

Why Development Needs a Rethink: Seeing Governance as a Living System

ASSEMBLAGE THINKING AND METHODOLOGICAL REORIENTATION IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

McGandy, Murphy & Paterson (2026)

Prepared by: Cynthia Mwende Maswili

FROM CONFERENCE TO REFLECTION



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This engagement led to a methodological reflective paper conceived within this forum and published in December 2025

THE BIG QUESTION?



What if development isn't what we think it is?

It's not just about what we do, but how we understand development itself



Development is not a fixed top-down system. It is a constantly evolving web of relationships between actors, institutions, technologies, and local realities



CONTEXT: A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

Geopolitical shifts, declining funding and evolving agendas are reshaping Development.

Power, knowledge and priorities clash across global, national and local levels. Development is relational, contested and deeply embedded in Context

WHAT IS ASSEMBLAGE THINKING?



Complex & relational
Development is shaped by interacting elements



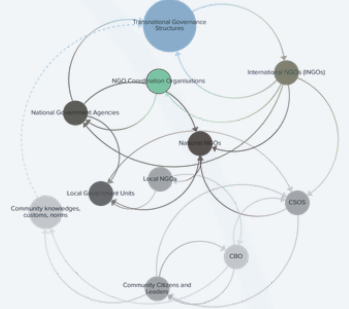
Dynamic & contingent
Assemblages are constantly assembled and reassembled



Distributed agency & power
No single actor is in control; powers operates unevenly



Method as exploration
It's not about fixing or classifying but following what emerges



Assemblage thinking helps us see development not as a linear process, but as a living system in constant flux

A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE: DEVELOPMENT AS A LIVING SYSTEM

THIS MEANS ASKING NEW QUESTIONS



How do relationships between actors shape outcomes?



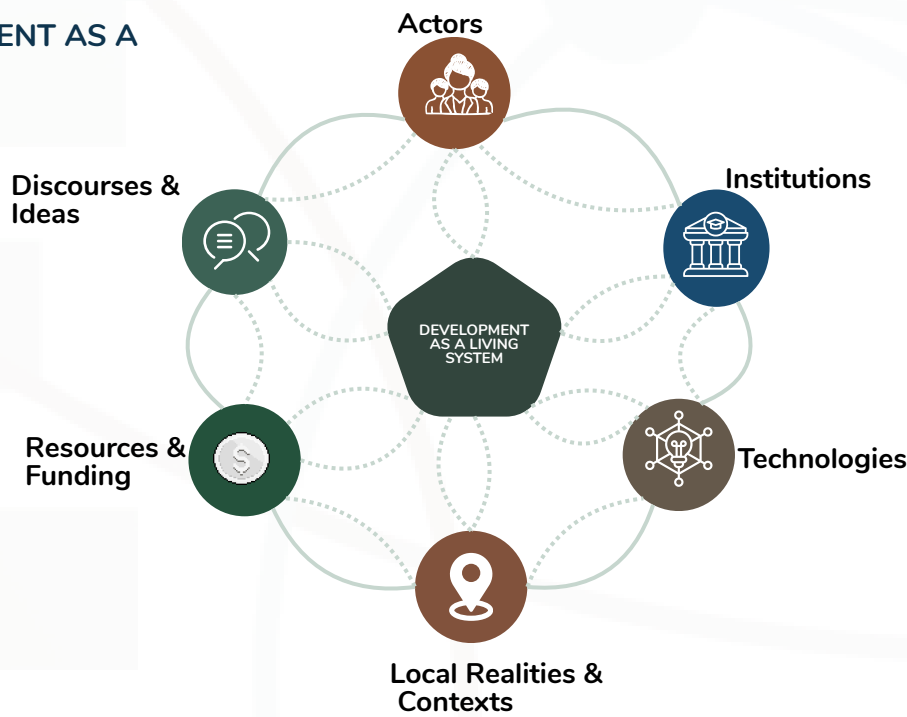
What happens when global policies meet local realities?



Where do unexpected collaboration or resistance emerge?

THIS SHIFT CALL FOR:

- More flexible and adaptive policies
- Greater attention to local knowledge and context
- Methods that capture complexity not simplify it



Our Empirics

We used assemblage thinking to explore how development governance is continuously formed and re-formed

To illustrate cases:

- Localisation in development policy (analysis of 32 donors)
- Participatory mapping of governance networks in Ukraine & Costa Rica

HOW WE APPLIED THIS APPROACH

How We Worked



Multi-sited empirical research



Documentary & policy analysis



Participatory mapping workshops



Iterative mapping & analysis

What we Mapped



- Actors & organisations
- Relationships & flows
- Discourses & priorities
- Institutions & policies
- Funding & resources
- Scales & connections



Across global, national and local levels

Why it Matters

This approach reveals how development outcomes emerge from the way elements come together in specific places and moments.

WHAT WE FOUND: FOUR KEY INSIGHTS

1

DEEP CONTEXTUALISATION

- Development must be understood within its historical, institutional, and discursive contexts.
- Discourses and relationships evolve over time and space.



2

EXPANDING THE SCALAR ANALYTIC

- Scale is relational, not fixed.
- Actors operate across multiple levels and roles.
- Power and agency are fluid and content-dependent.



3

UNCERTAINTY & CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY

- Key concepts in development are often contested and ambiguous (e.g localisation, participation, sustainability).
- Assemblage thinking embraces uncertainty to uncover how meanings are constructed and used in practice.



4

CONTINGENCY, TEMPORALITY & CHANGE

- Assemblages are never fixed.
- Governance arrangements shift as actors, resources, and contexts change.
- Change is constant and often unpredictable.



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE



Design flexible, adaptive interventions that can respond to change realities.



Engage local knowledge and context meaningfully.



Use approaches that capture complexity rather than oversimplify.

LIMITATIONS & REFLECTIONS



Assemblage research is resource intensive and methodologically demanding.



Openness to complexity can sit uneasily with practice demands for clarity.



Researchers are part of the assemblages they study hence reflexivity is essential.



Absence matters; when actors or funding withdraw, assemblages change.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS METHODOLOGICAL REORIENTATION IN DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

Assemblage thinking is not a panacea, but a powerful addition to our methodological repertoire.

It helps us move beyond simplified, top-down models and engage with development as it actually operates; relational, uneven and constantly evolving.

In a rapidly shifting world, rethinking development as a living system is essential for designing interventions that truly work.



Development is not a machine to be engineered. It is a living system



Understanding it is as such may be key to building a more just, inclusive and effective future