Chapter 11

Change and transformation in international development cooperation: assemblage thinking, transdisciplinary research design and the curious case of localisation.

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Abstract

This chapter shares methodological insights from GEOFORMATIONS, a European Research Council-funded project exploring governance relations in international development cooperation. We apply transdisciplinary research (TDR) principles and assemblage thinking (AT) to track and analyse the distribution of power, decision-making, and funding across civil society partnerships involved in development interventions. Since 2016, key stakeholders have committed to fostering localisation, ensuring that local voices and actors are central in decision-making processes and funding allocations in development efforts. However, data show little change in practice, and the underlying structural barriers to transformation remain poorly understood. Through critical policy analysis and stakeholder engagement, this chapter offers insights into the obstacles and opportunities for improving localisation. It reflects on the methodological implications of employing TDR and AT, outlining why and how crossing disciplinary and professional boundaries, along with active co-production of knowledge, can generate new insights with the potential for broader societal impact.

Keywords: International development; Assemblage thinking; Locally led development; Localisation; Transdisciplinary research

Introduction and Background

This chapter is rooted in a study of cross-border multi-entity governance structures and processes that support relations between non-governmental and civil society organisations (CSOs) in international development cooperation interventions. Development interventions refer to collaborative efforts between economically advanced 'developed' states, international organisations, national organisations, and local actors to advance specific forms of political, economic, social, and environmental change in low-income 'developing' states. Development interventions typically entail identifiable sets of processes, socio-spatial relations, actors and institutions that interact, intersect and organise to promote specific forms of material progress, broadly rooted in modernist assumptions of prosperity through continuous economic growth and advancement (Alami et al., 2021, 1295). A distinctly cross-border activity, interventions involve a range of actors and stakeholders including states and governments, multilateral and bilateral intergovernmental organisations (IOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), business and private sector actors, local and national actors and CSOs, community leaders, targeted beneficiaries and affected populations. Different consortia emerge and assemble to collaborate and cooperate, designing and implementing development projects and interventions, including short-term humanitarian action and longer-term development interventions. Globally governed, but locally enacted, development interventions have a direct bearing on the most intimate aspects of everyday life in affected populations and places.

Embedded within a dense array of transnational socio-spatial relations and dynamics, the practice of development is influenced by geopolitical trends and affected by geo-economic and global environmental movements and changes. Research in this space requires consideration of stakeholders, actors and political-economic factors, operating within distinct social, economic and regulatory formations across geographic and political boundaries. The complexity of studying governance within interventions in this context is matched by the

complexity of the problems it is designed to address—from poverty, insecurity, and inequality to climate breakdown —and requires cross-disciplinary considerations, methods, and skills to unpack and address.

Over the last decade, there has been strong evidence of broadening research approaches to incorporate wider sets of actors beyond the academy, deepening the relevance and range of research impacts. In a comparative analysis of five research-for-development projects, Belcher et al. noted a marked trend 'in the way research is conducted to address pervasive challenges with deliberate efforts to cross disciplinary and professional boundaries to engage stakeholders and intended research users as a way to deal with complexity and increase the relevance, update, use, and impacts of research' (2019, 192). In the field of development geography and critical development studies, feminist epistemologies that actively include diverse and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Flatschart, 2017) held within communities and practitioners have long been recognised as essential to the co-production of socially impactful research. Such epistemologies stand in sharp contrast to mainstream development research dominated by mainstream international relations (IR) and classical economic rationalist and positivist assumptions. This chapter shares insights from a research project designed to engage with the fluid, situated, and concrete context of development practice through interaction with and reflection on the spatial dynamics and social formations that shape practices in this sector.

Beginning with an overview of a complex problem, the paper then outlines the key tenets of an assemblage approach supported by a critical realist methodological framework used in the study. Critical realism was selected as it challenges flat, unilinear and positivist ontologies, enabling instead a rich processual-relational ontology, that permits the examination of reality understood as stratified across three domains – the empirical (perceptions, observations, what is 'known' or 'believed'), the actual (events that occur, objects that exist, whether or not they are observed or 'known') and the real (causal mechanisms or generative structured). Critical

realism first emerged through the work of Roy Bhaskar and has since been extensively developed and applied to broader studies of socio-spatial relations and critical social theory (Archer et al., 2013; Jessop, 2005).

