

International Institute of Social Studies

DEVISSUES

OCTOBER 2025

VOL.27 – NO.2



The impact of conflict: Recognizing the dangers and searching for solutions

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Erasmus

From the **Editorial Board**

Reimagining development

Dealing with the crises that define our moment – wars, food insecurity, cognitive manipulation and the erosion of social contracts – demands not only analysis but also imagination. The articles in this issue of DevISSues examine these crises, highlighting not only the dangers they pose but also how the search for solutions can encourage us to reimagine global structures and power relations.

Visser, Voicu and Bosman examine the links between conflict, geopolitics and food (in)security. They remind us that the weaponization of food is nothing new, and suggest that the intensifying vulnerabilities in the global food system give a new impetus to the ongoing debate about the need to rethink it.

Jayasundara-Smiths exposes a new frontier of warfare – cognitive warfare – where manipulation replaces missiles and perception becomes the battlefield. She argues that CogWar threatens our very democratic survival; to counter it will require strong investment in our societies.

In 'A Diseased State', Creed traces how anti-Blackness continues to shape the foundations of modernity, positioning the United States' political and health crises as symptoms of a deeper, global pathology.

And in their lively conversation, Fapohunda and Koch consider the crisis in aid funding and how this has the potential to re-shape power relations between the Global South and the Global North. Whilst not underestimating the immediate negative impacts of the cuts on aid recipients, they suggest that the end of aid dependency has the potential to open space for new forms of accountability and cooperation.

Further in this issue, we highlight ISS' one-year MA in Development Studies. The programme offers our global students the opportunity to not only theorize about development, it also challenges them to reflect on how to apply this knowledge to real-world challenges such as inequality, climate change and just transitions.

This issue puts a spotlight on the crises we are facing, how are they interlinked and how we can reimagine development to solve them. I hope you enjoy reading it and that it inspires you to embark, with others, on a collective exercise in unlearning, rethinking and building new futures.

Jane Pocock – Editor, DevISSues

Colophon

DevISSues is published twice a year by the International Institute of Social Studies, PO Box 29776, 2502 LT The Hague, the Netherlands
Tel +31 (0)70 4260 443
www.iss.nl
devISSues@iss.nl

Editor Jane Pocock

Editorial Board Marijn Faling, Sandra Nijhof, Sarah Njoroge, Sunil Tankha

Design Ontwerpwerk, The Hague

Cover concept Luca Lorodi

Cover design Ontwerpwerk

Production OBT, Leiden

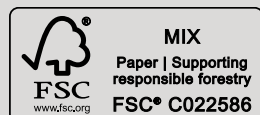
Circulation 5,000

The text material from DevISSues may be reproduced or adapted without permission, provided it is not distributed for profit and is attributed to the original author or authors, DevISSues and the International Institute of Social Studies.



A full list of references for relevant articles is included in DevISSues online.

ISSN 1566-4821. DevISSues is printed on FSC® certified paper.



Contents



4

Conflict, Geopolitics and Food (In)security



8

The rise, reach and impact of Cognitive Warfare



12

A new stage in the same old American disease

- 14 ISS News
- 17 Where are they now?
- 18 Focus on ISS
- 20 Staff-student dialogue
- 22 ISS publications
- 23 Student life

Rector's Blog Flourishing



This year, I dedicated the better part of my summer holiday to gardening. The place needed a major overhaul but we are quite happy with the result: beauty, diversity, serenity and even the practical outcome of our own fresh produce (if we are lucky). The positive effects on my own physical health and my tan were a bonus.

The garden also made me ponder the concept of growth, so dominant in economy and the broader field of development and politics. Clearly a biological metaphor and often used with strong positive overtones. In our garden, however, we were not always happy with growth. The excessive growth of ivy, for example, beautiful as it may be, called for serious pruning and curbing measures. We grunted regularly at another set of tangled roots from nearby trees or bushes. And the growth of algae on our pond...

Growth is not always positive. It is all about the more qualitative – and normative! – question of what is growing, and where. Not just in our garden, but in our societies as well. The increase of consumption of natural gas in a serious Dutch winter may count officially as economic growth, but it is a parasitic kind of growth, extracting and depleting natural resources and thereby more a liability than an asset. It should be counted as a negative on our balance sheets.

Growth is not always positive, and that has triggered the discussion about the need to respect planetary boundaries. But because economic development is spread so unevenly across the globe, that would imply serious redistribution, and even degrowth in some of the richer parts of the world. The latter is a consequence that is not very welcome in the dominant discourse.

Personally, I am inspired by the notion of flourishing that has been propagated by feminist philosophers, theologians and ethicists. It builds on another biological metaphor, linked perhaps to the idea of growth, but without the intrinsic element of expansion. One can flourish without growing. But eventually, one cannot flourish at the expense of others and therefore it implies a harmonious relationship to one's environment. We only flourish in mutually beneficial relationships.

Flourishing doesn't just happen. It requires pruning and curbing invasive species (like profit-driven cultures and industries). It requires nurturing those in less favourable conditions and valuing their resilience. It requires gardening. Laborious, but very rewarding as our own garden is telling me.

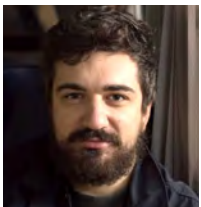
Ruard Ganzevoort, Rector ISS



Conflict, Geopolitics and Food (In)security

The blockade of Ukrainian ports during Russia's 2022 invasion triggered a record spike in food prices. Nearly 25 million tons of grains got stuck in Ukraine (Reuters 2022).

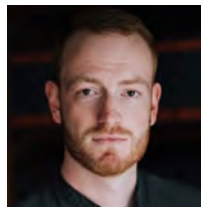
Exports of wheat, corn and sunflower seeds plummeted below 10% of their normal volume. Aside from hurting Ukraine's economy, it also generated a global food panic (Reuters 2022), as many countries, especially in Africa and the Middle East, had grown reliant on Ukrainian and Russian grain over the past decade.



