

# **Interdisciplinary approaches to research and development**

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## **Editor's note**

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This edition of the Global South Forum (GSF) Bulletin focuses on the nature of interdisciplinary research, an approach that has become common in the research arena. In a globalised world where events are influenced by multifaceted interactions and processes involving political, environmental, organisational, social, and economical change, explaining phenomenon has come to demand combined efforts from various disciplines. In these new circumstances, what is being required from academics and practitioners is a collaborative approach where individual disciplines are integrated, with each offering its own ideological standing and methodological strength to create an environment that can satisfactorily explain a host of complexities generated by contemporary issues. While there appears to be clear advantages to pursuing interdisciplinary studies, there are challenges to this new approach in that the success of it requires a degree of corporation between researchers to accommodate other theoretical foundations and methodologies besides that which is dominant in their own disciplines. Interdisciplinary research also requires collaborative competence between partners and the willingness to accept inter-professional knowledge. The balance between these advantages and challenges can enable researchers to produce quality outputs that adequately respond, through scientific processes, to the ever changing research context

This edition of the GSF Bulletin includes commentaries, reviews, and research from postgraduate students and academics in the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences and the University of Southampton. The first paper is a commentary on the use of interdisciplinary research by a postdoctoral research fellow in the faculty of social and human sciences, Gloria Langat. Langat offers a review of cross disciplinary research, commenting on its merits and relevance for application to researching contemporary issues. The second and third contributions are offered by two postgraduate researchers, Amie Kamanda and Rachel Ayrton. Kamanda's paper uses her doctoral research to illustrate the application of an interdisciplinary approach to studying the demographic impact of

civil conflict. Ayrton's paper, also based on her doctoral research, highlights the multifaceted nature of her research and the need to use a triangulation of methods to investigate her research questions. The final contribution by Athina Vlachantoni provides summaries of collaborative projects between the Gerontology Department and other research partners.

# What precisely is a multi-disciplinary approach to research?

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The trending byword in research presently is multi-disciplinary research. This has been conveyed by many including the European Union research advisory board of 2004 which remarked that “The solution to many of today’s complex problems in areas such as globalisation, environment, health, defence and security must, by definition, be addressed using a multi-disciplinary approach” (University of Southampton 2013).

Interdisciplinary research collaboration has a long history in the physical sciences particularly among the sub-disciplines in these fields (Biglan 1973). Given the current concerns in Higher Education such as student enrolment and restructuring by funding bodies (Becher and Trowler 2001), there is a high level of competition for existing funding making multi-disciplinary research initiatives even more attractive as a way of leveraging research support or funding. On the one hand, multi-disciplinary projects comprise a consortium of loosely bound disciplines within one umbrella research program but with researchers from each discipline pursuing its arm of research almost autonomously albeit under a shared vision. On the other hand, a small group of researchers drawn from different disciplines come together but where the discipline of the principal investigator carry the day with regards to the approach adopted in addressing the research problem. While these forms of collaborations qualify to be classified as multi-disciplinary research, the real challenge is to have a piece of research which integrates the culture and styles of the collaborating disciplines throughout the research process.

Biglan and Kolb have classified disciplines into four broad typologies as to whether they are hard pure (abstract reflective), soft pure (concrete reflective), hard applied (abstract active) or soft applied (concrete active) (Becher 1981). Disciplines are constantly undergoing changes with new disciplines breaking off and gaining independence from the parent or traditional disciplines (Becher & Trowler 2001). A discipline can be defined by a single paradigm or body of theory in which all the academics in the discipline ascribe to, thus, similar

methodology, structure and research output features. Bringing together people who ascribe to different paradigms can potentially be a hindrance for genuine multi-disciplinary research if the researchers have a different position or paradigm inclination (Biglan 1973).

