

CFP: What Was Development Mapping? Cartography, Power, and the Politics of Aid in the Twentieth Century and Beyond

Workshop at the University of Turku, Finland, Thursday 12th & Friday 13th August 2027

Overview

Mapping has played a central yet understudied role in the history of international development. Maps were key instruments in planning development projects, and the projects themselves frequently included surveying and mapping components. Mapping was also a development goal in its own right: national topographic, cadastral, and geological mapping schemes were financed through development funds, and the transfer of cartographic technologies and know-how constituted a distinct form of technical assistance. Contemporaries often referred to these activities as "development mapping" or "development cartography."

As analytical concepts, however, development mapping and development cartography are recent categories that remain unsettled. We are therefore organizing a workshop on the topic and invite scholars to examine development mapping as a phenomenon rooted in the twentieth century and to develop the concept critically – probing its scope, its analytical purchase, and its limits. At its core lie the surveying, mapping, and cartographic training carried out through bilateral and multilateral development cooperation, financed by donors and aid agencies that employed experts who moved between industrial nations, late-colonial territories, newly independent states, and international organizations.

Although coupled with scientific optimism, development mapping practices were never politically neutral. Decolonization was a protracted and geographically uneven process, stretching from the 1940s to the 1990s, which produced dozens of new states in pressing need of national surveys. Such surveys were needed for administration, taxation, resource extraction, and nation-building, and donor countries and international organizations were eager to provide them. The Cold War shaped cartographic assistance in uneven ways. In some places, maps, training programmes and survey equipment became instruments of bloc influence; elsewhere, newly independent governments played competing donors against each other, and neutral or non-aligned states presented their expertise as technical and apolitical. The end of the Cold War raises a further question: did development mapping outlast the geopolitical order in which it took shape, and on what new terms? One question that runs through the workshop is who development mapping benefited: newly independent governments, donor agencies, private companies, militaries, or the local populations rendered legible on the map?

"Development" is understood broadly, encompassing colonial and postcolonial improvement schemes, modernization and infrastructure projects, resource surveys, and the technical assistance that circulated through empires, nation-states, and bodies such as the United Nations and the World Bank. We are interested both in the practices of mapping (surveying, triangulation, aerial photography, remote sensing, thematic and topographic cartography) and in the politics and personnel of these projects (the networks, mobilities, partnerships, and choices through which maps were made, circulated, and put to use, and the social and economic power relations that underpinned these processes).

We welcome presentation proposals from historians of cartography, science and technology, empire, decolonization, and international development; geographers; environmental, economic, and social historians; anthropologists; and scholars in adjacent fields. The workshop's geographical scope is global.

Themes

We invite presentations to the workshop addressing, but not limited to, the following topics on the histories of development mapping and cartography:

Concepts, rhetoric, and approaches

- the concept and rhetorics of development cartography
- how different actors conceptualized development mapping
- oral histories of development mapping

Actors, networks, and collaborations

- bilateral and multilateral development cooperation (north–south and south–south) in mapping
- recipient states' agency in initiating and negotiating mapping projects
- the role of private companies and private–public partnerships
- conferences and scientific societies as sites of partnership-building
- expert mobilities and donor networks, development careering

Practices, technologies, and expertise

- technological choices and practices in development mapping
- local surveyors, technicians, and institutions in development mapping
- training and study programmes in cartography and surveying financed through development funds
- copyright and intellectual property in development mapping

Politics and economies

- continuities and shifts in mapping practices during imperial rule and after decolonization
- geopolitics and the Cold War in development mapping projects
- economic histories of development mapping
- the uses and beneficiaries of maps produced in development projects

The workshop

The workshop aims to establish development mapping as a shared field of historical inquiry by asking what, if anything, unites mapping efforts carried out under the banner of development across different actors, regions and periods. It brings together scholars working on the topic for presentations and structured discussions, with the aim of laying the groundwork for future collaboration, including exploring the possibility of a special issue or journal forum.

The organizers will cover accommodation costs for all accepted participants. A limited number of travel bursaries are available for participants without institutional funding, particularly early-career scholars and scholars based in the Global South. The workshop language is English. The workshop is supported by the Research Council of Finland.

Submission guidelines

Please submit – in a single file – an abstract of up to 250 words for a 15-minute paper, together with a short biographical note (max. 100 words) including your name, affiliation, and contact details, to the organizers Johanna Skurnik (jeskur@utu.fi) and Lauri Uusitalo (lauri.uusitalo@utu.fi) by 31 December 2026. If you wish to apply for the travel bursary, please state this in your application, together with an estimated budget and information on any other funding available to you. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by 30 January 2027.

Please also visit: <https://sites.utu.fi/devmap/en/>