Stefan Voicu is an anthropologist and visiting lecturer at the Central European University in Vienna, Austria



Oane Visser is Associate Professor at ISS



Paul Bosman is a political philosopher and researcher at independent think tank Socires

With regional wars, tariff wars and latent conflicts intensifying, and drawing increasingly more states into the crossfire, we use the turbulence of global food systems following the war in Ukraine as an entry point to examine the links between conflict, geopolitics and food (in)security. We investigate the current weaponization of food, what it reveals about the vulnerabilities of our global

Photo right: Wheat flour from Ukraine in Port Sudan, Sudan 2024 © WFP/Abubaker Garelnabei

'the two Trump administrations are ... unleashing a multipolar world system characterized by polycrisis and rising authoritarianism'

food system and the possibilities for its transformation.

In a *longue durée* perspective, Russia's weaponization of food is not new (Nelson 2022). In the Punic wars with Carthage, the Romans, after defeating Hannibal's armies, ploughed farmland with salt, destroyed irrigation infrastructure and contaminated wells. In the 1930s, Stalin starved millions of peasants resisting Soviet collectivization. Cold War-era US attempted to impose a wheat boycott on the Soviet Union to destabilize it, which failed as other wheat-exporting countries refused to follow suit. The 1973 US soy export ban (aimed at curbing domestic inflation) caused the so-called 'soy sauce shock' in import-dependent Japan.

The first two decades after the Soviet demise in 1991 constituted a relatively stable time when global food production increased and the West widely funded food aid and development cooperation. Geopolitics and the weaponization of food seemed something of the past. That optimistic outlook is quickly fading. The weaponization of food is not unique to Russia. Israel has been starving the Palestinians by blocking food aid deliveries to Gaza. While bombing grain elevators or starving citizens is of a different order than a food ban driving up prices abroad, they all reflect a suspension of 'business as usual' of the early post-Cold War era, rising geopolitics and weaponization of food (Sommerville 2024). Furthermore, the current weaponization of food occurs in a more globalized, interdependent and unstable world, even compared with the Cold War. Next to the alarming climate

change-induced food system volatility, the post-WWII globalization of trade and export of subsidized Western food production (especially US wheat) has been succeeded by several decades of deregulation of finance. The excessive hedging with food commodities this enabled means that the increasing occurrence of climate change-induced failed harvests has stark ripple effects, with price shocks magnified globally by aggressive speculation by food traders and investors. Simultaneously, the post-WWII international institutions that stabilized the global order upon which the contemporary food system relies are weakening. Having supported the US hegemony, institutions such as the UN, IMF and WTO are now under threat from sanctions, tariff wars and financial cuts. For many commentators, the two Trump administrations are hitting the last nails in the coffin of the, previously US-led, 'liberal international order' (McCoy 2024), unleashing a multipolar world system characterized by polycrisis and rising authoritarianism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2024).

The international status of countries like China, India and Russia has changed. While the US remained the World Food Programme's largest financial contributor till Trump-II, China has now also become one of its major donors. Russia has turned from a food aid recipient in the early 1990s into a food exporter and donor (Visser et al. 2017) and overtaken the US as largest wheat exporter. Food aid and exports are likely to increasingly become a tool in geopolitical struggles. For example, Russia announced that it will prioritize food exports to 'friendly countries'. And several EU countries are

limiting development cooperation in low-income countries (OECD 2025), focusing instead on neighbouring regions in line with strategic interests – particularly to curb migration. The Netherlands, for instance, has reduced development cooperation in Southern Africa and refocused it on the Horn of Africa and MENA. Precise motivations, abilities and the directness of geopolitical self-interest in food imports and aid differ across global powers. Yet the worldwide tendency to see food trade increasingly in terms of security and geopolitics (again), rather than in terms of market and development, is notable.

While the international institutions that shoulder the post-WWII free market order, especially the WTO, IMF and World Bank, have repeatedly been criticized (Li 2007; Peet 2009), a world where they disappear (or become largely inconsequential) looks even less appealing, especially for smaller, poorer and food insecure countries. The war in Ukraine, and especially the short-lived UN Black Sea Grain Initiative, exposed the vulnerability of international institutions (with the FAO hampered by internal divisions along geopolitical lines), but also the difficulty of ensuring food security on a regional and global level in their absence. Is there a way to get out of this catch-22 situation?

EU efforts to ensure global food security amidst the Ukraine grain crisis are an example of how difficult it might be. The establishment of the 'solidarity lanes', allowing the circulation of Ukrainian grains through its bordering eastern member states, mainly Romania and Poland, created more problems than

'vulnerabilities in the global food system give a new impetus to the debate about ... rethink[ing] the global food system'

solutions, revealing the crumbling foundations of the corporate food regime. With a Common Agricultural Policy favouring land concentration in capital-intensive farms and a neoliberal agenda over the past decades (van der Ploeg et al. 2015), the EU's geopolitical ambitions were thwarted by indebted farmers caught wrong-footed by the influx of Ukrainian grains. The latter lowered farmgate prices in the EU. Demanding compensation and the suspension of the solidarity lanes, the farmers' protests in the EU's east (CNN 2023) fuelled dissatisfaction throughout Europe with the Union's liberal economic policy and Green Deal environmental regulations, culminating in the EU-wide protests of late 2023, early 2024 (Finger et al. 2024). The discontent helped the

agribusiness lobby to water down the Green Deal.

The intensifying vulnerabilities in the global food system give a new impetus to the long-standing debate about the need to rethink the global food system. Re-localization to become at least partly self-sufficient might be a more sustainable and dependency-reducing alternative. Following the disruption of global food supply chains due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the World Bank – for the first time, and somewhat half-heartedly – advises (World Bank blogs 2023) some low/middle income countries to strengthen local production systems and lessen import dependencies, in sharp contrast with its prioritization of

export-led agriculture in the past few decades.

