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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

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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.

Keywords: Development, Assemblage Thinking, Stakeholder Mapping, Methodology, 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 long-standing 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.

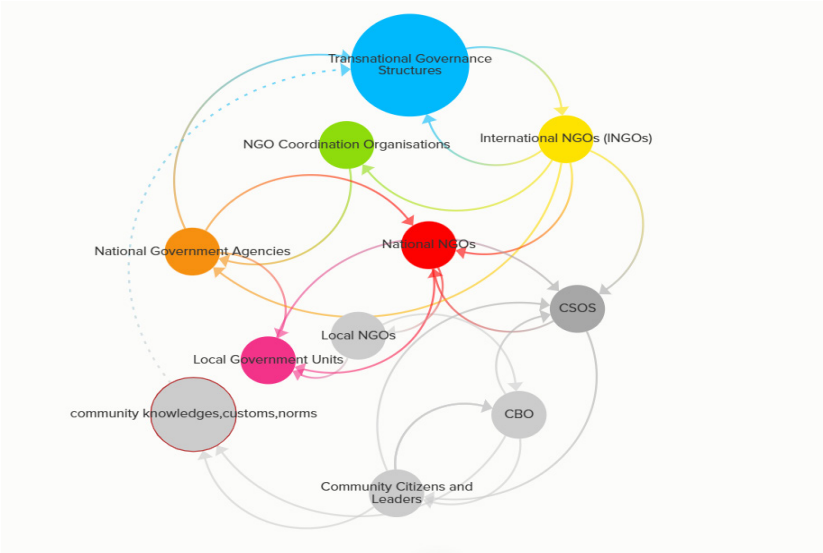

Figure 1: Development Governance Assemblage Map (Ukrainian Context)

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

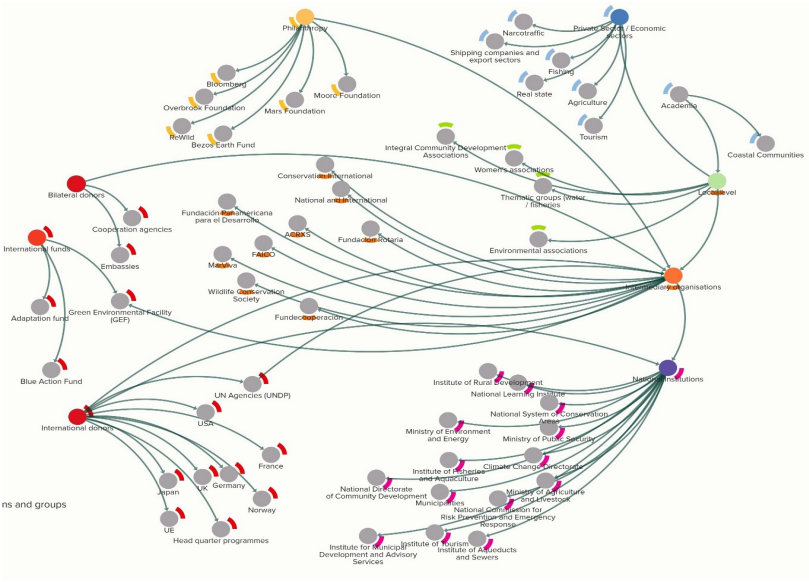

Figure 2: Development Governance Assemblage Map (Costa Rican Context)

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.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Legacy of Rostow: Modernization Theory, Global Challenges, and Alternative Development Frameworks

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Abstract

This article critically evaluates Walt Rostow's modernization theory, a Cold War-era model that presents development as a linear, universal process. It argues that the theory is fundamentally flawed due to its Eurocentric assumptions, reductionist framework, and disregard for historical and structural inequalities, particularly those stemming from colonialism. Drawing on postcolonial critiques from thinkers such as Mohanty and Spivak, the article contends that such models impose epistemic violence, erasing the voices and agency of the Global South while reinforcing neocolonial hierarchies under the guise of progress. It also critiques the theory's neglect of non-linear development trajectories, political contexts, and environmental sustainability. In response, alternative frameworks

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such as dependency theory, Sen's capabilities approach, and ecological modernization are explored for their more inclusive and context-sensitive visions. However, while Amartya Sen's capabilities approach offers a profound shift from Rostow by focusing on expanding human freedoms, his positioning within the mainstream economics tradition and the incomplete nature of his theory reveals certain ambiguities. Ultimately, the article calls for a postcolonial reimagining of development that embraces pluralism, sustainability, and local realities, aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Goals to foster an equitable future.

Keywords: Rostow, Global South, Development, Neo-imperialism, Economics

Introduction

Walt Rostow's The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (1960)[1] stands as one of the most influential and contentious development theories of the twentieth century. Forged in the crucible of the Cold War, its linear model progression from traditional society to the age of high mass consumption provided a powerful ideological blueprint for promoting Western capitalist modernity as a universal antidote to communism. While its historical significance is undeniable, Rostow's stages of growth have been the subject of decades of sustained critique for their profound theoretical limitations and damaging real-world implications (Itagaki, 1963). Rostow's model is not merely a flawed economic theory. It is a potent instrument of epistemic violence that universalizes the Western experience. The model obscures the structural inequalities perpetuated by colonialism and global capitalism. It also continues to implicitly constrain contemporary development discourse. Because of this, the model must be replaced by frameworks centered on pluralism, sustainability, and postcolonial equity (Itagaki, 1963).

The present analysis will first deconstruct the model's inherent Eurocentrism and its failure to account for the devastating legacies of colonial exploitation, resource dependency, and debt that precluded a linear "take-off" for many

1 *Walt Rostow's The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (1960) outlines a linear, five-stage model of economic development through which all societies purportedly progress: Traditional Society: Characterized by subsistence agriculture, pre-Newtonian science, and limited social mobility. Preconditions for Take-off: New ideas and investments (often spurred by an external force) begin to challenge the traditional economy, leading to the development of infrastructure and a centralized state. Take-off: A decisive period of intensive growth (2-3 decades) where industrialization increases, new industries expand rapidly, and investment rises to over 10% of national income. Drive to Maturity: A prolonged period of sustained economic growth and technological diversification, as the economy extends modern technology to all sectors. Age of High Mass-Consumption: The final stage, where the leading economic sectors shift toward durable consumer goods and services, and widespread affluence is achieved. This model was presented as a universal, non-communist path to modernity, emphasizing capital accumulation and industrialization as the primary engines of growth (Rostow, 1960).*

nations in the Global South. It will then examine the theory's neglect of non-linear pathways, internal socio-political barriers, and its environmentally destructive endpoint of high mass consumption (Thaha & Galib, 2022; Natural Resource Governance Institute, 2015; Hunter, 2012; Arora, 2010). Drawing on postcolonial thinkers like Mohanty and Spivak, the analysis will demonstrate how Rostow's framework imposes a singular developmental narrative, erasing alternative ontologies, and legitimizing neocolonial intervention. Finally, the paper will explore how alternative paradigms from Sen's capabilities approach, Ecological Modernization Theory, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals represent a vital, albeit incomplete, shift toward a more holistic and ethically grounded understanding of global progress. Ultimately, a critical examination of Rostow's enduring shadow is not an academic exercise but a necessary step in decolonizing development theory and practice (Ukwandu, 2017; Tobias & Boudreauz, 2011; Fischer, 1987; Hariram, Mekha, Suganthan, & Sudhakar, 2023; York, Rosa, & Dietz, 2003). The primary objective of this article is to present a comprehensive critique of Walt Rostow's modernization theory, demonstrating its fundamental flaws as a universal model for development. We argue that the theory is not merely an outdated economic model but a form of epistemic violence that erases alternative pathways and reinforces global inequalities. This paper will systematically deconstruct the theory's Eurocentric assumptions, its neglect of historical and structural barriers like colonialism and debt dependency, and its environmentally unsustainable vision. Drawing on postcolonial thought and alternative frameworks, the article ultimately aims to make the case for a postcolonial reimagining of development centered on pluralism, sustainability, and equity.

This analysis will proceed by first examining the theory's neglect of non-linear development pathways and internal socio-political barriers, alongside its environmentally unsustainable endpoint of high mass consumption (e.g., Thaha & Galib, 2022). It will then demonstrate how Rostow's framework imposes a singular developmental narrative, drawing on postcolonial arguments to show how this erase alternative ways of being and legitimizes neocolonial intervention. Acknowledging the more radical critique of the post-development approach, which questions the very concept of "development" as a Western imposition, this paper nevertheless explores alternative paradigms that seek to reform the goals of progress from within the development discourse. These include Sen's capabilities approach and the UN Sustainable Development Goals,

which represent a shift toward more holistic, if imperfect, understandings of well-being and sustainability. The paper contends that while these alternatives operate within a broad modernist tradition, their explicit focus on equity, human agency, and ecological limits offers a vital corrective to Rostow's economically deterministic and Eurocentric model. Ultimately, this critical examination of Rostow's enduring shadow is not a purely academic exercise but a necessary step in the broader project of decolonizing development theory and practice, a pursuit supported by critiques of its environmental unsustainability (York et al., 2003), its neo-colonial implications (Ukwandu, 2017; Fischer, 1987), and its failure to account for diverse, localized pathways to well-being (Hariram et al., 2023; Tobias & Boudreaux, 2011).

Critiques of Rostow's Model: Addressing the Shortcomings

The colonial legacy and dependency: historical context matters

Harry Truman's 1949 presidential address created a new US-led liberal international order by projecting American capitalism as the universal model for global development and framing poverty in the developing world as a problem to be solved through this system. The two main focuses of the speech signified how the US will play a special role in assisting poor countries development and revealed how the US will be a "savior" for the underrepresented background. This reflected a strong Eurocentric bias and presenting Western values and institutions as universal, it created the hierarchical relationship between the US and developing nations, with US as the dominant actor, further it oversimplified the complexities of historical development and structural factors that contribute to poverty and finally it promoted a specific ideological agenda, linking development to the expansion of capitalism and US influence (Parashar & Schulz, 2021).

The connection between Rostow's developmental framework and U.S. foreign policy, especially during the Vietnam War, underscore a critical issue: development theories are not politically neutral. Rostow's model, in many ways, served as a justification for American interventionism, cloaking military and geopolitical objectives under the guise of promoting economic progress. His role as a national security advisor and one of the key strategists behind U.S.

involvement in Vietnam reveals how development theory was weaponized to pursue ideological ends. In this light, Rostow's "stages of growth" model appears less as an objective economic theory and more as a Cold War instrument to counter communist influence, particularly in the Global South.

The tragedy in Vietnam, marked by widespread destruction and human suffering, reveals the dangers of imposing linear development frameworks without regard for local contexts, sovereignty, or the long-term consequences of forced modernization. Instead of fostering growth, these efforts often entrenched cycles of violence, instability, and economic disruption. As such, Rostow's theory, when divorced from the lived realities of those it sought to "develop" becomes not only inadequate but deeply harmful (Gawthorpe, 2021).

The Myth of Universality: One Size Does Not Fit All

Rostow's model, while influential, suffers from a fundamental flaw in its assumption of universality, implicitly prescribing a single, linear path of capitalist industrialization for all nations. This prescriptive approach disregards unique starting points, diverse resource endowments, varied cultural values, and distinct institutional capacities. For instance, the model homogenizes the "traditional society" stage, overlooking the vast differences in pre-existing social structures and historical legacies that profoundly shape a nation's development trajectory (Marinaro, 2017). It is precisely this rigidity that the alternative frameworks presented in this paper seek to overcome. Unlike Rostow's universal sequence, Sen's capabilities approach breaks with this model by rejecting a fixed end-goal, instead prioritizing the expansion of individual freedoms and opportunities, which can be realized through a plurality of economic and social arrangements. Similarly, the principles underpinning the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly reject a one-size-fits-all trajectory by integrating diverse environmental, social, and economic targets that nations can adapt to their specific contexts and challenges. This fundamental shift from a monolithic pathway to context-sensitive, pluralistic conceptions of progress represents the core epistemological break that this analysis champions (Frediani, Sen's Capability Approach as a framework to the practice of development, 2010).

Furthermore, Rostow's model culminates in "high mass consumption" as the pinnacle of development, equating prosperity solely with material abundance

and consumerism. This narrow definition is powerfully challenged by nations like Bhutan, which have deliberately prioritized Gross National Happiness (GNH)[2] and sustainable living over GDP growth as markers of success. Bhutan's embrace of GNH, encompassing spiritual, cultural, and environmental well-being alongside economic indicators, demonstrates that nations can define their own success metrics, which may fundamentally diverge from the Western ideal of endless material accumulation. This underscores a critical philosophical divergence: development is not solely about economic growth but can also encompass broader human flourishing and societal well-being, as defined by the people themselves, thereby directly challenging Rostow's final stage (Brooks J. , 2013).

The successful development trajectories of East Asian economies such as South Korea and Taiwan expose the limitations of transplanting Western models onto fundamentally different political, historical, and social landscapes. Unlike the more market-driven, minimal-state intervention approach often implicit in Rostow's later stages, these "Tiger Economies" [3] achieved rapid industrialization through highly interventionist, state-led development strategies. Their governments actively nurtured specific industries, provided subsidies, directed investment, and protected nascent domestic industries, showcasing a "developmental state" model that stands in stark contrast to a laissez-faire approach. Beyond economic policies, these nations also prioritized significant

2 *Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a holistic and sustainable development philosophy and metric pioneered in the Kingdom of Bhutan. It serves as a direct alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by prioritizing collective well-being and spiritual fulfillment over mere economic growth. The GNH framework is structured around four pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, conservation of the environment, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance. Its nine domains provide a comprehensive measure of well-being, including psychological well-being, health, education, living standards, and community vitality, thereby explicitly challenging the Western-centric, consumption-driven endpoint of Rostow's model.*

3 *"Tiger Economies" (or "Asian Tigers") typically refers to the highly free-market and developed economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. These nations achieved rapid, sustained economic growth and industrialization between the early 1960s and 1990s, largely through export-oriented industrialization, high savings and investment rates, and significant government intervention to guide the market a model often described as the "developmental state." Their success, achieved via a state-led approach that diverges from laissez-faire Western models, is frequently cited as a powerful counterexample to the universal, linear path of development proposed by Rostow.*

investments in education and human capital development, recognizing a skilled workforce as crucial for technological advancement, and fostered social cohesion to ensure political stability and the successful implementation of long-term development plans. These examples conclusively demonstrate that development is a multifaceted, context-dependent process, defying any simplistic, one-size-fits-all approach and highlighting the critical role of factors beyond a purely economic linear progression (Kim & Heo, 2017).

The Role of Structural Inequalities: Debt, Neo-Imperialism, and the Global Architecture of Underdevelopment

Rostow's "Stages of Economic Growth" presents development as an internal, linear progression, a formulation that fundamentally fails to account for the pervasive structural inequalities of the global capitalist system. This model, which assumes a level playing field where any nation can achieve "take-off" through sufficient capital accumulation and political will, is directly contradicted by the historical and ongoing realities of dependency, debt, and neo-imperial control that actively manufacture and sustain underdevelopment in the Global South.

The post-war era initially seemed to validate aspects of Rostow's framework through the rise of the Keynesian developmentalist state. Nations across Latin America, Asia, and Africa pursued state-led, interventionist policies, including import-substitution industrialization (ISI), mirroring Rostow's emphasis on state-guided "preconditions" and "take-off" (Chang, 2002). For a time, these policies generated significant growth, creating an illusion of a universal progression (Bresser-Pereira, 2022). However, this model's vulnerability to external shocks was brutally exposed by the oil crises of 1973 and 1979, which triggered global inflation and catastrophic balance-of-payments deficits for oil-importing nations (Yergin, 1991). This crisis revealed a fatal flaw in Rostow's theory: its inability to anticipate how the volatile, interconnected global economy could derail a nation's internal progression, an oversight that dependency theory powerfully explains.

Dependency theorists like Frank (1966) and Wallerstein (2004) argue that underdevelopment is not a primordial "stage" but a direct consequence of the Global South's ("periphery") structural position within a global system designed

to benefit the Global North ("core"). This manifests as unequal exchange, where the periphery exports low-value primary commodities and imports high-value manufactured goods from the core (Palestini, 2023). This dynamic systematically drains capital and perpetuates technological dependence, creating a structural trap that actively hinders the economic diversification Rostow's "take-off" requires. Where Rostow saw a "traditional society" awaiting transformation, dependency theory reveals an exploited periphery integrated into, and subordinated by, the global capitalist system.

The oil crises plunged developing nations into a debt dependency that became a powerful mechanism of this subordination. Turning to the IMF and World Bank for relief, countries were forced to adopt Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which mandated austerity, privatization, and trade liberalization (Babb, 2005). These policies systematically dismantled the developmentalist state, cutting public investment in health and education, stifling domestic industries through premature exposure to global competition, and exacerbating social inequalities (Justice, Debt, 2023). This enforced austerity directly contradicts Rostow's vision of self-sustaining progress, instead locking nations into a vicious cycle where debt service diverts resources from productive investment, making "take-off" an economic impossibility (McNair, 2024).

This perpetuation of control through economic means is a hallmark of neo-imperialism (Nkrumah, 1965). The global economic architecture, governed by institutions like the WTO, often enshrines rules that favor developed nations. For instance, agricultural subsidies in the North depress global prices, undermining farmers in the South, while protectionist measures block market access for Southern manufactured goods—directly contradicting the "infant industry" argument used by now-developed nations during their own ascent. Furthermore, stringent intellectual property rights (IPRs) create significant technology transfer barriers, legally blocking developing nations from accessing critical technologies and perpetuating their dependence on the Global North (Hassan et al., 2010). This creates a "catch-22" Rostow never contemplated: nations are told to industrialize, yet the rules of the system prevent them from acquiring the means to do so.

The "resource curse" provides another stark contradiction to Rostow's assumption that natural resources are a straightforward boon for capital

accumulation (Sandvik, 2015). Rather than fueling "take-off," resources like oil and minerals often correlate with lower growth, inequality, and instability. Reliance on a single commodity creates vulnerability to price volatility, while phenomena like "Dutch Disease" appreciate the national currency, eroding the competitiveness of other export sectors like agriculture and manufacturing (Label, 2025). Most critically, resource wealth fosters weak institutions and rampant rent-seeking, as elites battle for control of rents rather than building a diversified, productive economy (Ross, 2015). Rostow's model assumes that capital will be productively invested, but the resource curse demonstrates how it can be violently contested and squandered.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) exemplifies this tragic paradox. Its immense mineral wealth has not led to Rostovian prosperity but has fueled decades of conflict and governance failure (Tunamsifu, 2022). The colonial legacy of extractive institutions has perpetuated a cycle where resource control fuels violence, enriching armed groups and corrupt elites while actively preventing the stability and institutional development Rostow's model presumes as a precondition for growth (Reinsberg et al., 2020).

Similarly, the recurring economic crises in Argentina illustrate the compounded impact of these structural inequalities. Once one of the world's wealthiest nations due to its agricultural exports—a seeming fulfillment of Rostow's "preconditions for take-off" Argentina has been plagued by a cycle of debt dependency and speculative capital flight (Spruk, 2019). Its history of IMF interventions, with their attendant austerity conditionalities, has repeatedly undermined long-term, nationally-tailored development strategies. The susceptibility to volatile "hot money" flows led to currency crashes and deep recessions, notably in 2001-2002, demonstrating that development is not an internal progression but is profoundly shaped by the inherent volatilities and power dynamics of the global system.

In conclusion, Rostow's stages of growth offer a deceptively simple and internally-focused map to prosperity. However, the real-world terrain of global capitalism—marked by the core-periphery dynamics of dependency, the stranglehold of debt, the skewed rules of neo-imperial trade, and the paradoxical perils of resource wealth systematically prevents many nations from ever embarking on that journey. The theory's critical flaw is not just its linearity, but

its blindness to the global architecture of inequality that makes such a linear path impossible for those assigned the role of the perpetual periphery.

The Myth of Universality: Internal Social and Political Barriers to Development

Beyond external structural constraints, Rostow's model also significantly undervalues the crucial impact of internal social and political barriers that can derail or profoundly alter a nation's development trajectory, even when external conditions might appear conducive to growth. His linear progression often presumes a stable political environment and functional institutions, yet real-world economies frequently encounter deep-seated internal challenges that inhibit progress.

One critical internal barrier is weak governance and corruption. The absence of effective, transparent, and accountable governance, coupled with rampant corruption, can systematically divert resources away from productive investments. Funds intended for public services like infrastructure, education, or healthcare are siphoned off by elites, undermining the very foundations necessary for "take-off." Such environments also deter both domestic and foreign investment, as businesses face unpredictable regulatory landscapes and excessive informal costs, stifling economic activity. Furthermore, a lack of robust rule of law means that property rights are insecure, contracts are unenforceable, and justice is compromised, making long-term economic planning and entrepreneurial risk-taking extremely difficult (McMillan, Page, Booth, & Velde, 2017).

Deep social divisions and ongoing internal conflicts also fundamentally undermine the stable environment essential for Rostow's stages. Whether based on ethnicity, religion, class, or regional identity, profound social fragmentation can lead to political instability, civil unrest, and even prolonged civil wars. These conflicts devastate infrastructure, displace populations, disrupt economic activity, and divert national resources from development towards security expenditures. Such environments are antithetical to the sustained investment and societal consensus Rostow's model implicitly requires for linear economic progress (Crawford & Lipschut, 1998).

