and integrate work from other disciplines beyond social sciences and combine them with development studies.’

Taking this one step further, Arjun elaborates on two innate qualities within the ISS research community: internationalism and background. This is a sentiment that Arjun shares with the head of the Research Degree Committee, Thea Hilhorst. Arjun highlights how the three core types of PhD students most commonly found at ISS come from academia, those with INGO and NGO backgrounds, and those with national or international policy backgrounds. Working in tandem with the multinationalism of ISS, researchers often find themselves able to forge a unique path: often one that allows them to take their knowledge back to their home countries but with new-found networks and capacities that allow for deeper impact.

The positive impact and the unique capabilities of ISS

As happy as he is for ISS having reached it, the 250th PhD milestone is not as important in Arjun’s view. What is more important, seeing how quickly the PhD programme has grown, is to make sure that the quality and impact that candidates make stays strong as ISS continues to develop its research. He refers to one of his favourite projects over the past years: a community-based health insurance project in Ethiopia which involved three former ISS PhD students and engaged with public officials. The team worked on a project that continues to develop and yield academic and policy outcomes twelve years later. This is one of his favourite examples of the uniqueness of ISS’s PhD capabilities: combining research and real-world implementations that have a lasting long-term impact.

One of Arjun’s goals is to ensure that PhDs are better integrated into ISS’s research and the faculty in general. In the past we had ISS staff research and ISS PhD research, but we have now started seeing more collaborative research between the two, which the Research Degree Committee is looking to make into a more regular feature of ISS’s research function. And of course, where else can we find such a unique combination of practical, theoretical, international and academic? The hope is to continue to harness and develop the power of this invaluable combination and create cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary, cross-academic impact not just within ISS but outside it too.

Progressing with our PhD programme

Having completed her own PhD during a more cowboy-style era of research where the words ‘research ethics’, ‘safety and security’ and ‘data management’ were not even in research vernacular, she firmly believes that one of the best developments within the field of academic research is the progress and implementation of ethics and safety. In ISS, she and her team are taking this one step further, creating a series of trainings to improve the art of supervision and overall PhD experience for candidates and staff.

Future of development research

There is no doubt that candidates make stays strong as ISS continues to grow, is to make sure that the quality and impact that candidates make stays strong as ISS continues to develop its research. As the Chair of the Research Degree Committee, Professor Thea Hilhorst is tasked with monitoring the quality and output of PhDs at ISS by providing policy guidance and support to candidates and supervisors to realize the supervision that enable candidates to thrive. Seated in an armchair in her office, she explains her mission in her usual calm, poised manner: to design a robust, protective PhD environment that ensures candidates can have the fruitful experience they are entitled to during and beyond their PhD.

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Prof. Thea Hilhorst

PhD welfare and the uniqueness of the ISS PhD

I really appreciate how the PhD programme has grown in momentum and importance in the past few years. It has given us opportunities to see where we can improve in our work, but also see the kind of real impact we make.

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Second-to-none PhD researchers

Unique to ISS is the ability to combine all of these perspectives with international exposure: ISS is particularly special within European academia given not just its international student population but its international staff population too. Further enhancing the PhD profile is the fact that most candidates come in after having worked in public service, as activists, in diplomacy and beyond before starting their degrees. This combination is the foundation for a plethora of possibilities in impact: from activist-centric research that allows people to go back into the field to create change on the ground, to academic-centric research that leads to post-docs and future lecturers, to public service-centric research that has provided avenues for students to get into some of the highest echelons of service, where they can do things better.

