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Original Research Article

What Place-Based Development Is

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ABSTRACT

Although the concept of development is widely understood in the social sciences and planning literature as a process aimed at enhancing the quantitative and qualitative aspects of human life, it still suffers from multiple theoretical and practical ambiguities. A significant part of this ambiguity stems from neglecting the cultural, social, and spatial contexts within which development emerges in different societies. Dominant development paradigms including institutionalism, modernization, dependency theory, and international approaches have each illuminated certain dimensions of development, yet none has succeeded in providing a comprehensive account of its essence. Building upon the premise that understanding and achieving development is impossible without recognizing its spatial and identity-based foundations, this study explores the relationship between development and place. The research adopts a conceptual-analytical methodology and a dialectical approach: first, by reconstructing the antitheses of development and place formulated as "what development is not" and "what place is not" and then by synthesizing these insights to propose a conceptual framework for "place-based development." The findings indicate that development is an inherently multidimensional and systemic phenomenon whose realization requires its articulation through lived experience, temporal continuity, and the formation of a collective sense of place. Within this framework, place is not merely a physical backdrop but a multilayered structure of relations, identities, and human experiences that can facilitate, accelerate, and stabilize developmental processes. Accordingly, place-based development emerges as a holistic and interpretive paradigm that, by distancing itself from universal and imported development prescriptions, enables the formation of grounded, contextual, and sustainable pathways for societal progress.

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Introduction

Development, in its comprehensive sense, is a complex and multidimensional process encompassing quantitative and qualitative growth of production and services, enhancement of quality of life, transformation of social structures, redistribution of income, reduction of poverty and unemployment, provision of public welfare, and the advancement of endogenous knowledge and technology (Tavasoli, 1994, 26). A scientific understanding of development requires acknowledging a dialectical relationship among its determining factors, articulated through necessary and sufficient conditions. The sufficient condition complementing the necessary one refers to the enhancement of productive relations and the creation of structural transformations within society (Tabrizi, 2003).

However, development never occurs in an isolated or closed environment; rather, it unfolds within the cultural and social context of each society and through interactions with facilitating or inhibiting factors thus imposing its visible or invisible presence on development policies and programs. Furthermore, the strict separation of economic, social, and cultural dimensions of development is rarely feasible, as a society's economic activities production, distribution, and consumption constitute part of its culture and are shaped by its mental frameworks, historical traditions, and cultural values. Consequently, the cultural substratum of nations manifests itself often implicitly within societal lifestyles and economic relations.

In the literature of the social sciences, the concept of development is primarily used to denote targeted processes of transformation and restructuring in countries categorized as "developing" (Tavasoli, 1994, 32–33). Despite the expansion of numerous theories and approaches such as institutionalism, modernization, dependency theory, international development paradigms, and post-development perspectives the essence and ontology of development remain contested. Each framework has explained aspects of the phenomenon, but none has independently provided a sufficiently holistic account. This theoretical fragmentation has contributed to persistent ambiguity in the application of development in policymaking and practice.

One critical reason behind the failure of certain development policies is the neglect of the contextual foundations of development. Cultural and social differences shape the conditions under which development emerges, thereby influencing both its trajectory and feasibility. Hence, understanding place geography, environment, and spatial identity becomes essential to understanding how development occurs. Although various solutions have been proposed within existing development theories, the challenge of conceptualizing and operationalizing development in diverse societies persists. For development to become a functional and generative concept, it must be integrated with the spatial, cultural, and identity structures of each society. From this perspective, development is not a universal, one-size-fits-all model, but a facilitating process that must be interpreted and enacted through local cultural and spatial specificities.

Accordingly, the premise of the present study is that a proper understanding of development requires a simultaneous understanding of development and place as mutually constitutive elements. In this regard, place can act as a facilitator, catalyst, and stabilizer within the developmental process. Thus, the central research question is: What is place-based development, and how can the relationship between development and place be conceptualized? To address this question, the study first examines the antitheses of development and place "what development is not" and "what place is not" through a critical lens. Subsequently, drawing on the resulting insights, it proposes the argument that transforming development into a generative and context-responsive concept necessitates adopting a place-based approach in both understanding and practice.