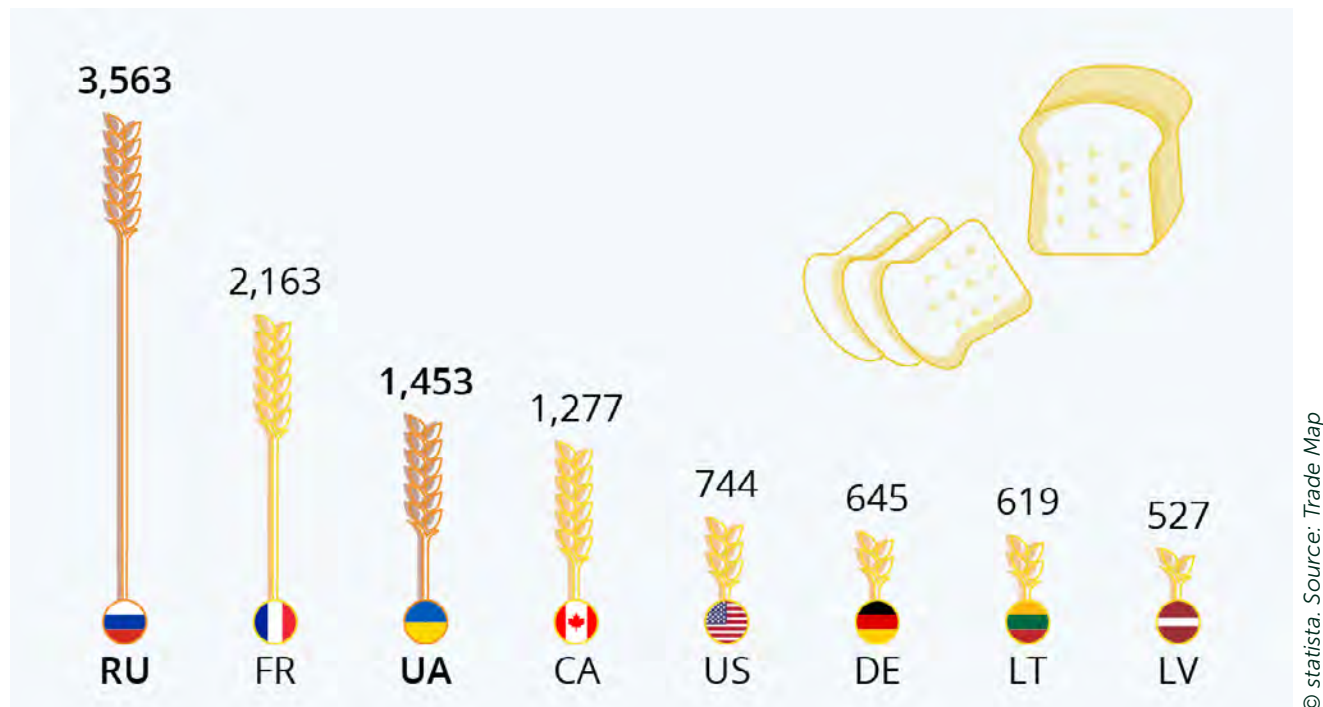
Bentley et al. (2022: 284) propose blending imported wheat with local, lower-cost cereals, and the substitution with drought-tolerant crops such as legumes, cassava and millet. This may offer countries a feasible strategy to curb dependence on imported staple crops. The role of the current crisis as a trigger of transition to sustainable agriculture might be more likely in the Global South than Global North. Many smallholders in the Global South, who are not integrated in export-oriented value chains, already work in a low-input, sustainable way. Further, low-income countries are most affected when global wheat shortages arise and prices increase. Consequently,



Aftermath of a Russian missile attack on grain elevator in Ukraine © State Emergency Service of Ukraine

Africa's Major Reliance on Russian and Ukrainian Wheat

Value of wheat imports into Africa of 2020, by exporting country* (in million USD)



* including meslin

they have an incentive to stimulate the production of local alternatives and start blending wheat-based flour with other (locally suitable) grains, as already practiced in Benin. Yet the pressure by the World Bank and IFC on low-income countries dependent on their loans not to subsidize food consumption or fertilizer has constrained governments in stimulating local, sustainable production.

The neoliberal World Bank recipe of export-oriented commercial farming rather than domestic production for food self-sufficiency, while encountering less enthusiasm amongst policy makers than before, remains prevalent. The war in Ukraine shows how this recipe only weakens low-income countries' capacity to face disruptions caused by the weaponization of food, while favouring a handful of multinational food corporations. However, numerous smallholders in Ukraine and Romania remain resilient, despite the neoliberal

policies of the international institutions these countries implement (Varga 2023). Many smallholders in the 'Global East', like those in the South, practice a 'quiet' form of food sovereignty (Siebert 2020; Visser et al 2015). But basing food security on this local, sustainable mode of food production would require fundamental change. Change that would halt food system corporatization and incentivize both smallholders and new de-globalized dietary cultures. To date, however, the dominant neo-liberal, export-led food paradigm has been

replaced by an incoherent mix of new security thinking, isolated localization attempts and ongoing market-led, export-oriented trends, within increasingly unstable international governance structures. Yet the current food system turbulence and cracks in international institutions might also open possibilities to reconsider old dogma's and come up with better interventions and global governance structures.

A full list of references is included in DevISSues online.

'Food aid and exports are likely to increasingly become a tool in geopolitical struggles'



Fewer Bullets and More Brains:

The rise, reach and impact of Cognitive Warfare



Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits is Associate Professor researching conflict and peace-building at ISS

Contemporary conflicts are increasingly protracted, attritional and politically complex. They no longer respect the geographical borders of a particular state or a region. There is a growing concern over rising reliance on non-kinetic warfare strategies whose effects are neither clear-cut nor easily traceable in real time. This is especially noted of Cognitive Warfare (CogWar); a distinct form of conflict that is redefining war in the 21st century. It operates within multiple grey zones – between war and peace, influence and interference, civilians and combatants (Henschke 2025, 22–23).¹ As kinetic wars grow costlier and riskier, CogWar offers belligerents a stealthier alternative: a means to fight without shedding blood.

Though lacking a universal definition and a nuanced framework, CogWar is distinguishable by its main target: our brains! It focuses on producing cognitive effects in the adversary, their allies or even neutral parties' populations and leadership. The most troubling aspect of CogWar is its civilian centrality. Unlike traditional warfare, CogWar directly targets civilians: their emotions, moral judgments, political affiliations and meta-cognitions. As Henschke notes, cognition in this context is not the representation formed from sensory input (i.e., information warfare) but a thought about that representation – a mental process reflecting on itself; thought about thought (2025: 17). Cognitive effects are not by-products of action but their primary aim (ibid). CogWar manipulates environmental stimuli to shape how people think and act (Hung and Hung 2022). NATO defines it as 'offensive actions employed to achieve effects on perceptions, beliefs, interests, aims, decisions, and behaviors by deliberately targeting the human mind' (2023). Instead of bombs and bullets, it deploys disinformation, psychological manipulation, lawfare and neuro-physiological techniques embedded in propaganda, public relations and diplomacy to destabilize identities, undermine agency and sow confusion and mistrust. A close reading of China's CogWar tactics reveals further methods – religious interference, staged

diplomatic gaffes, bilateral influence and population-wide disinformation campaigns – aimed at reshaping perceptions and weakening the integrity of democratic political and military systems (Backes and Swab 2019; Miller 2023). Its tools span online and offline realms: social media, algorithmic disinformation, educational content manipulation and coercive diplomacy

'CogWar offers belligerents ... a means to fight without shedding blood'

via economic pressure, political isolation and military intimidation. Its execution is sustained, systemic and multifaceted. CogWar is ambient and constant (Kamieński 2024), unfolding silently during war or peace, often without visibly aggressive acts. Its opacity and use of proxies – bots, users, corporations, legal entities – enable plausible deniability, making attribution difficult and accountability elusive.

