Data and Development

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Prof. Cuz Potter

Graduate School of International Studies
Korea University
Fall 2025

Course: Special Topics in International Development II

Course Number:	IDC519
Lecture:	Fridays, 14:00–16:45
Location:	International Studies Hall, Room 217

Contact info

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TA contact info

Note: Please note that this syllabus may be subject to minor alterations.

1 Introduction

Evidence-based policy making has come into greater demand as a tool of transparency and effectiveness, and has aggressively asserted itself in the realm of development policy. The AI tsunami has cleared a new landscape for collecting, processing, and analyzing development data. Through this demanding course, we will strive to build a foundation capable of withstanding this onslaught and turning it to our advantage. Students will learn how to think about data, how to construct data, and how to use data for academic research and policy formulation in the development field.

2 Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be knowledgeable on:

1. The role of data-based and evidence-based decision making in development.
2. Basic principles for using emerging technologies like LLMs and ML to analyze data.
3. The social construction of data and its inherently tenuous relation to the physical and social world.
4. Technical challenges in collecting, managing, and analyzing development data.
5. The political mobilization of data and analysis to pursue ends that may not align with development itself.
6. The way in which digital technologies' very design creates and reinforces systems of control.

3 Course Requirements

- **Readings:** Great consideration has been given to what readings are assigned. As such, you are expected to have completed all the readings assigned prior to our class meetings. Do not expect that you can complete the readings assigned in one night simply because there are only two chapters or a few articles to read. The readings can be dense and take time to get through.
- **Reaction papers:** You will write a one-page Reaction Paper (RP) on the assigned readings for each of the six out of the 12 weeks for which there are readings. The RP is due electronically by FRIDAY 9am *prior* to the class in which we will discuss those readings. This allows you to choose which weeks to write a reflection paper. I will drop the lowest score, thereby counting only the top eight. If you write more than the required number, I will grade only the first ones submitted. The papers will not be graded with a letter grade, but will be allocated zero, one, two, or three points depending on how actively your paper engages the material. Late papers will receive zero points, as the purpose of this assignment is to ensure that you have something to contribute in class.

  The paper should usually be 350–500 words (about one page single-spaced). You should include a word count in each submission.

  As these brief papers are intended to facilitate class discussion, you can use them in a variety of ways. For example, in addition to analyzing the readings, you can use the Reaction Paper (RP) to ask for clarification about any aspect of the readings you did not fully understand or to express an opinion about one or more of the readings. RPs should not be summaries of the readings; they should be reactions to the readings. In general, I would advise you to focus the RP on only one or two of the readings assigned for each week. RPs should be clearly written, spell-checked, and grammatically correct.
- **Participation:** Class attendance is mandatory. Your grade for class attendance will be a simple percentage of the number of classes attended between September 12 and December 15 divided by 14. Beyond this, class participation is strongly encouraged. I would grade on the basis of participation, but I do not wish to penalize students who are naturally reticent. However, you should expect to have your opinions solicited if you do not offer them freely...and nobody enjoys that.
- **LLM exercise:** Small groups of students will employ LLM strategies to identify patterns in Korean aid strategy documents. After downloading relevant KOICA strategy documents in English or Korean for individual countries, regions, or both, groups will use natural language processing (NLP) techniques to identify patterns in the documents. Students may also wish to obtain similar documents from target countries or other donors as well. At a minimum, students should attempt to use techniques covered in class but are encouraged to explore additional analytical libraries and apply them.
  - Topics may include but are not limited to:
    * Identifying similarities and differences in priority areas for different countries or regions

    * Comparing Korean priority areas to those identified by recipient countries
    * Comparing Korean priority areas to those identified by other donors
    * Identifying preferred aid modalities or projects
    * Identifying key themes in framing aid activities
  - Expected output: A Github repository with annotated code, output, and a README.md file of 500–1,000 words that summarizes findings.
  - Learning outcomes: Students will develop familiarity with (a) basic LLM techniques, (b) KOICA document stores, and (c) Korean aid strategies and motivations.

- **Comparative strategy analysis:** Small groups of students will work with students from ZHAW to conduct a comparative strategy analysis that will allow them to better understand and contrast the development cooperation strategies of Switzerland (SDC) and South Korea (KOICA). Teams will research and create a donor map (infographic) that compares five aspects (the ones they find the most interesting) of Korea´s and Switzerland´s development cooperation strategies. Through this exercise, students will gain a solid understanding of development actors and instruments, as well as comparative donor logic. Note that this activity will serve as input for the practical track activity and final presentations.