As proud as she is about ISS reaching this milestone, Thea is always looking for ways to improve. One opportunity she identifies is the development of more joint PhD supervisions and joint degrees with partner universities in the global South. An invaluable opportunity to create solutions across borders, perspectives and fields, ISS has already embarked on several successful collaborations and lessons have been learned. Thea is keen to make this a more regular feature of ISS’s research programme, including making such opportunities easier and more tailor-made for future candidates. She is also focusing on alumni engagement and the impact a well-connected alumni community could make. ‘It will be a great opportunity from a practical sense to know what everyone is doing – like if we have an MA student who wants to look into a specific field, we can say “Hey we have an alumnus in this field who might be good to connect with.”’ I think in the future we will be able to not only follow PhD alumni but also create a real community outfit that can connect and maximize their impact. It is also really nice to follow these stories, so we are keen on capturing that.’

Underlying her entire conversation is the desire to provide simply the most secure experience possible, to ensure PhD candidates not only find a way to complete their degrees successfully, but come out the other side stronger and able to implement their vision of the future. And of course, in Thea Hilhorst’s words, where else can you do a PhD within 5km of the beach?
IN CONVERSATION WITH

Dr Judith-Ann Walker
Cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary impact

I think completing a PhD is a juncture in our lives. It is unique in the sense that while you go through it, you don’t think about the significance in terms of the spaces and the classes and students. But if you are going to be in the development space, you’ll be able to draw from so many of the learnings, it’s important to understand there’s a community committed to solving development issues.

A work-life balance like no other

When Dr Judith-Ann Walker talks about her PhD being a life-changing juncture, she means it. Not only did it open up avenues in her professional life, she met and married a fellow ISS PhD alumnus. She then had children while doing her PhD, completing the programme in four years and defending her PhD while eight months pregnant! Amazing things can happen when you believe in your capacity to enable the lives of others.

In 1991, Judith-Ann married a fellow ISS PhD alumnus. She then had children, which opened up avenues in her professional life, she met and married a fellow ISS PhD alumnus. She then had children while doing her PhD, completing the programme in four years and defending her PhD while eight months pregnant! Amazing things can happen when you believe in your capacity to enable the lives of others.

Cross-disciplinary freedom within and outside ISS

It was a combination of this freedom and creativity that ISS allowed her to have, and the international exposure she received simply by being in the institute, that Judith-Ann values most about her time here. This comfort was useful in helping round out her experience and understanding of what development should be. As she puts it:

‘From the beginning, coming from the small island of Trinidad and Tobago, I was exposed to understanding development from many different terms, across Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe. But it was the synergy that we’re addressing the same issues – inequality, underdevelopment, policy being developed and implemented but not delivering what one wants to deliver – that synergistic experience of trying to combine all these perspectives from colleagues and friends that cemented my experience. I carried that drive forward into my PhD, of what development is, and what it shouldn’t be.’

Moving to the next stages in the development field, while unsaid, it is clear from her post-ISS work with universities, governments, the UN and DRPC, that this synergy went beyond her education. When asked what she thinks ISS could be doing more of, she points to the tension between academic-centric researchers focusing on theoretical understandings of development, while activist-centric researchers look to develop solutions that can be applied practically. As she notes, both are necessary in order to round out the field.

She goes further, pointing out that ISS is one of the places in which cross-disciplinary integration is becoming more mainstream. When she was studying, disciplines were sliced: economics, agrarian, public policy and so forth, all working in their own spaces. Over time she has seen a change towards cross-functional, cross-disciplinary collaboration, especially in the areas of gender and climate change.

This is a positive step she hopes to see more of from both ISS and the development field in general.

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Dr Getnet Alemu
The value of working together

I remember one time I sat in the Butterfly Bar for a few days, 1-2 hours a day, and I realised I was meeting people from at least 10 countries every time.

Building connections with unexpected long-term benefits

Dr Getnet Alemu completed his PhD on the nexus between economic growth and foreign aid in the local Ethiopian context. After receiving his degree in 2002, Getnet joined Addis Ababa university, working on various research projects linked to his degree.