Moreover, the absence or suppression of a vibrant entrepreneurial class and an innovative culture can be a significant internal impediment. Rostow's "take-off" relies heavily on new industries, technological adoption, and productive investment driven by dynamic entrepreneurs. However, in contexts where the state heavily controls the economy, where political connections are more valuable than merit, or where cultural norms do not foster risk-taking and innovation, this vital engine of growth may be absent or severely constrained (Julien, 2007).

The history of Iran vividly illustrates how these internal socio-political factors, intertwined with its external context, have profoundly impacted its development trajectory, often deviating sharply from Rostow's linear path. Despite possessing vast oil reserves—a resource that in Rostow's framework might be seen as a strong foundation for "take-off" through capital accumulation—Iran's development has been characterized by significant internal disruptions. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, driven by deep social, political, and cultural grievances against the Western-backed Shah's modernization efforts (which were perceived by many as culturally alienating and economically inequitable), fundamentally altered the country's development path. This massive internal upheaval, a rejection of a specific model of modernization, led to significant economic disruption, capital flight, and a reorientation of economic and social priorities. (Sugihartono, 2024)

In the post-revolutionary era, corruption and rent-seeking have remained persistent challenges. Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perception Index, for example, ranked Iran 149th out of 180 countries, indicating widespread perceptions of corruption that hinder economic efficiency and divert resources. Furthermore, the governance structure of the Islamic Republic, with its complex interplay of elected and unelected bodies, has at times led to policy inconsistencies and challenges to the rule of law, creating an unpredictable environment for investment and economic growth. While external sanctions have undeniably played a massive role, Iran's internal political struggles, social cohesion challenges (e.g., between different ideological factions and ethnic minorities), and the structure of its state-dominated economy have also constrained the emergence of a dynamic, innovation-driven private sector. This complex interplay of internal and external factors demonstrates that

development is not merely an economic process but is deeply embedded in, and often reshaped by, a nation's unique socio-political landscape, directly challenging the simplistic universality of Rostow's model. (Hosseini, 2025).

Alternative Development Theories: Beyond Economic Determinism and Western Prescriptions

While Rostow's modernization theory offered a foundational, albeit flawed, understanding of development, a robust body of alternative theories has emerged, advocating for more nuanced, equitable, and context-specific approaches. These frameworks directly challenge Rostow's Eurocentric bias, oversimplification, and neglect of structural inequalities, emphasizing human well-being, sustainability, and diverse pathways to progress.

Human Development Theory and Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach

The perspective that the Human Development Index (HDI) can be seen as complementary to Rostow's theory is insightful, as both frameworks operate within a broad modernist tradition that views development as a form of societal progress. However, while they share this common ground, Amartya Sen's Capabilities Approach, which underpins the HDI, represents a fundamental corrective that challenges the core assumptions and priorities of Rostow's model, shifting the ultimate end of development from economic output to human freedom (Sen, 1999).

Directly challenging Rostow's sole focus on economic growth and GDP, Human Development Theory reframes development as a process of expanding people's substantive freedoms and opportunities. Sen posits that real development lies in enhancing individuals' "capabilities"—their effective freedom to achieve valuable "beings and doings" (e.g., being healthy, being well-nourished, being educated, participating in political life). It's not just about what people have (income, material goods) but what they are able to do and be. Sen emphasizes that development must be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy, allowing them to lead lives they have reason to value. This shifts the focus from inputs (like capital investment) or outputs (like GDP) to the actual opportunities and choices available to individuals (Kuhumba, 2022).

This philosophical divergence becomes starkly clear through the concept of "conversion factors." Sen demonstrates that the relationship between income (a primary focus for Rostow) and well-being is not direct. Personal characteristics (e.g., age, gender, disability), social norms (e.g., discrimination, public services), and environmental conditions (e.g., climate, pollution) that influence how effectively individuals can convert resources (like income or food) into valuable functioning. For instance, a disabled person may require more resources than an able-bodied person to achieve the same level of mobility. Similarly, a woman in a highly patriarchal society may find it harder to convert educational opportunities into meaningful employment compared to a man. This highlights that simply increasing income does not guarantee improved well-being if these conversion factors are ignored, a nuance entirely absent from Rostow's economically deterministic framework (Kuhumba, 2022).

Therefore, while the HDI and Rostow's stages both seek to measure progress, they are guided by different teleologies. Rostow's model culminates in high mass consumption, treating economic output as the ultimate goal. In contrast, the Capabilities Approach, operationalized by the HDI, positions economic growth as a potentially powerful means to the ultimate end of expanding human capabilities. It does not oppose modernization but insists that its success must be evaluated not by the volume of goods consumed but by the richness of human lives enabled. This critical refinement moves the development discourse beyond economistic reductionism, forcing a confrontation with the qualitative dimensions of progress that Rostow's linear stages overlook.

Beyond simply receiving goods or services, Sen's approach places strong emphasis on agency people's ability to act on their own behalf, make choices, and participate in decisions that affect their lives. True development, in this view, empowers individuals to shape their own destiny, rather than being passive recipients of top-down development interventions. This directly challenges Rostow's more prescriptive model, which implicitly assumes a linear path to be followed. Rostow views development as a linear economic progression culminating in mass consumption, implying that material wealth automatically translates to well-being. Sen's approach highlights that even if GDP rises, if people lack access to quality healthcare, education, political voice, or clean water, they are not truly "developed." It criticizes the idea that economic

growth inherently leads to human flourishing, demanding explicit attention to equity, social justice, and individual agency. This framework directly informed the creation of the Human Development Index (HDI), a composite statistic measuring life expectancy, education, and gross national income per capita. It offers a stark contrast to Rostow's purely economic indicators and presents a far more holistic measure of a nation's progress. The HDI, by design, seeks to capture dimensions of human well-being that GDP alone misses, allowing for a more nuanced comparison between countries and highlighting that high economic output does not automatically equate to high human development if fundamental capabilities are constrained (Frediani & Walker, 2018).

Postcolonial Criticism: Deconstructing Power, Representation, and Knowledge in Development

Postcolonial criticism provides a fundamental challenge to Rostow's modernization theory by exposing the colonial power dynamics and Eurocentric knowledge systems that underpin it. This school of thought interrogates how mainstream development paradigms, including Rostow's, perpetuate intellectual and economic colonialism by silencing alternative voices and legitimizing Western intervention. The work of key thinkers Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said offers a multifaceted critique essential for deconstructing Rostow's model.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's seminal work critiques how Western discourses, including development theory, construct a monolithic image of the "Third World Woman" (Mohanty, 1984). She argues that this is an act of essentialism, portraying women in the Global South as a homogeneously oppressed group, thereby erasing their diverse histories, agencies, and forms of resistance. This critique extends far beyond gender. Mohanty's framework directly challenges Rostow's homogenization of "traditional society." Just as she exposes the creation of a singular "Third World Woman," Rostow's model creates a singular "underdeveloped nation" a blank slate defined by its deficits and destined to be remade in the Western image (Rather, 2023). This universalizing narrative ignores diverse social structures and cultural values, prescribing a one-size-fits-all solution that disempowers local populations and legitimizes top-down intervention.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak delves deeper into the power dynamics of representation through her famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988). The "subaltern" refers to those peasants, tribal communities, the urban poor whose voices are systematically silenced by dominant discourses. Spivak introduces the concept of epistemic violence, the harm inflicted when powerful knowledge systems, like mainstream development economics, dismiss or erase alternative ways of knowing. Her work profoundly undermines Rostow's model, which is a prime example of a Western expert speaking for the "underdeveloped" without engaging in their epistemologies or aspirations (Maggio, 2007). Spivak's critique compels a radical rethinking of development practice, demanding that interventions be based on ethical engagement with local voices and a recognition that the "subaltern" often cannot be heard within the existing structures of power that development institutions represent.

While Mohanty and Spivak focus on discourse and representation, other postcolonial thinkers provide crucial insights into the psychological and cultural dimensions of colonial power. Frantz Fanon, in his work The Wretched of the Earth (1961), analyzed the deep psychological wounds of colonialism and argued that genuine liberation requires a violent break from the colonial system, not a peaceful, staged assimilation into it. This stands in stark contrast to Rostow's vision of a smooth, guided transition to a Western-style modernity, ignoring the violent disruptions and cultural resistance that such a process often entails.

Furthermore, Edward Said's concept of Orientalism (1978) offers a direct lens through which to view Rostow's framework. Said demonstrated how the West constructs a fictional, inferior "Orient" to justify its domination and define its own superiority. Rostow's characterization of "traditional societies" as stagnant and pre-scientific functions in a similar manner, creating a hierarchical division between the "modern" West and the "backward" rest, thereby legitimizing the West's self-appointed role as the developer and modernizer (Abdelli, 2023).

In postcolonial criticism, through its analysis of universalism (Mohanty), epistemic violence (Spivak), the psychology of liberation (Fanon), and cultural representation (Said), reveals that Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth is not a neutral economic model. It is a political project that imposes a Western historical experience as universal, silences alternative visions of progress, and reinforces the very global power imbalances it claims to overcome.

Sankara's Philosophy and Self-Reliance

While not a formalized "development theory" in the Western academic sense, the philosophy and practical approach of leaders like Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso (1983-1987) offer a powerful, internally driven alternative that challenges core tenets of modernization theory. Sankara championed a radical vision of self-reliance, advocating for African nations to break free from external dependency, reject foreign aid (which he viewed as a tool of neo-imperialism), and mobilize their own resources and human capital for endogenous development. He believed that true liberation and development for African nations could only come from within, through their own efforts, rejecting the notion that salvation would come from outside benefactors. His policies focused on agrarian reform (redistribution of land to peasants), increasing local food production to achieve food sovereignty, mass literacy campaigns, public health initiatives (like nationwide vaccination drives), and environmental conservation (tree planting). Crucially, he also actively promoted gender equality, seeking to dismantle traditional patriarchal structures (Shipman, 2017).

Sankara's approach fundamentally rejects Rostow's implicit call for external capital and technological transfer as the primary drivers of "take-off." Instead, he prioritized internal capacity building, human dignity, and sovereignty. His policies were antithetical to the idea of a universal path imposed from outside; they were rooted in local needs and an anti-imperialist stance. By rejecting IMF loans and foreign aid, Sankara directly challenged the mechanisms of debt dependency and neo-imperialism, arguing that they perpetuated a cycle of control rather than genuine development. While short-lived due to a coup, Sankara's legacy represents a powerful example of an alternative, nationally defined development path that prioritized human well-being, social justice, and environmental stewardship over integration into a potentially exploitative global capitalist system, demonstrating that true progress can be rooted in internal transformation and a rejection of dominant external prescriptions (Krishna, 2009).

Sustainable Development Theory: Integrating Ecology, Equity, and Economy

While Rostow's modernization theory offered a foundational, albeit flawed, understanding of development, a robust body of alternative theories has emerged, advocating for more nuanced, equitable, and context-specific approaches. These frameworks directly challenge Rostow's Eurocentric bias, oversimplification, and neglect of structural inequalities, emphasizing human well-being, sustainability, and diverse pathways to progress.

Emerging as a direct and urgent response to the escalating environmental degradation and persistent social inequalities that accompanied the industrial growth celebrated by models like Rostow's, Sustainable Development gained mainstream prominence with the 1987 Brundtland Report, "Our Common Future" (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987)This landmark report famously defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition introduced the crucial concept of intergenerational equity, underscoring a moral and practical obligation to preserve resources and environmental quality for those who come after us. This was a significant evolution from earlier environmental movements (like the "Limits to Growth" debate of the 1970s) that often focused on resource depletion, by explicitly integrating the concept of "development" rather than just conservation. It calls for an integrated approach that simultaneously balances three interconnected and equally vital "pillars" or dimensions, often visualized as interdependent systems (Pohoață, Diaconaşu, & Crupenschi, 2021).

Safeguarding natural resources, biodiversity, ecosystems, and climate stability. This involves minimizing pollution, promoting renewable energy, adopting circular economic principles (minimizing waste and maximizing resource utility), and managing natural capital sustainably. Ensuring fairness, justice, and inclusion within and between societies. This addresses issues like poverty eradication, access to education and healthcare, gender equality, human rights, and social justice, promoting intragenerational equity a fair distribution of resources and opportunities among people alive today, recognizing that poverty can drive environmental degradation (Kirchherr, Yang, Spuntrup, Heerink, & Hartley, 2023).

Fostering economic systems that are productive, resilient, and inclusive, but not at the expense of environmental or social well-being. It emphasizes long-term economic resilience, resource efficiency, and the creation of decent work, moving beyond a narrow focus on purely quantitative GDP growth to consider the qualitative aspects of economic activity that genuinely contribute to well-being (Yanamandra, 2020).

This theory fundamentally argues that genuine progress requires simultaneously achieving goals across all three pillars (Environmental protection, Economic Viability and Social Equity), recognizing their deep interdependence. Compromising one for the sake of another (e.g., rapid economic growth at the cost of environmental destruction or heightened social exclusion) is deemed unsustainable and ultimately self-defeating in the long run. It implies a profound qualitative shift in societal values and economic practices, moving from a linear "take-make-dispose" model to one of efficiency, reuse, and the creation of regenerative, circular systems, rather than simply maximizing output (Mensah & Casadevall, 2019).

Rostow's model is inherently linear, teleological, and largely blind to environmental limits and the long-term ecological footprint of industrial expansion and high mass consumption. His vision of progress is one of continuous material accumulation and an unchecked transition to high consumption, assumptions that sustainable development critically questions. Rostow's stages implicitly assume infinite natural resources, infinite assimilative capacity for pollution, and that waste can simply disappear, notions starkly contradicted by the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion that sustainable development seeks to address. The concept of the planet's carrying capacity, which is fundamental to sustainable development, is entirely absent from Rostow's framework. Furthermore, where Rostow saw development as largely an internal process fueled by capital, sustainable development underscores the need for complex global governance and international cooperation to address transnational environmental problems (like climate change) and achieve shared equity goals (Thaha & Galib, 2022).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all UN member states in 2015, are a contemporary, globally agreed-upon manifestation of this theory. They provide a comprehensive framework of 17

interconnected goals, encompassing targets from ending poverty and hunger to climate action, gender equality, responsible consumption and production, and global partnerships. While the SDGs represent an unprecedented attempt to operationalize sustainable development, the theory itself faces ongoing challenges and critiques, particularly regarding the inherent tension between "development" (often still interpreted as economic growth) and "sustainability." Critics argue that a truly sustainable future may necessitate more radical systemic changes, including, for some, a move beyond growth, as explored by degrowth proponents. Nevertheless, Sustainable Development Theory firmly establishes that progress cannot be measured by economic metrics alone and must encompass ecological integrity and social justice as inseparable components of genuine human well-being (Swain, 2018).

Conclusion

Rostow's model of economic growth, with its linear trajectory from traditional societies to high mass consumption, has served as one of the foundational theories in post-war development economics. By conceptualizing development as a universal, stage-based process, Rostow attempted to provide a roadmap for nations transitioning from underdevelopment to modern industrial economies. While the model's historical significance and pedagogical simplicity are undeniable, this analysis has demonstrated that its applicability across diverse global contexts is both limited and increasingly contested.

Through a critical evaluation of its five stages: traditional society, preconditions for take-off, take-off, drive to maturity, and age of high mass consumption, it becomes evident that Rostow's framework is grounded in Eurocentric assumptions. It privileges Western historical experiences as a normative benchmark for development, thereby overlooking alternative growth paths, structural inequalities, and the legacies of colonialism and global dependency. The model's deterministic nature fails to account for the non-linear, multidimensional, and often cyclical patterns of growth observed in many countries of the Global South. Moreover, it largely ignores socio-political factors, environmental constraints, and issues of distributive justice that are essential to contemporary development discourse.

Despite its limitations, Rostow's model retains heuristic value, particularly in highlighting the role of investment, industrialization, and infrastructure in facilitating economic transitions. However, for modern policymaking and development strategy, there is a pressing need to move beyond rigid stage-based theories toward frameworks that are historically grounded, contextually sensitive, and inclusive of alternative indicators of progress such as sustainability, human capabilities, and digital transformation.

In an era marked by climate crisis, digital inequality, and multipolar economic dynamics, development cannot be seen as a singular journey to high mass consumption. Instead, future-oriented models must reflect pluralistic trajectories, respect national specificities, and prioritise equitable and sustainable growth. Thus, while Rostow's stages of growth offer a valuable starting point for understanding mid-20th century development thinking, they must be complemented and, in some cases, replaced by more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches to meet the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Ethics Statement

This study is based entirely on secondary sources and theoretical analysis. It did not involve human participants, personal data, or fieldwork, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools were used for language refinement and clarity during the drafting process. All content was critically reviewed, edited, and finalized by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aid, Security and Diplomacy: A Framework for Evaluating Turkish Foreign Aid in War-Torn Countries*

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Abstract

This study addresses a critical knowledge deficit regarding the impact of Türkiye's foreign aid on conflict dynamics and stability in war-torn regions. While the broader aid-conflict nexus is well-documented, Turkish interventions in insecure environments remain significantly underexplored. To bridge this gap, the research examines Türkiye's humanitarian engagement in Afghanistan (2001–2021) and Somalia (2011–2022). It proposes an alternative theoretical framework, arguing that Turkish aid functions as a violence dampener via three primary

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causal pathways: (i) the mitigation of socio-economic grievances, (ii) the acquisition of "hearts and minds" among local populations, (iii) increasing the opportunity cost for individuals considering insurgent recruitment.

Türkiye's "humanitarian diplomacy" diverges from traditional donor models by integrating immediate relief, long-term development, and peace-building. This approach is characterized by a distinct implementation style involving direct, unilateral, in-kind assistance delivered by state-affiliated agencies. By operating in high-risk zones and leveraging historical and cultural affinities, Türkiye achieves a comparative advantage in securing local legitimacy. Consequently, Turkish aid proves less vulnerable to negative externalities, such as predation and sabotage, which often undermine aid effectiveness in conflict economies. Despite these advantages in violence mitigation, the study identifies internal challenges, including inefficient resource allocation and the duplication of efforts among Turkish actors. Ultimately, the findings suggest that culturally aligned and locally responsive aid serves as an effective policy instrument for fostering sustainable security in fragile states.

Keywords: Aid-conflict nexus, Humanitarian diplomacy, Insecure regions, Turkish aid, Violence dampener

Introduction

Despite Türkiye's expansive global humanitarian engagement with an operational presence spanning over 170 countries, Program Coordination Offices in more than 60 countries, and a significant humanitarian aid portfolio encompassing over 32,000 events and projects worldwide (Nalcacioglu et al., 2025), scholarly research examining the impact of Türkiye's foreign aid on beneficiary countries remains underexplored. This research deficit is particularly pronounced in understanding Turkish aid distribution within insecure regions. While extensive foreign aid literature has comprehensively addressed the complex relationship between aid and conflict dynamics, researches specifically analyzing Türkiye's humanitarian interventions remain notably insufficient.

This study, therefore, endeavors to bridge this critical knowledge gap by investigating how Turkish foreign aid influences conflict dynamics in recipient countries and evaluating its potential to enhance stability in conflict-ridden states. To this end, analyzing Türkiye's increasing humanitarian engagement in war-torn countries, the study offers an alternative theoretical framework for the aid-conflict dynamics nexus, arguing that Türkiye's provision of public goods and services abroad primarily functions as a *violence dampener* through: winning hearts and minds of would-be rebels, reducing existing grievances among local populations, and increasing the opportunity cost of participation in rebel/insurgent groups. To illustrate these mechanisms, the study examines Afghanistan and Somalia as typical cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), both characterized by protracted civil wars and complex multiparty political landscapes. These contexts provide critical insights, particularly given Türkiye's role as a significant donor, offering a unique opportunity to investigate the nuanced interactions between foreign aid and conflict dynamics.

The article is structured as follows: After briefly examining the concept of foreign aid, its historical development, and Türkiye's evolving aid strategy as a donor in the first three consecutive sections, the fourth section establishes the theoretical framework addressing the nexus between aid and conflict dynamics.

The following two sections present analyses of the Afghanistan and Somalia cases based on the proposed framework. The final section offers concluding remarks and implications derived from comparing these two war-torn countries.

Conceptual Clarification: What is Foreign Aid?

Foreign aid constitutes an important concept in the study of foreign policy, shaping economic, social, political, and security landscapes of nations across the world, particularly in insecure regions characterized by conflict and instability. As a prominent realist scholar, Hans Morgenthau, notes, "of the seeming and real innovations which the modern age has introduced into the practice of foreign policy, none has proven more baffling to both understanding and action than foreign aid" (Morgenthau, 1962: 301). Contemporary foreign aid, however, is substantially different from Morgenthau's Cold War conceptualization. Foreign aid has undergone a significant evolution from a strategic Cold War tool responding to geopolitical tensions surrounding the Soviet Union into a political commitment by wealthier states to assist less developed nations.