  Rather than a list of data/facts from one country and then the other, it is expected that students make a comparative analysis: pinpointing key differences and similarities and briefly analyzing the possible origin and/or effects of such contrasts. Key aspects for analysis may include, but are not limited to:

  - Philosophy and historical evolution
  - Regional focus and top recipient countries
  - Sectoral priorities (e.g., climate, education, gender)
  - Funding flows and their historical evolution
  - Funding instruments
  - Type of partnerships with different stakeholders: government, private sector, nonprofits
  - Funding strategy and approach
  - Institutional setup
  - Competitive advantages
  - Strategies to measure effectiveness
  - Data generation and use

- Expected output:
  - One infographic (key figures, graphs, and messages; minimal text)
  - One 3-minute video per team explaining key differences and similarities

- **Project Design Matrix (PDM) exercise:** Small groups of students will work on this in-class activity to apply the PDM to a practical real-world case study.
  - Objective: To develop students' analytical and practical competencies in systematic project design methodology through hands-on application of the Project Design Matrix (PDM) framework. This exercise aims to bridge theoretical understanding of development project formation with real-world implementation challenges, while fostering critical evaluation of aid motivation dynamics in international development cooperation.
  - Task: Student teams will engage in a comprehensive project design simulation using authentic Official Development Assistance (ODA) case studies that include specific regional contexts, identified development challenges, and existing intervention efforts. Teams must systematically navigate the eight-step PDM methodology:

1. Stakeholder Analysis: Identify and map relevant actors and their interests to derive the project's target group
2. SWOT Analysis: Assess strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the chosen target group
3. Problems Analysis: Conduct systematic problem identification based on the results of weakness and threat analysis using a problem tree
4. Objective Analysis: Transform identified problems into achievable objectives using an objective tree
5. Project Selection: Justify strategic project choices based on preceding analysis
6. PDM: Construct the comprehensive PDM framework
7. Workplan Development: Create implementation timeline and resource allocation
8. Monitoring and Evaluation: Design appropriate assessment and feedback mechanisms

Additionally, teams must critically analyze and categorize the underlying aid motivation driving their chosen case study project (donor interest, recipient needs, or recipient merit).

- Expected output: 11-slide PowerPoint presentation structured as follows:
  * Slide 1: Introduction to the chosen case
  * Slides 2-9: Systematic documentation of each PDM step
  * Slide 10: Critical analysis of aid motivation typology
  * Slide 11: Team member information and contribution breakdown
- Learning Outcome: Upon successful completion of this activity, students will demonstrate evidence-based reasoning and practical application of theoretical frameworks, as well as the following:
  * Methodological Competency: Practical proficiency in applying the eight-step PDM methodology to real-world development challenges
  * Critical Analysis Skills: Ability to identify, evaluate, and categorize different aid motivation paradigms and their implications for project design and implementation
  * Collaborative Problem-Solving: Enhanced teamwork and communication skills in addressing multi-faceted development challenges through systematic project design approaches

- **Final project:** Students will choose between two tracks for their final project: a practical track and an academic track.

1. Practical track
   (a) This assignment builds on the comparative strategy analysis assignment. With teammates from ZHAW, small student groups will co-create a pitch for a development cooperation project targeting a shared Global South partner, based on both Swiss and Korean strengths and priorities.
   (b) Based on key findings from the comparative strategy analysis, mixed teams will select a Global South Partner and a target issue that aligns to both Swiss and Korean global development agendas. Students will then collaboratively design a project concept that includes the following elements:
      - Analysis of the development challenge in the chosen Global South country. This includes providing evidence (data) and explaining how this issue aligns with local and global priorities.
      - State project goals and key short and medium-term expected outcomes
      - Explain how a Swiss-Korean partnership would add value to the project: how can the project leverage the strengths of KOICA and DEZA; how would roles be divided; how can other local or regional partnerships be leveraged
      - Explain key project activities and expected added value
      - Analyze how you would measure success and impact. Key indicators of success; how will you measure change; longer-term impact potential of your project
      - Students are expected to apply the tools learned throughout the module: PDM, gender mainstreaming, MEL tools, data analysis, etc. Stronger outputs will employ more advanced data analysis strategies, including but not limited to LLM use, spatial analysis, and intergration of multiple data sets.

(c) Expected output:
   - Slide deck
   - 15-minute team presentation + Q&A, including description of (a) how they worked with students from KU, what challenges they encountered in the joint collaboration and how they overcame them, and (b) how they used LLMs and how those tools helped or hindered their efforts.