In 2011, a project on community-based health insurance (CBHI) brought Getnet closer to ISS again. Together with Professor Arjun Bedi, Dr Robert Sparrow, Professor Marleen Decker (from Leiden University) and two other then-PhD students (Dr Zealem Yima and Dr Anagaw Derseh) the team conducted four rounds of household survey on 12 pilot districts in Ethiopia. The findings established CBHI and helped scale it up to the current 900 districts it is working in. Twelve years later, several of the original team members remain involved, with new expertise coming in to strengthen the project, including several from ISS. The concept has been brought to the urban informal sector and the team is now exploring and designing features to fit CBHI into an overall urban community as well.

Around the same time, Getnet was working with Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Dutch government on an impact evaluation of two water supply and sanitation projects implemented in Addis Ababa and Adama in Ethiopia. Busy and engaged as he was at the time, what he values most about these experiences is the connections, especially within ISS. When asked about favourite moments or achievements in his career since his PhD, Getnet says:

‘What I get from these projects is the network. Of course, when you do an academic project there’s publications and reputation involved, but personally the most important thing is the network I have established. I feel I am part of the ISS staff without being formally on the payroll – the contacts I have gained are so strong, and the links I have built are so valuable and productive. I think I can also say that especially the CBHI project has contributed to the image and work of ISS as much as it has enriched me, and that is my biggest take away.’

Roses but also thorns: the journey of doing a PhD at ISS

At this point, the conversation moves towards Getnet’s experiences at ISS itself. He starts by talking about ISS’s internationalism: a common theme amongst everyone who spends time in the institute. In his view, ISS is like a mini-UN. It is possible to meet people from almost every corner of the globe, and the uniqueness is how all these different cultures, political stances and social experiences come together naturally. In addition to the training ISS gives formally through classes and research, ISS provides informal training around communication and cultural respect, which, as Getnet suggests, is hard to come across in other institutes to the same degree.

Having now worked in it for several decades, our conversation turns to how the field itself has changed. Judith-Ann refers to the role of young people, especially in Africa. There has been a drastic shift in recent years towards the role of youth, the voice they have, the exclusion they face and where they fit within society. Conversations around including women in the process of active participation in development have also started happening more regularly, where the possibility of bringing in more voices in a direct, honest manner is being tackled. Not fast enough for Judith-Ann, but it’s a start.
Extrapolating further, he refers to the changes the field has undergone in the past two decades: whereas previously there were distinct donor-recipient relationships, development studies now looks at the partnership that needs to be formed at the various levels of involvement. And while touchpoints like gender equality or environmentalism are becoming more prominent topics of conversation, Getnet’s perspective continues to focus on the role of development cooperation and community impact even when accounting for these areas, asking the question of how to protect policy and people when it comes to aid and top-down intervention. To an extent it is taking place, but it is up to people like Getnet to show us how meaningful these connections can be.

Yukari Sekine, ISS’s 250th PhD graduate walks into the room wearing a beige and green cardigan that had been knitted by a former employee turned friend. Having returned from a month-long silent retreat just days before this interview, she has a lot of reflections to share about her journey over the past six years.

The process and the pleasure of doing a PhD in ISS

In true ISS style, the 250th PhD was conducted using a scholar-activist approach to research, where Yukari focused on agrarian struggles (like land grabs and ecological consequences) in the era of climate change, populism and authoritarianism in Myanmar. She came to ISS to join a research project led by her now supervisor Professor Jun Borras, and found herself stepping into a challenging but rewarding research community. As she puts it, having this project group meant being able to see things from a broader, more complex perspective, and then working with Jun to network and connect patterns across diverse areas. That the group itself had genuine camaraderie, an interest in supporting each other and made her feel included and comfortable is, according to Yukari, true credit to the people that make ISS what it is – the staff, the professors, her supervisors and her diverse cast of colleagues and friends. Her gratitude is immense and unbridled, and she carries that energy as we start talking about some of the harder times she dealt with during her PhD trajectory.