Disciplines differ in various ways including the style of intellectual enquiry, epistemological foundations, methodological approaches, philosophical and theoretical frameworks. In one discipline, a piece of research can be accomplished by a solo researcher whereas teamwork is integral in other disciplines like the physical or hard sciences. There are differences also in the mode of publication with letters, or technical notes considered the most distinguished form of communicating research outputs in one discipline while others prefer journals, books or monographs. These differences can be deep seated with individual disciplines perceiving academics in other disciplines with stereotypes and classifying others as pseudo-scientists (Becher 1981; Biglan 1973). Disciplinary boundaries have even been noted in the style of teaching (Neumann 2001). Nonetheless, shared across all disciplines are the ideals for academic freedom and the need for research that is scholarly, original, stimulating, thought provoking, or rigorous, as opposed to anecdotal, contentious, biased, sloppy, or misleading piece of work (Becher 1981; Becher 1994). As researchers and funding bodies continue to advocate the need for multi-disciplinary research, there is need to showcase and document best practices in research that have truly integrated *multi-disciplinary* methods, philosophical and theoretical frameworks.

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# The demography of conflict, an interdisciplinary field

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## Abstract

The demography of conflict epitomises an interdisciplinary field of research within demography because it draws on geography, history, politics, sociology and statistics. This feature could be attributed to the dearth of data in researching the demographic impact of conflict since during such upheaval; national statistical offices cease to function. Subsequently, researchers utilise a multiplicity of data sources, which cross disciplines. Drawing on my doctoral research on the demographic consequences of the Sierra Leone civil war, the opportunities in this field of research will be discussed.

## Introduction

Development is a fluid term that has morphed since it was first coined in the 1960s (Madise 2012). The term implies human, economic, political and more recently environmental progress. Violent conflict is detrimental to development because it imposes huge human, social and economic costs on societies (Gates et al. 2012). Studies investigating the impact of conflict have typically focused on its economic and political consequences (Collier 1999, Cramer 2006). Omitted from these analyses are victims. The demography of conflict addresses this shortcoming by focusing on individuals (Brunborg and Urdal 2006). The benefits of interdisciplinary research are discussed using my doctoral research titled the 'Demographic consequences of conflict in Sierra Leone 1991-2002'. Section one introduces the demography of conflict, followed by a discussion of my research and section three concludes.

## The demography of conflict

The demography of conflict epitomises interdisciplinary research for three reasons (1) it draws on a multiplicity of disciplines; (2) it applies mixed methodology; (3) it utilises what I term a "collage of data sources".

As a sub-field in demographic research, the demography of conflict draws on several disciplines as reflected in the edited collection *The*

*Demography of Armed Conflict*. In this book, contributions include the demographics of the genocide through a historical lens, the impact of population on the onset of conflict by applying a logistic regression, analyses of forced migration through an anthropological approach and elucidating the challenges of documenting war casualties from a legal perspective. These examples demonstrate that the demography of conflict is multidisciplinary and as such exposes researchers to a variety of methodologies. However, a difficulty in capitalising on this advantage is limited availability of data.

Conflict results in destruction, oftentimes of data required for understanding population change. A vital source of data needed to understand population change, especially in the developing country context is census data. During conflict, it is usually impossible to undertake a census (the absence of a census in the United Kingdom in 1941 during the Second World War is illustrative). A shortage of vital information means that researchers necessarily have to utilise data sources at their disposal and adopt mixed methodology. This approach is exemplified by the study undertaken by Winter (1986) in *The Great War and the British people*. Winter uses a variety of data including vital registration, census data, life insurance information, university records and hospital records to analyse the trends in fertility and estimate war casualties among young men. The study applied mixed methodology through population projections and document analysis of literary works. The interdisciplinary approach was the basis of my doctoral research.

## The demography of conflict in Sierra Leone

It has been estimated that the Sierra Leone civil war resulted in over 50,000 deaths, between 1 – 2 million forcibly displaced persons and over 40,000 human rights violations (Sesay et al. 2006). This research aims to document the demographic effect of the war by (i) critically evaluating the component that contributed the most to change and (ii) uncovering the mechanisms that led to population

decline in the Kono District. Explorative analysis suggests that forced migration played an important role in population change; approximately 40% of the country's 1985 population of 3,515,812 was forcibly displaced. Figure 1 shows variation in percentage change of the population at the district for the period 1974 to 2004. The impact of the war was not uniform, with changes in population ranging from -13.9% (Kono District) and 106.3% (Rural Western Area).