(d) Learning Outcome: Students will apply key development cooperation tools—such as PDM, gender mainstreaming, MEL, and data analysis—as well as emerging technologies to design a project aligned with both donor and local priorities. They will also gain insight into the challenges of strategic alignment and cross-cultural collaboration in development cooperation project planning.

2. Academic track

(a) This assignment employs concepts and strategies explored through the readings to prepare an academic research paper. In groups of one to three members, students will select a development topic and address it through the application of techniques identified during the course to data drawn from at least two independent data sets.

(b) Expected output:
   - 6,000–8,000 word academic paper formatted for publication

(c) Learning Outcome: Students will apply emerging technologies to large data. Through this process they will learn how to implement these technologies, assemble and understand development data, and write an academic paper. They will also build understanding of a development-related topic that matters to them.

4 Grading

Weights	
10%	Attendance and participation
25%	Response papers
10%	LLM exercise
10%	Comparative strategy analysis
10%	Project design matrix exercise
35%	Final project

Note: I will deduct one point from your final grade if you ask me a question that is clearly explained in this syllabus.

5 Plagiarism

Plagiarism is unacceptable. **If plagiarism is detected, you will receive a zero for the given assignment.** Please note that plagiarism is much broader than many students realize. You are encouraged to look at the excellent descriptions of plagiarism from Indiana University (http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml), Harvard University (https://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/avoiding-plagiarism), and the University of Wisconsin (http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/QuotingSources.html), and you will be held to their standards. You can also look at my own website (https://www.cuzproduces.com/producinganew/contents/plagiarism).

6 Electronics policy

In this class electronic device use (computers, cell phones, etc.) will not be allowed in the front half of the classroom. Though I am willing to allow you to take notes in the way you wish, most contemporary science on note taking and comprehension suggests that computer use is detrimental. First, because you cannot write down everything a person is saying, it is necessary to do some preliminary processing of the material before you write your notes, leading you to retain the knowledge more effectively. Typing your notes allows you to do less pre-processing. Second, once your computer

is on, it is easy to be distracted by email, social networking, and other things. Though we all believe we can multitask this way, we are wrong. We do not process information as effectively. Third, an individual using a computer or phone distracts not only her but also those around her who can see her screen. Therefore, I am determined that there will be a laptop and phone free zone in the front of the classroom.
That said, I expect to use an online forum extensively and interactively during the semester in order to accommodate such a large class. During these exercises, you should use your laptops or phones to participate. But in the front half of the room, they should be put away when the exercise is over.

7 Communication and meetings

You can communicate with me in several ways:
Email: I prefer to work through email. If you choose to contact me this way, be sure to include the class you are taking with me and your student ID number in your email. This makes it much easier for me to identify who you are and address any issues you might have, especially if they are related to grading or Blackboard. Please be aware that I only check my email two or three times during the day, so I may not respond immediately. Also, I regularly—if not frequently—send updates out through Blackboard. You are responsible for checking whatever email account you have connected to Blackboard.
Class: You are also welcome to ask me questions when we meet for class. After class is always better. Before class I am typically preoccupied with getting everything ready.
Office: Finally, you can meet me individually in my office. The obvious preferred time for this is my office hours. After all, this is what they are for! However, you can arrange via email or in class to meet me at some other time. Unless it is a real emergency, please do not visit my office unannounced. It disrupts my work.

8 Mental Health

As a student you may experience a range of issues that can cause barriers to learning, such as strained relationships, increased anxiety, alcohol/drug problems, feeling down, difficulty concentrating, and lack of motivation. These mental health concerns or stressful events may lead to diminished academic performance or reduce a student's ability to participate in daily activities. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or in need of support, services are available. You can learn more about the broad range of confidential mental health services available on campus via https://kuscc.korea.ac.kr/kuscc/index.do.

9 Required texts

There are **no required texts** for this course. All readings will be available online through the LMS.
You may, however, consider obtaining the following books, as they will be drawn on as background or we will read a significant portion of them.

- William Kent. 2000. *Data and reality*. Rev. [Bloomington, Indiana]: 1st Books Library. ISBN: 1585009709.
- Matthew J. Salganik. 2019. *Bit by bit: Social research in the digital age*. First paperback printing. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691196107.

10 Schedule of Topics and Reading

Week 1 (September 5): Introduction

Week 2 (September 12): Data-informed decision making
What is evidence-based policy making? Introduces and explores the basic practice.

1. John M. Bryson. 2018. "Why Strategic Planning Is More Important Than Ever." Chap. 1 in *Strategic planning for public and nonprofit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement,* Fifth edition. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ISBN: 1119071615.