CogWar impacts

The impacts of cognitive warfare are not immediately visible; indeed they are

usually invisible, ambiguous and hard to determine. As Claverie and du Cluzel (2022) rightly note, 'All you see is its impact, and by then, it is often too late.' To date, only a handful of comprehensive studies have examined the deployment and impacts of CogWar. One of the most detailed empirical analyses – Hung and Hung (2022) – investigates China's CogWar campaign targeting Taiwan during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study reveals how coordinated disinformation efforts eroded public trust in the Taiwanese government, casting doubt on its pandemic response, the safety of locally produced vaccines and even official death statistics. China's tactics included the extensive use of bot networks, content farms and fake accounts on platforms such as Facebook and LINE – the latter crafted to mimic domestic sources and evade detection. Although the pandemic was a relatively short-lived context, it served as a strategic entry point to deepen and extend CogWar efforts. These tactics exploited existing ethnic, generational and ideological divisions, amplifying polarization and shifting public opinion subtly but significantly in Beijing's favour. China's use of emotional assertiveness by evoking public indignation and diplomatic outbursts to pressure adversaries and shape discourse in the South China Sea dispute provide further insights (Hall 2023). These emotional performances are orchestrated to extract concessions and deter behaviour against China's core interests and steer



Anti-Brexit demonstration in London, 2022 © Alexander Andrews on Unsplash

adversaries' foreign policy directions and decisions in favour of China's interests.

Similar CogWar deployments are identified in the Indian ocean region (Xavier and Jacob 2025). In the case of Taiwan, cognitive operations have been effective in subduing open support for independence among some segments of the Taiwanese public. Similarly, with tactics of gradual encirclement of Sri Lanka's port of Hambantota, China has been effective in planting psychological and symbolic pressure points in South Asian regional power dynamics (Indian-US alliance, in particular). As economically vulnerable, smaller states in South Asia are increasingly caught up in crosshairs of geopolitical rivalries between India, the US, Australia and Japan on one side, and China and Russia on the other. They are subject to offensive and defensive CogWar by the rivaling states via numerous diverse grey zone tactics aimed at eroding adversarial intent for tactical or strategic gains. In parallel, the use of existing social discontents and recent regime changes in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have enabled shifting public opinions in favour of China-friendly elites.

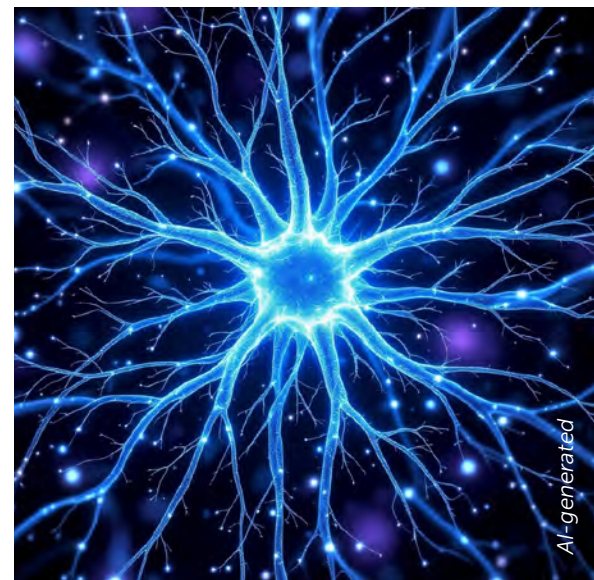
Russia's deployment of CogWar during the 2016 US presidential election provides compelling evidence of how various state-sponsored or backed operatives used social media to spread divisive content, impersonate American

'the Brexit campaign was shaped by emotional manipulation, identity politics and cognitive biases'

citizens and organize real-world protests. These tactics exploited cognitive biases, reinforced identity-based grievances and polarized the electorate. Russia's cognitive warfare approach was aimed at undermining the public's ability to distinguish truth from falsehood (Miller 2023). Through computational propaganda, deepfakes and disinformation, Russia eroded trust in democratic institutions and sowed discord, generating long term and profound impacts, as seen since then in declining public confidence in electoral integrity, intensified polarization and traction for adversarial narratives. The post-election investigations revealed how CogWar was expanded to include physical tactics, such as planting Russian agents in the USA, having them set up companies and identities and use their physical location and local knowledge to undermine the Democratic party's election campaign and pave the way for Trump to win the elections.

Although not labelled in terms of cognitive warfare, the Brexit referendum is cited as another compelling example that fits the grey zone boundaries of CogWar. According to Miller (2023), the Brexit campaign was shaped by emotional manipulation, identity politics and cognitive biases. External actors, including Russia, are thought to have amplified the prevailing dynamics through social media manipulation, spreading misinformation and stoking nationalist sentiment. These interventions significantly influenced public perception and behaviour, contributing to the referendum's outcome. Brexit underscores how cognitive warfare can be waged not only via disinformation but also through reinforcing existing societal tensions and emotional triggers. Similar cases have come to light in Africa with the recent controversies surrounding Cambridge Analytica's role in interfering in elections across Africa, deliberately undermining political independence and self-determination of African polities (Mare et al., 2019, p. 9).

Cognitive operations have likewise been integral to Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine. Narratives framing Ukraine as a failed state, NATO as an aggressor and Russia as a protector of Russian-speaking



'The impacts of cognitive warfare are not immediately visible; indeed they are usually invisible, ambiguous and hard to determine.'

populations, propagated via state media, troll farms like the Internet Research Agency, and using local influencers enabled the creation of a layered information environment that confuses and divides, delays international responses and complicates international diplomacy.