This methodological framework embraces the epistemological sensitivities of uncertainty, contingency, positionality, and multiplicity and is informed by TDR principles and design to support the co-production of knowledge that is contextually applicable, credible, and appropriate to the domain of operation (Knapp et al., 2019; Nicolescu, 2014).

Wicked problems and emerging research questions

At a time when the demand for effective development interventions is deepening, key institutions and agencies in this sector are experiencing declining levels of trust, socio-political capital, and legitimacy across multiple spaces and scales (Murphy, 2022). The sudden dissolution of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the largest institutional donor that provided almost half of all humanitarian aid, in early 2025 is an extreme example of the threats facing the sector and an indication of weakening international solidarity underpinning it.

Nested within an outdated unipolar global order, the institutions, structures, and processes of the international development cooperation sector are acutely exposed to geopolitical shifts. But as the polycrisis of global economic, ecological, political, and societal breakdown interact and unfold across multiple sites and scales, the harshest outcomes affect those with the least capacity to adapt and cope. These outcomes amplify their experiences of multidimensional poverty and further marginalise their voices from decision-making processes that affect the most intimate aspects of their lives (UNDP, 2024). These crises lead to accelerating needs. Meeting this demand requires effective institutions, structures and processes of development intervention (Murphy et al., 2019). Yet, it seems that the sector is locked into a vicious cycle

as these crises not only amplify needs but also erode the capacities of the institutions charged with meeting these needs.

Studies into development cooperation effectiveness indicate the need for greater distribution of power, decision-making, and funding through increased localisation and LLD practices (OECD, 2023). Dating back to the emergence of participatory approaches of the 1970s, key institutional donors, recipient states, agencies, and organisations seem to agree that local voices and leadership are necessary for efficient, effective, inclusive and emancipatory interventions (Roepstorff, 2019). Despite the calls for change, institutional donors have shown little appetite for reform (OECD, 2023; Banks et al., 2020; Barakat and Milton, 2020). Reasons for this apparent inertia are not well understood. This quandary has formed the basis of our study.

LLD and localisation are contested concepts. In the context of international development practice, they generally refer to the aim of 'strengthening local ownership through equitable partnerships and redistribution of resources and decision making' (Novovic, 2021, 1). Commitment to LLD is explicitly stated within the UN's *Agenda 2030.* In the humanitarian space, *The Grand Bargain* emerged as the consensus agreement from the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 governing the humanitarian space. Here, LLD, or localisation as it is more widely referred to, is identified as a mechanism for driving transformative structural change in development interventions. Consistent with the principle of subsidiarity, the Grand Bargain explicitly requires humanitarian institutions and agencies to shift finances and decision-making to organisations as close as possible to the affected populations. Thus, as a mechanism for driving structural transformation across the aid system, LLD entails processes of disassembling traditional ways of doing development interventions and reassembling new practices and processes. It requires consideration for local actors, agencies and voices engaged throughout the lifecycle of development interventions, including planning, design, implementation, and evaluation.

For some, LLD is presented as a technical solution, necessary to drive development effectiveness and improved efficiencies, where the existing 'rules of the game' and ways of working in development cooperation and practice remain largely unchanged. For others, it is understood in a normative sense as a moral imperative, as a way of acting that development and humanitarian organisations should undertake to recognise the autonomy and to demonstrate respect for the agency and capacities of those individuals, communities, and populations that they seek to serve. In this sense, it is understood as relational and processual, open and fluid.

Although the policy framework for development cooperation is developed at the global scale, it is necessarily transposed into national and local policy and planning processes. As such, development interventions are local matters – they are place-based projects aimed at intentional change at the local scale. That LLD has re-emerged as a panacea to enhance development effectiveness suggests that attention to the specificity of the local has not been sufficiently evident in development cooperation policy and practices to date (OECD DAC, 2024). This gives rise to some basic analytical and investigative questions – why has this happened and what causal mechanisms are driving this outcome?