This study will utilise different data sources including: census data, human rights data and interview transcripts. Initially, document analysis of published literature was undertaken to produce a chronology of the civil war, assess its causes and some of its consequences. The latter was achieved by reviewing estimates of mortality and forced migration. Next, demographic method, specifically the cohort component method was applied to address the first research aim. Future work includes application of geospatial analysis to map the spatial distribution of human rights violations and fieldwork adopting key informant interviews in Kono District.

## Conclusion

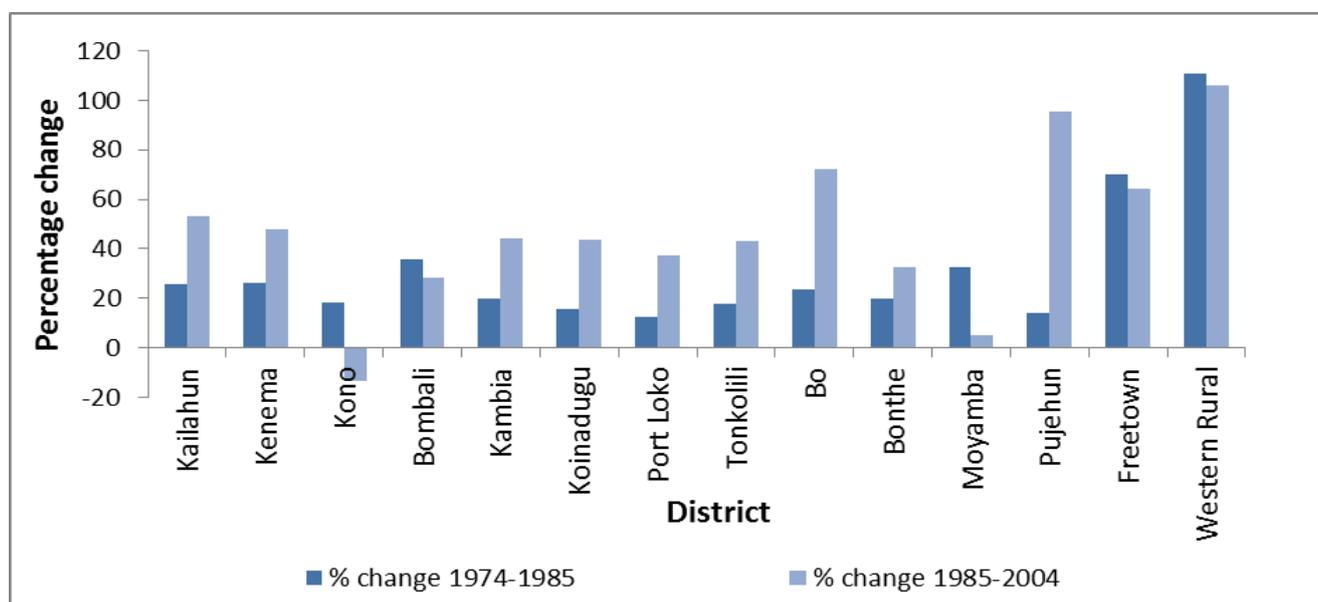
The demography of conflict is flexible because it allows researchers to draw on different disciplines, use multiple data sources and apply mixed methods

to investigate an important topic. This approach is suited to examining the impact of conflict because of data scarcity during and after conflict. By piecing together a collage of data sources, researchers can document the ramifications of conflict.

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Figure 1: Percentage change in total population by district and region: Sierra Leone, 1974-2004



Source: Sierra Leone 2004 Population and Housing Census.