Like many social science concepts, no single definition of foreign aid exists that everyone agrees upon. In simplistic terms, foreign aid can be regarded as "an effort to use public [...] resources from one country to bring about sustained, beneficial change in another" (Lancaster, 2007: 10). In that sense, foreign aid can take the form of cash, in-kind resources (e.g., food, medicine, *etc.*), or debt relief. The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), however, uses a narrower definition, termed "official development assistance (ODA)", defining it as government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries. Consequently, ODA comprises transfers from developed countries to the least developed countries, excluding official assistance (OA), which encompasses concessional public transfers to countries other than low-income ones. Furthermore, ODA excludes military assistance, counter-terrorism funding, government-to-government subsidies, and private giving. The DAC, thus, provides guidelines specifying what types of aid qualify as foreign aid.

Despite variations in the definition, certain common aspects exist in foreign aid conceptualizations. First is the transfer of resources from relatively rich to poor countries. Second, aid aims to improve the human condition in the recipient

country, whether through humanitarian relief or including other activities such as promoting democracy, addressing global issues, and managing post-conflict situations as in the DAC framework. It is evident that foreign aid may serve multiple purposes: diplomatic and security interests, functioning as a tool for building alliances, supporting peacekeeping, and preventing conflicts; delivering humanitarian relief; promoting cultural and religious influence; supporting democratic governance, norms, and values; addressing global issues such as climate change and pandemics; and advancing development and poverty reduction by funding infrastructure, education, healthcare and other sectors to stimulate growth (Lancaster, 2007: 12-18).

Brief History of a Policy Tool: Foreign Aid

The origins of foreign aid date back to 1947 when the US implemented the Marshall Plan to support European countries against the expansion of the communist bloc led by the Soviet Union. In that sense, the aid provided by the US to its allies represented a realist response to geopolitical necessities, including the containment of the Soviet threat against the liberal world order (Lancaster, 2007: 212). By the 1970s, aid had already become an element in relations between wealthy and least-developed countries. The share of aid directed to the least developed nations grew significantly, as did the political advocacy for development aid within donor countries. International organizations such as the World Bank, the DAC of the OECD, and various UN bodies pressured wealthy countries to enhance both the quality and quantity of aid. The UN, for instance, adopted a resolution based on the Pearson Commission's report, which recommended that developed nations should dedicate 0.7% of their GDP to ODA (Clemens & Moss, 2007: 7). It is important to note that aid recipients did not only consist of least-developed countries; the developing nations also had their share in foreign aid. Especially during the 1980s and early 1990s, international organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF offered conditional aid programs, which required the adoption of free-market reforms including the removal of tariff barriers and other protectionist measures, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises (Özcan et. al., 2024: 7).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, aid levels fell considerably due to economic difficulties in donor countries, skepticism about aid effectiveness, and the newly emerged international order without bipolar competition. This

decline triggered advocacy campaigns from development constituencies, leading to renewed aid support in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, further cemented the importance of aid for global security, as poverty reduction was considered linked to counterterrorism efforts (Lancaster, 2007: 214-15). This shift influenced the aid literature as well, which began examining whether the injection of aid in conflict-affected regions would positively impact conflict dynamics and promote stability. The so-called traditional donors, namely the US, Great Britain, France, Japan, Germany, and Norway, were not the only subjects of academic inquiry anymore, as new donors emerged. In that sense, the donor landscape includes traditional donors, who are OECD DAC members and whose aid adheres to established standards, and non-DAC donors whose aid policies reflect their specific contexts. Türkiye, as a donor country, belongs to the latter category.

Turkish Foreign Aid: Origins, Evolution and Distinction

Türkiye's history of foreign aid dates back to the beginning of the Cold War, when Türkiye received US aid as part of the Marshall Plan, which envisioned a restored Europe that could stand its ground against the Soviet threat. Initially, Türkiye entered the stage as a beneficiary country rather than a donor. Throughout the following decades, however, there were occasional calls for Türkiye not to remain a beneficiary country but to become a donor. The establishment of the DAC within the OECD in 1967, and the creation of Technical Cooperation Among Developing Countries (TCDC) as part of the South-South Cooperation, which gained momentum with the Non-Aligned Movement in 1978, contributed to the emergence of such considerations (İpek, 2024: 325). Nevertheless, Türkiye remained primarily a beneficiary country until the mid-1980s and focused on coordinating and managing the aid it received.

In 1985, Türkiye's Council of Ministers adopted a resolution assigning the State Planning Organization (DPT) responsibility for the administration of Türkiye's foreign aid, marking the first concrete step in institutionalizing aid and, thus, paving the way for Türkiye to become a donor country. Accordingly, Türkiye implemented its first foreign aid program in Sahel countries on the African continent, which were among the poorest nations. In 1987, the resolution was updated to also assign the DPT responsibility for planning and coordination of Türkiye's foreign aid and regulate aid financing. One year later, the Turkish

Agency for Cooperation (TAC) was established under the DPT, expanding Turkish aid to encompass all developing countries in need. This agency later became the Department of Bilateral Economic Relations and Technical Cooperation and implemented aid programs to developing countries through technical cooperation until 2003 (Gökgöz, 2015: 96-8).

The end of the Cold War saw the emergence of newly independent Turkic states in Central Asia, and newly independent Balkan states following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, with which Türkiye had cultural, religious, and historical ties. This provided an opportunity for Türkiye to improve its relations with these states, and foreign aid was considered a means to that end (İpek, 2024: 326). In 1992, therefore, a separate body called the Department of Economic, Cultural, Educational and Technical Cooperation (ETEKIB) was established under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to coordinate Türkiye's aid. ETEKIB was affiliated to the Prime Ministry in 1999, and, in 2001, rebranded as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). Although Türkiye failed to utilize foreign aid to become a regional player in the 1990s due to economic difficulties and political instability, the 2000s saw an increase in Turkish aid following Türkiye's economic boom and the presence of political will.

The rise of Türkiye as a humanitarian donor in the 2000s represents a unique case where Türkiye's aid policy diverges significantly from both traditional and emerging donors. This distinctiveness in Turkish aid policy stems from its relatively different conceptualization of humanitarian assistance, its motivations, the way it implements aid, and its integration of humanitarian assistance into its foreign policy objectives. First of all, Türkiye's conceptualization of humanitarian assistance transcends the traditional boundaries of humanitarianism, which focuses on saving lives and making conditions better for those who suffer in areas affected by humanitarian crises. In other words, Türkiye adopts a broader conceptualization, integrating humanitarian, development, and peace-building efforts under the so-called 'humanitarian diplomacy' (Davutoğlu, 2013: 865-7), distinguishing it from traditional donors who usually make a distinction between humanitarian aid (immediate relief), and development aid (long-term support). Furthermore, although Türkiye reports humanitarian and development aid flows to the DAC of the OECD despite not being a member, it also advocates for this type of broader conceptualization internationally (Binder & Erten, 2013: 7). Second, unlike traditional donors who emphasize universal humanitarian principles like neutrality and impartiality, Türkiye usually frames its aid within

narratives of historical and cultural affinity, leveraging its Ottoman heritage and Muslim identity (Altunisik, 2023: 669; Binder & Erten, 2013: 2). This is especially the case for Turkish aid to Central Asia, the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. Third, Türkiye usually employs unilateral, in-kind assistance for its aid delivery, which is directly implemented by government agencies or other NGOs closely aligned with relevant state institutions. Most of its humanitarian projects, for instance, are implemented through its own employees, who are sent by the government to beneficiary countries (Binder & Erten, 2013: 10). Among such government agencies are TİKA, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), Yunus Emre Foundation, and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB); and among the NGOs are the Turkish Red Crescent, Türkiye Diyanet Foundation (TDV), and Turkish Maarif Foundation. This, too, starkly contrasts with traditional donors, who often channel funds through international organizations like the UN or independent NGOs. Fourth, Türkiye is willing to operate for its aid delivery in high-risk and conflict-ridden countries such as Somalia and Afghanistan, unlike traditional donors who are usually reluctant to direct engagement in conflict zones due to potential risks. This hands-on approach, while risky, provides Türkiye with a visible presence and firsthand insights, which contributes to its influence in such areas. Finally, interrelated with the former, Türkiye integrates its humanitarian efforts with its foreign policy goals and strategic interests, including establishing legitimate entry points to different countries, strengthening bilateral ties, contributing to regional stability, and aspiring to expand its regional and global influence. To that end, Türkiye has crafted a new language of humanitarian diplomacy that rejects hierarchical relationships in humanitarianism, presenting itself as an equal partner, thus framing its interactions as mutually beneficial (Altunisik, 2023: 669). While not outright rejecting universal principles like neutrality and impartiality, Türkiye's unique approach diverges from traditional donors' separation of aid from politics.

Aiding Peace or Violence? The Nexus Between Foreign Aid & Conflict

The relationship between foreign aid and conflict dynamics is multifaceted and contested. While some argue that foreign aid can mitigate conflict and foster peace and stability, others contend that it can inadvertently exacerbate violence or prolong instability. The relevant literature identifies a number of causal

mechanisms that either link increased aid to reduced violence, or documents instances where increased aid conversely contributes to heightened violence and instability, with the positive causal mechanisms failing in insecure regions. In this regard, this section investigates the relevant literature in order to provide an alternative theoretical framework for understanding whether foreign aid decreases or increases violence in settings already experiencing conflict and under what conditions.

Foreign Aid as Violence Dampener[1]

Several different models exist that explain the causal mechanism between aid and conflict, suggesting that increased aid results in decreased violence and, thus, enhanced security. One such model is the *hearts and minds* model, which assumes that the goods and services provided to local communities lead them to develop positive attitudes toward the government and reject the insurgency. Consequently, rebels or violent groups are weakened, which, in turn, promotes stability (Beath et al., 2012).

Another causal mechanism is the *information-sharing* model, which extends the hearts and minds model (Berman et al., 2011; Berman et al., 2013). This model assumes that local communities usually possess important local knowledge about the activities and plans of rebels. Development aid can, thus, incentivize local communities to share this precious information with the government and its allies, enabling that government to develop a suitable counterinsurgent strategy, and eventually reduce violence. This model has been applied in several scholarly works (e.g., Berman et al. (2013); Berman et al. (2011); Child (2014); Crost et al. (2016)) to establish a causal relationship between aid and conflict dynamics.

The *reduced grievances* mechanism is the third model. According to this model, in societies where minority groups, particularly ethnic ones, hold social and economic grievances as they perceive themselves as marginalized and neglected, targeted aid for these groups can help address inequalities and grievances, thereby reducing the risks of violence and insecurity (Azam, 2001; Azam & Mesnard, 2003).

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1 *The term 'violence dampener' is derived from Zürcher (2017)'s systemic review of the impact of aid on violence in countries affected by civil war, in which he pointed out to 'violence-dampening effect' of aid in war-torn countries.*

Table 1: Theoretical Models on the Nexus between Foreign Aid and Conflict Dynamics

Conceptual Framework	Theoretical Mechanism	Causal Pathway
Aid as a Violence Dampener	Hearts & Minds Model	Provision of aid fosters public support for the government → Decline in insurgent recruitment → Weakening of rebel forces → Increased political stability
	Information-Sharing Model	Aid serves as an incentive for local populations → Enhanced intelligence-sharing with state forces → Improved counterinsurgency operations →Reduction in violence
	Reduced Grievances Model	Targeted aid mitigates socio-economic marginalization → Reduction in political and ethnic grievances → Lower likelihood of insurgent mobilization and violence
	Opportunity Cost Model	Aid investment in employment and public goods → Decreased economic incentives for insurgent recruitment → Diminished armed mobilization → Reduction in conflict intensity
Aid as a Violence Intensifier	Sabotage Model	Aid challenges rebel governance structures → Insurgent retaliation against civilian beneficiaries → Targeting and obstruction of aid delivery → Escalation of violence
	Predation Model	Aid as a resource to capture → Rebel groups seize or impose taxes on aid supplies → Increased financial capacity for armed operations → Prolonged conflict duration

Source: Compiled by the authors. The arrows (→) in the table indicate causal chains in the respective theoretical models.

The last violence-dampener mechanism, called the *opportunity cost* model, has been widely applied in several scholarly works (e.g., Collier & Hoeffler (2004); Dasgupta et al. (2017); Hoelscher et al. (2012)). This mechanism posits that foreign aid provides public goods and creates employment opportunities, particularly for young men in war-torn countries with a large youth bulge. This, in turn, makes it harder for warlords or leaders of violent/rebel groups to recruit would-be fighters, eventually depleting their manpower and war-fighting capacity. Essentially, as recruitment becomes more costly for recruiters due to aid-provided public goods and services, fewer people join these groups, thereby creating a secure environment for all.

Foreign Aid as Violence Intensifier

In addition to the previously discussed mechanisms that explain aid's potential to create an environment conducive to conflict resolution by either improving government capabilities or addressing the root causes of conflicts, some other scholars critically argue that aid may encounter significant challenges when deployed in insecure regions (Zürcher, 2019; Zürcher, 2017; Wood & Molfino, 2016; Wood & Sullivan, 2015; Weintraub, 2016; Crost et al., 2014). This primarily occurs when rebels strategically attempt to counteract aid's positive impacts that threaten their political and financial position. Specifically, two key mechanisms emerge in such volatile environments: *sabotage* and *predation*.

Aid's potential to improve relations between local communities and the government, coupled with increased recruitment costs, directly threatens rebel groups' survival, compelling them to retaliate through targeted punishment and systematic aid program sabotage. Given that these attempts to undermine the stabilizing effect of aid invariably involve violent acts, the injection of aid potentially exacerbates violence and instability. Empirical evidence substantiates this dynamic. Wood and Sullivan (2015), for instance, demonstrate how humanitarian aid in conflict zones can lead to increased violence by rebel groups against civilians, supporting the sabotage mechanism. Weintraub (2016), on the other hand, synthesizes information-sharing and sabotage models, arguing that rebels strategically target civilians to disrupt critical information exchange between local communities and the government. Similarly, Crost et al. (2014) further corroborate this pattern through their investigation of a community-driven development aid program in the Philippines, which revealed that such aid triggered increased rebel attacks against civilians. These cases illuminate a critical paradox: aid intended to stabilize conflict zones may unintentionally escalate violence, ultimately increasing civilian casualties.

The predation model presents an alternative perspective, conceptualizing aid as a potential resource opportunity for rebels rather than a threat to be sabotaged. Unlike the sabotage mechanism, this model views aid as a conflict-fueling resource that rebels can exploit through coercive measures. Specifically, aid's lootable nature –encompassing resources such as fuel, food, and construction materials– creates strategic incentives for rebels to appropriate these goods, thus prolonging violent conflicts. Rebels can leverage aid resources through multiple strategies: direct use, sale, or taxation. In this regard, Narang

(2015) delineates two critical mechanisms of aid misappropriation that can finance rebel activities. First, by alleviating the responsibility of providing basic goods to their population, rebels can reallocate resources toward their violent operations. Second, rebels may strategically prolong violent conflicts to maintain ongoing aid taxation, and, thus, private wealth accumulation. Empirical research also substantiates this model's insights. Nunn and Qian (2014), for instance, demonstrate that the US' food aid paradoxically increased civil conflict durations, aligning with the predation model. Additional scholarship by Wood and Molfino (2016), Narang (2014), and Wood and Sullivan (2015) further reinforce this interpretation. Notably, these studies suggest that predation and sabotage models are not mutually exclusive strategies but potentially interconnected and mutually reinforcing mechanisms of rebel resource exploitation.

Missing Piece of Puzzle: Context & Conditions

As mentioned earlier, the impact of foreign aid on conflict dynamics is inherently complex, multifaceted, and context-dependent, making generalizations difficult. Findley (2018) and Findley et al. (2023), for instance, underscore that aid's effectiveness varies significantly across different stages of conflict, each presenting distinct challenges and potential intervention strategies for aid injection. A seminal study by de Ree & Nillesen (2009) examined the relationship between foreign aid and civil conflict risk in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing specifically on aid's potential to influence conflict onset and duration. The research yielded nuanced findings: while increased aid influx was associated with a decreased likelihood of conflict duration, it showed no significant impact on the probability of conflict initiation. This suggests that aid may be more effective in mitigating ongoing conflicts than preventing their onsets. Conversely, alternative research by Wood & Sullivan (2015) presents a more critical perspective: aid can potentially prolong conflicts by providing resources to warring parties, thereby reducing their incentives to negotiate a peaceful settlement. Similarly, Wood & Molfino (2016) further emphasizes the risk of aid misappropriation, highlighting how rebel groups might divert aid resources to sustain rather than alleviate an ongoing conflict.

The type of aid can also influence its impact on conflict dynamics. Zürcher (2017), for instance, identifies five different types of aid studied in the literature: (i) community-driven development programs, (ii) Commander's Emergency Response Programs (a US military-specific type of aid used as a tool for counterinsurgency), (iii) conditional cash transfer, (iv) employment programs,

and (v) humanitarian aid. Each of these aid types can have a different impact on conflict dynamics. Humanitarian aid, in particular, may be less likely to exacerbate conflict than development aid, as it is typically targeted toward meeting basic needs and is less likely to be diverted or misused by warring parties. However, the literature provides limited understanding of which aid types are more vulnerable to exploitation, or whether some types are less susceptible to sabotage than others (Zürcher, 2019: 6). This lack of empirical evidence makes it difficult to differentiate among aid types in terms of their impact on conflict dynamics.

The impact of aid on conflict dynamics is also influenced by a variety of contextual factors, such as the political environment, the quality of governance, the nature of the conflict, and the capacity of recipient institutions. Besley & Persson (2011), for instance, argue that countries with strong institutions provide the necessary checks and balances against predation, making the predation arguments less relevant for them. Accordingly, aid is more likely to exacerbate conflict when it is delivered to a weak, fragile, and/or failing state with weak governance and ineffective institutions.

Turkish Aid in Conflict-Ridden States: Afghan and Somali Cases

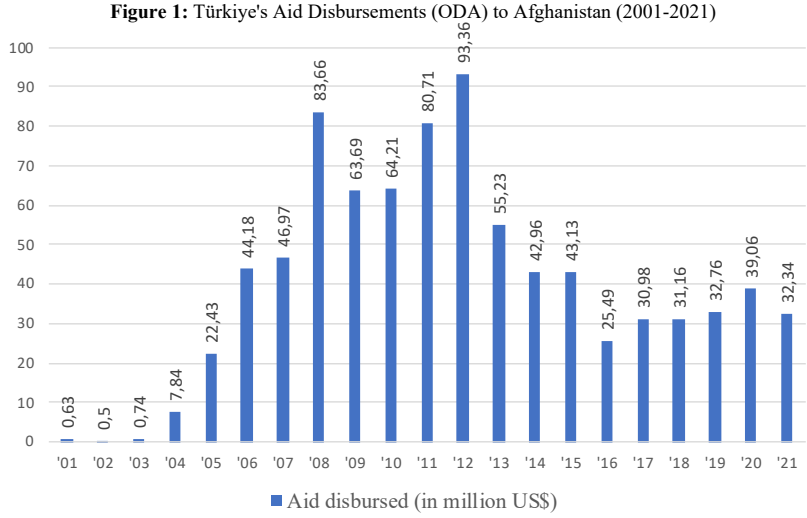
As briefly outlined in the introduction, the impact of Türkiye's humanitarian engagement on conflict dynamics can be better understood through examining its operations in war-torn countries. This section, therefore, analyzes two typical cases representing Türkiye's approach to foreign aid in conflict settings: (i) the Afghan case since the early 2000s, when Türkiye became a part of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and (ii) its humanitarian engagement, along with peace and state building efforts, in Somalia since the early 2010s. Spanning different time periods, institutional contexts, and regional settings, these cases may provide a comprehensive view of Türkiye's foreign aid strategy.

The Afghan Case (2001-2021)

Afghanistan, with its valuable strategic location in the southern part of Central Asia, has been the scene of interventions and power struggles by both local

and international actors throughout history. The four-decade-long conflict and foreign interventions beginning with the Soviet Union's intervention in 1979 and escalating with the 2001 US intervention against the Taliban caused significant loss of life and created a catastrophic humanitarian crisis affecting the lives of millions, thus necessitating emergency relief. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), despite the 2021 political transition, Afghanistan continues to face consequences of protracted conflict, poverty, and climate-induced crises (OCHA, 2023). While hostilities have decreased since the transition, the humanitarian crisis has worsened due to suspended bilateral development cooperation that the Kabul government previously relied upon, and the return of Afghan refugees. In this context from 2001 to 2021, Türkiye ranked among the top donor countries contributing to humanitarian relief efforts in Afghanistan.

Figure 1: Türkiye's Aid Disbursements (ODA) to Afghanistan (2001-2021)



Source: OECD Data Explorer[2] (compiled by the authors).