Theoretical Foundations

• The Concept of development[1]

The concept of development as progress is largely the outcome of an intellectual contest between proponents of classical antiquity and advocates of the modern world. This debate was primarily centered on comparing the merits and achievements of ancient Greek civilization with the emerging capacities of modern European civilization one of whose most significant contributions was the articulation of the idea of continuous human progress (Ahmadian, 2017, 25–26). Within the course of these intellectual transformations, the concept of development gradually acquired a central position in the social sciences and became one of the fundamental concepts for analyzing social and economic change. Development is a complex and multidimensional notion around which diverse theories and interpretations have emerged. Scholars and practitioners in the field of development, depending on their theoretical orientations and social contexts, have proposed different interpretations of the concept; consequently, development is characterized by both conceptual complexity and interpretive plurality.

The widespread use of the term "development"

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emerged mainly after the Second World War[2], a period during which planning for societal transformation and progress gained increasing importance. In its literal sense, development refers to the gradual unfolding and realization of latent capacities and potentials (Alipourpijani et al., 2018, 72). Following World War II, one of the primary objectives of development policies was the transition from traditional structures toward societies grounded in knowledge, production, and technology (Azkia, 2005, 60). This approach particularly influential in many developing countries became the practical foundation for development planning and gradually expanded to encompass broader conceptual dimensions. One of the earliest complementary notions in this regard was economic development, which in its initial stages emphasized quantitative indicators such as economic growth and increases in national production (Salimifar, 2003, 40; Motaghi, 2016, 184).

In the modern era, being "developed" was often associated with confronting an uncertain future distinct from the past a condition that, on the one hand, required the emergence of an abstract understanding of social order and, on the other, demanded the internalization of rationality within both individual and social structures. Such transformations can be understood through several major historical processes: first, the expansion of capitalism and the decisive role of technology, accompanied by the emergence of a self-grounded subject seeking to dominate nature; second, the rise of modern science grounded in empiricism and scientific method; third, the expansion of bureaucracy and bureaucratic rationality what Max Weber famously described as the "iron cage"; and fourth, the strengthening of a historicist outlook within the trajectory of modern history, reflecting the philosophical understanding of progress.

Overall, the concept of development has been widely examined within sociology and the broader social sciences from multiple perspectives. Various scholars have attempted to clarify different aspects of this complex phenomenon, each contributing to the understanding of its multifaceted nature.

• What development is not (development-related theories)

- Modernization theory

The first theories explicitly articulated under the label of "development" were introduced by Lewis (1954), Nurkse (1954), Nelson (1956), Rostow (1960), and Leibenstein (1960), which collectively later came to be known as the modernization approach (Haj Amini & Aboutorabi, 2018, 94). Within this framework, development is understood as the replacement of traditional values with modern ones (Webster, 2001, 47). Parsons, Redfield, Smelser, and Rostow are among the leading theorists in this field. Modernization theory emphasizing endogenous development considers internal resources and the specific social, cultural, and political conditions of societies as the drivers of transformation and progress. In this view, development emerges from applying well-tested principles and models that help establish the necessary socioeconomic and political foundations for societal evolution.

As noted earlier, the literal meaning of "development" refers to "unfolding" or "emerging from a covering," and within the context of modernization theory, this covering refers to the traditional society. Thus, societies must move beyond the traditional stage in order to modernize. This interpretation was also central to the works of scholars such as Lerner, Schramm, and Rogers (Alipourpijani et al., 2018, 72). Modernization theorists, by analyzing the historical transformations that shifted Western Europe from a traditional economy to a modern one, sought to identify a similar trajectory for developing societies.

The modernization approach and its associated theories possess several essential characteristics:

1. Emphasis on the supremacy of rationality in the West as the main cause of progress (Haj Amini and Aboutorabi, 2018, 94).
2. The assumption that developing societies are relatively homogeneous and resemble earlier historical stages of developed countries.
3. A focus on internal barriers to underdevelopment and the need to reform internal factors to achieve development.

However, major critiques of this theoretical paradigm include its one-dimensional view of development, the dominance of quantitative indicators such as economic growth and physical investment, its linear and mechanistic understanding of development stages, and its disregard for political, cultural, and social contexts as well as the heterogeneity of developing countries.

- Human development theory

After the Second World War, the metrics for assessing development gradually shifted from quantitative indicators such as GDP growth toward more qualitative and human-centered measures. In the early post-war years, with the rise of independence movements and newly established states, development was largely equated with industrialization; however, over

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time new interpretations and frameworks emerged (Movaseghi & Kaheh, 2015, 969). Development economists of this period emphasized the qualitative aspects of development, defining its goals as improving people's welfare and wealth, eradicating poverty, and creating employment opportunities (Salimifar, 2003, 40; Motaghi, 2016, 184).