Conclusion

CogWar is a whole-of-society issue. It is a form of warfare that can be deployed independently, often at lower cost, or used as a complement to traditional kinetic wars – with the dangerous potential of them becoming 'forever wars'. It is mostly desirable when a belligerent actor seeks to bring about long-term, society-wide changes in how people think to achieve strategic objectives. CogWar requires sustained engagement and can be waged from anywhere – not only by state actors but also by non-state entities acting alone, in support of or supported by states. Countering the impact of CogWar demands investment in societies – not just as a strategic measure, but as essential to democratic survival. Failing to do so risks cultivating an 'enemy within'.

A full list of references is included in DevISSues online.

1 Henschke (2025: 17) proposes three types of Cognitive Warfare – Defensive, Protective and Offensive and distinguishes war from warfare; to mean an activity taken by a political unit to weaken or destroy another.





Xander Creed is a
PhD candidate at ISS

A Diseased State:

A new stage in the same old American disease

Things are crazy in the United States right now, aren't they?' is a question that I have received a lot lately, mainly from people located outside its borders. Indeed, it is hard to write about the United States of America (USA) at present without addressing the petulant elephant in the room. So much so, that when writing about the USA it seems futile to address any other topic besides the endlessly fluctuating policy changes or most recent sound bites. There is so much pressure to talk about conflict as it exists now. However, in reply to the question, I find myself answering – 'When was it not a crazy time in the USA?'

That is, before we continue to publish analysis after analysis of the USA's national and foreign policy, let's take seriously Tiffany King's (2016) contention that we are moving too quickly past the violence of conquest. There is a much longer conversation needed compared to the often mentioned legacies of settler colonialism, even critical interventions which trace the neo-colonial dimensions of our present liberal democracies. In order to achieve this slow down, Black thought acts as 'a form of chafing and rubbing up against the normative flows of Western thought' (King 2019: 2), and we must speak about what precedes the current trumping iteration of madness. By doing so, we are not offering clean resolutions, but rather astute disruptions (Creed et al. 2025). Here, the point is to interrupt the violence of anti-Blackness.

Paying attention to conquest requires reckoning with the foundation of the

modern world, broadening our scope of the conflict at hand and its impact. For Chipato and Chandler (2022: 1786), the onset of the 'craziness' in the USA can be traced to anti-Black sentiment, which signals 'the violence of cutting, attributing, judging, allocating, assessing, deciding'. That is, anti-Blackness is the foundational element of modernity – of all conflict. From this, Blackness emerges as something that both precedes and is negated by modernity (Moten 2013). Christina Sharpe (2016: 16) reflects on the target of anti-Black violence in the history of the USA, fixated on 'bodies, to which anything and everything can be and is done', while Chassot (2015: 102) foregrounds that such a condition spurs the birth of 'new forms of social and cultural life' which is always playing out

in the 'eternal present'. So in that sense, both questions are right – things are crazy in the US right now; they used to be too. Anti-Blackness roots the conversation into the present, and we must resist this temporal limitation.

The impact of conquest and anti-Blackness are far-reaching, and it is understandably difficult to articulate one distinctly coherent impact of them. Yet I believe one valuable point of focus can be the American healthcare system – for this, I can only echo the words of Martin Luther King Jr., who, in 1966, said that, 'of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and inhuman' (in Pollock 2021: 138). World renowned for its exuberant costs and poor health outcomes, American

'anti-Blackness is the foundational element of modernity – of all conflict'

© Brett Sayles





'The US has always been a diseased state – both a state of illness ... and a state of unrest'

healthcare has been described as profit-driven rather than patient-centric (LiPuma & Robichaud 2020; Xavier Inda 2023). Of course, it would not be American if it was not steeped in inequality and conquest. Krumholz et al. (2022) reflect on the disproportionate death of Black people, as healthcare is socially manufactured: 'Black people in the United States are more likely to die young—not because there is some intrinsic biological risk, but because of racism'.

Notions of health emerge from the American context which stretch in both directions. On one hand, health and well-being remain within the domain of the so-called 'Granola Nazis' (Tebaldi

2023), or white supremacists who embrace wellness practices in order to strengthen the white race and ensure its continued survival (LeClerc 2022). Practices of health need not be this extreme or implicit – interpretations of health similarly valorize thin-ness, able-bodied-ness and, by extent, whiteness (Fritz 2023; Sanders 2019). All of these approaches to health sediment the anti-Black violence which is already entrenched in the American healthcare system. On the other hand – or rather, escaping its grasp entirely – notions of health and wellbeing emerge from Black Liberationists and Black Feminists, who are coming up with their own interpretation of what it means to be healthy amongst all madness (cf Frierson

2020; Khan et al. 2020; Monier 2023). Of note, Khan et al. (2020: 241) share a vision of abolitionist health and medicine, wherein resources are diverted away from forms of policing and instead 'invest in the welfare of all people, supporting movements for universal health care coverage, and establishing reparations for communities of color devastated not only by histories of unethical medical experimentation but also by institutions that have profited from policing and mass incarceration'. This is a vision which is already being enacted and is accessible to everyone, everywhere, both in the past and right now – by slowing down and taking it easy, 'through our bodies, we are able to find rest, repair, pleasure, and community' (Creed et al. 2025: 9). From this, it can be seen that conquest has borne twinned visions for American healthcare – one from which to rule them all, and one from which to free us.

As onlookers from inside and outside the USA offer their support and commentary, I implore them to view contemporary American politics from a wider lens. A history of conquest has gotten us here, and is no less relevant to non-American contexts. The US has always been a diseased state – both a state of illness (as in, literal disease) and a state of unrest (as in, dis-eased). We are merely witnessing a new stage of the pathology. Developing a critique from the perspective of anti-Blackness (Chipato & Chandler 2022) shatters the illusion of American exceptionalism. In other words, the American disease is contagious and it would be wise for everyone else to examine their own contexts for anti-Black violence before it is too late. Rather than continuing to be awe-struck by American politics and the latest distracting spectacle (who can keep track of the latest tariff rates anyway?), we must work towards treating the chronic disease of anti-Blackness worldwide, of which these disturbances are merely localized flare-ups. Given the tone with which people discuss presidential antics as of late – this is a hard pill to swallow.