The Türkiye-Afghanistan relationship has deep historical roots, with diplomatic

2 *Unless stated otherwise, all figures regarding Türkiye's aid disbursements to Afghanistan are derived from the OECD's Data Explorer's "DAC2A: Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions" section, accessible at https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?fs[0]=Topic%2C1%7CDevelopment%23DEV%23%7COfficial%20Development%20Assistance%20%28ODA%29%23DEV_ODA%23&pg=0&fc=Topic&bp=true&snb=26&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_DAC2%40DF_DAC2A&df[ag]=OECD.DCD.FSD&df[vs]=1.2*

ties established in the early 1920s when Afghanistan became the second country to recognize the newly founded Republic of Türkiye, establishing a historical foundation of friendship and cooperation. Türkiye has made significant contributions to Afghanistan in both development and humanitarian assistance, particularly since the early 2000s when it joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under NATO, with the stipulation that Turkish troops would not participate in explicit counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. Although not a DAC member, Türkiye voluntarily provides annual reports to the OECD. According to DAC data, Türkiye disbursed over 840 million US$ in ODA to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, spanning the NATO-led mission until the Taliban regained control of Kabul. As Figure 1 shows, Türkiye's ODA gained momentum in 2004, consistently exceeding 60 million US$ annually and peaking at 93.96 million US$ in 2012. Türkiye's ODA declined in subsequent years, primarily due to security environment changes when ISAF handed over security responsibilities to Afghan forces and was disbanded in 2014. Nevertheless, Türkiye maintained steady aid disbursement averaging 30 million US$ annually until 2021, positioning it among the few countries meeting and occasionally exceeding its aid commitments.

Türkiye's development aid to Afghanistan is coordinated primarily through TİKA, which has operated in the country since 1992, but established its first Program Coordination Office in 2004, followed by offices in Mazar-i Sharif (2007) and Herat (2016). Among the countries in which TİKA operates, Afghanistan hosts more TİKA Program Coordination Offices (three) than any other recipient country, with the legal foundation for their activities established through a January 2006 protocol between the two governments (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2024: 22). To date, TİKA has implemented more than 1500 projects in Afghanistan, with approximately 800 focusing on education and health. Over the past 20 years, TİKA has constructed numerous educational facilities across Afghanistan, creating modern learning environments for thousands of students. Continuing these efforts even after the 2021 political transition, TİKA built the Mahjube Hirevi Primary School in the Khalid bin Valid district of Mazar-i-Sharif province with eight classrooms accommodating 1500 children, including female students (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2024: 94). In healthcare, Türkiye operates two fully equipped hospitals, two clinics, and two mobile clinics serving 650,000 patients annually. Moreover, TİKA implements projects

to improve health infrastructure, equipping existing hospitals and healthcare centers with modern technology (Reliefweb, 2024).

Alongside development aid, Türkiye also provides Afghanistan with humanitarian assistance, coordinated primarily through AFAD and the Turkish Red Crescent. AFAD, for instance, launched the "Goodness Train" campaign to collect aid materials with NGO support and send them to Afghanistan via railway. As of January 2025, a total of 21 train expeditions have delivered more than 10 thousand tons of humanitarian aid (Güler, 2025). Türkiye has also responded promptly to natural disasters in Afghanistan. In 2024, for instance, Türkiye sent 20 tons of emergency aid, and 650 tons of humanitarian aid following floods in the Baghlan province (Rahmati, 2024). Similarly, the Turkish Red Crescent has spent over 18 million US$ on emergency and humanitarian aid across Afghanistan between 1995 and 2023, typically coordinating with other state-affiliated institutions like TİKA (Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2025). Türkiye thus supports Afghanistan through both long-term development projects and emergency humanitarian assistance, reflecting Türkiye's broader conceptualization of humanitarian assistance in both content and implementation.

Beyond development and humanitarian aid through civil state institutions and NGOs, Türkiye also took part in the US-led reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. The Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) formed the backbone of post-2001 reconstruction efforts, combining military officers, diplomats, and experts, thus blurring the lines between military and civilian roles. As an ISAF member since the beginning, Türkiye coordinated the Wardak and the Jawzjan PRTs. While other PRTs, particularly US-administered ones, were military-led with non-civilian characteristics, Türkiye adopted a distinct approach. This is because Turkish authorities decided to implement civilian diplomat-led PRTs rather than military-led ones, on the grounds that this facilitates interactions with local people and authorities through shared ties and values (Kaya, 2013: 24). In this vein, the first Turkish PRT was established in Wardak –one of the poorest provinces in Afghanistan– in November 2006. Working closely with TİKA, the Wardak PRT concentrated on education, health, and agriculture, completing over 200 projects including constructing and restoring mosques, schools, hospitals, social complexes, and other infrastructure projects (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). Following the Wardak PRT's success,

Türkiye established its second PRT in Jawzjan in July 2010, directed by a civilian coordinator from Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and staffed with civilians from various Turkish ministries and TİKA.

The effectiveness of aid to Afghanistan is often criticized on several grounds. First, it is argued that the total aid volume was inadequate to address humanitarian demands in a country affected by both ongoing conflicts and climate-induced crises such as drought (International Crisis Group, 2011: 3). Second, interrelated with the former, a significant discrepancy existed between donors' commitments and actual disbursements (Waldman, 2008), with only half of committed aid delivered between 2001 and 2011 (International Crisis Group, 2011: 3). While this may be true for most donors, Türkiye's performance was comparatively better, as DAC data indicates, Türkiye consistently met or occasionally exceeded its commitments. Third, there was also the allocation issue, meaning that a substantial portion of aid was usually directed toward security sector support rather than long-term development or capacity building (Atmar & Goodhand, 2002). This issue became particularly relevant for the post-2001 period when the Taliban-led insurgency reached its peak.

Regarding aid's impact on conflict dynamics in Afghanistan, which constitutes the main departure point of this paper, several key points stand out. First, it is true that aid to Afghanistan, particularly from the US, was often subordinated to short-term counterinsurgency objectives through military-led PRTs, but this often failed to build local trust (Waldman, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2011). However, this is not the case with Türkiye's aid as it differentiated the civilian role from the military one in its aid injection, thus being successful in winning the hearts and minds of the local people. As Mohammad Halim Fidai, the Governor of Wardak between 2008 and 2015, stated, "What lies at the foundation of Türkiye's successful [aid] model is Türkiye's closeness to the cultural values of the Afghan people and Türkiye's harmonization with the Afghan national development strategy", while also adding that "Turkish [aid] projects in Afghanistan receive great support from the Afghan people" (Turkish Coalition of America, 2010). This goes to show that Türkiye's advantage stemmed from its historical, cultural, and religious ties with Afghanistan. Second, it is argued that conditional aid –requiring human rights compliance or supporting counterinsurgency goals– compromised perceived neutrality and thus hindered access to populations

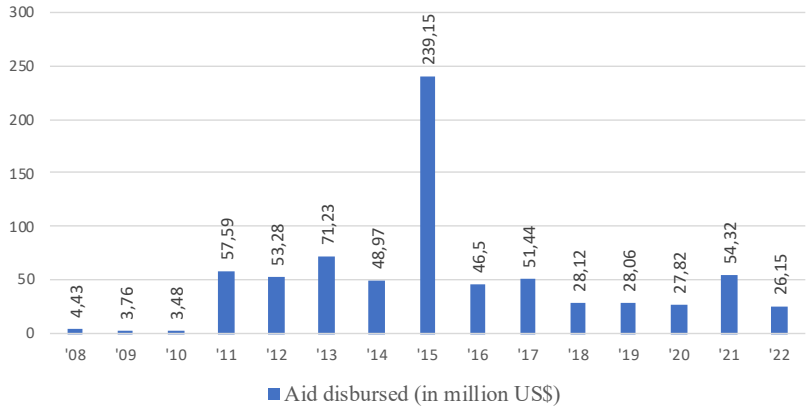
in insecure areas outside government control (Sopko, 2021). Again, this is less relevant to Türkiye's aid, as Turkish aid was unconditional and responsive to local needs. Unlike Western donors' aid, usually misaligned with Afghan needs and outstripped the government's capacity to manage, the Turkish approach, combined with civilian-led programs and cultural/historical ties, enabled it to access insecure regions, potentially facilitating information/intelligence sharing and winning local support, as suggested by the information-sharing and hearts and minds models. (Sopko, 2021). Third, aid influx in a country with weak institutional capacity often generated corruption at all levels through bribes, patronage networks, and payments to insurgent groups in order to ensure security for projects, with armed groups extracting customs duties from aid convoys. In Eastern Afghanistan, for instance, armed groups levied customs duty from aid convoys crossing the country (International Crisis Group, 2011: 4), aligning with the predation model. Though examples of sabotage incidents occurred, such as the April 2013 kidnapping of Turkish truck driver Kerim Yesil, whose truck delivering humanitarian aid was ambushed and set on fire by Taliban fighters. Yeşil was released unharmed three months later following the negotiations led by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MİT) (Anadolu Agency, 2013). Although such incidents demonstrate when and how aid exacerbates conflicts rather than mitigates them, it can be argued that Türkiye's aid experienced fewer such disruptions compared to Western donors. Research shows that aid looting in Afghanistan functioned as a mechanism where aid inadvertently sustained conflict, particularly in Southern Afghanistan, where the US, the UK, Canada, Denmark, and other Western donors operated (Ali Aqa, 2021). Eastern Afghanistan, Türkiye's operational area, performed significantly better in that regard, indicating Türkiye's delicate approach bore fruit and was effective. It should also be noted that Türkiye's ISAF participation without engaging in explicit counterinsurgency operations lessened Taliban's threat perception. The same also counts for the Afghan people, as Fidai stated, "Turkish troops serving in Afghanistan are welcomed and are not regarded as a hostile force throughout the country" (Turkish Coalition of America, 2010). This, combined with its Muslim identity, which is seen as a common denominator among Afghan groups (Sims et al., 2012: 180), enabled Türkiye to conduct aid operations with comparative ease compared to other Western donors.

The Somali Case (2011-2022)

Türkiye's high-profile humanitarian intervention since the 2011 famine had made Somalia a unique case illustrating Türkiye's foreign aid approach to conflict settings. Although Somalia hosts multiple actors with varying, at times conflicting, interests and goals (e.g., Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United Nations to name a few), only Türkiye's humanitarian engagement has received particular attention and praise from both Somalis and the international community (Ali, 2011). Emphasizing humanitarian assistance, developmental aid, capacity building and technical assistance through direct aid delivery by the Turkish personnel on the ground, the "Turkish model" contrasts with other "traditional donors" whose assistance is often criticized for being too slow, overly bureaucratic, and isolated (Sazak & Woods, 2017a; Wasuge, 2016). Although humanitarianism primarily motivated these efforts, Türkiye's foreign aid to war-torn Somalia reflects its broader foreign policy perspective, in which Türkiye aims to bolster its image as a rising power through projecting influence beyond its immediate neighboring regions and securing business opportunities abroad, along with shared religious, historical, and cultural affinity (Bilgic & Nascimento, 2014; Cannon, 2016; Özkan, 2010; Tank, 2013).

Even though Türkiye -Somalia relations gained prominence in 2011 when then-Prime Minister Erdogan visited Somalia during a devastating famine that peaked during Ramadan, the relationship between two countries dates back to the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century when the Ottomans assisted Somalis to fend off Ethiopian and Portuguese invaders. By the 17th century, most coastal towns came under control by local sultanates (e.g., the Adal Sultanate), having nominal links to the Ottoman Sultan. Moreover, during World War I, the Ottomans supported the Somali rebellion against Britain by providing arms to local forces. While relations largely ceased during the early republic and Cold War eras, Somalia was the only African country where Türkiye established an embassy (1971), which remained operational until the Somali civil war began in 1991, characterized by two-decade-long clan conflicts along ethnic lines and religious fundamentalism. Relations resumed after President Sheikh Sharif of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) visited Türkiye in 2009, marking growing interest among Turkish political and business leaders (Donelli, 2021: 78–80; International Crisis Group, 2012: 2–3).

Figure 2: Türkiye's Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Somalia (2008-2022)



Source: OECD Data Explorer3 (compiled by the authors).

From 2011 to 2013, Turkish aid was largely humanitarian assistance providing food, medicine, and basic supplies to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in and around Mogadishu. Beginning in 2013, however, Turkish aid shifted toward capacity-building and technical assistance programs, supporting state-building efforts to legitimize the TFG and counter al-Shabaab extremism through improved security and basic social service provision in health, education, construction, and security sectors. As Figure 2 shows, the year 2015 saw a huge aid influx to Somalia when Erdogan visited the country after his initial 2011 visit. This visit coincided with improved domestic security due to al-Shabaab's diminished fighting capacity as well as increased Turkish business interest in Somalia. After 2015, Türkiye began implementing its second stage of capacity-building and technical assistance programs, a collaboration phase transferring administration and responsibilities of these programs to Somali counterparts. Although Somalia remains the largest recipient country of Turkish foreign aid, the total volume of assistance has changed over time (see Figure 2), particularly after 2015 when Türkiye began focusing on collaboration with Somalia in its capacity-building programs (Sazak & Woods, 2017b: 175-180). In recent years,

3 *Unless stated otherwise, all figures regarding Türkiye's aid disbursements to Somalia are derived from the OECD's Data Explorer's "DAC2A: Aid (ODA) disbursements to countries and regions" section, accessible at https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?fs[0]=Topic%2C1%7CDevelopment%23DEV%23%7COfficial%20Development%20Assistance%20%28ODA%29%23DEV_ODA%23&pg=0&fc=Topic&bp=true&snb=26&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_DAC2%40DF_DAC2A&df[ag]=OECD.DCD.FSD&df[vs]=1.2*

Somalia has signed major cooperation agreements with Türkiye in the fields of maritime, defense, oil, and gas (Baez, 2024), illustrating that Türkiye's engagement through foreign aid over the years has yielded positive results in Somalia.

Somalia's fragile situation stems primarily from a two-decade-long internal conflict beginning with the Barre Regime's collapse in 1991 and intensifying with the gradual withdrawal of UN missions (e.g., UNITAF, UNOSOM I-II), particularly after the Battle of Mogadishu in 1993. The lack of state control created conditions for several Islamic NGOs to emerge, providing basic needs and social services to war-torn Somalia during the second half of the 1990s. This governance deficit ultimately led to the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in the early 2000s, prompting Ethiopian intervention in Somalia, particularly against al-Shabaab, which had disagreements with the ICU in 2006. Although the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) played a significant role in containing this fragility since the late 2000s, internal conflicts resulted in the division of Somalia into three separate state entities: (i) southern Somalia around Mogadishu controlled by the Somali Federal Government (SFG), the sole internationally recognized central authority in Somalia, (ii) Somaliland, a de-facto independent state in the northwestern area on the coast of the Gulf of Aden, and (iii) Puntland, an informal semi-autonomous ethno-state founded on the unity of Harti clan (Donelli, 2021: 80–81; Wheeler et al., 2015: 10–13).

The prolonged conflict has not only created an ongoing humanitarian crisis, forcing millions to flee their homes and requiring urgent humanitarian assistance, but also left state institutions underdeveloped, with insecurity persisting even in and around the capital. In this failed state context, Türkiye initiated its humanitarian assistance and later capacity-building and technical assistance programs through governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), TDV, the Health Ministry, AFAD, YTB, the Office of Public Diplomacy (KDK) along with Turkish NGOs such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), all coordinated by TİKA. Although these organizations initially operated with minimal personnel working closely with local people, their operations, staff, and funding expanded over time as Türkiye's engagement deepened in Somalia (International Crisis Group, 2012: 3–5; Özkan, 2014: 35–46).

Despite Türkiye's non-colonial past in Africa and an emphasis on its human-centered foreign aid with an equitable partnership in both business and trade,

which generated optimism and received praise from the African nations (Bilgic & Nascimento, 2014), the "Ankara consensus" nevertheless encountered several criticisms from both African and international actors. Essentially, Türkiye has conceptualized its foreign aid policy as "humanitarian diplomacy" –an idealized form of diplomacy predominantly focused on human welfare. Yet, it is often perceived as an opaque concept that insufficiently explains Turkish foreign aid policy. Specifically, while the concept emphasizes the human-centric dimension of Turkish diplomacy, it fails to capture the underlying dimensions of international prestige, status-seeking, and strategic business and trade interests on the continent. Conversely, excessive emphasis on these dimensions may potentially compromise Türkiye's image as a benevolent actor in Somalia, as such emphasis engenders a perception that Türkiye exploits African vulnerabilities to advance its geopolitical standing. More importantly, its practical implementation remains largely contingent on ground realities, transcending mere discourse and rhetoric (Akpınar, 2013: 746-751).

First of all, in comparison to other international actors such as Norway, Türkiye still has significant limitations in its comprehensive understanding of Somalia. Although historical links with East Africa extend to the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, meaningful bilateral relations only emerged recently, particularly after Erdogan's landmark official visit in 2011. Such a diplomatic neglect throughout the 20th century resulted in a profound knowledge and expertise deficit about East Africa and Somalia in particular (Akpınar, 2013: 747), undermining policy-making processes at the highest political levels and thus resulting in potentially misguided interventions.

Nevertheless, Türkiye's foreign aid approach significantly diverges from that of traditional donors (e.g., USA, UK, Norway) and newcomers (e.g., China, India) by being active in the field through its own personnel with state institutions and NGOs, in contrast to Western counterparts who largely operate from their offices in Nairobi and at the heavily secured airport in Mogadishu. While this direct engagement offers legitimacy and facilitates first-hand local knowledge acquisition in conflict-affected states like Somalia (see information-sharing model in Table 1), the unilateral intervention has often provoked criticisms from international actors, alleging that Türkiye circumvents official channels and evades international oversight, which potentially facilitate systemic corruption among Somali officials for personnel wealth accumulation (Cannon, 2016).

Furthermore, despite the fact that multiple Turkish NGOs since the 1990s

have operated in Somalia to provide basic needs and social services (e.g., IHH), a significant organizational challenge emerges from their limited coordination with state institutions, resulting in inefficient resource allocation and duplication of project implementations. Nonetheless, these NGOs, along with state institutions, demonstrate capacity to mitigate existing social and economic grievances among Somalis, thereby reducing the incentives for youth recruitment by rebel groups like al-Shabaab in the war economy (see reduced grievances & opportunity cost models in Table 1). Notwithstanding its potential shortcomings like corruption as a conflict-perpetuating factor and risks to aid workers' lives in the field, this direct and unilateral, often uncoordinated, approach demonstrates effectiveness in securing aid delivery to final beneficiaries without substantial illegal interruptions, unfair distributions, and a corrosive war economy associated with sabotage and predation models (Akpınar, 2013: 146–148; Wheeler et al., 2015: 13–16).

Conclusion

The relevant literature claims that foreign aid in (some) conflict settings may exacerbate existing conflicts rather than alleviate violence on the ground, which is in direct contrast with conventional expectations. This study, however, demonstrates that Turkish foreign aid to war-torn states like Afghanistan and Somalia reduces internal violence and fosters a conducive environment for sustainable peace and security mainly through three mechanisms. First, by providing basic needs and social services to the needy through its humanitarian aid while improving state institutions through its capacity-building and technical assistance, Turkish aid addresses existing social, economic, and political grievances that are primarily exploited by rebel groups for recruitment of would-be rebels against government forces. Second, as Türkiye's humanitarian diplomacy encompasses geopolitical interests and international recognition as a rising power as well as potential business and trade opportunities in aided countries, thus creating alternative livelihoods and occupations for even lay people, the Turkish model seems to increase the opportunity cost of joining rebel/insurgent groups. Lastly, all these efforts, including humanitarian aid, technical assistance, capacity building, *et cetera,* help win the hearts and minds of local people, which eventually confers Türkiye's legitimacy to embark on sustainable peace initiatives by bringing all stakeholders to the negotiation table. Türkiye's historical, cultural, and religious ties with the recipient countries also put it in an advantageous position in this regard.

It is important to note that compared to traditional donors and newcomers, the Turkish model is unique in its implementation approach. Türkiye delivers aid directly and unilaterally through its own personnel without coordinating with other stakeholders in the field, including Turkish NGOs. While such a unique approach has been criticized for fostering systemic corruption and patronage networks, particularly among recipient countries' officials, it also enables Türkiye to acquire first-hand local knowledge about who is who in the field, which eventually enhances Türkiye's operational effectiveness in recipient countries. For instance, unlike Western donors' aid convoys that frequently face assaults from rebel groups seeking economic gain, Turkish aid remains relatively immune to such attacks due to its direct engagement with local people. That being said, this model proves self-defeating as its unilateral nature impedes Türkiye from collaborating with other actors in the field, even Turkish NGOs. As a result, limited resources are likely to be utilized inefficiently and devoted to duplicating projects that are already undertaken by other actors.

Ethics Statement

This study did not include human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Use of Generative AI

During the writing phase, the authors used Claude (Sonnet 4.5) to assist in refining sentences without altering the manuscript's conceptual content and logical structure. The authors take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Each author contributed equally to the study and the manuscript.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Systems Analysis Framework with Business Analysis and Project Management for Building Corporate Governance Structures in Post-Conflict Syria

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Abstract

This paper presents a systems-analysis framework designed to facilitate governance development in Syria. The main idea is to use the methodological rigor of business analysis and project management to support the design and implementation of governance mechanisms in Syria. The proposed framework is based on systems thinking as it focuses on interdependencies between political stability, economic activity and institutional capacity. Drawing upon the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge and the Project Management Body of Knowledge, this study introduces a five-layer structure for the proposed model; (1) contextual systems mapping, (2) requirements definition for institutional reform,

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(3) project-governance integration, (4) performance measurement and learning and (5) adaptive feedback and sustainability. Outcomes and lessons from reconstruction efforts and governance attempts in other post-conflict countries inform the proposed model's applicability to Syria. Discussing implementation challenges and enabling conditions, we argue that the proposed framework that combines analytical discipline with structured execution offers feasible pathways to operationalize governance reform, enabling Syrians to build resilient institutions that steer and foster long-term stability and sustainable development.