In the 1970s, following widespread criticism of modernization theory, a new paradigm Human Development was introduced. Theorists such as Amartya Sen[3] (1973–1999), Mahbub ul Haq (1976–1996), Streeten (1980–1995), and Hossein Azimi were among the foundational contributors to this approach. They conceptualized development as a human-centered phenomenon and argued that its core outcome lies in expanding capabilities, realizing human potential, and broadening opportunities (Alipourpijani, 2018, 72). In this approach, meeting basic human needs forms the starting point; it is particularly emphasized that income growth alone is insufficient for reducing absolute poverty and must be accompanied by improvements in public services such as education and healthcare, along with fostering social participation.

The next step in this evolution was the formulation of the "General Approach to Human Development," which rests on two foundational principles:

1. Earlier development paradigms were not human-centered and ignored many determinants of quality of life, including freedom, opportunity, leisure, and human dignity.
2. Human development emphasizes the enhancement of human capabilities and functionings as the ultimate purpose of development not merely increasing economic efficiency.

Thus, within this framework, the human being is the end of development, not a means for achieving economic growth (Haj Amini & Aboutorabi, 2018, 95).

At the policy level, international organizations assess development through indicators such as per capita income, literacy rates, and life expectancy. The World Bank typically uses per capita income as its primary classification criterion, while since 1990, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has published the Human Development Index (HDI) as a composite measure for evaluating the development status of countries (Movaseghi & Kaheh, 2015, 969).

- **Dependency theory (the dependency school)**

Dependency theory emerged as a reaction to earlier development approaches particularly human centered models and was shaped largely within a Marxist intellectual framework. Thinkers such as Frank (1969, 1979, 1998) and Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989, 2011) are among the most influential representatives of this school.

Despite the diversity and sometimes internal contradictions within dependency perspectives, the core premise of this approach is that underdevelopment is itself a product of development; in other words, development in advanced countries has occurred at the cost of reproducing underdevelopment in the Global South (Haj Amini & Aboutorabi, 2018, 95). The fundamental argument is that development and underdevelopment cannot be understood separately or outside the structural dynamics of the global system (Roxborough, 2020, 72). Dependency theorists, critiquing the linear, stage based assumptions of modernization, argue that developing societies are not at earlier historical stages of currently developed ones.

From their perspective, the Third World does not exist in a historical or structural vacuum; rather, its underdevelopment results from historical processes and unequal economic–political relations between core and peripheral countries (Azkia, 2005, 55). Thus, underdevelopment is not caused by internal cultural, social, or economic deficiencies, but by unequal external relations and the dependent structure of peripheral economies (Haj Amini and Aboutorabi, 2018, 95).

The historical context of the 1970s played an important role in the rise of dependency thinking. Many African countries emerging from long periods of colonialism faced extreme poverty and lacked basic developmental institutions. Middle Eastern countries, prior to the first oil shock, were trapped in chronic underdevelopment, and after rising oil revenues, consumerism replaced structural development. In Latin America, despite following prescriptions of international institutions and maintaining close political–economic ties with the United States, debt crises and widespread poverty persisted. In East Asia, the developmental successes of emerging economies such as South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan were still in early stages and not yet consolidated (Salimifar, 2003, 175–176).

Given this context, the dependency school viewed the solution to underdevelopment in "delinking from the outside and returning inward." According to this perspective, as long as structural dependence on advanced economies persists, sustainable development in the Global South remains unattainable (ibid., 183–184). The aim of this school is not to reject industrialization, democracy, or modernity, but to emphasize that achieving these goals within unequal global relations is either impossible or inevitably generates

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contradictions incompatible with genuine development (Haj Amini & Aboutorabi, 2018, 96).

- **Institutionalism**

Following major transformations in the global economy including the rise of East Asian economies and the collapse of socialist systems new theoretical perspectives gained prominence. North (1990, 2009, 2013) and Acemoglu (2009, 2012) focused on analyzing the political, social, and historical foundations required for the emergence of markets and capitalist systems. Consequently, this period witnessed increasing attention to the role of markets and the private sector in development, alongside the advocacy of a small yet strong and development oriented state.

These scholars also emphasize the political and social preconditions necessary for a functioning market order. They complement conventional development theories and are often described as "market friendly" or "market oriented." The industrialization of Southeast Asian economies and the significant progress of major Asian powers such as China and India achieved through engagement with advanced economies, leveraging external opportunities, and utilizing comparative advantages serve as key empirical reasons for the institutionalist turn toward market-centered development (Haj Amini & Aboutorabi, 2018, 97).

