Preface and acknowledgements

This volume grew out of the seemingly straightforward presumption that if history matters for development policy, as most people agree it does, then perhaps historians – and not only economic historians – might have something important to contribute. Too often, it seemed to us, the substantive and methodological contributions of professional historians to development policy debates was marginal, whether because of the dominance of economists or the inability (or unwillingness) of historians to contribute. As a result, our view was that significant opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue were being lost, and that development policy itself was ultimately the poorer for this. As a step in a more positive direction, we decided to commission a series of papers by leading historians on four core development policy issues – social protection, public health, public education, and natural resource management – and to solicit feedback on them from people working directly at the nexus of scholarship and policy. The result is the volume before you: an introduction, nine substantive chapters and five commentary pieces that we hope exemplifies the fruitful and distinctive outcomes that can emerge when history – understood as both the past and the discipline – is taken seriously in contemporary development policy debates.

This volume emerged out of the engagement of three of us (Rao, Szreter and Woolcock) in the World Development Report (WDR) 2006, which was on the theme of equity and development. These Reports are the annual flagship document of the World Bank, and as such have a relatively large global impact on development policy and debate. As part of the various follow-up initiatives launched in the wake of WDR 2006, we decided to capitalise on the fact that the Report had opened up an important space for thinking historically about the emergence and consolidation of different types of ‘institutions’ in particular places. But how exactly would that space would be filled, by whom, and on what basis? The answers to these questions seemed to us to be sufficiently consequential as to warrant expending considerable effort to ensure that the skills and sensibilities of professional historians were included. To this end, we sought out the

wisdom and input of Chris Bayly, who became an eager companion on this venture. Bayly and Szeleter, as the two bona fide historians on our team, identified the historians we might approach to contribute to this volume, and collectively we sought to fashion topics and papers that would simultaneously showcase exemplary historical research and speak constructively to contemporary development policy debates.

The initial and final rounds of funding for this project came from the World Bank (its Research Support Budget and trust funds provided by the government of Sweden). The middle phases of the project, including an author's workshop, were generously funded by the Brooks World Poverty Institute at the University of Manchester. The assistance of Laura Partridge is especially acknowledged. We are extremely grateful to both organizations for making this project possible, and for themselves demonstrating that academic and applied organizations can work together to generate outcomes that neither could alone.

The overriding objective throughout has been to demonstrate that responding to inherently complex issues – such as institutional development, organizational design, service delivery and 'governance' – requires engagement with a diverse assortment of ideas and evidence. In this regard, the contributions of economists and historians (and other social scientists) are largely complements, not substitutes. It is in this spirit that we invite readers, no matter what their disciplinary training or professional background, to engage with the various chapters, each of which demonstrates in a practical, thoroughly evidence-based manner, and in relation to a specific development policy pre-occupation, how much can be gained by development policy practitioners taking seriously historians' knowledge of context, process, contestation and indigenous agency in the places where they operate. The chapters show how those involved in designing or implementing significant policy interventions, in the name of 'development', need to understand that they are attempting, usually with relatively minute instruments and blunt tools, to influence, alter and modify the course of a vigorous, living, flowing river – the metaphor we have adopted for a country's or a nation's ongoing history. Those involved in development policy are attempting to insert themselves and their projects, at a particular point of entry, into one of these many currents of history, as it continually negotiates its way from the present into the future, drawing on the resources of its past. They are making a bid to become part of that current and to have some influence over it. To do so most effectively, it would be well to spend considerable time consulting those who are best placed to understand the features of the riverbed and the river's course, the rhythms of the water's ebb and flow, the most propitious points of entry from the river bank and the varied forms of life it contains and sustains.

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