

<https://issblog.nl/2021/07/05/17th-development-dialogue-a-call-to-end-the-social-distancing-of-the-sciences-in-the-covid-19-era-and-beyond/>

## 17th Development Dialogue

### Bridging the sciences can be made possible – in the COVID-19 era and beyond

C. Sathyamala and Peter A.G. van Bergeijk

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*The chasm that separates the different scientific disciplines remains deep as ever despite the evident need to address pressing global problems through transdisciplinary collaboration. C. Sathyamala and Peter A.G. van Bergeijk in this article show how close and intensive cooperation across the artificial borders between the sciences can be made possible and argue for a methodology acknowledging that only a combination of qualitative and quantitative research can create the type of knowledge that's required to move forward together.*

We start with a proposition: that both social and natural sciences are good at boxing, but not so good at wrestling. They 'box' by telling themselves stories about where they and researchers in the respective fields 'fit' into the scaffolding erected around the supposedly chiasmic divide of natural and social sciences. We all seem to know what side of this divide we want to be on, and a lot of time is invested in delineation, often drawing distinctions without differences. For too long, specialisation and deeper knowledge, both applied and theoretical, have been seen as the royal road to academic success.

But [there are limits](#) to what any science can do on its own. We've seen this during the current pandemic. As in any context, COVID-19-related health problems cannot be tackled from a purely medical angle; the exploitative social and economic structures that make people sick must also be challenged. Indeed, the validity of medical solutions to a large extent depends on social and economic conditions of time and place. The pandemic does not provide a new insight – it simply makes it clearer.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that by boxing in the disciplines and keeping them apart, we fail in a monumental way to 'wrestle' with multi-faceted problems, like global pandemics. We avoid the intellectual battle inherent to what the other side thinks. To deal with COVID-19 or to understand what is happening, we need less boxing and more wrestling! A mono-disciplinary perspective, however sophisticated, cannot help us design and evaluate policy interventions, or grasp the wider meaning and significance of COVID-19 in specific contexts. A lot of time is now being invested in delineation with other strands and lines of thought based on high principles of epistemology and ontology. Our point is that that energy would be better spend on working truly together.

#### **A physician and an economist...**

We write from different sides of a supposedly chiasmic divide, a divide we each try to bridge and straddle in our own ways. [C. Sathyamala](#) is a public health physician with a Master's degree in Epidemiology who opted to do her PhD in development studies at the ISS. In the process, she developed a strong interest in class and state power and in the history of the biopolitics of [food and hunger](#). As a medical doctor, concerned with action for social justice, the [Bhopal gas leak disaster](#)

proved a crucial turning point in her life as corporate interests in collusion with the state effaced people's lives. The COVID-19 pandemic created similar tendency, displacing the migrant working class across India and subjecting them to what Giorgio Agamben has called '[bare life](#)'.

As an agnostic Dutch economist, [Peter van Bergeijk](#) is the first academic in a family of South Holland-based bakers, carpenters, and farmers. As a policy maker at the OECD, he was frustrated by the impossibility to engage major developing countries in discussions on environment and health. This motivated his move to the ISS, where he is equally happy to employ a neo-Marxist or a 'empiricist' framework as a toolkit, depending on what analytical toolbox is most suitable for the problem at hand.

### **...together critically examining the COVID-19 pandemic**

Each of us has [written on COVID-19](#) – on the urgency of communicating our concerns – in the form of [a book](#) or a range of [Working Papers](#). Writing from different social and professional positions, we now also write...together. **A common interest around COVID-19** has bridged our science-social science divide, reinforcing a common interest in COVID-19 and its present and likely future ramifications.

Primarily, we agree that if at all a silver lining is to be found in the COVID-19 situation, it is that we can learn a great deal, especially with mixed disciplinary backgrounds, with science, social science and the arts (we have also worked together artistically: you will find Sathya's poetry and Peter's lithography alongside at the exhibition [Broken Links](#)).

And we both agree that we will only truly understand pandemics and their consequences, and what to do about protecting human societies from their fallout, once social scientists and natural scientists stop practicing social and intellectual distancing by boxing themselves into their own disciplines.

This is more urgent than often recognised: the next pandemic is a certainty, only its timing is uncertain. The WHO hopes [to forge solidarity](#) and encourage the sharing of knowledge across disciplinary and global divides. The purpose is to generate greater consensus around COVID-19.

But while lip service is paid to medical opinion, it is powerful political and economic elites that continue to call the shots. State interventions provide selective care in the matter of making live and letting die, and even in making die in the [Foucauldian biopolitical](#) sense. Academics find themselves struggling to keep up in real time with the pace of the pandemic, with its spread, recurrence, changing pattern, and often its gross mismanagement.

Huge as the problem is, we are pleased to have started our own dialogue, right here in ISS, and based on our own published and ongoing research on the subject. How COVID-19 affects us now, and what kinds of 'pandemic futures' we face, are questions all of us can contribute to answering once we learn to wrestle across our disciplinary divides.