Keywords: Systems Analysis, Syria, Business Analysis, Project Management, Corporate Governance, Post-Conflict

Introduction

Syria has been torn apart by decades of civil war, leaving behind not only human casualties and physical damage but also a broken system of government, destroyed public infrastructure and erosion of institutions. World Bank (2025) projects that reconstruction costs range between USD 140 billion and USD 345 billion, with a conservative best estimate of USD 216 billion. Also, Syria's current macroeconomic and fiscal capacity are severely limited making it quite unlikely for the country to handle the reconstruction costs. Besides, service restoration needs for sectoral functioning are not even taken into account for in these figures.

Syria is now standing at the edge of a reconstruction phase. While physical structures like buildings and roads will need to be built, a harder task is to build trust, capability, and accountability in the institutional core of the country. In other words, post-conflict reconstruction is both a governance system design and an economic redevelopment challenge. Without mechanisms that are in action for coordination, transparency and stakeholder feedback to occur, there is a real threat that old distributional inequalities and governance problems will come back. To mitigate or to reduce the magnitude of these risks, we argue that the reconstruction process in Syria needs a framework that is intended to blend systems analysis, business analysis and project management thinking.

In the unstable nature of the post-conflict environment, efforts to reform governance often run into three major and persistent problems: (1) institutional fragmentation and overlaps or proxies in authority, (2) limited and compromised administrative capacity to consider policies and translate them into implementable projects and (3) absence of a performance monitoring methodology to enforce accountability of those in charge. To address these problems, we need to take a systems approach. A systems approach can map the interdependencies that are resident in all connected political, economic, and administrative subsystems, rather than treating them as separate silos. Systems analysis offers a conceptual framework for understanding the interactions

among various governance components and how adaptive learning can take place and mature. But this way of looking at things analytically is not enough on its own. Rebuilding also needs the enhanced ability to carry out tasks in a disciplined way through project management and making decisions based on evidence, informed, educated, and guided by business analysis.

The Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK) categorizes structured methods, tools and techniques to clarify stakeholder needs, eliciting requirements and designing value-adding solution options (IIBA, 2015). Similarly, the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) identifies knowledge areas that include initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and closing, which translate mechanism between high-level policy aspirations and actual operational work inside institutions and in the field (PMI, 2021). When combined within a systems analysis point of view, these two disciplines reinforce each other. Business analysis helps ensure that institutional reforms reflect stakeholder priorities in Syria, while project management provides the disciplined implementation structure needed for action cycles that are transparent, measurable and repeatable. When put together, we get a useful way to build strong and flexible governance frameworks in Syria.

Current research on post-conflict rebuilding based on experiences in Iraq, Bosnia and Rwanda, shows that governance reform efforts are successful when reform is treated as a system rather than as individual projects. For example, decentralization, regulatory reform and capacity-building must be synchronized across ministries, local governments and private enterprises. Also, in contemporary reconstruction, corporate governance plays a pivotal role: strengthening private-sector, public-private arm's length partnerships and diaspora investments all gain momentum on quality institutional environments. Thus, strengthening corporate governance is a key step toward political stabilization and social trust.

This study aims to develop a systems analysis framework that incorporates business analysis and project management knowledge areas to guide the formulation of corporate governance in post-conflict Syria. The proposed framework focuses on five interrelated layers, including contextual systems mapping, requirements definition for institutional reform, project–governance integration, performance measurement and learning, and adaptive feedback

and sustainability. By aligning business analysis diagnostics with project execution, the framework aims at operationalizing transparency, participation and responsiveness in Syria's institutional environment.

We facilitate a conceptual approach based on systems thinking and organizational analysis. It draws lessons learned from international reconstruction programs in retrospect and applies them to Syria's fragmented authority and limited administrative capacity. The proposed framework is not about a single institutional model; but an flexible architecture that national stakeholders, international donors and the Syrian diaspora to adapt to organize the efforts, assess progress and build trust.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews theoretical foundations linking systems thinking, business analysis and project management for the formation of post-conflict governance. Section 3 describes the methodological foundations. Section 4 explains the proposed framework. Section 5 analyzes comparative lessons from Iraq and Bosnia. Section 6 discusses implementation challenges and enabling conditions. Section 7 concludes with policy implications for sustainable, inclusive and accountable reconstruction in Syria.

Theoretical Background

This section establishes the conceptual grounding for the proposed systems analysis framework by linking systems thinking, business analysis and project management to post-conflict governance and corporate governance rebuilding in Syria. The argument is that effective governance reconstruction is not only about policy design, but also about implementation under volatile conditions.

Systems Thinking in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Systems thinking frames governance reconstruction as an adaptive, interdependent network rather than a sequence of isolated reforms. Classical systems theory describes institutions as components in a dynamic whole, connected by feedback loops and shaped by changing constraints. In post-conflict conditions, this lens is crucial because institutional failure is rarely

confined to a single ministry or sector; instead, breakdowns in security, finance, service delivery and legitimacy reinforce one another (Morgan, 2011).

As Hinnebusch (2019) argues, the Syrian state has historically functioned through a hybrid of centralized authoritarianism and localized clientelist networks where sectarian and regional allegiances and proxies erased institutional accountability. This was consequential in generating inefficient feedback loops between political loyalty, economic privilege and administrative survival, a structure highly resistant to reform. Systems thinking therefore provides a way to figure out how these subsystems interact, how shocks affect them and where there might be opportunities for change.

In Syria, the legacies of centralized rule, regional fragmentation, sanctions and infrastructure destruction have produced governance environments that are uneven, overlapping and sometimes competing. Current policy analysis on Syria notes that political fragmentation and weak regulatory credibility persist alongside urgent demands for economic stabilization and service delivery, which means that any governance intervention in one sector (for example, licensing for private investment) has immediate spillover in security perception, donor confidence and local legitimacy (Mahli, 2025).

Öztürk (2022) adds that "identity-based polarization and the erosion of trust networks" continue to hinder conflict-resolution and consensus-building processes in post-war Syria. From a systems-analysis perspective, this social fragmentation must be treated as an endogenous variable within the governance system — affecting how reforms are perceived, communicated, and institutionalized. Incorporating sociocultural feedback loops into institutional design becomes critical for sustainable governance recovery.

Systems thinking contributes three concrete capabilities to post-conflict rebuilding: (i) interdependency mapping, which exposes how fiscal management, local administration, infrastructure rehabilitation, and anti-corruption oversight interact and either stabilize or destabilize the wider recovery environment (Morgan, 2011); (ii) leverage-point identification, which helps locate small but high-impact interventions—such as transparent procurement or participatory budgeting—that generate visible trust gains without requiring full institutional maturity, a logic also emphasized in multi-level governance toolkits for

distressed countries (Morgan, 2011); and (iii) adaptive learning, which assumes that governance arrangements must evolve in response to political shocks and stakeholder pushback. This perspective aligns with recent assessments of Syria's transition, which argue that inclusive governance and credible reform must proceed in parallel with economic recovery (Mahli, 2025).

Akkan and Aksu (2023) reinforce this logic by showing how sectarianism has been "instrumentalized as a governance tool," producing overlapping decision networks that persist even amid administrative collapse. A systems approach is thus indispensable for identifying these informal power circuits and for designing reforms that replace loyalty-based control mechanisms with transparent, rule-based structures.

Critically, systems thinking also reframes "corporate governance" in post-conflict Syria. Corporate governance here is not only board accountability inside firms; it is the predictable, rules-based environment in which private actors, public agencies and foreign or diaspora investors operate without arbitrary interference. Analyses of Syrian economic governance argue that wartime economic orders reproduced many pre-war patterns: opaque regulation, patronage networks and weak rule of law (Donovan et al., 2025). This continuity means that rebuilding governance is not a clean reset but a transformation of entrenched practices (Hinnebusch, 2019). A systems approach makes that continuity visible instead of assuming a "fresh start".

Business Analysis for Institutional Reform

Business analysis is fundamentally about defining needs, aligning stakeholders, and ensuring that proposed solutions deliver measurable value to those stakeholders. In governance rebuilding, those stakeholders include ministries, municipal authorities, civil society organizations, donors, returning refugees and private sector actors that are expected to generate employment and tax base.

Post-conflict governance programs repeatedly fail when institutional reforms are designed top-down without validated stakeholder requirements. UNDP's capacity development work in fragile and post-conflict states (for example, Liberia and Sierra Leone) highlights that imported institutional designs collapse when they are not co-produced with local actors and when they ignore local

incentive structures (Morgan, 2011). This is directly relevant to Syria, where governance will be negotiated among interim authorities, local councils, surviving administrative cadres and external funders. Business analysis techniques such as stakeholder analysis, needs elicitation, requirements traceability specifies a disciplined way to document and reconcile these competing expectations instead of letting the loudest actor dominate.

According to ISO 21502 (2020), successful project and program governance requires "identifying, engaging and managing stakeholder expectations in a transparent and documented manner to maintain alignment with organizational objectives." This mirrors BABOK's emphasis on continuous stakeholder collaboration and provides an operational reference for public-sector reform projects in post-conflict environments. Embedding ISO-compliant stakeholder registers and decision-logs within business-analysis processes ensures traceability and legitimacy in policy formulation.

Another BABOK principle that becomes highly relevant in this context is requirements for validation and value assessment. In for-profit organizations, the term "value" is normally interpreted through a financial lens in monetary terms. In a post-conflict governance setting, however, "value" cannot be reduced to revenue or return-on-investment. Here, the term "value" includes legitimacy, inclusion, transparency, procedural fairness, and basic service delivery outcomes. In other words, value must be interpreted in governance terms. Table 1 presents examples about defining value as follows:

Value Dimension with respect to Governance	Illustrative Question for Operational Interpretation
Transparency and Auditability	Can the procurement processes for reconstruction projects in governorates such as Aleppo, Hama and Latakia be audited step-by-step by independent oversight units?
Equitable Resource Allocation	Can local councils in Idlib, Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor allocate municipal budgets so that affected communities themselves recognize as fair and not captured by factional interests?
Predictable Rule-Based Investment Environment	Are international or Syrian diaspora investors (for example, industrialists returning from Türkiye, Jordan or Europe) protected against unpredictable expropriation or politically motivated asset seizure by any authority or any proxies claiming jurisdiction?

Table 1. Governance Value Dimensions and Syria-Specific Questions

The OECD (2019) evaluation framework broadens the concept of value by embedding relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. If Syrian reconstruction agencies and stakeholders embed these six criteria into their business-analysis cycles, they can systematically test whether a reform proposal is technically sound, institutionally legitimate and morally defensible. To illustrate briefly: the "coherence" dimension can be used to check whether externally funded projects are actually compatible with Syria's national governance priorities, rather than just donor agendas. Likewise, "impact" and "sustainability" indicators can steer adaptive learning so that institutional strengthening is not short-lived but accumulates over time.

Business analysis also helps anti-corruption architecture develop. In Syria, where reconstruction funds are projected in the hundreds of billions of dollars (World Bank, 2025), the ability to define, document and audit requirements for procurement, licensing and service delivery is not just administrative hygiene, it also means conflict prevention. Integrating these steps within business-analysis templates strengthens integrity controls and allows early detection of governance risks such as patronage or procurement bias.

In addition, the use of a standardized risk register aligned with ISO 31000 (2018) gives reconstruction authorities and external donors a shared language for categorizing, assessing and reporting risks. This transparency in turn provides a more objective basis for oversight, progress reporting, and escalation of concerns when necessary.

In our study's framework, business analysis is therefore positioned as the "institutional design and requirements" function.

Project Management as Governance Execution

Project management provides the structure for translating defined requirements into accountable execution under resource constraints. The PMBOK process groups (initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling and closing) can be repurposed as governance delivery cycles in fragile environments. Field examples from Iraq, Bosnia and other post-conflict settings shows that reconstruction programs succeed when they are run as portfolios of projects with explicit scope, risk controls, stakeholder engagement plans and measurable

outputs (Voetsch and Myers, 2005; UNDP, 2024).

Three elements of project management theory are especially relevant for corporate governance rebuilding in Syria: (1) Integration management and portfolio alignment: UNDP's recent program evaluation in Iraq (2020 - 2024) notes that stabilization work progressed when humanitarian assistance, infrastructure recovery and governance reform were managed as an integrated program rather than as disconnected donor projects. That integration included administrative and fiscal decentralization, institutional reform, and capacity development for local authorities (UNDP, 2024). ISO 21502 (2020) likewise emphasizes the need for "a clear governance framework defining roles, responsibilities and decision-making paths across the project portfolio," which directly supports this integration logic in public-sector reconstruction. (2) Stakeholder governance as risk governance: PMBOK treats stakeholder identification and engagement as continuous, not one-off. In conflict-affected environments, stakeholder structures are fluid: authorities change, mandates overlap and political legitimacy is contested. Reconstruction case work from Iraq, Sudan, Bosnia and Kosova shows that project teams must continuously renegotiate who authorizes, who blocks and who must be visibly consulted to avoid sabotage or reputational collapse (Voetsch and Myers, 2005). This is directly applicable to Syria's fragmented sovereignty. (3) Monitoring, transparency and accountability: In post-conflict settings, donors and local populations demand rapid, visible gains (for example, electricity restored, hospitals reopened, payrolls stabilized) but also demand proof that funds are not being captured by elites or factions.

The Need for an Integrated Systems Framework

Even where reconstruction resources exist, governance rebuilding in post-conflict states often fails because efforts are fragmented, politicized or purely technocratic. Comparative evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that reconstruction can stall without secure environment, strategic vision and strong leadership to coordinate aid and institutionalize reform (Nedić, 2006). At the same time, analyses of post-war Syria warn that simply rebuilding physical assets without transforming governance practices risks reproducing opaque pre-war and wartime economic orders: patronage networks, weak rule of law

and exclusive decision-making (Donovan et al., 2025).

We argue that Syria now needs an integrated systems framework that closes the loop between analysis, design, execution and learning:

(1) Systems analysis identifies where governance is structurally weak (for example, municipal fiscal authority, procurement oversight, licensing for private investment) and maps interdependencies across political, economic and administrative subsystems (UNDP, 2024). (2) Business analysis translates those systemic gaps into explicit governance requirements, assigns ownership, and defines the value of reform in measurable governance terms such as transparency, participation and service reliability (Nedić, 2006). (3) Project management plans and delivers these reforms as controlled portfolios with defined scope, budget, KPIs, governance milestones, stakeholder accountability mechanisms and auditable reporting structures (Voetsch and Myers, 2005). (4) Feedback and adaptation (continuous improvement) ensures that each governance project is evaluated, lessons learned are captured, and processes are iteratively refined to become part of a stable corporate governance environment. This echoes guidance that post-conflict public administration reform must be tailored to local parameters and cannot rely on "one size fits all" templates (UN DESA, 2010).

ISO 21502 (2020) does not present governance as a fixed structure. Instead, it defines project governance as the combination of principles, policies and procedures through which projects are authorized, guided, and kept aligned with decided requirements. The standard also emphasizes that oversight, justification, and key decision-making points occur throughout the project's life cycle, including through gates and progressive justification stages. Read in Syria's post-conflict context, this means that governance cannot be treated as a one-time design option: Conditions will shift, new risks will appear, and additional data will invalidate earlier assumptions. OECD (2019, p.3) reaches a similar position by arguing that the criteria should be applied in ways that are adapted to context rather than mechanically.

Therefore, the theoretical standpoint of this study is that rebuilding corporate governance in post-conflict Syria is not simply a technocratic or legal drafting drill. It is much closer to a systems-transformation exercise that needs iteration,

feedback, and correction. Systems thinking provides the analytical framing; business analysis defines and tests requirements and value, and project management provides the structured execution logic needed to make those institutional changes real and trackable across time.

Methodological Approach

Design Rationale

This study develops a systems-analysis framework that unites business-analysis and project-management methods to guide the reconstruction of corporate-governance structures in post-conflict Syria. The methodology is comparative, integrative and practice-oriented, drawing simultaneously from (a) multilateral post-conflict governance literature, (b) empirical recovery assessments and (c) Türkiye's development-cooperation experience as a non-traditional donor.

The approach follows the logic of design-science inquiry, where theory informs a structured model that is later adapted for implementation. Data and conceptual anchors are derived from five bodies of evidence: (1) World Bank (2024) for providing quantitative baselines on infrastructure loss, capital-stock depreciation, and sectoral priorities for reconstruction. (2) UN DESA (2010) for identifying administrative capacity, legitimacy and public-service delivery as the main determinants of durable peace. (3) Morgan (2011, pp.18-19) for supplying operational insights on sequencing, leadership and absorptive capacity. (4) Nedić (2006) for illustrating donor coordination and governance fragmentation. (5) Mahli (2025) provides a recent projection of transitional governance and economic-reform dynamics.

Complementary regional sources include Sarmini (2024) on Syria's political stalemate and Türkiye's contributions to reconstruction diplomacy analyzed by Elbehairy (2025) and Düzyol (2025) which together frame Türkiye's development-cooperation model and its implications for soft-power-based capacity building.

As Brown (2019) warns, donor state-building logics often replicate pre-conflict centralization through technocratic design; the present framework instead embeds adaptive feedback loops to maintain local legitimacy.

Comparative Analytical Framework

The analysis employs a multi-layer comparative design combining vertical (macro-meso-micro) and horizontal (cross-country) dimensions: (1) Macro-level: Governance system design, public-administration architecture (UN DESA, 2010, pp. 13-15) and the interface between national legitimacy and international engagement. (2) Meso-level: Institutional performance—ministries, regulatory agencies and corporate-governance oversight bodies. (3) Micro-level: Organizational and project units implementing reconstruction programs.

Comparative baselines were established through two reference cases: Bosnia and Herzegovina (1995-2010) and Liberia/Sierra Leone (2003-2010) are selected because they illustrate contrasting donor-coordination and capacity-development outcomes. These cases are documented in Nedić (2006) and Morgan (2011) and triangulated with UN DESA (2010) findings.

The method proceeds in three analytical stages:

- Contextual Mapping (Step 1): Using systems-analysis techniques (causal-loop and stakeholder mapping) to delineate interdependencies among political, economic, and administrative subsystems.
- Institutional Diagnostics (Step 2): Adapting BABOK requirement-elicitation principles to governance reform by identifying stakeholder needs, governance gaps and enabling conditions for capacity development.
- Programmatic Integration (Step 3): Translating diagnostic outputs into project-management portfolios using PMBOK process groups and risk-management tools.

In line with field evidence from conflict environments, projectized approaches integrating humanitarian, governance and fiscal interventions under unified accountability mechanisms have shown higher institutional resilience (Voetsch and Myers, 2005).

Data Sources and Validation

The empirical foundation combines quantitative assessment from World Bank (2025) with qualitative interpretive data from policy briefs and institutional reports:

World Bank Syria assessments provide baseline data: 14 million displacements, USD 216 billion total damage, USD 117 billion direct physical losses (World Bank, 2025, p. 29). These figures informed the scope and prioritization matrix in the proposed framework's "contextual mapping" layer. Mahli (2025) contributes scenario-based governance data on transitional institutions, economic-policy sequencing, and donor conditionality. Sarmini (2024) commentary on regional political dynamics contextualizes external-actor influence, emphasizing the persistent role of Russia, Iran and Türkiye in shaping reconstruction pathways. Contributions by Elbehairy (2025) and Düzyol (2025) supply empirical evidence on Türkiye's evolving development-cooperation model, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), TİKA's operational instruments and complex-realism frameworks linking humanitarian and geopolitical motives.

Analytical Procedures

System Boundary Definition: Boundaries were drawn around four governance subsystems: legislative and judicial institutions, economic regulation and fiscal governance, corporate oversight and anti-corruption mechanisms and donor coordination platforms.

Stakeholder Analysis: Adapted from BABOK (IIBA, 2015) stakeholder mapping; actors include transitional ministries, local councils, diaspora networks, private-sector associations and international donors such as TİKA and UNDP.

Governance Requirements Definition: Requirements were categorized as structural (legal and institutional reforms), processual (transparency and coordination mechanisms) and capability related (administrative skills and digital tools).

Project-Portfolio Integration: Drawing on PMBOK (PMI, 2021) knowledge areas, each requirement is linked to a project cluster with defined scope, resources and accountability indicators. This translates the systems map into implementable portfolios.

Feedback and Learning Loop: Continuous evaluation is embedded through key governance indicators (KGIs) for transparency, participation and performance. Reconstruction must be an iterative process driven by learning and innovation.

Brown's work illustrates that donor-designed governance programs often ended up repeating the same contradictions and design errors that existed in earlier state building efforts (Brown, 2019). In other words, lessons were not actually absorbed back into the next cycle of intervention. For this reason, in our proposed framework, iterative feedback loops are built in, so that reform decisions can be corrected and refined along the way, rather than simply reproducing same patterns of the past.

