Assemblage Thinking and Methodological Reorientation in Development Studies

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Abstract

In the context of interconnected crises and shifting geopolitical dynamics, the imperative to reimagine how development is practiced and studied has grown increasingly urgent. This paper advances a methodological intervention in development research by drawing on insights from multi-sited empirical work that examines development governance through the lens of assemblage thinking. Using illustrative cases from studies from Ukraine and Costa Rica, we demonstrate how assemblage approaches can illuminate development governance as a dynamic, relational, and multi-scalar field of practice. Assemblage thinking pushes analysis

beyond fixed spatial, temporal, and institutional frames by foregrounding the contingent configurations through which development interventions are continually assembled and the shifting relations of power and knowledge that underpin decision-making. The paper highlights both the possibilities and methodological tensions of operationalising assemblage thinking in empirical development research. The empirical cases engaged serve to illustrate how assemblage-oriented inquiry can help trace emergent and uneven forms of coordination and cooperation, while bringing issues of positionality, coherence, and contextuality into view. By engaging assemblage thinking as both an analytic and methodological orientation, the paper contributes to ongoing dialogue on advancing more situated, plural, and reflexive methodological approaches to studying development governance.

Introduction: Rethinking Development Research Methodologies in a Shifting Landscape

The field of international development practice is changing rapidly. The current conjuncture, shaped by abrupt geopolitical shifts and longer-term declines in financing and support for the institutionalised practice of development, demands renewed attention to how development is conceptualised and studied. International development practice can be understood as the field in which a diverse range of actors, including economically "developed" states, international and national non-governmental organisations, private sector actors, and an array of civil society actors, coordinate and collaborate to promote particular forms of social, economic, and institutional change in so-called "developing" states and contexts (Carroll & Jarvis, 2015). Resourced primarily through overseas development assistance (ODA), international development practice extends beyond the disbursement of aid, encompassing efforts aimed at governance reform, service delivery, humanitarian response, and, increasingly, activities in the realm of environmental and climate action. At its core, international development practice is oriented around particular visions of progress, historically tied to modernist assumptions about linear trajectories toward economic growth, material improvement and institutional transformation (Alami et al., 2021). More recently, these narratives have been overlaid with notions of 'green' growth and sustainability, though the underlying conception of development remains deeply contested. Such contestations sit within a broader critical lineage that interrogates how dominant development imaginaries emerged though, and continue to reproduce, relations of coloniality and modernity (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992; Latouche, 2008). Here, we use 'development' to describe the institutionalised discourses and practices through which particular forms of change are framed as desirable and actively pursued. In practice, development operates as a powerful set of discourses, policy agendas, and multiscale interventions that reflect and reproduce persistent asymmetries of power within a shifting global order. Despite these

tensions, the field continues to constitute a dynamic arena of transnational cooperation, shaping responses to urgent challenges and remaining crucial in contexts where needs persist.

As a field shaped by global agendas and operationalised within national and local contexts, international development practice is distinctly scalar in its organisation. Policies, priorities, and funding streams are most often shaped at the international level, coordinated through networks of intergovernmental organisations, international financial institutions, and donor states, supported by a wide range of non-governmental actors, organisations and institutions across geographies (Hameiri & Scarpello, 2018; Murphy, 2022). Global agendas, such as the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, are subsequently negotiated and reconfigured through national institutions before being realised in highly situated local contexts. Although perceived as hierarchical in form and flow, such scalar relations are rarely uniform in practice. Rather, they expose discursive and material tensions between global priorities and contextualised local practices, highlighting how power, resources, and knowledge are unevenly distributed across sites (Bebbington, 2004). In this sense, the scalar dynamics of international development governance and decision making are not seamlessly top-down, but are relational, contested, and always contextually embedded, shaping how development interventions are legitimised and implemented. Attending to these relational dynamics highlights the limits of conventional analytical frames that conceptualise interventions as bounded, hierarchical processes of knowledge and resource transfer, and prompts reflection on the epistemological assumptions and dominant methodological frameworks through which interventions can be understood.

The current conjuncture finds the sector in flux, shaped by parallel trends of donor retreat and diversification. On one hand, traditional donors in the so-called Global North have scaled back commitments. The dissolution of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in January 2025 and the United States' broader withdrawal from a range of global cooperation initiatives accelerated an emerging trend. Since 2023, European states and other long-standing donors have reduced aid budgets, citing domestic political pressures and the reorientation of public expenditure (OECD, 2025). These shifts reflect

longer-term patterns of declining support for the institutionalised practice of development cooperation. At the same time, the broader international development landscape is becoming increasingly multipolar. Emerging and so-called 'non-traditional' donors, including China, Gulf states, Türkiye and regional development banks, are expanding their presence and reshaping the terms of cooperation (Elbehairy, 2025; Mawdsley, 2018; Zoccal Gomes & Esteves, 2018). These dynamics challenge the outdated unipolar model that positioned Global North/Western donors at the centre of development practice, producing instead a more fragmented and contested arena in which multiple actors, agendas, and modalities of cooperation intersect. For scholars, this unsettled terrain calls for analytical approaches attuned to fragmentation and emergence, which move beyond geographically embedded assumptions about scale and order.

