

Report on Book Launch and Panel Discussion

The Bahá'í Chair for Studies in Development at Devi Ahilya University, in collaboration with the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs, New Delhi, organized a book launch and panel discussion on 15 March 2026 on the eve of its newly published book 'Dialogues on Development: Rethinking Development for a Just and Sustainable Future'. The event brought together scholars, practitioners, and members of civil society.

The program opened with welcome remarks by Nilakshi Rajkhowa, followed by an introduction to the book by Arash Fazli, who situated the publication within a broader effort to rethink development through questions of knowledge, participation, and justice.

In his reflections, Amitabh Kundu highlighted the evolving nature of development discourse, noting the shift from narrow economic indicators to more multidimensional frameworks. He emphasized the importance of continued conceptual refinement, while cautioning that meaningful engagement with policy requires definitional clarity and measurable frameworks.

The panel discussion, moderated by Arash Fazli, featured Aditi Kapoor, Steven Schonberger, and Prof. Kundu. A central theme that emerged was a critical reassessment of the concept of "development" itself. Dr. Schonberger, a former Director at the World Bank, traced its historical roots in colonial and post-war contexts, arguing that prevailing paradigms—whether state-led or community-based—carry implicit cultural biases. He provocatively suggested replacing the term "development" with "progress," emphasizing a continuous, collective process of human advancement rather than a hierarchical distinction between "developed" and "developing" societies.

Dr. Kapoor, who is a Co-Founder of Alternative Futures, underscored the importance of individual and cultural dimensions of change, highlighting language, values, and self-transformation as central to any meaningful social transformation. She emphasized that change begins with the evolution of individuals and communities, rooted in cultural contexts and ethical frameworks. The discussion also explored the importance of agency, with panelists noting that enabling people—especially youth—to act meaningfully requires both inner development and supportive social conditions, including a sense of security.

The moderated dialogue and audience interaction further expanded the conversation. Participants raised concerns about ecological degradation, inequality, and the limits of growth-based models, as well as the need to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and lived realities into development thinking. Questions also addressed issues such as youth participation, technological change, and the ethical dimensions of public policy.

In response, panelists emphasized the need for plural approaches, rejecting one-size-fits-all models and advocating context-sensitive pathways. The discussion highlighted tensions between measurement and meaning, particularly in relation to concepts such as happiness, sustainability, and justice.