- **Post development theory**

Post development theory emerged within the broader intellectual currents of Western postmodernism and Eastern religious fundamentalism, functioning as a critical reaction to modernity, modernization, and even the very notion of the "development discourse" (Movaseghi, 2008, 22). Influenced by Michel Foucault's thought, this perspective argues that development does not merely represent reality it constructs it. Development discourse, by producing knowledge and meaning, eliminates alternative ways of understanding reality and generates a particular regime of organizing social life (Kiely, 1999, 31).

From this vantage point, development serves as a tool for legitimizing Western dominance over the Global South; by defining development standards, the West evaluates other societies according to its own model and interprets difference not as "diversity" but as a sign of "backwardness". Development is thus viewed as a discursive order that classifies differences and determines what is "normal" and what is "deviant" (Munck, 1999, 68).

Prominent thinkers of this school include Escobar[4] (1988, 1992, 1995, 1998), Sachs (1992, 2000), and Goudzwaard/ Goulet (1995, 2006). By critically examining classical development paradigms, they show that development and developmentalism were reflections of Cold War power relations and tools for containing communism. Consequently, development is not a scientific project but a "language of power" in the modern world one that has now reached an impasse and must be abandoned.

Post development theory thus calls for opening spaces for alternatives grounded in culture, local knowledge, and community-based practices. It supports pluralistic and grassroots social movements against centralized development policies (Ahmadian, 2017, 40–41). The core of this approach is rooted in localism and the revival of indigenous values. In contrast to many modernist paradigms, post development thinkers do not view tradition as an obstacle but as a rich source of knowledge and capacity for creatively reconstructing socio economic life and overcoming dependence on global markets (Alavi & Ranjpour, 2014, 183).

Accordingly, they propose forms of people centered development in which local actors and social movements replace state centric elites (Ahmadian, 2017, 41–44), and decision making processes shift from centralized mechanisms toward direct democracy (Haj Amini and Aboutorabi, 2018, 97).

Nonetheless, post development thinking faces major challenges. The most significant critique concerns the contradiction that, while the approach advocates participation, dialogue, pluralism, and anti elitism, it remains unclear how its theorists claim to speak on behalf of developing societies or determine that development is "undesirable" for them. Furthermore, Goulet's (1989) emphasis on local participation encounters serious structural and institutional barriers in many developing countries (Haj Amini & Aboutorabi, 2018, 109).

• What place is not (non place)

The concept of "non place" was first introduced by Douglas (1966). In his study of the evaluative image of the city, Jack Nasar (1998) demonstrated that residents' mental images of the urban environment include elements perceived as either desirable or undesirable. Among these components, some are understood as being "out of place" elements such as certain signs, billboards, or vehicles that are viewed as intrusive by local inhabitants (Nasar, 1998; Bandarabad, 2017, 159). This perception varies according to environmental conditions, spatial quality, and the cognitive context of the observer. For example, abandoned spaces, litter, or signs of vandalism are all factors that reinforce the sense of being "out of place." Any urban element that conflicts with its contextual setting tends to be perceived as imposed upon the environment and therefore classified as undesirable (Bandarabad, 2017, 167).

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One of the most evident manifestations of this notion in contemporary cities is street vending. While urban specialists often regard it as disruptive and seek its removal, many residents consider it an attractive and integral part of urban life. Thus, "out of place" is not an absolute concept; rather, it is shaped by collective perception and cultural context. In theoretical literature, non place is generally associated with negative meanings disturbance, negative spatial perception, and elements that contradict the urban context.

These spaces lack spatial identity as well as historical or cultural continuity; therefore, values and meanings do not emerge within them. Typical examples of non places include standardized, placeless environments such as gas stations, fast food outlets, and roadside shopping centers that could appear anywhere and maintain no relationship with their surroundings (Bandarabad, 2017, 152). Consequently, the reduction of place to quantitative and mechanical dimensions while ignoring meaning, history, and human experience results in the production of identity less, placeless spaces. Such environments neither reflect culture nor foster place attachment.

• What place is

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Geography, place is defined as a specific point on the Earth's surface that forms a foundation for the emergence of human values. In Webster's Dictionary, beyond its geographic dimension, place is linked to its social aspect and the positioning of people within space (Bemanian and Mahmoudinejad, 2008, 20). Generally, space is an abstract and open expanse, whereas place is a portion of that space that becomes enriched with meanings, values, and human experiences through occupation or engagement (Madanipour, 2000, 32).