Ethical and Operational Considerations

This research is positioned within the extensive UN dialogue on ethical engagement in post-conflict scenarios. UN DESA (2010) and Morgan (2011) both clearly identify that legitimacy, ownership and inclusion are structural preconditions for meaningful capacity development, not optional normative add-ons. If they are not taken into account, capacity development becomes performative. So, three components are emphasized in this framework:

Local Ownership and Diaspora Participation: Rebuilding institutions should not be decided and realized by a small group of elites from the country or outside experts. The Syrian professionals and business diaspora, who already have knowledge of the sector and connections across borders, should be involved in the process of redesigning institutions. The TİKA case in Türkiye illustrates that a common history, shared memory and cultural familiarity facilitate smoother and easier implementation and expedite the establishment of trust (Elbehairy, 2025).

Do-No-Harm Principle: UNDP (2024) consistently emphasizes that interventions which reproduce or reinforce old power asymmetries cause harm although short-term outputs appear efficient, successful or clean.

Accountability and Transparency: Previous post-conflict assessments in Bosnia and Iraq pointed to significant corruption vulnerabilities (Nedić, 2006; UNDP, 2024; Güven and Krupalija, 2025). The appropriate response is not merely language. Audit trails, accessible documentation and disclosure rules should be integrated into the project cycle rather than relegated to project closure reporting.

These ethical anchors directly respond to the risks of authoritarian-style reconstruction raised by Heydemann (2019), they help ensure that auditability and participatory budgeting really perform as protection against elite capture.

Integration with Regional and Donor Practices

A further aspect of this framework is that it looks at how regional actors actually operate, instead of assuming that all donors act the same way. Türkiye is a good example of this because it is both a donor and a direct political actor in the region. Elbehairy (2025) demonstrates that the TİKA model is not solely a technical aid instrument; it functions within what he terms a "complex-realist" framework. In this way of thinking, humanitarian diplomacy and geopolitical calculations are very closely related. Düzyol (2025) notes that Türkiye sets itself apart from traditional OECD donors by using cultural proximity and relationship-based trust building as operational tools instead of just following procedural project cycles.

Adding these insights, regional actors have become co-facilitators of institution-building, and in many cases, they are perceived as more legitimate by local organizations than Western agencies, because the relational distance is smaller. This regional layer matters for the Syrian case. Administrative and geopolitical stabilization will almost certainly require structured cooperation with Türkiye, and also, in varying ways, with neighboring states. In that sense, regional involvement is not an optional supplement; it is part of the environment in which institutional capacity will consolidate or fail.

The Framework for Corporate Governance Reconstruction

Conceptual Overview

Based on the analytical and comparative foundation discussed in the previous sections, this part of the study introduces a systems analysis framework (SAF). It is meant to serve as a structured approach for rebuilding corporate-governance capacity in post-conflict Syria. The framework attempts to operationalize the fusion of systems thinking, business analysis, and project management into a usable methodology for fragile-state reconstruction.

It is also important to note that post-conflict settings are highly context-dependent. State capacity, inclusivity, and the intensity of international commitment change from case to case. Therefore, reconstruction planning cannot be based on a one-template approach because enabling conditions differ across cases.

The five layers proposed here; namely, contextual systems mapping, requirements definition, project governance integration, performance measurement and learning and adaptive feedback mechanisms, should not be read as a linear sequence (Fig.1). They operate more like interdependent cycles. Each layer informs the next, but they also return back to check earlier assumptions in previous layers. In that sense, the SAF is designed to create rounds of design, implementation, and improvement, rather than a checklist.

Layer 1: Contextual Systems Mapping

This foundational layer identifies the political, economic, and institutional interdependencies that shape reconstruction. Drawing on systems thinking and UNDP's capacity-development principles, contextual mapping visualizes how governance institutions, private-sector actors, donors and communities interact across national and local levels (Morgan, 2011; Mahli, 2025).

The mapping process integrates:

- Causal loop diagrams to capture reinforcing and balancing feedback loops

between governance trust, investment confidence and administrative efficiency.

- Stakeholder mapping (based on BABOK) to clarify roles, interests and influence of ministries, local councils, business associations and external partners such as TİKA and UNDP.
- Dependency matrices linking macroeconomic stabilization (monetary and fiscal control) with micro-level corporate regulation (licensing, compliance, audit transparency).

For a credible recovery analysis, governance mapping must handle both the vertical institutional architecture and the horizontal actor network. Otherwise, interventions do not land well in the real environment. And in Syria's case, this contextual mapping also needs to show that some groups have more access to resources than others and that there are clear horizontal inequalities between groups. Comparative studies have shown that these kinds of imbalances are not only barriers to development, but they are also linked to the possibility of conflict happening again (Brown et al., 2011). So, this is a significant design concept in the methodology.

The World Bank's 2025 reconstruction assessment gives the quantitative references for this layer. It documents the scale of infrastructure damage, identifies priority sectors for reinvestment, and estimates the fiscal capacity available for reconstruction. These baselines set the stage for governance interventions to be adjusted. If planners disregard this, the reforms may devolve into abstract notions rather than practical strategies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, fragmented donor involvement led to parallel interventions and ongoing inefficiencies (Nedić, 2006, pp. 8-11). Such examples encourage a more disciplined alignment to systemic realities.

The deliverables are: (1) Governance Ecosystem Maps of Syria to identify principal stakeholder communities. (2) Systemic Interdependency Matrices to visualize cross-sectoral feedback loops (for example, investment climate → governance trust → service delivery). (3) Baseline Dashboards to summarize macro indicators, for example, many of which can be drawn directly from the World Bank's (2025) reconstruction damage assessment.

Layer 2: Requirements Definition for Institutional Reform

When the systemic relations become more visible, the second layer moves into a business-analysis logic and starts to define governance requirements. In essence, this stage answers a practical question: which institutional capacities are needed, by which actor, and for what kind of measurable public-value outcome.

BABOK approach with adaptation for post-conflict agenda:

- Elicitation techniques (interviews, focus groups, workshops, document analysis) are adapted to post-conflict stakeholders such as transitional authorities, municipal councils, private-sector representatives and other actors in the fragile institutional environment.
- Requirement categorization follows along three dimensions: Structural (legal frameworks, regulations, oversight mandates), processual (workflows, transparency practices, coordination mechanisms) and capability (human skills, digital instruments, and resource base).
- Prioritization, verification, and validation are done through consensus-seeking sessions moderated by a facilitator who is trusted by both donors and domestic actors.

Morgan (2011) notes that capacity development in post-conflict agenda works best when local actors articulate their own institutional requirements and external actors support but do not dictate. Türkiye's development cooperation record, especially the way TİKA works with local partners during the design of projects, shows a relevant model for the region. OECD's principle of "relevance and coherence" also supports a stakeholder-driven requirement definition and helps prevent externally imposed templates (OECD, 2019, pp. 7-8). Türkiye's peacebuilding experience in Bosnia additionally indicates that long-term participation of domestic institutions improves legitimacy and implementation (Güven and Krupalija, 2025).

Deliverables: (1) A Governance Requirements Catalogues (aligned with international frameworks like OECD (2019)). (2) Stakeholder-Validated Use Cases to translate governance needs (for example, transparent procurement) into functional processes. (3) Traceability Matrices to link each requirement to expected governance outcome (legitimacy, efficiency, inclusivity).

Layer 3: Project Governance Integration

The third layer transforms those requirements into practical projects, using project-management structures in line with PMBOK. Here, governance reform becomes a portfolio of implementable and auditable projects, not only policy languages. This is consistent with OECD policy and governance guidance on post-conflict transition, which notes that "effective support to transition requires collective and parallel engagement by different policy communities" (OECD, 2012, p. 5). Practically, Layer 3 is about the coordination mechanism that links institutions, donors and delivery instruments into one coherent governance portfolio.

Key process groups include:

1. Integration Management to align donor and government efforts under a shared portfolio design
2. Scope and Risk Management to define deliverables, success metrics and risk mitigation;
3. Stakeholder Engagement to coordinate, for example; EU, World Bank, Türkiye, UNDP and domestic bodies;
4. Monitoring and Reporting to embed dashboards and audit trails inside project management offices (PMOs).

Morgan (2011) demonstrates that capacity gains are weakened by fragmented execution. Reconstruction in Bosnia required harmonized financial pipelines and accompanying reporting standards (Nedić, 2006). UN DESA (2010) shows that centralized governance platforms, similar to the proposed National Project Governance Office, are important to avoid duplication. This is also directly aligned with OECD's warning that donor instruments often fail to connect strategically: "This has resulted in both duplication and a fragmentation of efforts, preventing strategic linking of different instruments to a coherent delivery strategy" (OECD, 2012, p. 14). Accordingly, deliverables for this layer are: (1) National Project Governance Office (NPGO) acting as the PMO. (2) Portfolio Alignment Matrices that connect each integrated portfolio to strategic governance goals. (3) Standard Reporting Templates for transparency and donor coordination.

Layer 4: Performance Measurement and Learning

KGIs are used in this layer to set up structures for ongoing monitoring and evaluation. These evaluate metrics like time, cost, scope; as well as the actual results of governance, such as transparency, citizen trust and accountability. This aligns with UN DESA (2010) on feedback mechanisms and with World Bank (2025) on data-driven reconstruction oversight. There are three main areas from which indicators come:

- Institutional Effectiveness (for example, number of functioning regulators, business-license getting lead times, efficiency of procurement cycle, construction-permit time means and ranges in cities like Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Latakia).
- Transparency and Accountability (for example, public disclosure rates for reconstruction contracts, corruption-perception improvements, data publishing on time indexes from bodies like Aleppo Chamber of Commerce or the Ministry of Finance).
- Participation and Inclusivity (for example, percentage of projects with civil-society oversight, gender balance in committees, closure rate of citizen feedback tickets).

Data sources include administrative records, third-party data checks and open data dashboards. UNDP's experience in Iraq (2024) shows that publishing performance information in public portals improves donor trust and help reduce corruption.

Deliverables: (1) Governance Performance Dashboard for KGI tracking. (2) Learning Reports for summarizing cross-project findings. (3) Adaptive Strategy Notes for describing improvement suggestions.

Layer 5: Adaptive Feedback and Sustainability

This layer formalizes institutional learning by turning lessons into policies and standard operational procedures. Sustainability is obtained when institutions learn continuously. This layer has:

- Feedback Cycles linking evaluation results to new policy revisions;

- Institutional Memory Systems documenting reforms and decisions via digital tools;
- Capacity Retention through training, succession, leadership development;
- Regional Partnership Mechanisms which use Türkiye's cooperation infrastructure and regional universities for long-term transfer.

Adaptive feedback works best when it is paired with inclusive governance and international partnerships aimed at capacity transfer, not dependency (Güven and Krupalija, 2025). In post-conflict Syria, adaptive governance will depend on balancing central oversight with local responsiveness. With institutionalized feedback, SAF is going to remain dynamic and respond to political change, donor fatigue, or economic shocks.

Deliverables are: (1) Governance Learning Repository with quarterly updates and annual audit. (2) Annual Adaptation Cycle Reports. (3) Reform Continuity Charter that supports ownership transition from donors to Syrian institutions.

Schematic Description

SAF (Fig. 1) turns systems thinking and management theory into a way to rebuild governance. It helps Syria's transition by: (a) organizing reforms into portfolios that can be managed and audited; (b) connecting local ownership with international accountability; and (c) making learning and adaptive resilience a part of institutional processes. This architecture puts into action the main argument of this study: good governance after a conflict needs both analytical coherence and managerial discipline:

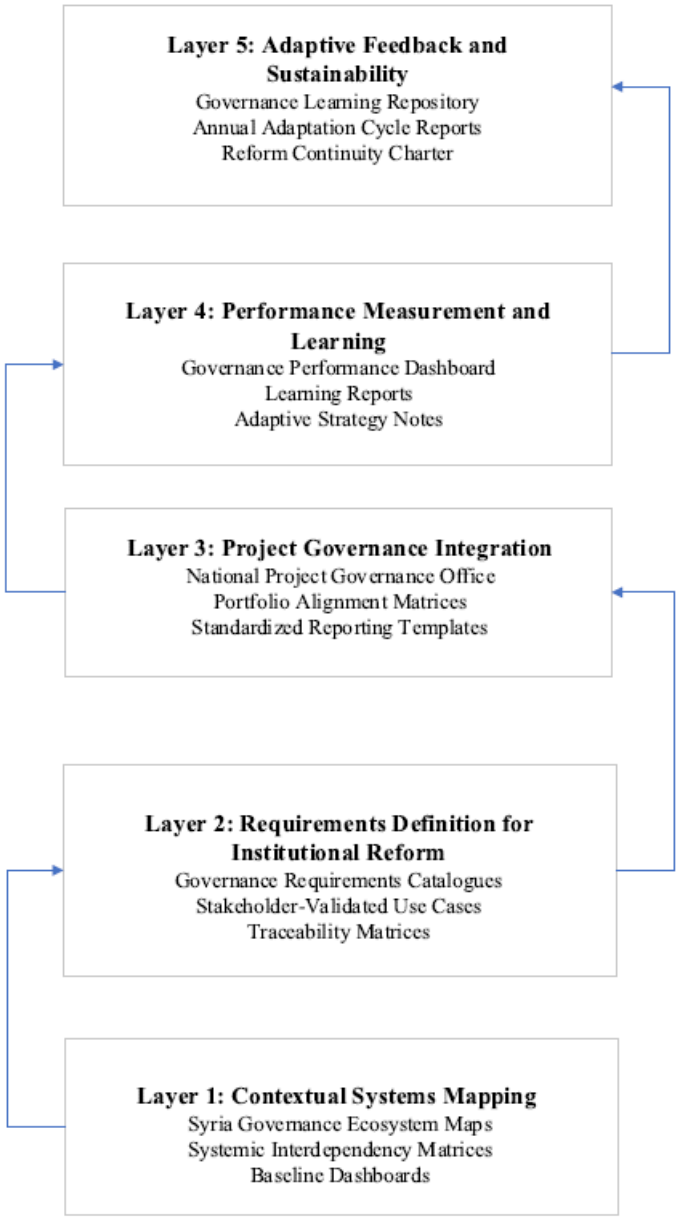

Figure 1. SAF for Post-Conflict Syria Corporate Governance Reconstruction

Discussion and Policy Implications

Translating Systems Analysis into Governance Practice

SAF regards reconstruction governance as a living system rather than a fixed agenda. This is highly relevant in Syria, years of conflict have created institutional voids. SAF attempts to move from abstract analysis to procedural discipline so that reform efforts can be flexible. Brown (2019) notes that many donor-driven programs in Syria repeated similar "state-building from above" pattern, ignoring social realities in the field. The main innovation of SAF lies in the dual mechanism: analytical coherence via systems mapping and executional discipline through project management integration. In practice, design and delivery is expected to reinforce one another.

Layer 1 anchors context; Layer 2 clarifies institutional needs; Layer 3 structures implementation; Layer 4 includes performance learning and Layer 5 is for sustained adaptation. Morgan (2011) recommends iterative cycles and integrated feedback and here the SAF tries to close the loop between policy intent and actual outcomes.

Institutional and Political Preconditions

For the SAF to function, two enabling conditions are necessary: political authorization and institutional absorptive capacity:

Political authorization determines whether a transitional authority can define a unified reconstruction framework. Without that, donor programs will continue to operate in silos and producing overlapping authorities weaken accountability (World Bank, 2025). International actors sometimes bypass local legitimacy at the expense of generating governance vacuums (Brown, 2019).

The second factor is absorptive capacity: the ability to internalize external support. UNDP-World Bank studies (Morgan, 2011) show failures occur when outsiders "do for" instead of "build with."

Regional Cooperation and Türkiye's Role

SAF has a distinctive implication for Türkiye. Türkiye is a neighbor, but also it

is an emerging donor with expertise in reconstruction. Türkiye's development-cooperation model, rooted in cultural ties, humanitarian diplomacy and "complex realism" (Düzyol, 2025; Elbehairy, 2025), brings useful lessons. Agencies and organizations like TİKA, AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Authority), and YTB (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities) help with both infrastructure and institutional mentoring.

Comparative Insights: Bosnia and Iraq

Bosnia and Iraq show two different examples. Bosnia reflects too much international control that suppresses local learning (Nedić, 2006). Iraq shows the other side: donors working independently without any oversight, which leads to separate bureaucracies. The UNDP (2024) evaluation of Iraq shows that fragmentation led to repeated training, poor monitoring and projects that didn't survive. SAF's integrated portfolio method is meant to help solving problems like these.

SAF suggests a mixed approach that tries to balance two directions simultaneously: centralized oversight through the NPGO and decentralized execution through project management. In this way, each layer is made to protect local learning while keeping a national line of coherence. For example:

- Contextual Systems Mapping (Layer 1) allows region-specific diagnosis;
- Requirements Definition (Layer 2) ensures local input;
- Project Governance Integration (Layer 3) centralizes reporting and risk management;
- Performance Measurement (Layer 4) standardizes indicators across provinces and cities;
- Adaptive Feedback (Layer 5) synthesizes local lessons into national policy updates.

This hybridization mirrors Bosnia's eventual shift toward local ownership after 2006 (Nedić, 2006, pp. 6-10) and Iraq's stabilization programs post-2018, which successfully integrated subnational actors under unified monitoring dashboards (Morgan, 2011). By putting this structure into Syria's reconstruction, the SAF aims to create a bridge between central and local legitimacy. In our view, this balance

is not a luxury concept; it is a material equilibrium that post-conflict resilience of Syria depends on.

Operationalization Roadmap

From the conceptual level to the actual field implementation, we suggest a phased operational roadmap, and it should move in three sequential phases:

SAF Phased Operational Roadmap	SAF Tasks (summarized in practical terms)
Phase I - Institutional Readiness (0 - 18 months)	• establish the NPGO with UNDP and Türkiye • organize national systems-mapping workshops with technical experts, local councils and diaspora professionals (for external insight) • draft the first Governance Requirements Catalogue, prioritize regulatory reform, fiscal oversight including public procurement
Phase II - Integrated Portfolio Deployment (18 - 48 months)	• launch pilot portfolios in sectors such as energy, infrastructure, utilities and municipal services • apply formal and standard processes for risk, stakeholder and performance management • introduce a set of KGIs to track transparency, procurement efficiency and citizen feedback performance • activate data platforms so monitoring can be conducted
Phase III - Institutionalization and Scaling (48 months onward)	• establish project management and business analysis units in ministries (apart from those in external PMOs) • gradually transfer NPGO functions into ownership of Syrian government • institutionalize the Adaptive Feedback Cycle by publishing annual governance reviews to feed real policy revisions • establish a Reform Continuity Charter to strengthen learning mechanisms, succession planning, institutional memory and maturity

Table 2. SAF Phased Operational Roadmap and Tasks

This roadmap operationalizes the SAF in practice, while still respecting the incremental and context-sensitive approach emphasized by UN DESA (2010) and by Morgan (2011).

Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Post-conflict reconstruction frameworks always face both structural and contextual risks. In Syria's case, the principal risks and the suggested SAF remedies would include the following:

Risk	Description	Mitigation within SAF
Political Fragmentation	Competing authorities to block centralized coordination.	Start with regional pilots; build legitimacy through transparent reporting and multi-stakeholder steering committees.
Donor Overlap	Parallel aid flows risk duplication and corruption.	Portfolio alignment under NPGO; standard reporting templates.
Capacity Deficit	Shortage of trained administrators in business analysis and project management.	Training-of-trainers programs via Türkiye and other donor countries with UNDP partnership; integration of Syrian diaspora expertise.
Corruption and Elite Capture	Reconstruction funds diverted to corruption.	Real-time dashboards (Layer 4); independent audits; civil-society monitoring.
Economic Volatility	Inflation, sanctions, and resource constraints hinder sustainability.	Flexible budgeting and adaptive learning (Layer 5).

Table 3. The principal Risks for the Syrian Context and Mitigation within SAF

Broader Policy Implications

The SAF gives three general policy messages that are relevant not only for Syria but also for other post-conflict environments:

Governance has to be designed as a lean system. Success in reconstruction is not about adding more units or agencies. Instead, it depends on whether institutions, procedures and accountability mechanisms are aligned and function together.

Value has to be measured in governance outcomes. The important questions are not how much money is spent or how many activities are completed. Instead, the important ones are "Did citizen trust increase? Did participation expand? Is transparency visible and traceable?"

Capacity development can be regionalized. In many cases, a neighboring country, especially one with cultural or historical proximity, can co-produce institutional learning. Türkiye is an example here. Several recent studies (Elbehairy 2025; Düzyol 2025) argue that Türkiye's approach to development cooperation has slowly moved toward a relational "co-development of capacity".

Summary

SAF is representing a paradigm shift from projects led and run by donors to governance that is focused on learning and developing. It uses systems thinking into business analysis and project management. SAF aims to align local and regional actors with continuous feedback to promote sustainability. For Syria, after the war, using this framework could turn recovery into an opportunity to build a state that is transparent, accountable and encourages participation.

Conclusion

Rebuilding Syria is not just a technical job. Economic revival, institutional redesign, and political stabilization are interconnected processes that exert complex influences on each other. In this study, we introduced a Systems Analysis Framework (SAF) designed to integrate systems thinking with business analysis and project management. The purpose of SAF is to support and enhance corporate governance structures in post-conflict countries like Syria, linking concepts with real-world implementation rather than presenting a purely theoretical model.