ISS

news

alumni
awards
EUR
events
PhD
projects
research
staff
students

Welcome 2025-2026 MA batch students



On 1 September, we welcomed the new MA in Development Studies and Mundus Master in Public Policy batch. 72 students from around the world arrived in The Hague for the Orientation Week before diving straight into lectures the following week. We wish them all a happy, healthy and successful stay at ISS.



Arul Chib part of project on democratizing AI research

Professor Arul Chib is one of the researchers working on the Democratizing AI: Empowering citizens through transparent decision-making project. The project aims to develop AI systems that are inclusive, transparent and grounded in citizens' values and lived experiences.



Kaira Zoe Cañete joins editorial board of Environmental Hazards staff

As a member of the editorial board, Kaira will help shape the journal's content which encompasses issues around responses to and the creation of risk and vulnerabilities, and foregrounds broader societal impacts on development and social justice.



Continued cooperation between ISS and the FHR Institute for Higher Education in Suriname *teaching*

The agreement, signed in June of this year, will continue the cooperation on the teaching and quality control of the Master of Public Administration in Governance at FHR.



Leading journal in Development Studies *publications*

ISS journal Development and Change has once again improved its rating in the Clarivate Web of Science Citation Report. Its impact factor rose to 3.2, putting in position 13 out of 65 journals in the Development Studies category.



ISS PhD researchers awarded research grant *awards*



Haya AlFarra and Gabriela Villacis, along with colleagues from Leiden University, have been awarded the Governance of Migration and Diversity Seed Grant for their co-interdisciplinary research project entitled 'Beyond Remittances: Diasporic aid and care in times of crises'.



In Memoriam

As an ISS community we send our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of those former students and staff who have passed away in recent months.

Kazuyo Yamanaka

Kazuyo studied at ISS in the Local and Regional Development programme, graduating in 2005. Originally from Japan, she also worked in Ethiopia. She passed away in September at the age of 41.



Cynthia Recto-Carreron

Cynthia passed away in June at the age of 77. Originally from the Philippines, Cynthia was part of the ISS community for 37 years and was fondly known as 'Mama Cynth'.



Sucheela Tanchainan

Sucheela from Thailand passed away in July. She graduated from the ISS in 1986 from the Women and Development specialization. She was one of the leading activists for women's studies in Thailand.



Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh

A former associate professor at ISS, Godfried passed away at the age of 92. He taught in the International Relations and Development post-graduate diploma programme. He also held key Dutch development advisory bodies.



Sipko Maarten de Boer

Former ISS colleague and Dean of Studies, Sipko passed away at the end of August at the age of 91.



Helena Varrkey new Prince Claus Chairholder staff



Dr Varrkey was appointed for a period of 2 years (2025-2027). She will be a part of the Water, Securitization Anxieties and Border Imaginaries (WASABI) project which compares the lived experiences and imaginaries of communities crossing and living in securitized water borders in Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean region, Central America, Eastern Mediterranean, the Southern Caucasus and the Sulu Sea in the Philippines.



Luisa Cortesi joins Global Young Academy staff

Luisa's selection to this prestigious organization recognizes her academic excellence and her strong commitment to engaging science with broader societal challenges.



Global South perspectives on NATO events

Jointly organized by ISS and Leiden University, the event took place in the days running up to the NATO summit in June. It brought together speakers with academic and diplomatic backgrounds to discuss how NATO's actions are viewed in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The researchers and policy experts gathered at ISS to reflect on the alliance's global role and its impact beyond Europe.



PhD defences PhD



Maria Alejandra Pineda Escobar

6 October 2025

Frugal Innovation Beyond its Surface: The relevance of context for understanding the concept and its relation to sustainability



Kim Chi Tran

2 October 2025

On Being Education Nomads: Mongolian herders' children straddling ways of knowing and relating



Thandiwe Matthews

23 September 2025

Advancing Substantive Equality in South Africa: Elite contestations surrounding constitutionalism, gender and the right to social assistance



Anne-Marie Brinkman

16 September 2025

Libyan Civic Contributions to Development During Conflict: Dynamics of actors, ambitions and approaches



Maria Fernanda Morales Camacho

4 July 2025

Adaptation of Artisanal Fishers in the Context of Climate Change: The case of Costa Rica



Saba Al Kuntar

30 June 2025

Entrepreneurship in Refugee Contexts: Multi-level analysis of Syrian entrepreneurial activities in urban areas in Lebanon

Where are they now?



Md Mofizur Rhaman

Study programme Women, Gender and Development

Year of graduation 2006

Country of origin

Bangladesh

Current occupation

Professor of Mass Communication and Journalism, Dhaka University

What made your time at

ISS special? Studying development with participants from around 80 countries. ISS conducts the biggest global class on development, with a rigours approach to teaching and research.

What is your best memory

of ISS? The study trip to Madrid and Paris: seeing the Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci and Guernica by Pablo Picasso was amazing. I still recall grocery shopping at The Hague market and walking to the hostel carrying all the stuff in a trolley.

What does ISS mean to you

now? I made lots of friends from many countries. It contributed to the development of my critical thinking. I still have my ISS Readers and value them very much. I sometimes go back to them and re-read them to recall some theories and concepts. I wish I could visit this great place again.



Hettie Walters

Study programme Diploma in Rural Policy and Planning. Women & Development.

Year of graduation 1990 and 1991

Country of origin

The Netherlands

Current occupation Retired.

Formerly gender and development specialist and NGO consultant. Gender trainer with private company formed with colleagues.

What made your time at ISS special? ISS formed a firm basis for my later career. I also made some lifelong friends.

What is your best memory of ISS? There are too many memories to mention.

Above all I remember the cooperation and joint learning across cultures and fields of experience.

What does ISS mean to you

now? ISS remains a reference and source of inspiration to me.



Kim Anh Duong

Study programme Public Policy and Management

Year of graduation 2006

Country of origin Viet Nam

Current occupation Vice Rector of Vietnam Women's Academy

What made your time at ISS

special? The chance to engage in a diverse and collaborative learning environment. The dynamic discussions, group projects and cultural exchanges broadened my knowledge, deepened my understanding of global issues and strengthened my ability to work effectively in an international context.

What is your best memory

of ISS? The wonderful time I spent at the dormitory on Oude Molstraat. We shared stories about our countries, cultures and favourite foods, learning so much from each other.