Place emerges from the interaction of three components: human behavior, conceptual frameworks, and environmental characteristics (Afshar Naderi, 1999, 4). It is formed through networks of social relations, cultural processes, and communication systems at various scales. Place identity represents the human need to understand oneself through cultural, historical, and geographical elements (Badiee Azandahi & Pooyandeh, 2013, 1). Awareness of being "in place" arises when individuals grasp the conceptual layers of the environment and experience belonging and attachment. Such attachment grows through prolonged interaction with place, participation in its formation, and the accumulation of memories within it. In the phenomenology of place, lived experience is considered the central dimension of spatial perception (Badiee et al., 2008, 163).

Accordingly, place constitutes the center of immediate human experience and the result of one's fusion with the natural order (Relph, 2010: 167). Place is an assemblage of "locale," "setting," "ritual," "paths," "others," and "experience." Without understanding these human dimensions, no segment of space can be meaningfully defined as place (Pourjafar, 2011, 14). Settlements, therefore, are not mere physical containers of activities; they embody human existence itself. For instance, when walking, a house located at a greater physical distance may feel perceptually closer because the mind perceives meaning rather than physical metrics alone; human cognition actively interprets, senses, and assigns meaning to the environment (Partovi, 2008, 68).

From Heidegger's viewpoint, human identity is shaped through "dwelling" and the interpretive act of understanding things, with place playing a fundamental role in authentic human existence (Bemanian and Mahmoudinejad, 2008, 17). Place influences identity through two dimensions: objective characteristics and perceptual–meaningful experiences (Badiee Azandahi & Pooyandeh, 2013, 4). In line with this, Relph identifies three components physical setting, activity, and meaning as the foundations of place identity, noting that meaning is the most complex of these dimensions (Relph, 2010, 62). Lynch also regards meaning as one of the essential criteria of a good place, arguing that place must be legible, recognizable, and associated with cultural values and symbolic concepts.

According to Norberg Schulz, although the structure of place changes over time, places maintain their identity, and the sense of place does not necessarily disappear (Partovi, 2008, 121; Badiee Azandahi & Pooyandeh, 2013, 6). In the field of landscape studies, phenomenological approaches emphasize sensory experience; landscape is conceived not merely as a collection of elements, but as a perceptual whole involving sound, smell, and tactile qualities, with a strong capacity for memory and association. Creating such a landscape generates a coherent, meaningful, and sensorially satisfying environment (Matlack, 2009, 55–56). Norberg Schulz argues that places possess inherent qualities and that successful human intervention requires a deep understanding of the place's character and designing in harmony with it.

Thus, place is a qualitative, multidimensional phenomenon shaped by social, cultural, economic, and psychological forces. It is the ground for meaningful experiences and an interior realm in contrast to exterior space. Its key characteristics include holism, physical symbolic integration, human environment connectedness, plurality, dynamism, and multi

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layeredness. Accordingly, the character of place as an "existential possibility" can provide a foundation for revitalizing identity and function in contemporary urban environments (Fig. 1).

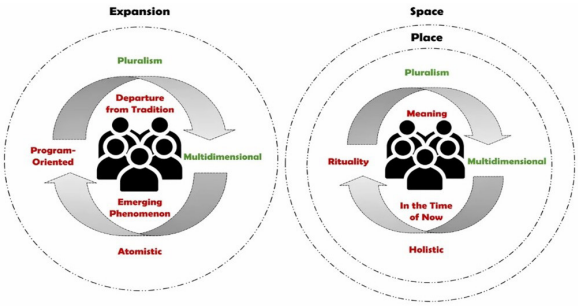


Fig. 1. Indicators of placeness (right) and development indicators and characteristics derived from relevant development theories (left). Source: Authors, 2026.

• The relationship between geography, place, and development

According to Relph, geography is fundamentally grounded in a phenomenological perspective, and understanding place is possible only when examined through such a lens (Tabrizi, 2003, 97). Paasi likewise argues that geography is rooted in "geographical consciousness," asserting that both the geographer and the discipline of geography acquire meaning only within societies that possess a geographical sense (Badiee Azandahi & Pooyandeh, 2013, 6). In a similar vein, Dardel conceptualizes geography as an experience imbued with meaning and intrinsic to human existence.