Thinking through assemblages

It is precisely because of the complexity of this sector that assemblage thinking emerges as a helpful lens for unpacking and revealing the core ontological elements involved in understanding what is happening and why things happen the way they do. Assemblage thinking first emerged in the 1970s through the works of Deleuze and Guattari, and has since featured heavily in scholarship across a range of disciplines, including social theory (Latour, 2005), geography (Richmond, 2018; Dovey et al., 2022), critical policy studies (Savage et al., 2021), and governance studies (Briassoulis, 2019).

Assemblage thinking has been conceptualised in different ways, but broadly entails the coming together of groups, collectives, heterogeneous and diverse elements. Each element is autonomous, and so both agency and power are distributed rather than held centrally (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011). For some, assemblage thinking is understood as an ethos, a tool, or a state of being to examine relationships between different elements (Kinkaid, 2020). McFarlane and Anderson (2011) stress that assemblages are fragile, with gaps and fractures that arise during processes of gathering and dispersion. Understanding assemblage as an ethos within which a researcher engages with the world allows space for experimentation, embracing the uncertainty of the research subject and appreciating its fragile composition (McFarlane and Anderson, 2011).

For all engaged in assemblage thinking, interpretation of events and situations is central. This requires reflection on the situated position of the researcher and the methodological assumptions that inform the research process, as they influence the interpretation of the relationship between different components of the assemblage under review and the understanding of its formation and flow. Assemblage thinking is also forward looking. As Deleuze and Guittari note 'the sound of a contagious future, the murmur (rumeur) of new assemblages of desire, of machines, and of statements, that insert themselves into the old assemblages and break with them' (1986, 83). With the landscape of aid and development cooperation in a state of turbulence and transformation, an assemblage analytical approach, which tracks and traces uncertainties, complexities, and multiplicities, can reveal processes of dis/re/assembling over time and space.

Whilst recognising its openness and contested nature, there are common characteristics and sets of interrelated processes in assemblage thinking. It requires us to consider how different actors, forces, material and immaterial components influence development processes. Assemblages are in continuous processes of de/re/territorialisation with elements of an

assemblage – human and non-human – playing active roles and expressing agency, regardless of whether this is consciously known or not. It is linked to a stratified post-positivist and post-structuralist understanding of reality, revealing the struggles and labour entailed in coordinating disparate entities assembling to achieve shared objectives (Forney et al., 2018). We witness this throughout each layer of the development cooperation sector as it responds, for example, to the consequences of funding cuts, with the emergence of new actors and ways of working. Connecting with post-positivist critical realist logics reveals and unfolds the stratified layers of reality from the empirical, the actual, and the real (Rutzou and Elder-Vass, 2019). This combined approach challenges potential ontological hierarchies of focusing on process over structure, or systems and structures over agency (Alliez, 2015). However, it is imperative not to employ assemblage as a descriptor. Assemblage is better understood as a verb, a practice, and/or a process of 'co-functioning' whereby heterogeneous elements come together in a non-homogeneous grouping (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011).

Tracing assemblages as they interact across borders to the specific spaces where interventions are undertaken requires us to reflect on theories of place. Development interventions require the assembling of heterogeneous autonomous entities with different norms, views, beliefs, and values to enable change (or deliver to pressing needs) in a specific space. This, in turn, can influence identities and understandings of belonging and connection for those who occupy this space, transforming their understanding of place. Development interventions entail multiple actors and agencies, interacting with and through human and nonhuman components to drive "change" in some sense of their target population and practice. Thus, networks interact across scales and spaces, and temporalities, to deliver outcomes and outputs rooted in places and influencing human understandings and development potentialities.