These shifts underscore the fluid nature of the sector, which is neither immediately collapsing nor coherently reconstituting, but evolving in ways that expose the unevenness, tensions, and contingencies of governance arrangements and practice across sites and scales. Crucially, development needs do not evaporate when funding recedes, or interests shift. Rather, they generate new and dynamic fields of response that equally warrant scrutiny (Horner, 2020). For development studies, this conjuncture is more than a contextual backdrop: it is a methodological opening, an opportunity to expand existing approaches to better engage with the complexity and processuality of development in practice. As the field evolves through unstable relations, overlapping agendas, and emergent forms of cooperation, research frameworks likewise need to remain capable of engaging with these shifting dynamics in context. Assemblage thinking offers both conceptual and methodological tools for such engagement, foregrounding relationality and uncertainty to enable more situated accounts of how development is organised, adapted, and contested across sites and scales.

In this paper, we advance a methodological intervention that mobilises assemblage thinking to better capture the relational and contingent character of development practice as it unfolds. The present conjuncture, we argue, presents an opportunity for a broader methodological reorientation in how development is studied and represented. Drawing on insights from multi-sited empirical research that incorporated critical policy analysis of

the localisation agenda and participatory work in Costa Rica and Ukraine, we illustrate how assemblage approaches can be operationalised to trace the dynamic configurations through which development cooperation is continually assembled. Bringing these cases into dialogue, we reflect on the methodological possibilities and tensions of studying development as a field of practice, and on what assemblage thinking contributes to advancing more plural and reflexive forms of development research. The paper proceeds as follows. Part 1 introduces assemblage thinking and outlines its relevance for studying development governance. Part 2 presents two illustrative cases that apply this approach to explore different dimensions of how development cooperation emerges in practice. Part 3 draws together the main theoretical and methodological insights that emerge from these cases, reflecting on how assemblage thinking reorients the analytical lenses and scope for studying development relations. The paper concludes by outlining the contribution this approach makes, its limitations, and opportunities for future research and collaborative inquiry.

Assemblage Thinking and Development Governance

Methodological reflection in/for studying development governance

Development research necessitates engagement with a broad array of actors and stakeholders, as well as contextualised knowledge of the political economies, institutional arrangements, and physical and human geographies in which practice unfolds (Sumner & Tribe, 2008). Yet, much contemporary analysis continues to be shaped by singular political-economic and institutionalist lenses that privilege structural and rational-institutionalist forms of analysis, often relying on decontextualised approaches and limited sites of inquiry. These tendencies can constrain the capacity of research to capture the transboundary and transdisciplinary nature of development practice and the diverse sites in which it materialises.

This is not to infer that the field has remained static. Rather, important epistemological and methodological innovations have emerged that extend its capacity for situated critical analysis. Feminist (Jenkins, 2006; Wanderley, 2017), postcolonial (Noxolo, 2016; Raghuram & Madge, 2006), and poststructuralist (Escobar, 1995, 2012; Ziai, 2009) perspectives, for instance, have foregrounded

more reflexive and situated approaches, prompting critical interrogation of the politics of knowledge production that shape development practice and scholarship. Likewise, participatory and co-productive approaches have fostered closer connections between research and localised practice, enabling more grounded and dialogical forms of knowledge production (Mitlin et al., 2020). Collectively, these interventions have broadened the epistemological and methodological terrain, but they remain marginal relative to dominant traditions. Even where more relational approaches such as actor-network theory have been adopted, they often risk reproducing hierarchical imaginaries or overlooking spaces of agency that fall outside nested hierarchical conceptualisations of development as a field of practice (McFarlane, 2009; Rocheleau, 2016). Progress to date has been meaningful but remains insufficient. Dominant approaches struggle to adequately capture the uneven, contingent, and emergent character of development in practice. These limitations invite methodological approaches and orientations capable of engaging development governance and decision making as relational and processual. Assemblage thinking offers one such approach.

Assemblage Thinking in/for studying development governance

As both a conceptual and methodological orientation, assemblage thinking foregrounds complexity, contingency, and relationality, resisting the tendency to conceptualise development as a stable system or linear process. Instead, it begins from an acknowledgement that development is continually assembled and reassembled through heterogenous relations among actors, institutions, discourses, and practices. This is especially valuable at the current conjuncture, where established donor hierarchies are shifting, new actors are emerging, and practices are increasingly being disrupted and reconfigured. For development studies, such an approach illuminates the uncertainties and tensions that shape development as a field of practice, and captures the forms of adaptation and contestation that define practice in place.

Emerging originally in the work of Deleuze and Guattari in the 1970s and 1980s, assemblage (translated inexactly from the French agancement) was developed to conceptualise the provisional and contingent coming together of heterogenous elements which coalesce around emergent alignments or provisional configurations, and whose relations are continually negotiated and reconfigured. Since then, the concept has received marked interest within the academy and has travelled widely across disciplines including geography (Richmond, 2018),

critical and social theory (Latour, 2005), postcolonial studies (Klein, 2021), governance (Briassoulis, 2019), and critical policy studies (Savage, 2020), taking on diverse conceptual and methodological inflections. While its applications and methodological flexibility have prompted debates about its fidelity to its philosophical origins (Buchanan, 2015; Kinkaid, 2020), such openness is seen as central to its analytical and investigative value.

