Development is in trouble. Successive waves of ideas, policies, programmes and financial transfers\(^1\) over the past 50 years have yielded meagre results for many of the world’s most marginalised peoples. Much of Asia is said to have been hit by ‘crisis’, Latin America has experienced a ‘lost decade of development’, Russia and Eastern Europe are experiencing the ‘travails of transition’, while Africa has been completely ‘marginalised’ from the global development process (Payne, 2001). While living conditions, prospects and opportunities have improved for some people within these regions, many others have been cut off – economically, socially and politically. Many of these marginalised people, communities and groups are to be found in Africa, where poverty – in all its dimensions – continues to rise. Over 50 years on from the self-proclaimed ‘golden age of development’ (Singer, 1989; Kohler, 1995) some 300 million African people, almost half the continent’s population, survive on less than $1 a day (UNDP, 2006: 269). With the growing marginalisation and sense of powerlessness this engenders, global development thinking and practice has come to be characterised more by ‘impasse’ (Schuurman, 1993; Booth, 1994) than by sustainable achievement.

While, in Ireland, exuberant accounts of the now late departed ‘Celtic Tiger’ paint a somewhat different picture, their triumphalist brush-strokes mask an underlying canvas of more complex hues. Even before the global financial crisis revealed the exceedingly shaky foundations on which such hyperbole was based, a growing body of empirical evidence was uncovering the rise in both income inequality and social exclusion that characterised this period (Allen, 2000; Kirby, 2002, 2003; Hardiman, 2004; NESC, 2005a). The numerous accounts of growing levels of drug and alcohol addiction (NACD/DAIRU, 2007), rising crime and violence (CSO, 2007),\(^2\) homelessness (Dublin Simon Community,
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2007), stress and mental health problems (HSE, 2007) reveal a society where all is certainly not well, and where the underlying model of development, while undoubtedly bringing substantial benefits to some, has failed, and badly failed, many others.

That something is wrong is widely acknowledged in the global context. The relevance of development studies to the everyday lived realities of people on the ground has been questioned and debated by practitioners and theorists alike (see, for example, Edwards, 1989, 1994; Booth, 1994) and the concept of development itself, as privileging particular forms of knowledge and notions of progress, has come under critique from a diverse range of post-development theorists (e.g. Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995 and Rahnema, 1997). In Ireland, however, while the gap between the rich and the poor widens and social exclusion deepens, the holy grail of development – economic growth – remains largely uncontested within public discourse. Whereas globally since the 1970s, although analyses certainly vary, development has moved from a narrowly economic conception to one which embodies also social, political, cultural and environmental dimensions, in Ireland thinking on development remains largely unchanged since the Whitaker report of 1958, with the concept remaining largely synonymous with export-led economic growth. It would appear that the global consensus on the inadequacy of the ‘trickle down’ model (see Todaro, 1994: 154–8) has failed to trickle through to Ireland.

What is to be done? Accepting what both experience and post-development theorists have taught us – that a universal model of development does not translate effectively to specific political, social and cultural conditions – where do we turn to from here? There is an urgency to this question. While we debate and theorise, critique and counter-critique, life for many people around the world, including Ireland, is characterised by growing marginalisation, immiseration and, for some, despair.

Given what we now know, that universal models do not work for all – indeed they deepen social and political exclusion for many – there is clearly a need for spaces wherein the visions and aspirations of development which befit specific times, peoples and places may be imagined, articulated and debated, and wherein the people most adversely affected by development models promulgated to date might be afforded a voice. Where might such spaces be found? While some analysts point to the need for deliberative spaces away from proponents of the dominant paradigms of development – for example, the World Social Forum – arguably more direct and immediate results are likely to be obtained through direct engagement with state authorities and traditional decision makers.