Without hesitation, she talks about the internal conflict she faced when it came to the writing. While the fieldwork had its challenging moments, it was engaging and dynamic. By contrast, 40% of her time in the past two years went into taming her insecurities around writing and finishing on time. Writing and learning how to write was the hardest part, and Yukari talks openly about the mental health struggles that she has observed PhDs face in general. Having reached the end of her own process, she is looking to make this her personal quest for the future: supporting mental health needs within and beyond academia in the years to come.

Deciding what happens after the PhD defence

Of course, this is not the only thing she will be looking to do after receiving her degree! Reflecting on her experience as an activist-turned-scholar-activist, she talks about how her perspectives on activism have developed over the years. Where before she would be highly encouraging of social movements, she now sees the inner workings of them more clearly from an academic perspective. Advocacy and activism are necessary, but Yukari now more clearly sees the conflicts and layers involved in constructing change. She gives the example of Myanmar’s land struggles, where conflict over land takes place alongside military dominance, conflict over state and ethnic armed organizations over territory and power. There is historical context involved, as well as socio-economic and political structures. Activism is one element of a lot of moving parts. So, after a well-deserved break with her family, ISS’s 250th PhD candidate is going to re-enter the field, as an engaged researcher and advocate, and learn how to re-connect in social justice. Just this time with a view to understanding alternative ways of advocating and contributing to social change.

‘The reason why I came to ISS was because it was so politically and socially engaged. After graduating I’d like to think of what the best way is to contribute. I want to help as much as I can, but I think I do need to reassess how I can help and what my position in that space will be without adding my own inner conflict or preconceptions. I think that is where I will start.’

As our newest graduate, ISS congratulates Dr Yukari Sekine on the success of her efforts and we cannot wait to see just how she redesigns her activist efforts in Myanmar and beyond.
II. Statistics 250 PhD alumni

Gender distribution of PhD graduates
- 49% Male
- 51% Female

PhD graduates with distinction
- 8% With distinction

Previous study at ISS
- 72% Yes
- 28% No

Country of origin of PhD graduates
- 36% North America
- 16% Middle/South America
- 30% Africa
- 13% Asia
- 5% Australia

Areas of work PhD graduates

PhD defences per year

Countries with the most PhD candidates
1. Ethiopia (21)
2. India (17)
3. The Netherlands (15)
4. China (9)
5. Philippines (9)
6. Vietnam (9)
III. List of 250 PhD Graduates

1986

1 Mr Kappadath P. Kannan
Indian
Rural Proletarian Struggles: Mobilisation and Organization of Rural Workers in Kerala, India
Professor A. (Ashwani) Sath
Professor J.C. (Dan) Breman
10 September 1986

1988

2 Mr Jose A. Pereirinha
Portuguese
Inequalities, Household Income Distribution and Development in Portugal
Professor R. (Ruud) Teekens
Professor P. (Manuela) Silva
07 October 1988

1990

3 Mr Marito Garcia
Filipino
Resource Allocation and Household Welfare: A Study of the Impact of Personal Sources of Income on Food Consumption, Nutrition and Health in the Philippines
Professor R.N.F. (Ben) White
Professor R. (Ruud) Teekens
23 March 1990

4 Mr Bill Paton
Canadian
Labor Export Policy in the Development of Southern Africa
Professor R. (Iker) Post
Professor G. (Geerthe) Lycklama à Nijeholt
15 September 1990

1991

5 Mr Anjan Kumar Datta
Bangladeshi
Control, Conflict and Alliance: An Analysis of Land and Labour Relations in Two Bangladesh Villages
Professor B.N.F. (Ben) White
Professor H.P.A. (Here) van Roosmalen
18 October 1991

1993

6 Mr Luis Carlos Jemio
Bolivian
Professor E.V.K. (Vopsy) FitzGerald
Dr R. (Reine) Pitton
Dr T. (Thanh-Dam) Truong
07 March 1994

1994

7 Ms Virginia O. Del Rosario
Filipina
Lifting the Smoke Screen: Dynamics of Mail-Order Bride Migration from the Philippines
Professor G. (Geerthe) Lycklama à Nijeholt
Dr R.J. (Reine) Pitton
Dr T. (Thanh-Dam) Truong
29 July 1994