A key implication of engaging assemblage thinking for development research is recognising that elements within an assemblage retain a level of autonomy even as they come into relation (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020; McFarlane & Anderson, 2011), making assemblages fragile, partial, and always subject to reconfiguration. Agency, in this view, is distributed across the assemblage rather than being centrally held, while power is understood to operate unevenly across elements. Such an orientation directs analytical attention to how territory, place, scale, and networks are relationally constituted (Jessop et al., 2008), and to the processes of de- and re-territorialisation through which assemblages are stabilised or unsettled (Amelina, 2021; Amoako & Frimpong Boamah, 2020).

While sharing affinities with other relational approaches commonly used in development studies, assemblage thinking departs from them in important ways. In contrast to political economy and institutionalist approaches that emphasise stability, superstructure, and hierarchical determination – whether market-driven or geopolitical – assemblage thinking foregrounds contextual specificity, contingency, and emergence. Centring such concerns does not imply a neglect of structure, nor of material constraint. Rather, assemblage approaches prompt researchers to attend to how such forces emerge, endure, and evolve within distinct configurations and contexts. In this sense, structural and historical conditions are not understood as external, objective determinants within development governance, but as forces that accrue meaning and effect through their situated entanglement with other relations. Forces such as capitalism and colonialism indeed anchor particular configurations, yet their effects are always mediated and materialised through specific contexts and practices. Unlike actor-network theory, which often traces connections node by node, assemblage approaches attend more pointedly to the conditions through which relations cohere and, crucially, dissolve. This attention to both formation and fragmentation underscores assemblage's capacity for live, situated analysis, attuned to the partiality, fragility, and instability of relations and to the ways new configurations continually unsettle the old (Sassen, 2008). In doing so, it

exposes the coexistence of order and disorder in the making and unmaking of governance arrangements. Thus, assemblage thinking opens analytical space for tracing how coherence is achieved and lost across time and space.

'Doing' assemblage research is less about tracing fixed networks or identifying bounded entities than about attending to ruptures and emergences. It requires a willingness on the part of the researcher to follow empirical leads, however unexpected, and to remain open to indeterminacy and contestation in context (Baker & McGuirk, 2017). Assemblage, in this sense, is best understood not as a static descriptor but as a verb (Buchanan, 2017): a practice of "co-functioning" through which heterogenous elements come together in contingent, non-homogenous groupings. As Deleuze and Guattari suggested, assemblages carry "the murmur" of "new assemblages" that unsettle and break with what came before (1987: 83). Importantly, as Richmond (2018: 243) notes, such flux is not a weakness but a defining feature: assemblages "would always prefer not to change," yet moments of disruption compel reorganisation, as "deterritorialisation is always immediately followed by reterretorialisation." Attending to these processes, particularly in moments of instability, can reveal the forces and relations that hold assemblages together and the conditions under which they shift. Assemblage research thus demands an experimental and reflexive ethos, closely attentive to temporality.

Such sensibilities underpin the multi-sited research project from which this paper draws, within which we examine development governance as a sphere continually dis/reassembled through shifting actor constellations, agendas, and relations. The project traces how development interventions are organised and re/configured across institutional, geographic, policy and political contexts. In this sense, we approach development not as a fixed set of norms and institutions, but as a dynamic field in which diverse actors and interests come together to cooperate and collaborate. As such, negotiation, contestation, and reconfiguration are considered defining features of the field, which is continually being made and remade through interactions within and across scales. For us, assemblage thinking provides a means to trace how governance arrangements are formed and re-formed across policy processes, shifting aid and humanitarian operations, and fluctuating financial flows, while remaining attentive to scalar relations and the power dynamics that shape development practice and research.

In what follows, we operationalise this approach through two illustrative cases drawn from our broader research: a critical policy analysis of the 'localisation' agenda, and participatory field research mapping development governance networks in Ukraine and Costa Rica. We do not treat assemblage as a single, prescriptive method or set of methods. Instead, it is engaged as an analytical orientation that informs how diverse qualitative methods, including document analysis, interviews, and participatory mapping, can be mobilised and brought into conversation to trace how relations between actors and discourses emerge, cohere, and shift in practice. We do not present these cases as comprehensive or conclusive accounts, but as situated and partial examples that demonstrate how assemblage thinking can be applied across different research contexts to illuminate the dynamic configurations through which development cooperation and decision making occur. We subsequently reflect on the methodological possibilities and tensions that accompany such an approach.

Assemblage in Practice: Illustrative Cases

Localisation as an Entry Point

Localisation is commonly framed as a means of redistributing power and agency within the development sector, functioning simultaneously as a reformist agenda and as a broader critique of development practice (Van Selm et al., 2025). As an institutionalised discourse, it is promoted as a pragmatic response to longstanding concerns around efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Walsh, 2025), with advocates arguing that shifting resources and authority closer to affected communities enhances contextual fit and improves outcomes (Barakat & Milton, 2020; Robillard et al., 2021). Localisation is also invoked in more normative and decolonial debates that seek to rethink development's scalar and epistemic hierarchies (Slim, 2021; Tawake et al., 2021), challenging how legitimacy and expertise are assigned and distributed (Roepstorff, 2020).