What does ISS mean to you

now? ISS is a place where I grew both professionally and personally, a place that opened my mind to diverse perspectives and global issues. ISS represents a community of inspiring people who continue to motivate me to contribute to positive change in my work and my life.



Nelson Bryant

Study programme MA in Development Studies

Year of graduation 2011

Country of origin USA

Current occupation

Assistant Professor at Midwestern University, Illinois

What made your time at ISS

special? I made friends who became my best study buddies. I enjoyed insightful interactions with the most passionate faculty who shaped my academic worldview about socio-legal issues in the Global South and North.

What is your best memory

of ISS? Professors who influenced my thought process on human rights and social justice. The International Day helped me appreciate other students' cultures and cuisines.

What does ISS mean to you

now? A place where competing yet complementary development and human rights theories and approaches are critically assessed for their practical evidence and relevance. A leading global graduate school where students' perspectives about development are challenged. ISS students are inspired to drive innovative approaches and propel practical solutions to modern world development issues.



**Starting
2026!**

Ready for a Flying Start:

The new MA in Development Studies

In October 2025 the new ISS MA in Development Studies (MADS) gained accreditation and did so with flying colours!

The new programme builds on ISS' reputation, offering students a strong academic foundation in global development linked to the analysis of real-world issues. The new programme has been formally assessed by a panel of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). In one of its final reports,¹ the panel found that:

The curriculum, teaching methods and overall learning environment work together exceptionally well to deliver intercultural learning. (...) The active use of student diversity in teaching and the staff-to-student interaction can be regarded as an international best practice.

But the praise aside, what's really new here? The most visible change is the duration of the programme: from 15.5 months to a more regular 12-month programme. With this change, the new MADS is a better fit with donor frameworks, employers' leave of absence provisions and other study programmes. Additionally, it shortens students' residential period in (expensive) The Hague and reduces the time of foregone earnings. Combined with ISS' substantial partial tuition fee waiver programme and the availability of other fellowship opportunities (such as the Joint Japan-World Bank graduate scholarship and the ISS-OAS Scholarship) we are confident that the new programme will remain accessible to a highly diverse and

international student body – a unique feature of the ISS educational experience.

A less visible, but perhaps more important change is the restructuring of the MADS in terms of content and organization. This redesign is the result of a rigorous internal process of revisiting the curriculum, reflecting on current priorities and consulting students, alumni and practitioners in the field of 'development' (in the broadest sense of the word). Over 12 months, students complete 60 EC, consisting of coursework (40 EC) and a thesis (20 EC). Course work is organized into 10-week blocks, comprising eight weeks of intensive classes and a week for assignments. Each block is capped with a final week of extra-curricular activities



'The new programme ... [offers] students a strong academic foundation in global development linked to the analysis of real-world issues'

- Migration, Mobilities and Development: Global Entanglements, Livelihoods and Intersectionality
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Policy Analysis, Design and Implementation
- Political Ecology of Natural Resources and Development
- Political Economy of Agriculture and Food
- Politics of Global Order: Debating Liberal Internationalism
- Social Protection and the Life Course

Moreover, for those who want to deepen their engagement with development practice, there is the option to write a thesis based on a practical assignment about a real-world issue provided by a development organization.

All in all, the redesigned MADS programme is thus ready for a flying start in 2026, under leadership of the MADS Coordination Team consisting of Dr Jeff Handmaker (Programme Director), Dr Nanneke Winters (Vice Programme Director) and Dr Sonja Fransen (thesis coordinator).

The new MADS offers a rigorous and professionally relevant academic foundation in development theory, methods and practice. The programme is suited to those aiming to pursue doctoral studies or advance their careers in policy, research or practice across international development sectors.

including influential guest speakers, study visits and some leisure time of course.

A unique feature of the redesigned MA is the large space for tailoring the curriculum to students' individual academic interests and professional goals. Through conversations with their academic mentors, students can design their own learning pathways by complementing the 15 EC (3 courses) of mandatory course work with no less than four electives (20 EC) to be chosen from the following offering:²

- Armed Conflict, Collective Violence and Epistemologies for/of Peace Governance
- Behavioural Perspectives and Development
- Climate Crisis, Disasters and Humanitarian Action
- Contemporary Capitalism and Governance: Neo-Liberalism and Beyond
- Economic Analysis of Households, Firms and Institutions
- Economic Perspectives on Globalization and Development: Theory, Evidence and Policy
- Entrepreneurship and Organizations in Development
- Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Development
- Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics and Challenges
- Humanizing Digital Design for Development

For those looking for some structure, there is also the possibility of selecting two thematically connected electives that together form a track. A track is capped by a thesis related to it. The following tracks will be available in the 2026-27 academic year: Environment; Development Economics; Social Justice; Politics and Governance; and Social Innovation.

For research methods too, students have ample choice, e.g. between (some) of the following courses: Multi-methods Research in International Development; Discourse Analysis and Critical Social Research; Qualitative Research Methods and (Digital) Fieldwork; Deep Diving into Quantitative Analysis; Quantitative Methods for Development Research; Decoloniality in the Development Research Context; Decolonizing Knowledge.

Next to theorizing and promoting a critical and methodologically grounded approach to research and policy analysis, the new MADS will also challenge students to engage with practice. For example, how to apply academic knowledge to real-world challenges such as inequality, climate change and just transitions? How to work ethically with diverse communities? And how does one's positionality matter in doing development studies and practice?



Learn more about the new MA in Development Studies:



- 1 Report on the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation, p. 23.
- 2 Another important feature is that we will regularly update the electives on offer to ensure the offering stays up-to-date with the latest developments in the field.

MA student Adenike Fapohunda and Professor Dirk-Jan Koch discuss the global impact of US cuts to aid funding.

USAID Cuts: A crisis or an opportunity?

Adenike Fapohunda (A): The reliance on aid has been a contentious political issue for a very long time. Dambisa Moyo argues that aid doesn't work for Africa: what the continent needs is investments and infrastructure. But the most immediate effects of the cuts are, of course, the large scale job losses in the aid sector and less humanitarian aid.

Dirk-Jan Koch (DJ): Some say that aid wasn't working anyway, so maybe the cuts don't matter so much. What's their impact in South Africa and Nigeria?

A: In South Africa, the government has stepped in to fill the gaps, especially in HIV treatment, but it had to reallocate money to do so and is now facing a budget deadlock. In Nigeria the cuts are just another crisis. The government's paying off IMF loans to attract more foreign investment whilst cutting back on emergency response to crises.