8 Ms Patricia Mohammed
Trinidadian
A Social History of Post-Migrant Indians in Trinidad from 1917 to 1949: A Gender Perspective
Professor G. (Geerthe) Lycklama à Nijeholt
Dr R.J. (Reine) Pitton
29 July 1994

9 Mr Yahaya Hashim
Nigerian
The State and Trade Unions in Africa: A Study in Macro-Corporatism
Professor J.W.J. (Jeffrey) Harrod
Dr N.B. (Paschal) Mihyo
29 July 1994

1995

10 Mr Gebru Mersha
Ethiopian
State Farms in State-Centred Accumulation Strategies in Socialist Africa: The Rationale and a Critique
Professor A. (Ashwani) Sath
Professor R. (Iker) Post
20 January 1995

1996

11 Ms Laurine Platzky
South African
The Development Impact of South Africa’s Industrial Location Policies: An Unforeseen Legacy
Professor J.G.M. (Joes) Hilhorst
Professor A.H.J. (Bert) Hetruins
30 May 1995

12 Ms Judith-Ann Walker
Trinidadian
Development Administration in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago (1960-90)
Professor J.W. (Umut) Björkman
Dr V.V. (Nasad) Mohair
30 June 1995

13 Mr Fernando Tenjo Galarza
Colombian
Corporate Finance under Adjustment. Firm Behaviour, Private Sector and Economic Policy in Colombia
1970-90
Professor E.V.K. (Vopsy) FitzGerald
Dr K. (Karel) Jansen
08 December 1995

1997

14 Ms Joan M. Rawlins
Jamaican
Women from Middle: Coping in Jamaica: A Study of Power in the Lives of Women Aged 50-74 in Jamaica
Professor G. (Geerthe) Lycklama à Nijeholt
Dr R.J. (Reine) Pitton
Dr I. (Inez) Smith
23 February 1996

15 Mr Purnendu S. Kavoori
Indian
Pastoralism in Expansion: The Transhuming Sheep Herders of Western Rajasthan
Professor M.R. (Martin) Doornbos
Professor A.J. (Toni) Dietz, University of Amsterdam
11 October 1996

16 Mr K.L. Chandratilleke
Sri Lankan
Managerial Value Orientations and Labour Management Relations: A Study of Export Manufacturing Firms in Sri Lanka
Professor J.W.J. (Jeffrey) Harrod
Professor P. (Peter) Kloos, VU Amsterdam
09 June 1997

17 Mr Laixiang Sun
Chinese
Professor A. (Ashwani) Sath
Professor M. (Marc) Wynts
Dr K. (Karel) Jansen
21 November 1997

1998

18 Ms Maria Magdalena Guadalupe Barros Nock
Mexican
Small Farmers in the Global Economy: The Case of the Fruit and Vegetable Business in Mexico
Professor N. (Norman) Long, Wageningen Agricultural University
Dr F.C.M. (Frits) Wils
06 January 1998

19 Mr Alemanyehu Geda
Ethiopian
Finance and Trade in Africa: Modelling Macroeconomic Response in a World Economy Context
Professor E.V.K. (Vopsy) FitzGerald, University of Oxford
Professor R.P. (Rob) Vos
26 March 1998

20 Mr Ashesh Ambasta
Indian
Capitalist Restructuring and Formation of Adivasi Proletarians: Agrarian Transition in Thane District (Western India) c. 1817-1990
Professor M.R. (Martin) Doornbos
Professor H. (Henk) Thomas
30 September 1998