# Trust, conflict and development: the need for micro-level explanation

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Civil war has blighted the hopes of development in some of the world's poorest nations since they attained independence from colonial rule until the present day. The experience of sustained and repeated internal violence has emerged as a serious pattern in the early 1990s, with 94% of armed conflicts in the decade taking this form (Paris 2004: 1). The gravity of the situation has been emphatically underlined by the World Bank, recently describing insecurity (defined as fragility, conflict or large-scale, organised criminal violence) as "a primary development challenge of our time" (World Bank 2011: 1). Violent conflict, and in particular civil war, has been identified as one of the primary poverty traps experienced by the poorest nations (Collier 2008: 17), which is borne out by the record of the last decade, in which 90% of new conflicts broke out in countries that had previously experienced civil war (World Bank 2011: 3). The clear reciprocal relationship between violent conflict and poverty is evidenced politically, in that not one country suffering from insecurity has achieved a United Nations Millennium Development Goal (World Bank 2011: 1), as well as economically through statistical analysis which demonstrates that countries with low income, slow growth and dependence on natural resources are more prone to civil war (Collier 2008: 19-20). It is clear that civil war is one of the main causes of human suffering and underdevelopment (Stewart & FitzGerald 2001: 1).

In these contexts, peace building has been conducted in an attempt to establish a sustainable peace that is essential to escaping the poverty trap. These have tended to focus on the establishment of democracy and free market economics; however, whether this is sufficient to bring about a "radical transformation of society away from structures of coercion and violence to an embedded culture of peace" (Keating & Knight 2004: xxxiv) has been disputed by Paris. He observes that far from achieving the stated goal of establishing a "sustainable peace", international efforts "have, in a number of cases, inadvertently exacerbated societal

tensions or reproduced conditions that historically fuelled violence in these countries" (Paris 2004: 6).

There is a growing awareness that there are other conditions that are necessary to protect a fragile peace and prevent a return to conflict. It is a characteristic of intra-state violence that it permeates all levels of society, it is not restricted to a structural level, and there is an undemonstrated assumption that institutional change will naturally cascade to communal or inter-personal relationships. As Sultan Barakat (2010: 10) has observed: "it is the destruction of relationships, including the loss of trust, dignity, confidence and faith in others ... that proves the most far-reaching, potent and destructive outcome of conflict". There has however been very little research into the impact of chronic violence on interpersonal relationships in contexts ravaged by intra-state war, so there is little knowledge of how relational qualities impact on individuals' and communities' capabilities, well-being and ultimately on their opportunity to live in an enduring state of peace.

This is despite the fact that violent forms of conflict are fundamentally micro-level phenomena, taking place in interactions between individuals, their surroundings and their social groups (Justino 2007:4). There is a need for a greater body of empirical research focusing on the relationships that make up the fabric of civil society in post-conflict settings in order to understand the impact of conflict on these relationships, the effect this has on poverty and well-being, and ultimately to identify how the damage can be repaired in order to sustain peace and enable development.

In post-conflict developing contexts the majority of research undertaken on trust is subsumed within research on social capital (Cox 2009; Woolcock 1998; Woolcock & Narayan 2000; Woolcock et. al. 2006) which clusters concepts including trust, norms, networks, values, collaboration and reciprocity. The aim of this project is to isolate trust as an independently important concept in

interpersonal relationships. It will explore the meaning, measurement and explanation of trust in the specific environments of two post-conflict contexts, to identify how violence and war have impacted upon trust, the implications this has had for poverty, and how trust can be built in the aftermath of war.

This project will take a comparative approach in order to seek similarity and variation across contexts. Two national contexts in sub-Saharan Africa will be chosen in light of the volume of conflicts experienced in the continent over the last two decades in particular, the intractable nature of these conflicts (which is presumed to exacerbate the impact of war on trust) (Williams 2011:4-5) and the widespread experience of poverty in this region. The first national context to be considered will be South Sudan which, after decades of exploitation in various guises has become the world's youngest nation, and one of its most troubled. The second will be identified inductively on the basis of theoretical literature and research findings in South Sudan. Three sample communities will be identified in each national context studied, adapting the approach taken by Colletta and Cullen (2000). These will include one urban and two rural communities, including one which experienced high intensity conflict and the other low-intensity conflict.

The research questions require both the identification of causal processes through the examination of events to uncover mechanisms and structures (intensive research) and an assessment of how widely such findings are distributed (e.g. prevalence of trust in the context of a particular type of relationship) in the population (extensive research) (Sayer 1992: 237-243). A sequential mixed-methods approach is therefore envisaged that gives equal status to qualitative and quantitative aspects. The intensive (qualitative) elements will take place first, followed by the extensive (quantitative) element. The methodology will be implemented in South Sudan in the first instance, and then replicated in the comparator nation.