Such instrumental and transformative logics coexist, we argue, within a broader localisation assemblage: an unstable constellation of actors, discourses, and practices that converge and coalesce around contested notions of local agency in development. Critical scholarship emphasises that the 'local' is itself a deeply contested signifier, frequently invoked as a self-evident category detached from the political, historical, and geographical specificities that shape local realities

(Mohan & Stokke, 2008). What counts as 'local' is thus never given but is continually produced through the shifting relations among donors, intermediaries, governments, and communities. These tensions position localisation as a fluid and contingent configuration rather than a coherent policy model, making it a productive entry point for examining development governance through an assemblage lens.

To explore the value of assemblage thinking in practice, we examined how institutional donors frame and operationalise localisation within international development governance. This analysis formed one strand of the broader multi-sited project introduced earlier. Localisation offered a productive entry point because it exposes the interplay between policy discourse, resource allocation, and shifting power relations. Our analysis drew on three datasets: OECD DAC donor policies, ODA flows, and commitments in formal cooperation agreements. These datasets together provided a scalar and cross-sectoral view of how localisation is positioned and operates as a policy imperative. Full empirical detail is presented elsewhere (Murphy & McGandy, 2026 forthcoming); here, we highlight the dynamics most relevant to our methodological argument.

Across the corpus, donors conceptualised localisation in diverse ways while simultaneously homogenising the category of 'the local'. This definitional divergence underscored the discursive ambiguity of localisation, enabling actors to frame it in ways that align with existing operational priorities. Although often invoked in normative terms, donor framings remain highly technocratic, reducing localisation to an institutionalised agenda and foreclosing engagement with its more transformative potential.

Two broad donor approaches to operationalising localisation emerged. A small number, led initially by USAID, presented localisation as a driver of structural reform, with measures aimed at revising funding mechanisms and assessment tools to enable direct financing of in-country organisations. These gestures pointed toward redistributing authority away from international intermediaries, though the extent of change remains unclear. Most donors adopted a more incremental capacity-building model that left existing institutional hierarchies intact, with funds continuing to flow through established international partners. This approach stabilised prevailing modalities of cooperation, positioning localisation as a functional adjustment rather than a transformative shift.

ODA data further highlighted the gap between rhetoric and practice. Although 24 donors had pledged under The Grand Bargain to direct 25% of humanitarian aid directly to local actors, only 1.2% reached them through such channels in 2023 (Development Initiatives, 2023). Scrutinising policy texts, institutional pledges, and financial flows together through an assemblage lens revealed that donors are not simply failing to realise localisation but are actively reproducing the scalar hierarchies and asymmetries of power it purports to unsettle. This perspective brings these contradictions into view, illuminating how any fragile, emergent coherence around localisation is continually made and unmade within and across contexts.

Our analysis indicates that the contemporary revival of localisation represents less a rupture than a rearticulation of long-standing institutional logics. Despite rhetorical commitments to reform, donor practices largely reproduce inherited aid structures, with power and resources remaining concentrated among dominant actors. Localisation thus functions less as a transformative agenda than as a discursive device, mobilising the language of participation and ownership while leaving underlying hierarchies intact and flattening the multiplicity of 'the local' into depoliticised, techno-managerial framings of capacity building and partnership (Mohan & Stokke, 2008). The current conjuncture – marked by donor retreat and emergence, geopolitical realignment, and escalating global crises – renders these dynamics more visible, if unsettled.

Methodologically, this case demonstrates the distinctive value of assemblage thinking for development research. By enabling a simultaneous reading of discursive, institutional, and financial dynamics (Li, 2014; McFarlane & Anderson, 2011), it reveals localisation as a process continually assembled and reassembled, not as a coherent project but as a contested and uneven sphere of discourse and practice. This approach allowed us to trace how convergences and contradictions materialised both within and across policy texts, budgetary allocations, and global commitments, illustrating how localisation is at once mobilised and constrained within the enduring architectures of development. More broadly, the case shows how assemblage thinking can illuminate the contingent, relational, and power-laden character of development governance, offering a methodological resource for examining the evolving configurations through which development is made and remade.

Assemblage Mapping: Tracing Development Networks in Ukraine and Costa Rica

The second illustrative case examines how assemblage thinking can be operationalised analytically in participatory, field-based research. Here, we reflect on two parallel but distinct assemblage-mapping exercises undertaken in Ukraine and Costa Rica. Both formed part of the multi-sited project introduced earlier, which investigates how development governance arrangements emerge, are negotiated, and are continually reconfigured across diverse institutional and geographical contexts. These sites are engaged as examples in part because they represent markedly different development governance environments. In the current conjuncture, the Ukrainian context is shaped by humanitarian crisis and reconstruction dynamics, while the Costa Rican context is characterised by shifting relations and material change in the field of climate and development financing. This contrast enables us to consider how assemblage mapping can be applied across divergent institutional and geopolitical contexts.