Assemblage thinking emphasises emergence and indeterminacy (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011), processuality, heterogeneity, uncertainty and contingency (Alliez, 2015; Amelina, 2021;

Baker and McGuirk, 2017). As such, this approach is deeply compatible with the study of development cooperation as a form of cross-border practice which can be understood as essentially indeterminate and imperfect (Murphy, 2016).

Linking assemblage thinking with TDR

Reflecting on the development cooperation sector through an assemblage lens, it is necessary to consider and recognise the range of diverse and heterogeneous elements that come together to inform provisional social-spatial relations and formations. In the case of LLD, the network of actors includes institutional donors, international NGOs and intergovernmental organisations, governments of recipient states, local and national actors and civil society entities, target populations and affected populations. These networks operate across technologies, spaces and scales, creating spatialities and forming new territories as sites of intentional action and associated unintended effects. Power in this context is best understood as plural and fluid, distributed across territories, networks, places and scales. Actions and activities are enabled or constrained through technologies, physical geographies, ecologies, and non-human elements, all of which need to be considered in actions that aim towards some form of change or transformation.

From an epistemological perspective, this suggests that the process of knowledge production should be open and engaged with stakeholders and elements entailed in the assemblage process. This requires tracking and tracing emergent and ongoing processes. It animates development practices. Rather than flattening, abstracting, and isolating distinct variables, it emphasises 'active composition – fitting, connecting, combining and aligning relations between heterogeneous elements within and across space' (Baker and McGuirk, 2017, 428). Further, this approach prioritises the situated nature of knowledge and knowing, thus insisting on engagement with participating elements. Thus, an assemblage approach is complemented and enhanced by an explicit linking with TDR. As noted below, embedding the study in a TDR

design emerged organically from the initial ideation and framing of the study. Linking assemblage thinking with TDR ensured that the research could be relevant, appropriate, and socially impactful.

Geoformations research study

The study design was distinctly transdisciplinary in its emergence and development. The idea for the study emerged through discussions in a development studies association study group between practitioners and academics focused on adaptive development. The academic researchers (including the authors) were commencing the Geoformations project that engages with disciplinary insights, theories, and methods from development studies, human geography, critical social theory, politics, and heterodox economics. The practitioner experts included NGO and policy community representatives, all of whom were experiencing calls to engage LLD as a mechanism to drive structural change in their area of practice. However, there was no consensus of what LLD means, how it is or should be conceptualised and how it is or could be operationalised, within the sector. This presented an opportunity to co-design a TDR study to examine the potentialities within LLD and to catalyse transformation in development practices. Following consultations, the project team narrowed the focus to two key questions relating to institutional donors – one of the key sets of actors engaged in the assembling process: what do donors want in relation to LLD; and what are they doing to enable and operationalise LLD in their policies and practices? These questions were necessary to answer the overarching question of why the sector seemed to be stuck, unable to embrace the opportunities and potentialities of LLD.

Utilising assemblage epistemologies and critical realist ontologies, the study analysed three data sets – firstly, the development cooperation policies of thirty-two institutional donors; secondly, the official development assistance (ODA) financial flows of these institutional

donors, all of whom are members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC); and thirdly, formal commitments to global agreements and declarations (e.g. signatories to the Grand Bargain), coordinated through UN agencies. Assemblage thinking helped in exploring the relations and connections between the multiple autonomous donors engaged in development cooperation activities. Critical realism was helpful due to its focus on stratified understandings of reality – pushing the research team to reflect on the competing discourses and hierarchies outlined in policies and empirical sources, and to critically examine what happens in practice to identify why things are happening as they are, that is, the causal mechanisms driving specific outcomes. In this case, the outcome pointed to no significant transformative movements towards LLD.

We accessed policy data through government websites. Financial data were harvested from the OCED statistics open data website, and formal commitments to multilateral agreements and declarations at the global and regional scales were examined. Nvivo 14 was used to support the management and analysis of the policy data. Following on Baker and McGuirk's (2017) methodological sensibilities in the application of assemblage thinking to critical policy analysis, we traced sites and situations, drawing upon the development cooperation policy architecture at global, international, and national scales, critically examining policy positions of OECD institutional donors to understand how ODA is governed across development intervention areas, through the interaction of material and expressive elements, examining the informative and performative dimensions of these policies.