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# Summaries of Gerontology Projects

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## **Social protection and poverty alleviation: assessing the evidence**

The extent to which social protection programmes 'work' is a question which has attracted major policy attention in the last two decades, and academic research has often been the mechanism of producing empirical evidence in order to support informed policy decisions in this field. Members of the Centre for Research on Ageing (Dr Athina Vlachantoni, Professor Maria Evandrou and Professor Jane Falkingham) were involved in a project entitled "*ESRC-DFID-funded research on social protection and poverty alleviation: reviewing the evidence, assessing the impact and identifying the gaps*". This project was funded under a joint scheme between the Economic and Social Research Council and the Department for International Development, and aimed at identifying the substantive and methodological lessons of research in the area of poverty alleviation and social pensions, and the gaps where research could contribute in the future.

The review explored different aspects of social protection programmes in a variety of country contexts, highlighting opportunities for policy learning across country boundaries, as well as the importance of contextualisation for the application of effective policy solutions to chronic poverty. The review team's understanding of social protection used in this report is based on DFID's definition, which includes three elements: social insurance, social assistance and labour market protection (DFID 2006). In addition to the substantive lessons learned in the field of poverty and social protection, the review assessed the range of methodologies used in order to approach key policy-relevant questions on the conceptualisation, design and application of social protection programmes. Such findings will be of relevance to ESRC-DFID as key funders of policy-relevant research, as well as to the academic community in the UK and beyond.

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## **Ageing and well-being in a globalizing world**

Currently the population aged 60 years and older in India constitutes over 7 percent of the total population (1.21 billion) and is projected to triple in the next four decades, from 92 million to 316 million (James, 2011). Along with an increasing elderly population, India's adults are increasingly resorting to migration both within India and abroad for enhancing social and economic well-being. In the past, the family has been the major source of support in later life. However, increased mobility may challenge the continued reliance on family in the future. Understanding the links between population ageing, migration and the health and well-being of older people will become increasingly important as India continues to age.

This project is funded by the Indian-European Research Networking Programme in the Social Sciences, involving funding organisations from the UK (ESRC), India (ICSSR), France (ANR), Germany (DFG) and The Netherlands (NWO). The aim of this project is to engage a multidisciplinary international network of academics in order to address critically important demographic issues in India, UK and Netherlands. The project will investigate ageing and well-being in a globalised world through the comparison of the situation of older people living in India, UK and Netherlands, using both quantitative and qualitative data. A particular focus of the research will be on the role of public versus private transfers and the well-being of older people and the extent of intergenerational exchanges. It will provide state of the art reviews of existing research in order to identify knowledge gaps and new research areas, as well as providing opportunities for exchange of research expertise and capacity building.

The international project is led in the UK by Professor Maria Evandrou, and includes colleagues from the Centre for Research on Ageing (Dr Aravinda Guntupalli and Dr Athina Vlachantoni) and the Division of Demography and Social Statistics

(Dr Sabu Padmadas). Beyond the UK, the project involves collaborators from the Population Research Centre ISEC (Bangalore, India), the Centre for Development Studies (Trivandrum, India), and the Population Research Centre (PRC) (Groningen, The Netherlands).

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James, K. S. (2011) "India's Demographic Change, Opportunities and Challenges", *Science*, July, 29, P: 576-580.

### **Assessing the impact of internal labour migration on intergenerational support, health and income: the cases of China and South Africa**

In recent decades, China and South Africa have been characterised by rapid industrialisation and economic growth that has contributed to transformations in the structure of the labour market. Both countries are economic leaders within their respective regions, and the economic growth has been fuelled, in part, by the availability of relatively inexpensive migrant labour. The combination of demographic changes, internal migration patterns and simultaneous economic growth and restructuring give rise to a number of policy-relevant questions relating to the financial circumstances and health well-being of vulnerable populations, particularly children and older people. The research literature discusses labour migration as an adaptive household livelihood strategy that can provide essential income to family members in the form of remittances and research has highlighted the positive impact for those 'left behind' (Falkingham et al, 2009). However, existing research emphasises the overall impact of the absence of the middle generation for both younger and older people.