Each case emerged and unfolded at a moment of flux in multi-scalar development governance. In Ukraine, the reorientation of aid architectures and humanitarian systems in the wake of conflict, alongside the arrival and withdrawal of international actors, generated a densely layered and shifting nexus of operations spanning humanitarian, reconstruction, and development agendas. In Costa Rica, shifting climate and development financing relations and the contraction of international support, particularly following the withdrawal of USAID, prompted local and national organisations to forge new operational and financial arrangements. Across both contexts, development governance emerged as a dynamic and continually reassembled field of practice, inviting reflexive, contextually grounded methodological approaches that can trace how relations are organised, negotiated and transformed over time.

In each site, we adopted an assemblage-mapping approach to trace how relationships among actors, institutions, and resources materialised in practice. This mapping constituted one element of a broader process of data synthesis rather than a standalone exercise. Using Kumu, an open-source network visualisation platform, we co-produced interactive maps in consultation with local researchers and practitioners. These maps integrated qualitative and

quantitative data generated through semi-structured and expert interviews, document analysis, and participatory workshops. Through this process, we identified the relational linkages, whether articulated through funding flows, knowledge exchange, technical support, shared mandates, or informal collaboration, through which development assemblages emerged and were (re) configured across sites and scales.

Crucially, assemblage mapping in this instance was treated as a process of iterative, dynamic inquiry, rather than as a tool for static representation (Baker & McGuirk, 2017). Participants were invited to challenge and revise emerging representations, identify omissions, and propose alternative schema. This iterative process foregrounded the contingent, partial, and situated nature of the relations being mapped, aligning with assemblage thinking's emphasis on processuality, emergence, and non-linearity. The resulting maps therefore remained provisional, revealing moments of coherence alongside disjunctures and absences, rather than functioning as an articulation of completeness or fixity.

Across both sites, the mapping made visible the density and complexity of development networks rarely captured in policy or project documentation. The visualisations (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate how governance emerged through overlapping clusters of relations among various types of donors, meso-level organisations, local and national CSOs, and government agencies among others. Apparent hierarchies give way to more intricate webs of interconnection and interdependence, where funding, knowledge, and legitimacy circulated through shifting, multi-directional channels. Rather than depicting linear trajectories of resource transfer, the maps revealed fluid, adaptive assemblage in which actors continually repositioned themselves in response to changing intrinsic and extrinsic conditions.
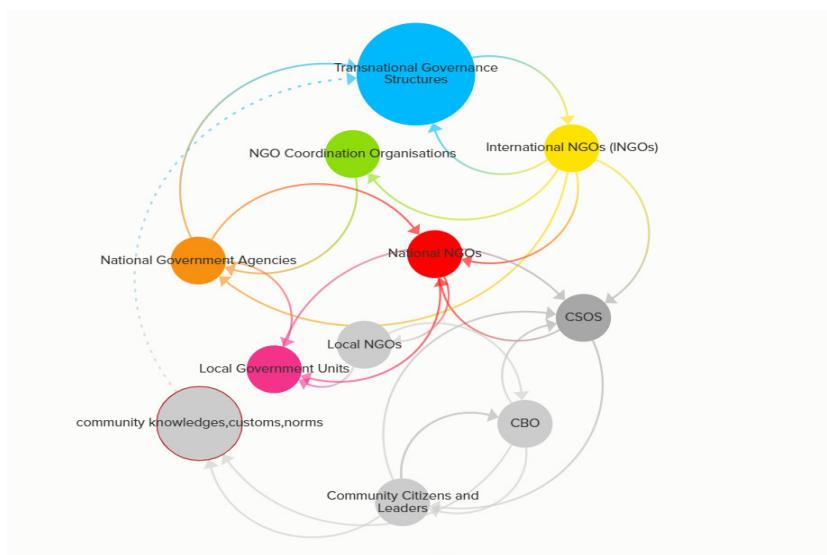
Figure 1: Development Governance Assemblage Map (Ukrainian Context)

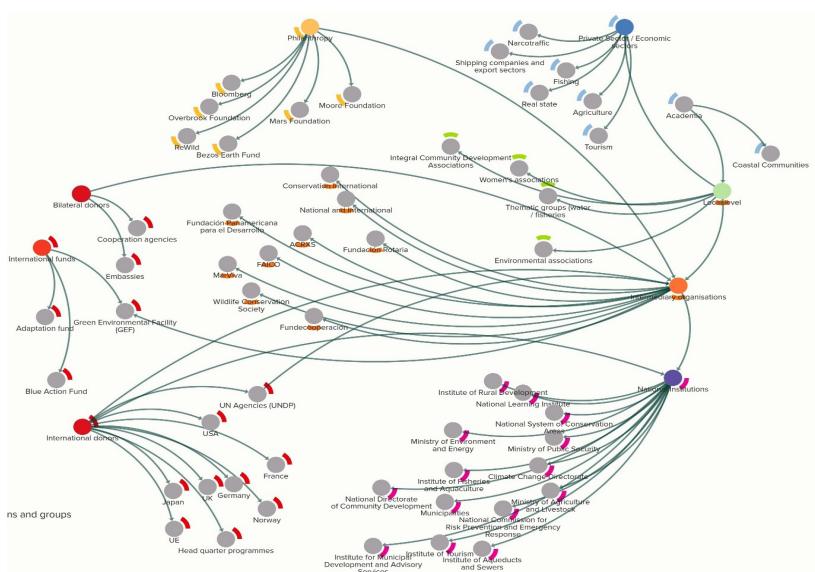*Note. Diagram created by C. Maswili Mwende and S. Murphy (2025) using Kumu.*