From initial ideation and framing, through design and implementation, the project was a product of transdisciplinary relationships. The initial study design was drafted in consultation between an interdisciplinary academic research team and NGO representatives. Initial results of the analysis were shared with interested donors and NGOs at a conference side event in October 2023. This side event was open to any interested parties and generated interest from

around 30 participants from a wide body of NGOs and government entities. Participants were encouraged to interact, debate and contribute to generate new levels of insights and appreciation. In this way, the study intentionally sought to embrace 'that which is at once between disciplines, across different disciplines, and beyond all discipline...' (Nicolescu 2014, 187). The working paper was then further refined on the basis of questions, comments, and insights from the workshops and shared at four follow-up seminars with NGOs and government officials, all of whom were developing their organisational positions and policies on LLD. Key insights and implications were distilled further and brought back for discussion with interested stakeholders. Action research roundtables (ARRO) were organised with leading Irish-based NGOs (x10), local and national organisations (x2) and policy experts (x2) in 2024 and 2025 to share the results and reflect on the initial findings from the policy and document analysis. These sessions were open to all parties who had expressed interest in participating in the research. As such, we remained rooted and engaged in the practice community throughout the evolution of the research. This helped us to validate insights and to support NGOs to develop their policies and plans for LLD. The research team reflected on TDR principles throughout the project to ensure the study was relevant, credible, legitimate, and applicable (Knapp et al., 2019, 12). Further, by working closely with practitioners and experts throughout the process, the research team had to keep up with policy and practical changes as they unfolded in real time.

Key findings from the study

The study revealed a significant gap between the informative and performative domains — what donors say they (will) do and what they actually do. It also revealed forms of radical diversity and multiplicity in donor discourse and conceptualisations of LLD, thus problematising efforts to utilise LLD as a mechanism to drive change within the sector.

In many ways, the latest policy articulations represented continuity with historical and institutional antecedents. Across all policies analysed, the term 'local' was used as a

homogeneous, vague, abstract, and ambiguous concept. From the analysis, it was evident that donor positions did not differentiate between different scales and sites of 'local', and there was no clear consensus on what constituted a local partner. This ambiguity extended Roespstorff's (2019) findings, indicating that the 'local' remained homogenised and its' diversity radically underappreciated.

Redistribution of resources seemed to entail movement within and between existing dominant actors in INGO and intergovernmental spaces for the majority of institutional donors. However, there was little insight into how this redistribution could or should change, and little incentive to revise internal processes, preventing more expansive engagement with new local and national actors. USAID emerged as an outlier in this case, explicitly examining ways to modify its internal processes and structures to facilitate direct financial flows to local and national actors. However, the risks of unintended outcomes were under-examined, and the possibility of harm arising from their approach was not explicitly considered. Risks included the potential to increase competition between local and national CSOs and international NGOs, and to generate new hierarchies and power structures that fundamentally weakened international solidarity and local civil society capacities.

Findings suggest that although 24 of 32 institutional donors have signed the Grand Bargain and committed to increasing LLD (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, EU, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America), the vast major of these parties do not explicitly recognise or transpose these commitments to their formal development cooperation policies. Most donors mentioned the value of local ownership, leadership, and partnership, but in abstract terms,