Taylor and Flint regard place as a geographical scale within which everyday life unfolds, extending across a hierarchy of scales from the individual to the global. Place emerges from the interaction of local, regional, and global forces a site where reciprocal relationships among "spatial conditions," "identity," and "material life" are formed (Badiee et al., 2008, 159). Because spatial scales are inherently intertwined, the analysis of any place is intelligible only within a wider system of scales (Dollfus, 1995, 29). On this basis, examining place, accessibility, settlement patterns, land use structures, transportation networks, and the diffusion of ideas from a geographical perspective is essential for addressing development challenges (Behforouz, 2000, 103). Both the natural and human dimensions of geography from cultural and social attributes to political and economic factors play decisive roles in national development (Alizadeh & Momeni, 2022, 66). Human and cultural diversity, along with natural characteristics such as geomorphology, climate, soil, and location, continue to shape regional distinctions and geographical differences. Even in the technological era, these non human elements remain active in producing and reproducing geographic constructs such as place, neighborhood, and scale (Heydarifar et al., 2012, 81–82; Alizadeh & Momeni, 2022, 66).

The persistence of spatial inequality further demonstrates the dynamism of geography within development processes; development simultaneously produces and reproduces differentiated geographies. Despite the penetration of global forces into even the most remote regions, processes rooted in specific histories, cultures, and environments continue to resist homogenization and generate new uneven geographies. Cosgrove, therefore, critiques totalizing planetary representations such as the celebrated Apollo image of Earth emphasizing the enduring nature of spatial difference (Alizadeh & Momeni, 2022, 67).

Holloway, drawing on human and psychological geography, underscores the "intractability" of place in the age of development. By emphasizing the limits of human sensory perception touch, smell, taste he argues that these embodied experiences form the basis of place attachment and prevent the erasure of geography. Development operates through the reproduction of regional differences, the dynamism of places, and the social networks embedded within them. These networks are not only unequal but also inherently shaped by geographical distinctions; development does not create spatial unity but rather intensifies spatial inequality (Heydarifar et al., 2012, 83; Alizadeh & Momeni, 2022, 67).

Taken together, development does not imply the disappearance of geography rather, it signifies its continual vitality. Global and local forces act simultaneously, reinforcing regionalism, localization, and the ongoing formation of spatial regions. Thus, within development processes, geography is neither erased nor rendered irrelevant; instead, it is constantly produced and reproduced, and places maintain their essential role in shaping human experience and development patterns.

Findings

• What development is (place based development)

Defining "development" has long been one of the most contentious issues among planners and theorists, and a comprehensive consensus on its precise meaning has yet to be achieved. Some equate development with rising income; others emphasize employment, quality of life, welfare, and well being; and still others regard the fulfillment of basic needs as its central measure. Consequently, development acquires different definitions across individuals and intellectual traditions; what is shared, however, is the universal desire for

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progress even if each interprets progress differently. This situation resembles the parable of the blind men and the elephant: each observes a particular part, assuming it represents the whole, yet none perceives the complete picture. Contemporary understandings of development are similar interpreters and planners often observe only a single dimension and assume they have grasped the entire truth.

In reality, development is a complex and multilayered phenomenon that can be comprehended only by considering its various aspects simultaneously as components of a system. Thus, while defining development may be difficult, its effects are far easier to observe (Misra, 1985). The multidimensional nature of development and the need to integrate its quantitative and qualitative dimensions shows that development is not merely an economic concept but a comprehensive process encompassing economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental domains.

In certain perspectives, non economic dimensions hold greater weight; for instance, Kan Jers defines social development as encompassing everything that is "non economic," dividing development into economic and social spheres (Motaghi, 2016, 185). From another perspective, development is inherently interdisciplinary, requiring ongoing interaction and dialogue among economic, political, social, cultural, technological, and environmental dimensions. Without such integration, development especially in the context of localization becomes vulnerable to fragmented and subjective interpretations. These fragmented views translate into divergent narratives in practice, producing ambiguous policy environments that lead to inefficiency, imbalance, and confusion.

The diversity of interpretations stems from the temporal and spatial contexts within which development theories emerged, and these contexts must be considered when evaluating the experiences of different countries. In Iran's academic landscape as well, multiple and sometimes conflicting approaches to development can be observed some prioritize economic aspects, others political or sociological, and still others cultural, environmental, or managerial dimensions. This plurality reflects the intellectual backgrounds of the interpreters and calls for interdisciplinary dialogue to build coherence and synergy among perspectives.