Figure 2: Development Governance Assemblage Map (Costa Rican Context)

Note. Diagram created by C. Maswili Mwende and I. Lopez Arce (2025) using Kumu.

The partiality of the maps also proved analytically significant. Silences and absences emerged through certain actors and relations that remained peripheral, marginalised, or entirely invisible, due to the situated nature of our positionality, the unavoidably limited nature of our engagement, and the inherent subjectivity of participants. Such instances opened space for critical reflection, with gaps prompting deeper questions about which actors are recognised as legitimate, how power operates and flows within particular contexts, and where accountability is located within these evolving configurations. Attending to these exclusions underscored how power operates relationally, not just hierarchically, and how coherence within governance arrangements is always contingent and contextually dependent.

Methodologically, this case highlights both the value and challenge of operationalising assemblage thinking in empirical development research. Assemblage mapping did not seek to stabilise complex systems into fixed analytical or representational units. Instead, it provided a means of experimenting with more dynamic forms of representation, enabling researchers and participants to observe evolving relations and reflect on how configurations of development practice cohere, shift, and unravel across space and time. In doing so, the approach translated assemblage thinking's theoretical commitments to contingency, multiplicity, and emergence into research practice, offering a way to study development governance as an ever-evolving set of relations continually made and remade through situated practice.

Methodological Reflections: Navigating Situated, Relational Inquiry

These cases underscore not only the contradictions of contemporary development governance, but also the analytical possibilities presented by an assemblage approach. Beyond specific findings, they invite reflection on what assemblage can offer as a methodological resource for development research. Four dimensions emerged as especially productive: deep contextualisation, an expanded scalar analytic, an openness to uncertainty and imprecision, and attentiveness to contingency and change. Together, these elements highlight the distinctive contribution assemblage approaches can make in capturing the evolving, relational nature of development governance across sites and scales.

Deep Contextualisation

Assemblage thinking in development research requires analysis to be situated within the specific historical, institutional, and discursive contexts through which interventions emerge and unfold. This aligns with other relational approaches in development studies that emphasise the geographically embedded nature of practice and the value of genealogical attention to how discourses and relations are produced over time. In our cases, this involved tracing how discourses such as localisation became institutionalised over time, how their meanings were constructed and reinterpreted, and how actors and relations shifted in response to both intrinsic and extrinsic changes. In the localisation case, this meant situating contemporary donor commitments within longer-term aid reform cycles, while in Ukraine and Costa Rica it involved examining how historical funding patterns and geopolitical relations shaped the networks and configurations later rendered through assemblage mapping.

An assemblage approach treats neither discourses nor actors as fixed, but as emergent effects of relations that evolve over time and across scales. This requires close contextual reading of particular sites and subjects, and of their positioning within the broader development sector and its histories. Such depth helps situate contemporary configurations within longer term trajectories, productively illuminating the antecedents that underlie apparent shifts as they occur. It also demands holding together multiple contexts, positionalities, and ontologies at once, an approach well suited to development studies, where diverse histories and geographies intersect within specific interventions. Although the need to balance breadth and depth can sit in tension with practical constraints, the complexity revealed can be analytically productive. As others note, such research is necessarily labour intensive and rarely tidy, requiring openness to "messiness" and unexpected results (Grove & Pugh, 2015). While this can pose challenges for distillation, such features are central to producing accounts attentive to the indeterminate character of development interventions.

Expanding the Scalar Analytic:

Assemblage thinking unsettles hierarchical or bounded understandings of scale – which are prominent in development studies – by refusing to privilege any single site or level of governance. Rather than treating geographical scale

as a pre-given, it foregrounds relationality and co-constitution, echoing broader shifts in geography toward 'flat' or emergent accounts of spatial relations (Marston et al., 2005). In the localisation case, examining the policies and ODA flows of thirty-two institutional donors enabled us to 'flatten' the donor as a unit of analysis. This revealed striking internal diversity and showed how donors are assembled differently through discourses, commitments, and financial practices. We assembled the corpus around localisation and its scalar, discursive, and operational dynamics, rather than presuming coherence within donor categories. The analysis subsequently demonstrated that donors cannot be treated as a monolithic group. This is of particular importance for development governance, where categorical grouping often obscures dynamism of practice, the plurality of agency, and the fluidity of power.