21 Mr Roodal Moonial
Trinidadian
Changing Labour Relations and the Future of Trade Unions: A Case-Study of Trinidad and Tobago
Professor M.R. (Martin) Doornbos
Professor D. (Dirk) Krujt, Utrecht University
Dr E.A. (Eadress) Ramaswamy
25 November 1998 – with distinction
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>University</th>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>22 Mr Zhang Weiguo</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Economic Reforms and Fertility Behaviour: A Study of a Northern Chinese Village</td>
<td>Professor M. (Marc) Wuysts</td>
<td>Professor F.J. (Francis) Wilkieks</td>
<td>University of Groningen</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>25 Mr Gabriel H.R. Rugalema</td>
<td>Tanzanian</td>
<td>Adult Mortality as Entitlement Failure: Aids and the Crisis of Rural Livelihoods in a Tanzanian Village</td>
<td>Professor M. (Marc) Wuysts</td>
<td>Professor F. (Paul) Richards</td>
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<td>2000</td>
<td>27 Mr Edsel E. Sajor</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>Upland Livelihood Transformations. State and Market Processes and Social Autonomy in the Northern Philippines</td>
<td>Professor B.N.F. (Ben) White</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>28 Ms Mona Mehta</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Suppressed Subjects? Gender Dynamics in the Context of Agrarian Change and Seasonal Labour Migration in Dahanu Taluka, Maharashtra</td>
<td>Professor J.C. (Jani) Brennan</td>
<td>Professor B.N.F. (Ben) White</td>
<td>Dr R. (Rachel) Kurian</td>
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<td>30 Mr Alejandro F. Izurieta C</td>
<td>Ecuadorian</td>
<td>Crowding-out or Bailing-out? Fiscal Deficits and Private Wealth in Ecuador, 1971-99</td>
<td>Professor E.V.K. (Valppy) FitzGerald</td>
<td>Professor R.P. (Rob) Vos</td>
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<td>31 Mr Abebe Haile Gabriel</td>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
<td>Development Strategies and The Ethiopian Peasantry: Supply Response and Rural Differentiation</td>
<td>Professor A. (Ashwanii) Salih</td>
<td>Professor M. (Marc) Wuysts</td>
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<td>35 Ms Claudia Sanchez Bajo</td>
<td>Argentinian</td>
<td>The Political Economy of Regionalism. Business Actors in Mercosur in the Petrochemical and Steel Sectors</td>
<td>Professor J.W.J. (Jeffrey) Harrod</td>
<td>Dr G.W. (George) Irvin</td>
<td>26 March 2001</td>
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<td>36 Mr Terefe Degefa</td>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
<td>Death of the Mother Tree: Land Tenure and Environmental Degradation in the Oromian Highlands, Ethiopia</td>
<td>Professor M. (Marc) Wuysts</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>41 Mr Getnet Alemu Zewdu</td>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
<td>Aid-driven Import Substitution and the Agriculture-Industry Nexus. Conceptualising the Aid-Growth Relationship in Ethiopia</td>
<td>Professor M. (Marc) Wuysts</td>
<td>Professor B.N.F. (Ben) White</td>
<td>30 September 2002</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>42 Ms Imani M. Tafari-Ama</td>
<td>Jamaican</td>
<td>Blood, Bullets and Bodies: Sexual Politics below the Poverty Line: The Political Economy of Violence, Power, Gender and Embodiment in Jamaica’s Inner-City</td>
<td>Professor G. (Geertje) Cylakma à Nijeholt</td>
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<td>43 Mr Claudius Preville</td>
<td>St. Lucian</td>
<td>Trade Liberalization under Imperfect Competition. An Analysis of the European Union’s Market for Banana Imports</td>
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<td>Professor M.P. (Meine Pieter) van Dijk, Erasmus University Rotterdam</td>
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Against the Grain. The political ecology of land use in a Kerala region, India  
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<td>2015</td>
<td>Ms Rekowswe Mate</td>
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<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>Grappling with Emerging Adulthoods: Youth Narratives of Coming of Age in a Frontier Town, Zimbabwe</td>
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<td>The Old is Dying and the New is Not Yet Born. The 2011 Egyptian Revolution: Labour, Capital, Time</td>
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