In this context, hermeneutics as the discipline of understanding and interpretation offers a pathway for transcending superficial readings and achieving deeper comprehension of development. As interpretive depth increases, subjective conflicts and misunderstandings diminish, enabling greater collaboration and synergy among theoretical perspectives. A hermeneutic sensitivity to temporal and spatial contexts also prevents simplistic generalizations and the prescription of one size fits all development models for diverse settings. This approach helps interpreters critique existing development theories constructively, design intelligent scenarios, and theorize development suited to national conditions.

Based on these principles, "place based development" can be defined as an approach that conceptualizes development not as a collection of isolated economic or social indicators but as a multidimensional, systemic, and context specific process grounded in place. Within this framework, understanding development requires simultaneous attention to the interconnections among economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental dimensions as they unfold within the historical, institutional, and spatial characteristics of each place.

Place based development, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives and a hermeneutic approach, seeks to avoid reductionist interpretations and universal, abstract models by situating development within the temporal and spatial contexts from which it emerges. Policies and interventions become effective and sustainable only when they are grounded in deep knowledge of local contexts, endogenous capacities, and historical experiences, and when they harness the synergy of multiple viewpoints to create pathways toward balanced, meaningful, and context appropriate development in each place (Fig. 2).

Development		
Theorist	Theoretical Content	Development Characteristics
Lerner, Schramm, Rogers	Modernization theory; Transition of traditional society to modern society	Departure from tradition
Pritchard and others	Development concept-equals improving living conditions including poverty	Soiving social problems
Misra & Mirdal	One of dimenesic-of development includes economic, political, social, cultural, and technological aspects	Developmental progress
Michael Todaro & Denis Seers		Multidimensional concept
Amartya Sen, Mahbub ul Haq	Expanding human acpabilities and achieving welfare, freedem, and completion of human potential across generations	Human-centered
Deltas, Li, Vacker, King, Goulden, Gordon		Interpretive (tools for unde/Standing phenomenà

Characteristics of Place		
Characteristics of Place	Theoretical Content	Theorist
Meaning-based	Place is not only formed through physical dimensions, but also through social interactions; place	Cuba & Hummon
Symbolic	Place is defined not by physical features but by symbolic and cultural characteristics associated with values and collective memory	Cheng & Daniels
Emotional		Tuan
Holistic & Qualitative	Place is a holistic concept that includes both physical and non-phystcal dimensions.	Relph
Key / Meaning-generating	Place reflects individual and collective characteristics; spatial identities express personal, social, and cultural meanings	Amdut & Epstcin-Pliouchich
Individual-collective semantic features	Place reflects individual and collective characteristics; spatial identities express personal, social, an	Canter

Fig. 2. Comparative analysis of theorists' perspectives on development and place. Source: Authors, 2026.

Conclusion

Being rooted in a place extends far beyond the mere experience of "sense of place." A society that possesses historical monuments, shrines, or museums does not necessarily exhibit genuine rootedness in its locale, for representations of the past are often the result of deliberate, intentional acts rather than the natural outgrowth of lived continuity. A temporally informed understanding of place and the cultivation of a culture of development emerges

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only when new events are interpreted in connection with the past and within the meaningful structure of place.

Development becomes effective only when it is conceptualized not as a one dimensional occurrence but as a multidimensional and systemic phenomenon. Moving from a fragmented to a holistic understanding of development enables planning to shift toward meaning oriented and place based approaches, in which development drivers are grounded in the actual characteristics of place and the substance of social experience. Within such a framework, the notion of "instant development" is abandoned, and development is understood as a gradual, time dependent, and context specific process. The very nature of development rests on processes such as understanding, connecting elements, and enhancing rationality. From this perspective, the existence and essence of development are not sequential stages but are simultaneously present from the outset. Consequently, binary oppositions such as reason versus will, individual versus collective, part versus whole, subjectivity versus objectivity, or mind versus body offer limited analytical utility, as these elements are deeply interwoven and each illuminates a particular facet of the complexity inherent in development.

Development may be considered a "simple but difficult" concept one whose internal structure is complex and whose realization in each society is shaped by its unique historical and cultural trajectory, yet one that simultaneously draws upon a body of established principles and accumulated experience. In this sense, development is an effort to organize time, and development policy is tasked with identifying the most effective means of undertaking such temporal organization. Achieving this requires development to become a domain of interdisciplinary synergy a space where data, theories, and experiences from diverse fields converge. The nature of development may be described as gradational and movement based, manifesting in varying degrees of intensity. Its origins lie in fundamental human characteristics such as the pursuit of truth, justice, knowledge, and benefit. Seen in this light, development theories cannot be interpreted through absolute dichotomies; rather, each illuminates one aspect of the broader reality of development, often emerging through the combination, refinement, or reinterpretation of earlier theories.