2. Christian Gade. 2024. "When is it justified to claim that a practice or policy is evidence-based? Reflections on evidence and preferences." *Evidence & Policy* 20, no. 2 (May): 244–253. ISSN: 1744-2656. https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421x16905606522863.

3. Brian Head. 2010. "Evidence-based policy: principles and requirements: Volume 1: Proceedings, Roundtable Proceedings." Chap. 2 in *Strengthening Evidence-based Policy in the Australian Federation,* edited by Productivity Commission, 13–26. Canberra.

4. Karen L. Webber et al. 2020. "Data Analytics and the Imperatives for Data-Informed Decision Making in Higher Education." Chap. 1 in *Big data on campus: Data analytics and decision making in higher education,* edited by Karen L. Webber et al. Includes bibliographical references and index. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. ISBN: 9781421439044.

Week 3 (September 19): Data and reality What is data? How do we translate our reality into a form that computers can process?

1. William Kent. 2000. *Data and reality.* Rev. [Bloomington, Indiana]: 1st Books Library. ISBN: 1585009709, chapters 1–6.

Week 4 (September 26): Emerging technologies: Large language models and machine learning
How can we use LLMs to analyze development data? How do we use large language models (LLMs), machine learning (ML), and APIs? Does theory matter any longer?

1. Chris Anderson. 2008. "The end of theory: The data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete." *Wired* (June 23, 2008).

2. Emily M. Bender et al. 2021. "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots." In *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency.* ACM, March. https://doi.org/10.1145/3442188.3445922.

3. Jaron Lanier. 2010. "An Apocalypse of Self-Abdication: A manifesto." Chap. 2 in *You are not a gadget,* First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. ISBN: 9780307389978.

4. Tianyuan Wang et al. 2025. "Natural language processing for planning policy identification: A benchmarking study using 113 Chinese cities between 2011 and 2019." *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science* (June). ISSN: 2399-8091. https://doi.org/10.1177/23998083251351743.

Week 5 (October 3): Holiday. No class.

Week 6 (October 10): Identification and formulation of development projects (Grace Choi, GSIS)
Note: LLM assignment due.
This session equips students with essential Project Design Matrix (PDM) skills for Official Development Assistance Projects, covering the entire project cycle from planning to evaluation while connecting these practical tools to global development agendas and trends, culminating in a hands-on group activity where students select from real ODA case studies to create mini-PDMs to apply their learning.

Week 7 (October 17): Tools to measure the effectiveness of development cooperation (Alma Rasmden, ZHAW)
Note: PDM assignement due.
This session introduces the importance of monitoring and evaluation, key concepts in MEL (monitoring, evaluation, and learning), and a general overview of experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies.

1. Matthew J. Salganik. 2019. *Bit by bit: Social research in the digital age.* First paperback printing. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691196107, chapter 4.

Week 8 (October 24): Exam week. No class.

Week 9 (October 31): Data and data sources

What is big data? Where can we find it? How can we use it?

1. Joshua Blumenstock et al. 2015. "Predicting poverty and wealth from mobile phone metadata." *Science* 350, no. 6264 (November 27, 2015): 1073–1076.
2. Matthew J. Salganik. 2019. *Bit by bit: Social research in the digital age.* First paperback printing. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691196107, chapters 1 and 2.
3. Roxanne Connelly et al. 2016. "The role of administrative data in the big data revolution in social science research." *Social Science Research* 59 (September): 1–12. ISSN: 0049-089X. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.04.015.
4. Neal Jean et al. 2016. "Combining satellite imagery and machine learning to predict poverty." *Science* 353, no. 6301 (August 19, 2016): 790–794.

Related readings:

1. Jessica E. Steele et al. 2017. "Mapping poverty using mobile phone and satellite data." *Journal of The Royal Society Interface* 14, no. 127 (February): 20160690. ISSN: 1742-5662. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsif.2016.0690.
2. John Gibson et al. 2020. *Night lights in economics: Sources and uses.* Technical report 419. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, LICOS Centrefor Institutions and Economic Performance.

Week 10 (November 7): Philosophy and politics of quantification

How is data is socially created and enforced? Examines the philosophical and political foundations of quantification.

1. Theodore M. Porter. 2020. *Trust in numbers: The pursuit of objectivity in science and public life.* New edition. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 0691210543, chapters 1 and 2.
2. James C. Scott. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, chapter 1.
3. Timothy Mitchell. 2002. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity.* Berkeley: University of California Press, chapter 3.

Week 11 (November 14): Citizens and experts

How do we navigate the intersection of experts and citizens? Does one group have more privileged knowledge?