Expected contribution of SAF can be described in three main ways:

- First, it changes the way we think about rebuilding governance. It suggests a shift from a list of administrative changes to a systems challenge. To realize this, SAF provides diagnostic tools to discern systemic fragility and identify leverage points by mapping the interconnections among political, economic, and administrative subsystems.
- The model then directs the diagnosis into mechanisms that can be executed. Using BABOK-informed elicitation to define requirements with stakeholders and using PMBOK techniques to make sure that execution

stays on-track and can be audited. The layered architecture of SAF is meant to change reconstruction from a donor-driven delivery to the one that builds governance nationwide.

- Third, the framework aims to connect global theory with regional practice in different parts of the world. Türkiye's evolving development-cooperation model showcases how familiar regional actors can bring culturally familiar, relationship-based and capacity-focused engagements.

SAF also contributes to governance theory by linking systems analysis with evaluation based on results. Key governance indicators change the focus of governance from reporting inputs to learning and progressing through outcomes.

In practice, success in Syria will depend on the right conditions, like political support, fiscal space and good administration. The model proposed is iterative; it should start with pilot portfolios and then expand. Syria's fragmented authority, uneven administrative capacity and data constraints may limit the immediate feasibility of rollout, which reinforces the need for staged pilots and iterative adaptation. Future research can examine interdependencies via simulation and compare and validate results with Syrian stakeholders and regional partners.

In summary, this study presents a theoretically grounded yet practical model (SAF) for strengthening corporate governance in post-conflict Syria. The broader implication is relevant beyond Syria: in fragile settings, sustainable governance will belong to institutions that learn, adapt and evolve.

Ethics Statement

This study did not include human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Use of Generative AI

This manuscript was written entirely by the author. No generative AI system was used to generate original scientific content, analysis, interpretation or argumentation in this manuscript. Grammarly for Windows (version 2025.11) was used only to correct grammar, spelling and minor phrasing. ChatGPT-5 and Google Translate were used solely to translate short excerpts from Turkish-language references, which are directly quoted in the text, into English.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond the Humanitarian Mandate: Assessing the Strategic Calculus of Türkiye's Foreign Aid Programs

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the performance of Türkiye's foreign aid programs through an analysis of its strategic objectives, implementation, and anticipated outcomes. Over the past decades, Türkiye has substantially increased its foreign aid ratio and emerged as a significant actor in international humanitarian efforts. The study examines the scope and character of Türkiye's aid across selected regions and sectors, highlighting how foreign policy interests correlate with the developmental utility of aid programs. In addition, the paper investigates how strategic goals are translated into concrete policies and programs, assessing their execution and alignment with Türkiye's broader foreign policy agenda and international positioning. Particular attention is given to the role of non-state actors in aid delivery, with an emphasis on their impact on program effectiveness. Ultimately, the study situates Türkiye's foreign aid within the wider international assistance architecture, offering insights into how its strategic objectives reinforce both national interests and global development initiatives.

Keyword: Türkiye, Foreign Policy, Development Aid, Soft Power, Humanitarian Aid, Emerging Donors

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Introduction

Foreign Aid (FA) stands as a perennial and critical component of international relations and global development, traditionally serving as a primary instrument for addressing pressing humanitarian needs and fostering global progress (UNDP, 2025). As a distinct aspect of foreign policy, FA involves the transfer of varied resources including financial assistance, goods, services, and technical expertise, from one country to another, often channeled through either bilateral or multilateral mechanisms (UNDP, 2025). Historically, the core goals of foreign aid have revolved around supporting economic development, alleviating poverty, providing essential humanitarian relief, and promoting political stability. These motivations are complex and often driven by a spectrum of factors, ranging from pure philanthropy to calculated strategic self-interest, with contemporary issues of security and related concerns increasingly shaping the foreign policy agendas of donor nations (Alesina & Dollar, 2000).

In recent decades, the landscape of foreign aid has undergone a significant transformation. Once primarily the exclusive domain of major powers, aid diplomacy is now increasingly practiced by a new group of nations often referred to as middle-powers or emerging donors (Huntington, 1971). This trend fundamentally challenges the traditional status quo, particularly the structured and often conditional model employed by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD. Emerging donors typically operate with greater flexibility, characterized by a pragmatic blend of geopolitical, commercial, and humanitarian interests, often preferring bilateral, project-based assistance. This non-traditional category provides the context for countries such as Türkiye, which can align its aid programs more directly with its own comprehensive foreign policy objectives.

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye's official development assistance (ODA) has expanded substantially. This has positioned the country among the world's leading humanitarian donors relative to its gross national income (Tüyloğlu, 2021). This study is focused on evaluating the outcomes and effectiveness of

this burgeoning Turkish foreign assistance model. This evaluation is critical for three reasons: first, to determine the extent to which Türkiye's aid programs are achieving their stated goals; second, to assess the compatibility of these programs with both Türkiye's broader foreign policy objectives and the actual developmental needs of recipient countries; and finally, by examining the role of non-state actors, particularly NGOs. From this point, this article aims to critically examine Türkiye's foreign aid programs, thereby contributing to the existing literature on the country's emergence as a formidable donor.

Literature Review

The scholarly discourse on the motivations and function of foreign aid is multi-varied and robust, establishing three core theoretical lenses through which to analyse its impact. Hattori (2001), in his critical interrogation *Reconceptualizing Foreign Aid*, identifies three main theoretical perspectives derived from international relations theory: (i) Liberalism, which views aid mainly as a technical tool to promote economic cooperation and genuine development between countries, (ii) Realism, which sees aid as a strategic instrument used by states to advance their specific national interests, gaining influence and leverage, and (iii) World-Systems Theory, which considers aid as a structural mechanism used by developed nations to maintain economic and political dominance over the Global South, thereby reinforcing existing global inequalities. Rather than endorsing a single framework, Hattori critiques the respective limitations of each, calling for a more integrative approach that moves beyond narrowly political or economic interpretations to foreground the ethical and social dimensions of aid.

The realist and critical perspectives are also supported by other influential scholars. For instance, Hayter (1971), argues that foreign aid serves the strategic interests of donor countries by exerting economic and political leverage over developing nations. Similarly, Malacalza (2019) views the politics of foreign aid as a mechanism shaped by structural power relations, one that reinforces global inequalities. These views align closely with Hans Morgenthau's influential idea (1962) that foreign aid is not a purely charitable act but fundamentally a strategic tool of foreign policy, used by donors to achieve political and strategic objectives.

However, as foreign aid has evolved, its practice has become more nuanced, requiring contextualization within a donor country's specific national interests and foreign policy goals (Natsios, 2020). For example, countries like the United States have explicitly used aid as a diplomatic tool, leveraging it to influence policy in recipient nations (CNN, 2019). This nuance is especially pronounced in the context of emerging donors. Unlike DAC members who adhere to a standardized, conditional framework, emerging donors operate with greater flexibility, allowing them to align aid explicitly with their geopolitical priorities.

The expansion of Türkiye's ODA since the early 2000s, reflects the emergence of a distinct Turkish model of development cooperation. This model is characterized as human-centered and demand-driven, with a strong emphasis on sharing Türkiye's own developmental experiences and tailoring assistance to the specific needs of partner countries (TİKA, 2022). The approach privileges bilateral cooperation and prioritizes visible, tangible initiatives such as technical assistance and infrastructure projects, particularly in regions of strategic importance including Central Asia, the Balkans, and Africa (OECD 2022; TİKA, 2022). Consequently, the need for this evaluation stems from the aid program's dual function: delivering conventional development outcomes and humanitarian relief, while simultaneously advancing the country's foreign policy objectives and enhancing its soft power projection.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The study critically examines Türkiye's ODA by utilizing established theories from International Relations to dissect the underlying motivations and strategic deployment of the aid program. While Liberalism and Critical Theory offer interpretations of foreign aid, a comparative analysis reveals Realism as the most robust framework for understanding the distinctive characteristics of Türkiye's aid allocation.

From a Liberal perspective, aid is undeniably strategic; technical assistance, capacity building, and promoting institutional stability are crucial tools for fostering economic interdependence and shared stability within a donor's sphere of influence (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Similarly, a Critical Theory lens views aid as strategically deployed to preserve global power imbalances, ensuring

economic access and political dominance, even if disguised as development (Woods, 2005).

Despite the strategic elements inherent in these alternative theories, the observed patterns in Türkiye's ODA are best understood through the fundamental principles of Realism. This framework interprets state action through the lens of power politics and rational self-interest, viewing foreign aid not as mere philanthropy but as a calculated instrument to advance specific political and strategic objectives (Morgenthau, 1962). This perspective offers clearer and more direct explanatory power for the specific traits of Türkiye's aid: namely, its substantial bilateral focus and its prioritization of highly visible, large-scale infrastructure projects over the sustained, low-visibility technical cooperation typically emphasized by Liberalism. This approach aligns directly with the Realist need for rapid diplomatic returns and clear demonstrations of influence in strategically vital regions.

Some argue that a Realist interpretation conflicts with the early Republic's non-interventionist policy. While this point is well-taken, the author maintains that it is insufficient to account for the complex evolution of Türkiye's foreign policy since the 2000s. This transition was defined by a deliberate strategic recalibration that actively sought proactive, multi-regional engagement and was formalized in a foreign policy doctrine emphasizing influence and depth (Davutoğlu, 2012). The discontinuities of the early period, while historically significant, therefore do not negate the explanatory power of Realism in interpreting the strategic pursuits of the contemporary era.

This contemporary policy is characterized by an active, multi-dimensional diplomacy and a competitive drive for autonomy and regional influence. This current environment provides a consistent context for interpreting ODA as a Realist instrument, strategically leveraged to enhance diplomatic presence and soft power projection in areas of historical and geopolitical importance. Ultimately, Realism provides the most compelling lens for critically assessing how Türkiye, as an emerging middle power, strategically employs development assistance to increase its diplomatic leverage and secure its national interests in a shifting global order.

This study situates Türkiye's ODA within a critical engagement with International

Relations theory, drawing on Liberalism, Realism, and Critical Theory to frame its methodological approach. Liberalism interprets aid as a cooperative instrument embedded in institutions and norms, emphasizing humanitarian duty, shared benefits, and the strengthening of global governance. From this perspective, aid fosters interdependence, reduces conflict, and advances collective stability through institution building and normative commitments such as democracy promotion and human rights. Realism, by contrast, views aid as a strategic tool of statecraft, shaped by national interests, power asymmetries, and geopolitical calculations, treating development cooperation as a vehicle for consolidating influence and securing national objectives (Morgenthau, 1962; Alesina & Dollar, 2000). Critical Theory extends this debate by interrogating the assumptions embedded in both perspectives, highlighting how aid discourses can reproduce hierarchies, legitimize state power under the guise of humanitarianism, and obscure the voices of marginalized communities. From this vantage point, Türkiye's ODA is not only a matter of strategic calculation or institutional cooperation but also a site where competing narratives of development, modernity, and national identity are constructed and contested.

Empirically, Türkiye's aid patterns (its bilateral concentration, preference for visible infrastructure projects, and focus on regions of historical and strategic importance) suggest a closer alignment with Realist assumptions than with the multilateral, institution building orientation often associated with Liberalism. Yet, by incorporating Critical Theory, the study interrogates how these practices reproduce or challenge global power relations and how aid narratives contribute to Türkiye's self presentation as an emerging middle power. The evaluative framework therefore examines three dimensions: effectiveness, understood both as developmental outcomes and strategic utility; strategic alignment, assessed in relation to recipient needs, global agendas, and foreign policy priorities; and the role of non state actors, analyzed as either autonomous agents of humanitarianism or instruments co opted into state strategies. Taken together, this pluralist framework integrates Realist assumptions, acknowledges Liberal contributions, and incorporates Critical Theory's emancipatory critique, providing a comprehensive account of how Türkiye's aid functions simultaneously as development cooperation, foreign policy instrument, and site of contested power relations.

TİKA and the Global Turn in Türkiye's Development Diplomacy

Türkiye's foreign aid operations have evolved in tandem with the broader contours of its international relations and regional strategic interests. In the initial phase, aid distribution was primarily shaped by geographical proximity, cultural affinity, and urgent humanitarian imperatives, particularly in response to regional aggression and instability. The post-World War II and early Cold War periods presented a complex landscape for Türkiye. Following the Cold War, Türkiye encountered significant challenges, notably the management of refugee inflows from neighboring conflict zones (Gunay, 2019). This juncture proved pivotal, prompting a redefinition of Türkiye's international posture and a marked expansion of its humanitarian outreach. The regional orientation of aid during this period reflected Türkiye's broader objectives: fostering stability, promoting goodwill, and mitigating threats in its immediate neighborhoods (Gunay, 2019).

Nevertheless, Türkiye's early foreign aid interventions were more geographically targeted and less developed, frequently operating on an ad hoc basis without a clear central coordinating structure. It often occurred through an assortment of governmental bodies, NGOs, and individual forms of organization, which created a labyrinthine aid structure. This lack of a clear strategy and supervision created an ineffective and unsustainable approach to Türkiye's aid work, thus greatly hindering its potential impact. However, such preliminary attempts paved the way for Türkiye's further evolution into a networked and systematically planned international assistance framework (Gunay, 2019; Zengin & Korkmaz, 2019). This period provided the opportunity for Türkiye to utilize its history, culture, and geography for collaboration with its immediate neighbors and thus, improve its surrounding positions. Despite the incongruity and failure of centralized coordination, the approach and issues which were confronted at this stage played a crucial role in defining the further advancement of the systematic and bureaucratic foreign aid regime in subsequent years.

Beginning in the 1980s and early 1990s, Türkiye's regional aid has increased in an organized and distinctive manner (Gunay, 2019). Emerging from the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of Central Asiatic and Caucasian states, new challenges and opportunities arose for Türkiye to expand

its sphere. During this period, Türkiye maintained aid programs that sustained its pan-Turkish ideology by emphasizing shared cultural roots of these newly independent states with the Turkic peoples (Haidar, 2015). These efforts included educational and cultural cooperation and exchanges, economic aid, and development of structures. The emphasis on Central Asia and the Caucasus was not only in Türkiye's wish to improve cooperation with ethnically and culturally similar countries, but also its desire to dominate a quickly changing geopolitical area (Landau, 1995). This argument is supported by Alrmizan (2022), who notes that pan-Turkism initially informed Turkish state approaches to the region, and hence, Türkiye leveraged cultural ties to expand its influence through diplomatic and aid-based programs in the Central Asian republics. In support of this, Kahveci and Kuşçu Bonnenfant (2023) argue that the post-Cold War environment offered Türkiye a new opportunity to redefine its foreign policy and assert regional leadership through cooperation and aid programs. They add that the emergence of newly independent Turkic nations gave Türkiye a strategic opening to use soft power for the first time, an experience that would later serve as a model for other regions.

Likewise, Türkiye's involvement in the Balkans is multifaceted, encompassing historical ties, cultural connections, and strategic interests. The region's significance to Türkiye is evident from its diplomatic efforts, cultural outreach, and economic engagements. Türkiye's support for Muslim communities in the Balkans aligns with its broader foreign policy objectives, which include fostering regional stability and countering the influence of other regional powers (Tabak & Bozkurt, 2022). This parallel engagement, particularly in the Balkans, where aid and cultural initiatives reinforced historical affiliations while countering rival influences, further underscores its realist orientation. These actions exemplify the realist logic of foreign aid as a vehicle for advancing national interest, consolidating regional dominance, and enhancing state power in competitive international arenas.

> *"...Türkiye is the top provider of humanitarian aid to (Gaza) Palestine..."*[1]

1 *Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, at the World Islamic Scholars Consultation Summit 12.05.2024, Istanbul. Obtained at https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/152327/-turkiye-is-the-top-provider-of-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza-*

The evolution of Türkiye's foreign aid is a compelling narrative of a nation's shifting international role, moving from a regional player to a significant global humanitarian force. The story begins in 1992 with the establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), an institution created to centralize and professionalize the country's development assistance (Akilli & Çelenk, 2019). TİKA's birth was a direct response to the fragmented and uncoordinated nature of earlier aid efforts, which often lacked a unified strategy and sufficient resources to meet ambitious goals (Tomlinson, 2013). Early on, TİKA's projects were heavily concentrated on regions with strategic importance, primarily the Balkans and Central Asia, sometimes to the neglect of other areas in need (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022).

However, these initial challenges ultimately spurred a period of refinement. Türkiye's approach became more structured, and its humanitarian efforts began to expand in both scope and ambition. This maturation was reflected in its growing financial commitment to international aid. By 2021, ODA as a percentage of Türkiye's gross national income (GNI) reached 0.95%, surpassing the UN target of 0.7% and positioning the country as one of the most generous donors in the world by this measure (OECD, 2022).

This upward trajectory continued, and by 2022, Türkiye's total ODA stood at $7.116 billion (TİKA, 2023). This remarkable growth was largely due to a commitment to humanitarian diplomacy. In 2023, for instance, a substantial portion of the aid budget ($6.05 billion) was allocated to official humanitarian aid (TİKA, 2024). These consistently high levels of funding have cemented Türkiye's place among the top providers of humanitarian assistance globally, often ranking second only to the United States. This demonstrates how the country's aid program has evolved from being an uncoordinated, ad hoc system into a strategic tool of foreign policy, effectively blending humanitarian compassion with the goal of projecting soft power and influence on the world stage (Atalay, 2013).

Therefore, the arguments presented suggests that the Türkiye's aid dispensation has evolved from an ad hoc system with a limited regional focus into a highly structured and globally influential tool of its foreign policy. This evolution was not merely a reaction to external events but a calculated strategic move to advance both humanitarian objectives and Türkiye's geopolitical interests on the world stage. The professionalization of aid through institutions like TİKA

and the massive increase in funding demonstrate this conscious shift toward becoming a major international actor.

Strategic Goals and Alignment with Foreign Policy Objectives

Türkiye's foreign aid programs are a key instrument of its foreign policy, strategically designed to enhance its geopolitical influence and diplomatic relationships (Akilli & Çelenk, 2019). This alignment is clearly seen in its aid distribution, which is not merely a response to humanitarian crises but a calculated move to advance specific national interests. One of the primary objectives of this approach is the promotion of regional stability and security. By providing aid to its neighbours, partner countries conflict-affected regions, Türkiye aims to foster a stable environment and mitigate the potential for conflict to spill over its borders (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022). This strategy not only addresses immediate humanitarian needs but also works to reduce long-term security threats, creating a more cooperative and secured environment.

> *"...Türkiye is ready to collaborate with other nations to defend our shared values and fulfil our shared responsibilities in establishing an inclusive and effective international system that places high priority on human welfare, tackles economic disparities, and promotes global peace, security, stability, and prosperity..."*[2]

Another critical objective is the expansion of Türkiye's influence in the international arena. Through its substantial development and humanitarian aid, Türkiye presents itself as a major, humanitarian player in global efforts, a strategy often termed "humanitarian diplomacy" (Altunışık, 2019). This strategic function is especially pronounced in regions of historical and strategic importance where Türkiye seeks to increase its geopolitical presence, such as

2 *Fidan, H. Turkish Foreign Policy at the Turn of the 'Century of Türkiye': Challenges, Vision, Objectives, and Transformation." Insight Türkiye 2023 Vol. 25 / No. 3 / pp. 11-25 pdf, turkish-foreign-policy-at-the-turn-of-the-century-of-turkiye-challenges-vision-objectives-and-transformation (insightTürkiye.com).*

Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008; Tüylüoğlu, 2021). Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which emphasizes attraction over coercion, is particularly relevant to humanitarian diplomacy, a phenomenon framed as not just "winning hearts and minds, but saving lives" (as cited in Delaney, 2025). Therefore, this strategic deployment strengthens alliances, secures political support in global forums, and advances Türkiye's specific interests on the world stage.

Furthermore, foreign aid is a crucial tool for economic diplomacy. Aid programs frequently include components that foster economic ties, such as infrastructure development and technical assistance. These initiatives help open new markets for Turkish businesses, promote trade, and create economic interdependencies that benefit both Türkiye and the recipient countries (TİKA, 2022). TİKA-funded projects often involve Turkish companies, which provides economic opportunities for Türkiye while contributing to the recipient nation's development (TİKA, 2022). Although specific names of Turkish companies are often not publicly disclosed (due to various governmental and bureaucratic policies), TİKA's projects frequently involve the procurement of Turkish goods and services. For example, the Palestine-Türkiye Friendship Hospital in Gaza was equipped with modern medical technology by a Turkish company, while a significant portion of the furniture for the Bishkek Kyrgyz-Türkiye Friendship Hospital in Kyrgyzstan was also sourced from Türkiye (TİKA, 2020). Similar procurement practices were used for the Niger-Türkiye Friendship School. These examples demonstrate how TİKA's projects form a broader strategy to expand Türkiye's geopolitical presence and foster economic opportunities for its private sector, thereby fulfilling both humanitarian and strategic objectives (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

Therefore, Türkiye's foreign aid is a complex instrument that is synchronized with the country's strategy for external policy. As a result, realistic considerations that include addressing regional security challenges, increasing Türkiye's geopolitical presence, advancing economic diplomacy, and establishing cultural connections are some of the instrumental objectives to which Türkiye relies on its aid programs. Such correlation guarantees that Türkiye's foreign aid does not only meets present humanitarian and development objectives, but also furthers Türkiye's strategic goals toward being a key global player (Fidan & Nurdun, 2008).