Assemblage thinking similarly unbound hierarchical conceptions of actors and scales in the Costa Rican and Ukrainian cases. Mapping cooperation networks through an assemblage lens avoided dualisms such as 'global vs local' by attending to how actors and scales are co-constituted through their relations with others and with the broader development enterprise. For instance, national CSOs in Costa Rica appeared simultaneously as recipients, intermediaries, and agenda setters within climate finance flows, while in Ukraine certain actors were positioned at once as local implementers and as key regional nodes within transnational humanitarian coordination. These examples illustrate how assemblage mapping does not treat any actor or scale as dominant or derivative, instead allowing for contextual factors and participants to determine the scope of analysis.

For development research more broadly, this approach facilitates analyses that trace how historical, geographical, institutional, and discursive contexts intersect within an assemblage. This requires close engagement with space, place, and scale, dimensions which are often undertheorised, even if conceptually or analytically operationalised (Hart, 2004). Methodologically, an assemblage approach mandates both diverse datasets and methodological pluralism, developing frameworks capable of holding multiple positionalities, knowledges, and sites of practice in view at once (McFarlane & Anderson, 2011). This renders the scalar analytic expansive and reflexive, attuned to heterogeneity and open to reconfiguration.

These insights resonate with longstanding debates in critical development studies that have challenged hierarchical geographies of power and the stratified positioning of actors and "beneficiaries" (Escobar, 2012; Mawdsley, 2018; McEwan, 2018). Assemblage thinking extends this tradition by interrogating how scales and positions are relationally constituted and contested, rather than taking such asymmetries as fixed or uniform.

Uncertainty and Conceptual Ambiguity:

Assemblage thinking enables research to proceed without presuming consensus or definitional clarity. In our first illustrative case, we began from an acknowledgement around the indeterminacy of localisation itself. This allowed us to trace how the term was framed, operationalised, and contested across donors and sites. Engaging with this uncertainty aligns with broader relational and poststructuralist approach that unsettle positivist and Eurocentric assumptions about knowledge and development (Escobar, 1995; Li, 2007). This enabled us to examine the gaps between rhetoric and practice, rather than prematurely resolving them into coherent narratives.

This openness can give way to tensions at the research-practice interface. Practitioners often seek consensus around operational concepts such as localisation, while assemblage research may instead reveal the absence of shared meaning. This attention to the multiplicity of meaning was equally evident in the mapping exercises, where participants offered competing accounts of relational dynamics and where iterative map revisions exposed silences, gaps, and divergent interpretations of who or what mattered in practice. Such findings may be uncomfortable, but they can illuminate how power operates through ambiguity, and how indeterminacy can itself shape practice. Assemblage research does not seek to fix or stabilise concepts. Rather, it seeks to attend to processes as they unfold, treating concepts and phenomena as evolving, open-ended, and dynamic. This requires embracing the situated nature of research and the knowledge it produces, while resisting the urge to flatten or isolate variables. In this sense, assemblage functions as an ethos as much as an analytic, one that treats uncertainty as an inherent feature of inquiry rather than a problem.

Indeterminacy extends far beyond localisation and the cases presented here. Other central concepts in development, such as participation (Cooke & Kothari,

2001), resilience (Cannon & Müller-Mahn, 2010), and sustainability (Brown, 2016:), have similarly operated as 'floating signifiers', gaining traction in large part because their ambiguity allows diverse actors to enrol them for different purposes. From an assemblage perspective, such fuzziness is not a challenge to be resolved but a condition to be analysed. Tracking ambiguity can reveal how meaning is produced in practice, how concepts and discourses travel, and how they are interpreted, recast, captured/co-opted, or contested across contexts. For development studies, this requires methodological flexibility, that is, a willingness to trace multiple and at times contradictory articulations, to accept the partial and situated nature of any account, and to situate meanings within the wider assemblages in which they are positioned and transformed.

Contingency, Temporality, Change:

Because assemblages are never fixed, assemblage thinking foregrounds the contingent and continually shifting nature of development practice. This was evident throughout our study, where the relational terrain of development governance was approached as an active and dynamic space continually being reconfigured. This was visible in the mapping exercise, where cooperation networks in both Ukraine and Costa Rica shifted between iterations as organisation entered, withdrew, funding channels evolved, and relational ties were configured in real time. Traditional donor positions, for example, acquired new significance following the withdrawal and dissolution of USAID, underscoring how mainstream development architectures constantly evolve in surprising ways. Assemblage thinking accommodates such transitions, enabling analyses to attend to moments of flux while remaining open to re-evaluation as relations change.

This orientation speaks to broader work on the temporality and fluidity of spatial and governance arrangements in human geography (Massey, 2005) and development studies (McFarlane, 2009). Importantly, assemblage approaches do not seek to define or cement subjects and objects. Instead, they trace how relations and configurations emerge, interact, and transform across time and space. This aligns with development research attentive to dynamic institutions and practices shaped by competing logics, shifting contexts, and unstable (if often enduring) scalar architectures. Rather than sanitising volatility, assemblage thinking treats contingency and change as fundamental conditions of governance (Briassoulis, 2019), offering a framework for analysing how interventions take form, unravel, and reassemble within evolving contexts.

Conclusion: Towards Methodological Reorientation in Development Research?