Human beings bear responsibility toward the time and place that are transformed in the course of development. Yet, as Tuan notes, modern individuals inhabit conditions of constant acceleration and mobility that diminish opportunities for deep rootedness, leaving their experiences of place often superficial and transient. Although the visual quality of an environment may generate an immediate impression, the emergence of "sense of place" is a gradual and profound process. Understanding place constitutes a cumulative perception that frequently forms unconsciously through lived experience. In this process, the intensity and depth of experience hold greater importance than the mere duration of presence for the more meaningful and deeply felt the events occurring within a space, the more precise and enduring one's understanding of that place becomes.

One of the major challenges of development emerges from the reliance on imported, incomplete models that often transmit only the external manifestations of modernity while disregarding its underlying philosophical, cultural, and historical foundations. Such models are not only inadequate but are frequently accompanied during localization by selective interpretations, misreadings, or excessive dependence on outdated theories. Thus, revisiting and reexamining the intellectual foundations of development becomes essential. Although the trajectory of development may include ruptures, pauses, or reversals, the lived experience and collective memory of societies function as a form of enduring capital, enabling the revival and continuation of development when appropriate conditions arise.

Within this broader context, the concept of place based development provides a coherent synthesis. Place based development rests on the premise that the development process becomes effective and sustainable only when it is organically intertwined with the spatial characteristics, social identity, historical experiences, and endogenous capacities of each place. Emphasizing temporally informed place understanding, strengthening sense of place, grounding decisions in lived experience, and adopting systemic and interdisciplinary perspectives, this approach departs from generalized, accelerated, and context detached development models. Consequently, development is understood not as a set of fragmented interventions but as a gradual, meaning driven process rooted in place a process in which development policies and programs are designed and implemented based on in depth knowledge of each locale's social, cultural, and spatial fabric (Fig. 3).

Endnotes

1. In Dehkhoda Dictionary, the term tose'eh (development) is defined as expansion and the act of making something broader or more spacious. Similarly, in the Moein Dictionary it is defined as: (1) the act of widening, expanding, or giving breadth; (2) breadth or spaciousness; and (3) progress or advancement.
2. The concept of development and its practical application can be clearly traced back to the period following World War II, particularly the postwar era from the 1950s to the 1960s.
3. Amartya Sen proposed a more humanistic conception of

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development and linked it to the notion of freedom. In his work (1998), Sen defined development as the removal of constraints that limit freedom—such as hunger or authoritarian governance—which restrict people's opportunities and choices. He argues that development should be evaluated in terms of the expansion of people's capabilities to lead lives they have reason to value (Sen, 2002).

4. According to Escobar (1995), development has become a space for thought and action to the extent that people view the world through the lens of Western development, and even critics of development articulate their objections using its very terms and conceptual frameworks.

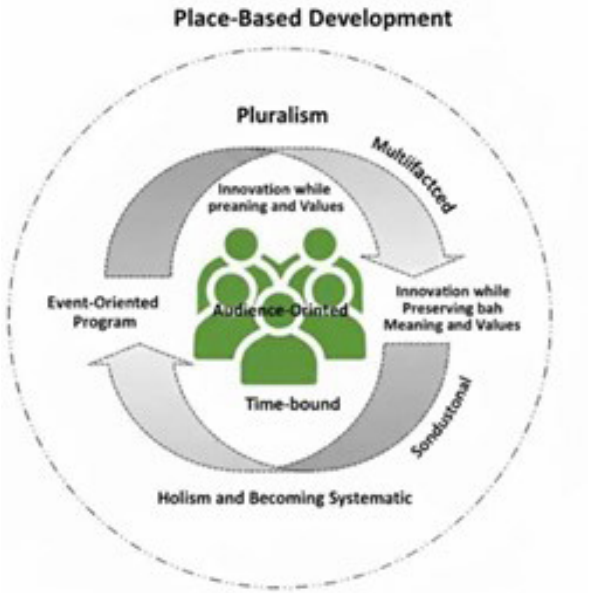


Fig. 3. Place based development indicators. Source: Authors, 2026.

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