without any indication of what this means explicitly or how it might be operationalised. Rather than embracing the normative possibilities and critically assessing the extent to which their current practices influenced the autonomy and capacities of local and national actors, the policy materials presented LLD as a technical change - ahistorical, depoliticised and devoid of what L'Anson and Pfeifer (2013) refer to as it's entangled histories, colonial legacies and the paternalistic hierarchies influencing power relations and dynamics between donors, practice-based organisations and recipients. References to LLD point to a technocratic and depoliticised shift that risks obfuscating the intent and reinforcing status quo asymmetrical power structures. This is consistent with the findings of an OECD (2023) peer learning exercise on LLD that pointed to the persistence of disembodied, ahistorical, depoliticised assumptions informing institutional donor practices and policies, albeit wrapped in a veneer of enlightened national interest and opportunities for mutual benefits. It was evident that there was limited appetite to reform funding application and grant management processes. This left current bureaucratic systems inaccessible to many local and national actors, structurally inhibiting shifts towards LLD and protecting the current distribution and decision-making system. In addition, for many institutional donors, national regulations prohibited direct funding to local and national organisations that did not have a base or presence in their territory, thereby prohibiting the distribution of funding directly to enable LLD (for example, Ireland and the European Commission entity ECHO). All but two of the institutional donors reviewed indicated plans to change this regulatory structure (USAID and the Swedish Aid Agency), thus reinforcing a structural barrier to substantive change and indicating a lack of political will to transform practices.

However, despite these challenges, the limited consensus and persistent ambiguity on how to define LLD and how this might be operationalised in practice offered an opportunity for all stakeholders involved to interpret and engage with the LLD/localisation agenda. This created

space for dis/re/assembling of actors and entitles to experiment with different forms of LLD. This openness was also risk-laden. For example, Goodwin and Ager (2021) noted that stakeholders could seek to serve their own organisational interests. This contingency, uncertainty, and dynamism increased the need for ongoing research on how entities were dis/re-assembling to respond to different sets of needs and interests.

Reflecting on the study: Ontological richness & Epistemic vibrancy

Contingency and change: Engaging an ontological approach that seeks to embrace and trace multiplicity and processual-relational dynamics enables insights into the movements of an ever contingent and changing array of relations and actors across spaces, time, and places. Such an approach is essential to understanding what is happening relating to LLD in development practice. The reductionist nature of key terms such as 'institutional donor' or 'local actor' mask the radical heterogeneity within and between these categories, including their objectives, values, needs, interests, and capacities. From the analysis, these differences were evident in the approaches donors took to conceptualising LLD, with tensions and contradictions between donors and, at times, within donor positions. The analysis of the policy data set revealed evidence of insufficient engagement with local/national development policies, interests and views of recipient states, yet at the same time pointing to the need for greater local leadership and ownership. The radical differences were also illustrated through the ways in which institutional donors engaged with local CSOs, both directly and indirectly.

Across all the policies analysed, the idea of 'local' remained vague, abstract, and ambiguous, presented as homogeneous and monolithic. Yet, the 'local' contained a rich ecosystem of actors and interests. In their study of organisation types, Wilder and Morris (2008) found that, compared with international organisations, subnational organisations would consider themselves local, but to community-level CSOs they may not be considered local. From a socio-spatial perspective, local implies a distinctly heterogeneous, multiplicitous, complex,

interconnected, and diverse place imbued with relationships, social structures and power dynamics, attributed status and meaning through embedded cultures, norms, and practices. It is within these places that needs arise, assemblages emerge and actions unfold. These actions then influence and are influenced by hierarchies, social structures, and dynamic relations across multiple sites and scales connected to the actors and entities (Barbelet, 2018).

The richness and potentialities embedded within the local is flattened through the simplistic, technocratic, reductionist language of LLD when presented as a process of resource redistribution. This implies that the superstructure of development cooperation is set, and it is within these boundaries that local agency must operate. This carries implications for who can engage with an emerging assemblage to respond to needs as they arise. Wall and Hedlund's study (2016), for example, highlights how the narrow interpretation of community-based organisations affects who will be recognised and granted access as a legitimate partner by IOs seeking to support the response to a humanitarian event.

At the same time, recognising the heterogeneity within the local can be challenging for institutional donors. Goodwin and Ager's (2021) study of UK development agencies found that the diversity presented by the local made it a more challenging landscape for donors to traverse. To reduce the resource demands of such heterogeneity, many donors have identified organisational capacity building as a means to support the expansion of LLD. Thus, localisation becomes something 'done to' local organisations to help them fit in with the established order. Further, such actions are likely to create tensions between local actors and organisations as they are now placed into the category of 'competitors' rather than 'collaborators'. Such actions potentially reduce the space for autonomous action of local actors as partners in broader aid chains (Mulder, 2023). Further, they risk devaluing and excluding situated knowledge and local

practices (Barakat & Milton, 2020) as they essentially convert local organisations into mini versions of Western-based NGOs.