The current conjuncture in international development practice is marked by contraction, contestation, and reconfiguration. Donor realignment, budgetary retrenchment, and the simultaneous retreat and emergence of institutional actors and agendas are reshaping the landscape, alongside broader geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts, multipolar competition, and domestic political pressures in 'traditional' donor states. Still, development needs continue to escalate, generating new terrains of response even as resources contract. This unsettled terrain underscores the need for methodological approaches that can account for how practices are being reconfigured, how these processes relate to longer-term histories of development governance, and how relations between actors and scales might evolve or solidify in time. The challenge, empirically and methodologically, is how to illuminate a sector that is fragmented, dynamic, and deeply contested rather than defaulting to inherited logics of linearity, fixity, or hierarchy.

Localisation sits within these debates as both a policy agenda and an analytical frame. While animated by reformist ambitions, our analysis revealed an uneven terrain in which entrenched hierarchies endures and donor policies and practices largely affirmed existing decision-making arrangements. This contradiction exposes localisation's dual character: signalling responsiveness to critique while often reproducing the status quo. Assemblage thinking made these contradictions visible, tracing gaps between discourse, policy, and practice, and illuminating how localisation functions both as an empirical object and as a vantage point for methodological reflection.

Our second case, the mapping of development assemblages in Ukraine and Costa Rica, extended this reflection by demonstrating how assemblage approaches can be operationalised in the context of participatory, field-based research. Mapping visualised shifting cooperation networks, revealing absences and capturing how actors repositioned themselves in response to change. These exercises highlighted that such assemblages are continually reconfigured, neither static in composition nor fixed in structure.

These cases illustrate the value of assemblage thinking through four methodological dimensions: deep contextualisation, an expanded scalar analytic, engagement with uncertainty and conceptual ambiguity, and attentiveness to contingency and change. Each dimension enabled us to apprehend the uneven, relational, and evolving character of development governance across sites, scales, and registers. More broadly, they show how assemblage approaches can extend ongoing efforts in critical development studies to move beyond discipline-bound traditions toward more plural, reflexive, and situated approaches. Assemblage, therefore, offers not a blueprint but an ethos (Adey, 2012; Anderson et al., 2012), one that embraces relative volatility, contradiction, and heterogeneity while remaining attentive to how relations materialised and are transformed.

Important limitations and tensions remain. Assemblage research is resource-intensive and rarely tidy, and deep contextualisation and multi-scalar analysis demand time, care, and methodological pluralism. Further, the openness that enables analytical depth can sit uneasily alongside practice contexts that require clarity and consensus. Further, researchers themselves are always entangled within the assemblages they study. As McFarlane and Anderson (2011: 164) remind us, Greenhough (2011) notes that, inevitably, "academics become caught up in the 'contours and composition' of the assemblage" as our knowledge of it "is conditioned by our involvement in its naming and production." As such, reflexivity is essential to avoid reproducing the hierarchies that assemblage thinking seeks to unsettle. Critical debates also caution against reducing assemblages to simplified gatherings of heterogenous parts (Buchanan, 2015; Lea et al., 2022). Instead, assemblage scholarship foregrounds processes such as composition, articulation, and (re)territorialisation, emphasising the contingent ways in which relations are constantly stabilised and unsettled in practice (Amelina, 2021). Our cases also raise unresolved questions about absence within assemblages. The withdrawal of donors and the disappearance of financial flows can reshape assemblages as powerfully as their presence, warranting further empirical and methodological attention. Such tensions do not diminish the value of assemblage approaches in and for development studies, but they underscore the importance of critical reflexivity in their application.

Assemblage should not be treated as a methodological panacea. It is, however, a productive extension of development studies' methodological repertoire, encouraging researchers to embrace plural epistemologies, situate inquiry across intersecting institutional and geographical contexts, and engage seriously with the relational constitution of scales, actors, and practices. For practice, assemblage approaches can reveal hidden asymmetries, tensions, and potentialities, providing a lens through which to engage with the dynamism of categories such as 'the local' while avoiding reduction and homogenisation. For future research, assemblage offers a way to grapple with uncertainty and flux, tracing shifting configurations of the sector while remaining open to emergent possibilities, whether reformist, transformative, or destructive. The current conjuncture is therefore not only a political and institutional crisis, it is also a methodological opening. Localisation represents one entry point, and assemblage mapping one approach, but the cases presented here demonstrate how assemblage can help illuminate contradictions in development governance while pointing toward new methodological and analytical horizons. If development studies is to remain relevant in a rapidly shifting landscape, it must continue to experiment with conceptual and methodological tools capable of apprehending the uneven, relational, and evolving character of development governance and practice. Assemblage thinking, we suggest, offers one such tool.

Ethics Statement

This publication draws on insights from two studies conducted as part of a broader ERC-funded research project. Both studies involved human participants and received full prior ethical approval. All research was conducted in accordance with approved protocols and applicable ethical guidelines.

Use of Generative AI

Microsoft Copilot was engaged exclusively to aid with spelling and grammar during proofing. Generative AI tools were not used to generate the content of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the final version.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

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