DJ: Nigerian newspapers are reporting that the government is now increasing its investments in healthcare. So maybe the USAID cuts are also an opportunity to increase accountability.

A: I agree. There's great financial potential in Africa which has large-scale youth under- and unemployment. Nigeria, for example, has been trying to increase its tax base for a long time; now there's more urgency and opportunity to get it right.

DJ: Of course, there was no proper handover strategy. An appropriate exit strategy could have mitigated some of the problems.

A: Definitely. The cuts may also change international relations, with African governments feeling able to engage on a more equal footing with the USA. For example, Ghana supported South Africa against Trump's accusations of a white genocide. Would it have done so had it still been receiving US aid?

And in Nigeria there's a growing sentiment of, 'We don't want your aid'. But of course, the people voicing that sentiment aren't personally affected by the cuts. That narrative is usually framed by elites, not the people who are reliant on aid.

DJ: Maybe it's time to move from aid to trade?

A: I'm not convinced. What happens to all those people who lack education or the necessary skills while this new economy is being built? We need to focus on building infrastructure to

provide jobs now. That's why China's Belt and Road Initiative is different – it creates jobs rather than simply providing food.

DJ: I've seen two responses to the current aid cuts: reform and a total reimagining. Where do you stand?

A: I lean towards reimagining. I believe we need a new framework that isn't rooted in old dynamics.

DJ: I agree, though there's a moral argument to continue with humanitarian aid. In stable countries, however, aid can stifle accountability. Maybe the answer is to reinforce the social contract between citizens and governments.

A: Exactly. Basic services like education, healthcare and sanitation are the national government's responsibility.

DJ: Or should we just stop aid all together?

A: Not everywhere. Poorer countries like Burundi and Somalia may still need aid,

'The cuts may also change international relations, with African governments ... able to engage on a more equal footing with the USA'



'There's a moral argument to continue with humanitarian aid [but in] stable countries aid can stifle accountability'

whereas the problem in South Africa, for example, is inequality, not poverty.

DJ: I agree. So a reimagined aid model would shift from rich-to-poor transfers to partnerships.

A: But even that is controversial. For example, much of the pushback on LGBTQI+ rights in Africa is due to the perception that the West is once again pushing its values into Africa.

DJ: In the face of global challenges like climate change and pandemics, maybe we need to reimagine foreign aid as international cooperation.

A: I agree. It's also about an accountable political process. I think many Africans feel that their vote doesn't translate into political representation.

DJ: What do the aid cuts mean for ISS?

A: Well, the lack of scholarships is changing the demographic of ISS with fewer African students, for example. And that can lead to a bias in knowledge creation.

DJ: If we're reimagining foreign aid, shouldn't we also be reimagining ISS? Maybe it shouldn't be solely in The Hague.

A: Maybe, but ISS isn't just a location; it's also the people. It's a diverse, global community. I'm not convinced that ISS would attract people from all over the world if it moved - Europe is still more multicultural than anywhere else.

DJ: Another opportunity may be more double degrees and joint programmes. And we need to consider different financing models to replace scholarships.

A: More modular and practical programmes, for example.

DJ: Or short programmes for career professionals. ISS is an ideal place to get

to know people from different backgrounds and cultures.

A: I agree. I could have studied in South Africa but I'm enjoying the global environment and different perspectives available here at ISS.

DJ: Absolutely! Thanks for a great conversation.

Development and Change

Development and Change is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal devoted to the critical analysis and discussion of current issues of development.

Volume 56, Number 3, May 2024

When Governments Deliver: Migrant Remittances and the Willingness to Pay Higher Local Taxes

Ana Isabel López García

The Care Agenda in Latin America: Towards a New Understanding of Well-being?

Belén Villegas Plá

A Postcolonial Card Cartel: How European Companies Sold Biometric Voting in Africa

Marielle Debos

'I Love Being My Own Boss (But the Work is Killing Me)': Ride-hail Drivers' Contradictory Ideas about Work in African Cities

Matteo Rizzo

Green Energy and State Power: The Case of Zhanatas Wind Power Project in Kazakhstan

Weishen Zeng

How the Institutional Context Creates a Neoliberal Politics of Aid: An Italian Case Study

Lisa Ann Richey

Rereading Ujamaa, Rethinking Freedom

Stephanie Wanga

Working Papers

The ISS Working Paper series provides a forum for work in progress which seeks to elicit comments and generate discussion. The series includes academic research by staff, PhD participants and visiting fellows, and award-winning research papers by graduate students

Level Playing Field as a social policy instrument: Toward a Level Telling Field on migration Mansoob Meskoub ISS Working Papers Series no. 730.

Policy entrepreneurship in Chinese poverty alleviation: A case study of the Britevilla initiative Z. Xu and Wil Hout, ISS Working Papers Series no. 729.

Sex ration imbalance and economic development in China: A feminist economics perspective X. Yu, ISS Working Papers Series no. 728.

Voices of migrants: From cross talks and exchange of narratives to policies for migrants Mansoob Meskoub et al, ISS Working Papers Series no. 727.

New publications



KidsRights Index report 2025

The 2025 report identifies a troubling relationship between problematic social media use and deteriorating mental health situations. It also reveals growing international efforts to address digital harms but warns against approaches that may inadvertently violate children's rights.



More books and articles on development studies by ISS researchers:



STUDENT LIFE



1. ISS students visit the windmills of Kinderdijk as part of their orientation programme. © Amina Said
2. During the Introduction Week, students had ample opportunity to make new friends © Sal Byczuk/Luca Lorodi
3. ISS students joining the Rode Lijn demonstration in Amsterdam to protest against the ongoing genocide in Palestine and demand immediate action against Israel (5 October 2025) © Annalisa Mercadante
4. Students participating in the Change agents in the making workshop in the ISS canteen. © Sal Byczuk/Luca Lorodi
5. Getting to grips with the Dutch summer © Sal Byczuk/Luca Lorodi



Take a look at
the courses that
we currently have
on offer:



Engagement and impact through our online courses

Evidence-based policies for development, earth economics, disaster risk reduction. These are just a few of the free online courses taught by ISS. Freely accessible to anyone interested in the topic, they offer critical insights on global development, social justice and humanitarian issues.