The objectives of this project included the strengthening of existing research networks between academics in the UK, China and South Africa, with a view to developing cross-national and country-specific research agendas and research proposals. It also included the exploration of the availability and comparability of large-scale national survey datasets in China and South Africa to address key policy-relevant questions in the area of economic migration, social protection and population health. The project was led by Professor Jane Falkingham,

from the Division of Demography and Social Statistics, and Director of the ESRC Centre for Population Change, and the rest of the UK team consisted of researchers (Professor Maria Evandrou, Dr Lucy Jordan, Dr Sabu Padmadas, Dr Athina Vlachantoni and Professor Jackie Wahba) who together represent expertise from four interdisciplinary research centres in the Social Sciences: the ESRC Centre for Population Change, the Centre for Global Health Population, Poverty and Policy (GHP3), the Centre for Research on Ageing and the Child Wellbeing Research Centre. The Chinese team consisted of researchers from two of the country's leading research Institutes under the auspices of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: the Institute of Economics and the Institute of Population and Labour Economics, with particular expertise in the areas of social protection, economic migration and the differential impact on populations in rural/ urban areas. Finally, the South African team consists of researchers with expertise in population health, family demography and household responses to HIV/AIDS based at the University of Witwatersrand/ Agincourt DSS and the Africa Centre for Health and Population Studies.

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## Coming of age: the 21st PopFest Conference

Postgraduate research students from the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences are currently busy organising PopFest2013, an annual multidisciplinary population studies conference for PGRs.



Popfest2013 will be hosted on the Avenue Campus, at the University of Southampton, from the 8th to 10th July 2013. A uniquely informal yet informative event, PopFest aims to bring together research students from a variety of disciplines with a common interest in population. The conference is the ideal opportunity for PGRs to present their work, further their knowledge and network in a friendly and encouraging environment.

This year's theme, 'Coming of Age', marks PopFest's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and return to its birthplace, as the University of Southampton also hosted the very first conference in 1992. In order to celebrate the return of PopFest to Southampton, the committee will be expanding the remit of the conference through the inclusion of a training day designed to equip delegates with valuable skills for establishing their careers. Dr Helen Fielding of Quercus Training will be providing two training sessions on how to 'get the job you want', and Dr Alice Reid, editor of *Population Studies* will be providing training on 'how to get published' – an essential requirement for both the dissemination of research findings but also for career progression.

Furthermore we are pleased to announce that Professor David Martin, Professor of Geography and co-Director of both the ESRC UK Data Service and ESRC National Centre for Research Methods, will be our conference keynote speaker. David will open the conference and will speak about the census in the past and looking to the future, drawing on his experience as Director of the ESRC Census Programme.

PopFest2013 is open to all postgraduate research students with an interest in Population Studies, regardless of discipline, and we are anticipating a substantive element focussing on the developing world context of population research. We also expect streams to include Ageing, Health, and Migration, and we welcome abstracts from all postgraduate researchers to enable a fully multidisciplinary conference.

The Call for Papers can be found on our website at [www.southampton.ac.uk/popfest](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/popfest) or to be added to our mailing list, please email [popfest2013@southampton.ac.uk](mailto:popfest2013@southampton.ac.uk).

# **GSF Bulletin: Call for papers**

**Theme:** Millennium Development Goals and the post 2015 Agenda

**Deadline:** 31st March 2013

**Publication date:** April 2013

The next issue of the Global South Forum Bulletin will focus on the Millennium Development Goals and the plans for the post 2015 agenda. We welcome articles of between 500-1000 words. These could be plans for future research, reviews of books, articles, working papers, as well as comments on conferences and workshops. The **deadline for submission is 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013**. Please submit your articles, including your name, title of your paper, contact details and Faculty/University to [gsforum@soton.ac.uk](mailto:gsforum@soton.ac.uk). All articles must include an abstract of 100 words. Please use the following font specification: style – Georgia, size – 12. Style of referring should be the Harvard style.

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