From realism perspective, Türkiye's foreign aid functions as a deliberate extension of state power, interwoven with its foreign policy objectives. Rather than serving purely humanitarian ends, aid is strategically deployed to secure national interests enhancing regional stability, expanding geopolitical influence, and deepening economic interdependencies. By leveraging development aid as a tool of soft power, Türkiye reinforces its role as a proactive regional actor and an emerging global player. The use of aid in this manner, reflects realist emphasis on state-centric strategies, where foreign policy instruments are mobilized to maximize national advantage in an anarchic international system.

Bridging Global Education, Development and Role of Türkiye Scholarships

Türkiye's foreign aid strategy places a strong emphasis on education, with programs designed to expand school enrolment, construct educational facilities, and develop human resources. These initiatives are primarily managed through the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). The YTB's flagship Türkiye Scholarships program, for instance, provides comprehensive scholarships for students from various developing nations to study at Turkish universities (YTB, 2022). This initiative not only supports academic pursuits but also fosters cultural exchange and future diplomatic ties (YTB, 2022). In addition to scholarship programs, TİKA has a long history of constructing educational facilities. Specific examples include the renovation and equipping of schools in Afghanistan, the construction of the Niger-Türkiye Friendship School, and the modernization of educational infrastructure in Moldova (TİKA, 2022). TİKA also supports vocational training to help individuals gain the skills needed to overcome poverty and contribute to their countries' socio-economic development (TİKA, 2022). These multifaceted efforts are aimed at helping individuals and recipient societies enhance their development and escape the poverty trap.

The Türkiye Scholarships Programs, a prestigious initiative by YTB has emerged as a significant force in international higher education. As of 2024, the program has demonstrated remarkable growth and influence, drawing a diverse and substantial pool of applicants from across the globe. The YTB's strategic goal is to build a network of future leaders who can strengthen global cooperation

and foster mutual understanding (YTB). This objective is supported by the comprehensive nature of the scholarship, which not only offers financial aid but also provides university placement, accommodation, and cultural enrichment opportunities.

According to YTB's record, over the years, the Scholarships Scheme's reach increasingly expands with significant margin. In 2023-2024, the Scholarship Programs received 121,830 applications from 170 different countries (YTB, 2024). This volume of applications highlights the programs' global appeal and the intense competition for a limited number of spots. While the YTB gives out approximately 5,000 scholarships each year, there are roughly 15,000 scholars currently continuing their education under the programs (YTB, 2024). Although specific data on the exact number of departments for scholarship students is not centrally published in a single, accessible report, however, YTB's programs places students in a wide array of fields across Turkish universities. These fields span from health sciences and engineering to social sciences and humanities. The objective is to provide students with a broad range of academic choices while contributing to both the personal development of the scholars and the academic prestige of Türkiye's universities. The program's success is a testament to Türkiye's commitment to becoming a hub for international student mobility (Türkiye Scholarships, 2024).

As Kavakli, (2018) remarked, Türkiye's foreign aid policy is founded on a multifaceted approach that extends beyond traditional development assistance, encompassing strategic, humanitarian, and developmental goals. This comprehensive strategy positions Türkiye as a significant and responsible actor within the international community, capable of providing both emergency relief and long-term developmental support. As such, health initiatives are a particularly visible component of this aid policy. Through bilateral relations, Türkiye has made substantial contributions to global healthcare by assisting in the construction and rehabilitation of hospitals, supplying health facilities with essential equipment, and providing training for health personnel in numerous countries (TİKA, 2020). These projects are designed to strengthen local healthcare systems, expand access to facilities, and address critical health needs. Türkiye's healthcare projects have focused on combating diseases like malaria and tuberculosis, decreasing maternal and infant mortality rates, and

enhancing overall health infrastructure. One clear example of these projects in Africa is the construction of the Somalia-Türkiye Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Training and Research Hospital in Mogadishu (TİKA, 2015). This project is a cornerstone of Türkiye's health aid, and it serves as a modern medical facility for the region. It directly contributes to enhancing health infrastructure and addresses critical issues by providing advanced medical services that can help combat diseases and reduce maternal and infant mortality rates.

Another example is Maternal Health and Rehabilitation Center in Niger Republic established to specifically address the high rates of infant and maternal mortality. These projects, along with the donation of incubators and other medical equipment to countries like Guinea-Bissau, directly support the goals of improving health outcomes for women and children in Africa (TİKA, 2022).

Moreover, Türkiye's aid policy also prioritizes economic and infrastructure development. The nation provides assistance for projects such as roads, bridges, and water supply systems, which establish a foundation for sustained growth in recipient countries (Karacasulu & Karakır, 2022). These infrastructure projects not only improve physical access to essential goods and services but also stimulate local economies by creating employment opportunities. This focus on institutional and economic development is further complemented by technical cooperation activities that support governance and promote sustainable development principles.

Similarly, Türkiye's foreign aid addresses environmental sustainability by funding projects that align with global Sustainable Development Goals. For example, the TİKA has implemented a climate change proof agricultural project in Laos (TİKA, 2023). This initiative supports sustainable agricultural practices by distributing climate-resilient rice seeds to farmers affected by floods, thereby helping them adapt to the effects of climate change. By doing so, Türkiye actively contributes to the global fight against climate change, resource conservation, and the creation of resilient development processes, underscoring its commitment to a more sustainable and prosperous future for all.

Strategic Patterns and NGO Roles in Türkiye's Foreign Aid Architecture

Türkiye's official development assistance is characterized by a flexible and regionally targeted strategy that prioritizes bilateral aid to areas with historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance. This is a deliberate approach, distinct from traditional donor models (Ekşi, 2019). Türkiye's total ODA reached approximately $7.75 billion in 2023, with 99.5% of disbursements allocated bilaterally, primarily focusing on the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, and Africa (OECD, 2025; TİKA, 2024). In these regions, aid is directed toward key sectors such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare. For example, in the Balkans, TİKA has supported the development of healthcare infrastructure by providing a modern ultrasound device to a health center in Serbia, and in Central Asia, it has engaged in projects like the renovation of the Faculty of Turkic Studies in Uzbekistan, strengthening educational and cultural ties (TİKA, 2025). Furthermore, this approach emphasizes a "kinship" dimension, which prioritizes countries with shared Islamic heritage or Ottoman-era ties. This is often expressed through cultural restoration projects that reinforce soft power and cultural diplomacy (Altunışık, 2019). TİKA's restoration of the Mausoleum of Hoca Ahmet Yesevi in Kazakhstan, a site of spiritual importance, and the rebuilding of the Ferhadija Mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina serve as powerful examples of this strategy in action.

Türkiye's responsiveness during crises also demonstrates its operational agility and commitment to global solidarity. The country's swift mobilization of resources has been evident in its responses to health emergencies. During the Ebola crisis, Türkiye donated $1 million to the African Union to help combat the disease (Getachew, 2015). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, TİKA provided medical equipment and food aid to over 160 countries, including to locations like Georgia, where a TİKA-renovated hospital became a key center for pandemic response (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022; TİKA, 2020). Multilateral contributions, while a smaller portion of the total ODA, are also vital. Through active participation in the UN, the OIC, and the OECD, Türkiye extends its development footprint and aligns its efforts with international norms (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

A key distinction between Türkiye's model and the traditional approach of the OECD's DAC is its non-conditional and people-centered philosophy. Unlike the often-criticized conditionality of DAC donors, Türkiye's aid is often delivered with an emphasis on mutual respect and local needs. This comprehensive and adaptive model enables Türkiye to pursue both developmental and strategic objectives, positioning it as a rising donor and a model that is responsive to recipient needs and flexible in its implementation, thereby earning Türkiye a reputation as a trusted partner in global development paradigm (Kavakli, 2018).

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are a vital component of Türkiye's foreign aid program, acting as key partners to state agencies and helping to define the "Turkish model" of development cooperation. This model is characterized by its collaborative structure, which effectively integrates both public and non-state actors (TİKA, 2017). This synergy allows for a flexible, responsive, and people-centered approach that complements official, government-led initiatives by reaching remote or crisis-affected areas with greater speed and agility.

A prominent example of this collaboration is the work of the Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay). As the largest humanitarian organization in Türkiye, it plays an indispensable role in emergency and disaster relief. The Turkish Red Crescent has provided assistance in numerous countries, often working in coordination with state bodies like the TİKA and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD). Its humanitarian operations, ranging from providing food and shelter to delivering emergency medical aid, are critical for the immediate post-crisis phase. Others such as Doctors Worldwide Türkiye (Yeryüzü Doktorları Türkiye) specializes in medical assistance and capacity-building in underserved regions, focusing on healthcare infrastructure and professional training, while the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (TDV), a faith-based organization, undertakes culturally and religiously oriented projects, including mosque construction, religious education, and humanitarian aid distribution during Islamic festivities. Similarly, the İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, provide critical on-the-ground support in conflict zones and disaster-affected areas (İHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, 2019).

Highlighting the impact of these organizations, Turhan and Bahçecik (2021) underscore the pivotal role of faith-based NGOs in shaping Türkiye's foreign aid

landscape, which offers a compelling illustration of Joseph Nye's (2008) notion of soft power. They argued that rather than serving merely as instruments of state policy, these organizations operate as autonomous yet strategically aligned actors. Their humanitarian missions resonate with global audiences and local communities alike, enabling Türkiye to cultivate attraction and legitimacy core elements of Joseph Nye's soft power through culturally embedded, people-centered diplomacy. In this way, these NGOs function as conduits of public diplomacy, translating state interests into socially meaningful engagement that enhances Türkiye's international image and influence.

Turkish NGOs possess wide-ranging expertise in dealing with emergencies, as well as in healthcare, education, and capacity development, positioning them to effectively tackle multifaceted challenges in both humanitarian crises and long-term development programs (Özkan, 2013). Their operational agility and local engagement enable Türkiye to respond swiftly to humanitarian emergencies while implementing sustainable, community-driven development programs. Thus, this integrated engagement between governmental and non-governmental actors not only optimizes the operational reach and responsiveness of Türkiye's aid delivery but also consolidates its humanitarian diplomacy and reinforces its strategic presence in global development arenas.

This perfectly align with realism perspective. Türkiye's involvement of NGOs in its foreign aid programs is a strategic manoeuvre to extend state influence under the umbrella of humanitarianism. These organisations act as instruments of national power, enabling Türkiye to penetrate crisis zones, shape local perceptions, and reinforce its geopolitical presence all while maintaining the appearance of benevolent assistance. The collaboration between state and non-state actors thus serves the realist imperative that is, securing national interests in a competitive international system.

> *"Turkish aid is human-centric. If a project does not touch the lives of ordinary people, it is unlikely to get financed."*[3]

3 *Mehmet Ozkan former Director, TIKA, Colombia/Latin America. DEVEX Report: Emerging Donors 2.0 (Türkiye). Accessed 7 February, 2024, at Devex (2020). emerging donors report. https://pages.devex.com/rs/685-KBL-765/images/Devex-Emerging-Donors-Report.pdf.*

Conclusion

Türkiye's foreign aid strategy reflects a dynamic and increasingly institutionalized model of development cooperation, evolving from a sub-regional focus to a globally engaged framework. The establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency has been pivotal in structuring aid delivery, enabling a responsive and organized system. Complementing this state-led architecture, Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a critical role in extending the reach, adaptability, and societal embeddedness of Türkiye's aid efforts.

These NGOs such as the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), Doctors Worldwide and Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs have contributed significantly to humanitarian assistance, post-conflict reconstruction, and capacity-building initiatives. Their grassroots networks, cultural affinity with recipient communities, and operational flexibility have allowed them to deliver aid in complex environments where state actors may face limitations. In sectors like education and healthcare, NGO-led projects have complemented governmental efforts by constructing schools, distributing educational materials, providing scholarships, and delivering mobile health services and emergency medical aid.

The findings thus highlight the dual nature of Türkiye's aid as both a strategic instrument of foreign policy and a genuine expression of humanitarian solidarity. Its success lies in a hybrid model anchored in institutional coordination and enriched by civil society engagement that enables rapid crisis response and fosters long-term development partnerships. Continued investment in human capital and enhanced synergy between state and non-state actors will be essential to amplifying Türkiye's global development impact in the years ahead. Lastly, Türkiye's foreign aid strategy is not merely a humanitarian gesture but a dynamic and institutionalized instrument of foreign policy designed to advance national interests, which aligns with the realist perspective of foreign aid as an instrument of statecraft.

Ethics Statement

This study did not include human participants and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Use of Generative AI

Generative AI tools were used for language refinement and clarity during the drafting process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Viktor Jakupec • Max Kelly and • John McKay

Foreign Aid in a World in Crisis: Shifting Geopolitics in the Neoliberal Era

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"The world is in crisis, or more accurately crises" (p. 1) is the opening sentence of the recent work titled "Foreign Aid in a World in Crisis: Shifting Geopolitics in the Neoliberal Era" as part of Routledge Explorations in Development Studies series. The opening sentence of the book immediately strikes the reader as well as offering important clues about the theoretical and conceptual lens through which the Jakupec, Kelly, and McKay see the foreign aid architecture. Jakupec and Kelly have previously made valuable contributions to the foreign aid literature through compelling works which critically examine the practical (e.g.,

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aid for trade[1]), procedural (e.g., the transformation of neoliberalism[2]), and crisis-related (e.g., Covid-19 and rising nationalism[3]) dimensions of the foreign aid architecture. Accordingly, this book not only serves to update, reinterpret, and holistically reassess the debates presented in their earlier works, but also—given the current international context—advances a timely and significant core claim: "foreground(ing) the geopoliticisation of foreign aid, as 'hard power' and beyond, thus questioning its relevance in its current constellation." In doing so, it engages with foreign aid architecture from a realist theoretical perspective, contributing to a significant gap in literature. Although the book's relatively modest length (120 p.) and its—perhaps overly—extensive engagement with debates from the authors' previous works may disappoint more advanced readers, what most distinguishes the volume is the authors' attempt to contribute to the dialogue between two concepts that have not been sufficiently examined in relation to one another: geopolitics and development.

The book consists of six chapters. In the first chapter, the message is clear: "the relationship between aid, development and geostrategic influence is therefore clearly apparent, but equally complex" (p. 3). The authors argue that a new form of "world order(s)" is emerging, grounding their claim in the empirical observation that multiple crises are converging into a broader "polycrisis," including climate change, armed conflicts, the Covid-19 pandemic, economic recessions, energy shortages, and migration. The first chapter thus serves as an introduction by which the reader is acquainted with the political economy perspective and the concepts such as polycrisis and permacrisis. In the remaining pages of the chapter, the authors draw attention to the ways in which modern international development architecture has evolved within the post-World War II liberal international order. The effects of systemic power shifts and emerging fragmented orders are underlined as the underlying dynamic shaping divergent development performance across the Global North and the Global South. The

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1 *See Viktor Jakupec & Max Kelly (Eds.), Assessing the Impact of Foreign Aid: Value for Money and Aid for Trade (Academic Press, 2015).*

2 *See. Viktor Jakupec, Max Kelly & Jonathan Makuwira (Eds.), Rethinking Multilateralism in Foreign Aid: Beyond the Neoliberal Hegemony (Routledge, 2020).*

3 *See. Viktor Jakupec, Max Kelly & Michael de Percy (eds.), COVID-19 and Foreign Aid: Nationalism and Global Development in a New World Order (Routledge, 2022).*

most significant contribution of this chapter lies in its careful attention to the effects of shifting power relations on both the understanding and practice of development cooperation.

In the second chapter, the account of how neoliberalism —market liberalization, privatization, and globalization— has historically shaped the idea and practice of foreign aid since the 1980s provides the foundation for the notion of emerging new world order(s) put forward in the first chapter. Highlighting the inherent relationship between current foreign aid architecture and the practices of traditional Western donors, i.e., the conditionality principle, this chapter offers the reader a rigorous critique of neoliberalism's influence on foreign aid allocation, as well as de-hegemonization of neoliberalism. However, despite engaging with structural mechanisms of international development – especially by drawing on well-known arguments from Dependency School and post-development theory - the authors do not add sufficient substantial and theoretical evidence to mechanisms of "non-death of neoliberalism" (p. 31). Still the reader might find convincing the appraisal of rising alternatives to neoliberalism from institutional (e.g. China-led New Development Bank, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Beijing Consensus) and political-theoretical (such as illiberalism, populism, and post-neoliberalism) perspectives.

The authors highlight two main crises of the 21st century: the GFC and the Covid-19 pandemic – as well as the Russo-Ukraine war – in the process of possible de-hegemonization of neoliberalism. For a huge amount of foreign aid has been, and will be, required after these crises. The emergence of non-Western rising powers as alternative donors in this competitive context therefore would require re-theorization of aid as part of an ideological and institutional order beyond as a neutral policy tool. However, the chapter gives insufficient attention to how emerging donors might reinterpret neoliberal aid norms, which merits further consideration given the diverging aid modalities within the Global South.

The systemic transformation observed through the lens of polycrisis constitutes the central theme of the third chapter. The authors ask the question of how the current global system of governance can be reformed in the face of polycrisis. This chapter stands out from the others as it offers more concrete and empirically grounded discussions about threats against global

peace, development, and stability. The authors' focus on various crises and disruptive conditions—such as the Global Financial Crisis, the global pandemic, destabilizing developments in the Middle East, the Russia–Ukraine War, U.S.–China rivalry, and the multidimensional negative impacts of the climate crisis—provides a highly useful perspective for understanding the current disorder and uncertainty in global economics and politics.

Then, the authors turn to a critical question of what will follow neoliberalism—"will it be right-wing populism or vapid cosmopolitanism?" (p. 56). To the authors, a more robust alternative – empowerment of the state to provide stronger social protection, not only against economic disruptions but also in response to security crises – might be contemplated. And building on similar arguments advanced by the prominent scholar Mark Duffield, the authors identify the elimination of underdevelopment and poverty as indispensable parameters shaping the future forms of development which, they argue will increasingly hinge on conflict resolution and social reconstruction given the expanding competition in international system.

The fourth chapter operationalizes the developmental lens outlined by the authors to offer a critical appraisal of the existing foreign aid regime, questioning its relevance to developmental needs and priorities of recipient countries. The authors draw particular attention to increasingly growing tensions between humanitarian principles, development goals and security concerns as the main source of disruption within the foreign aid architecture. The war in Ukraine serves as a critical illustrative case, offering significant insights into these tensions: the prolonged war has drawn a substantial sum of resources from the Western traditional donors at the expense of non-Ukraine crises. Despite serving as a solid proof of geostrategic concerns preceding over the developmental dimension of the flows of foreign aid, the critique offered by the authors remains under-theorized – which is also acknowledged by the authors as well (p. 69). More importantly, the analysis of the emerging donors focuses exclusively on China, limiting the scope of insights as to the heterogeneity within the Global South.

The core argument of the book — "geopolitical considerations are taking a central role in the aid programmes offered by major donors" (p. 80)— is put to

test through examination of the geopolitical underpinnings of various donors' aid policies toward Africa and the South Pacific. In this regard, the fifth chapter constitutes the most original part of the book, as it seeks to contribute to the dialogue between two concepts that have not been sufficiently examined in relation to one another: geopolitics and development. Reinterpreting the historical transformation of foreign aid, the authors find striking similarities between the current era and the Cold War period in terms of states' approaches to foreign aid. And the particularly powerful conclusion of the chapter "aid is now in the process of being weaponised" (p. 94) sounds convincing given the global strategic rivalry between the United States and China. It is quite significant that the analysis in this chapter is not confined to traditional donors, also paying attention to the implications of current trends in aid distribution for the development trajectories of Global South countries—an approach that significantly enriches the book's analytical depth.

The concluding chapter reiterates the central theme of the book – "the world is progressing towards a permanent state of geopolitical crises which has all the hallmarks of becoming the new normal" (p. 97). The argument here builds upon the perspective that disruptions (e.g., Russo-Ukraine War) and the emerging world order(s) (e.g. China's increasingly expansionist foreign policy orientation) differ substantially from the previous crisis situations. However, the analysis does not fully address critical questions such as whether China actually seeks to establish a new world order, to what extent it perceives the existing order as inadequate, or in which dimensions it envisions change. Instead, the authors briefly refer to some of the recurring themes frequently emphasized in Euro-centric literature—such as China's expanding investment and trade relations and its post-2010 institutional initiatives in the financial domain. This approach reflects a broader tendency observable throughout the book: an emphasis on Euro-centric perspectives that tend to overlook the agency of non-Western actors.

Overall, "Foreign Aid in a World in Crisis" offers not only a convincing portrayal of the dynamics of uncertainty and instability that characterize the contemporary international system but also a comprehensive interpretation of how these dynamics shape a key policy instrument such as foreign aid. Although the book's central thesis—that multiple geopolitical crises and disruptive conditions have

led major donors to weaponize foreign aid—may not be entirely unprecedented from a historical perspective, its distinctive contribution lies in the authors' effort to foster a dialogue between the fields of geopolitics and development studies. In this regard, the book represents a valuable and much-needed attempt to refine and update existing theoretical approaches that have often proved insufficient or disengaged in interpreting the uncertainties regarding foreign aid architecture.