These findings point towards a need for recognition of the labour involved in examining and understanding dynamic, complex, real-world contexts. Further, they reinforce the need to move past reductionism in knowledge production processes central to understanding development in/effectiveness.

Uncertainty: Following the completion of this study, in January 2025, USAID, the largest institutional donor in international development cooperation, was suddenly and abruptly dissolved by the Trump regime. This intervention harshly and brutally exposed the fragility and vulnerability of the interacting assemblages that deliver lifesaving services and supports to millions of people in dozens of countries. The intervention provides a real-time window into the sector's uncertainty, which needs to be incorporated into the epistemological foundations of development research.

So, what conclusions can we draw from our study and our approach at this time? We suggest, firstly, that the interest to drive change from within the sector is weak, in part because lack of shared understanding, but also diverging interests. Secondly, a study of development cooperation needs to consider the geopolitics and international political economy dynamics that influence development cooperation. The collapse of USAID marks a significant geopolitical shift that will disrupt and transform the sector. Early indications suggest that other donors, such as the UK and the Netherlands, are reducing their ODA commitments and redirecting their funding to national rather than international concerns. It is too early to determine the implications for LLD, but it is likely that the need for local responses will radically increase, as international NGOs and the multilateral system struggle to survive. From

a research assemblage perspective, changes of this magnitude require transdisciplinary reflection, revision, and adaptation to continue to trace the assemblage form and flow as it responds and reacts to these exogenous forces.

Outcomes & Conclusions

International development cooperation interventions have a deep and lasting influence and impact on communities targeted for change. Drivers of need are complex and varied. Robust research on development effectiveness and reasons to explain why ineffective practices persist carries significant societal impact and value. However, such research must be grounded in lived experiences of the sector and situated knowledge of practitioners and affected communities if it is to be relevant and credible. Therefore, TDR is essential to the quality and relevance of the knowledge produced through the research process. Further, inclusion of a TDR approach is necessary to conduct socially responsible science (Bernstein, 2015, 5).

LLD and development cooperation more broadly are not purely technical matters. They are deeply rooted in political-economic systems, influenced by socio-spatial dynamics and historical processes. It is necessary to unpack these dynamics to understand why efforts to activate LLD as a mechanism to drive structural change in the sector have failed to date. Engaging with knowledge, skills and experience beyond academic disciplines, through TDR, is essential to understand what happens when the rhetoric of global declarations and commitments meets the reality of multi-scale power and politics.

Understanding LLD as assemblage experimentation that entails new forms of territorialisation and socio-spatial relations which in turn drive the making and remaking of understandings and relations of place essentially reanimates and repoliticises LLD processes and the corresponding social process of knowledge production. The co-production of knowledge through TDR in this area offers the possibility of achieving greater societal impact for all engaged in and affected

by these development processes as it aims to be more relevant, appropriate, and informed by the lived experience of participants.

Finally, TDR approaches using assemblage thinking are labour-intensive, and caution is required. As a co-functioning transdisciplinary assemblage of academics and professionals, the research team experienced distinct challenges holding the parts together as tensions and sensitives emerged around the findings, as these created challenges to established practice and beliefs. As the fragility of the practices and relations within the sector become more exposed, assemblage thinking allows for analysis of those elements and tensions that exist within the space by embracing the uncertainty and accepting the fragility of the assemblage. TDR complements this thinking by linking the epistemological gaze of the research team to the social processes of knowledge production. Rather than seeking to reduce and simplify elements of the complex dynamic context, the TDR assemblage explicitly values embedded practices, situated knowledges and different ways of knowing, and thus engages with rather than abstracts from forces of change as these emerge.

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