1. Matthew J. Salganik. 2019. *Bit by bit: Social research in the digital age.* First paperback printing. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691196107, chapter 3.
2. Frank Fischer. 2000. *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, chapters 1 and 2.

Week 12 (November 21): Construction of development data

How data and measurement have evolved in development practice, from early statistical efforts to modern indicator systems.

1. James Ferguson. 2017. *The anti-politics machine: "development", depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho.* Eleventh printing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN: 9780816624379, chapter 1.

2. Morten Jerven. 2013. *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It.* 1st ed. Cornell Studies in Political Economy. Description based on publisher supplied metadata and other sources. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. ISBN: 9780801467615, selections.

3. Sally Engle Merry. 2011. "Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance." *Current Anthropology* 52, no. S3 (April): S83–S95. ISSN: 1537-5382. https://doi.org/10.1086/657241.

4. Sakiko Fukuda-Parr. 2016. "From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals: shifts in purpose, concept, and politics of global goal setting for development." *Gender & Development* 24, no. 1 (January): 43–52. ISSN: 1364-9221. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2016.1145895.

Week 13 (November 28): Data Systems and Infrastructure

The institutional and technical foundations of data collection in developing countries. Explores capacity constraints, funding challenges, and the digital infrastructure needed for modern data systems.

1. Justin Sandefur et al. 2014. *The Political Economy of Bad Data: Evidence from African Survey & Administrative Statistics.* Technical report 373. Center for Global Development.

2. Hai-Anh H. Dang et al. 2020. "Tracking the sustainable development goals: Emerging measurement challenges and further reflections." *World Development* 127 (March): 104570. ISSN: 0305-750X. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.05.024.

3. Matthew J. Salganik. 2019. *Bit by bit: Social research in the digital age.* First paperback printing. Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN: 9780691196107, chapter 5.

Related readings:

1. Gabriel Demombynes et al. 2014. *Costing a Data Revolution.* Technical report Working Paper No. 383. Center for Global Development, October 20, 2014.

Week 14 (December 5): Data quality and reliability

Measurement challenges specific to developing country contexts. Examines sampling issues, recall bias, seasonal variation, and the difficulties of measuring complex concepts like poverty, consumption, and agricultural productivity.

1. Kathleen Beegle et al. 2012. "Methods of household consumption measurement through surveys: Experimental results from Tanzania." *Journal of Development Economics* 98, no. 1 (May): 3–18. ISSN: 0304-3878. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2011.11.001.

2. Calogero Carletto et al. 2015. "From Tragedy to Renaissance: Improving Agricultural Data for Better Policies." *The Journal of Development Studies* 51, no. 2 (February): 133–148. ISSN: 1743-9140. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2014.968140.

3. Vellore Arthi et al. 2018. "Not your average job: Measuring farm labor in Tanzania." *Journal of Development Economics* 130 (January): 160–172. ISSN: 0304-3878. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2017.10.005

Week 15 (December 12): Digital colonialism

Examination of the digital frontier as a form of colonialism. What and who are being colonized?

1. Langdon Winner. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" In "Modern Technology: Problem or Opportunity?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (Winter): 121–136.

2. Jim Thatcher et al. 2016. "Data colonialism through accumulation by dispossession: New metaphors for daily data." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 6 (July): 990–1006. ISSN: 1472-3433. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775816633195.

3. Shakir Mohamed et al. 2020. "Decolonial AI: Decolonial Theory as Sociotechnical Foresight in Artificial Intelligence." *Philosophy & Technology* 33, no. 4 (July): 659–684. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-020-00405-8.

4. Mirca Madianou. 2019. "Technocolonialism: Digital Innovation and Data Practices in the Humanitarian Response to Refugee Crises." *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 3 (April). ISSN: 2056-3051. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119863146.

Related readings:

1. Michael Kwet. 2019. "Digital colonialism: US empire and the new imperialism in the Global South." *Race & Class* 60, no. 4 (January): 3–26. ISSN: 1741-3125. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818823172.

2. Shoshana Zuboff. 2015. "Big other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization." *Journal of Information Technology* 30, no. 1 (March): 75–89. ISSN: 1466-4437. https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.5.

3. Cédric Durand. 2024. *How Silicon Valley unleashed techno-feudalism: The making of the digital economy.* Edited by David Broder. London: Verso. ISBN: 9781804294383, chapter 2.

Week 16 (December 15): Presentations to and from ZHAW students

Note: Final paper due.
Note: This class is currently scheduled for Monday afternoon to accommodate ZHAW students.