Rethinking Development: A Systematic Review of Paradigms, Critiques, and Alternatives

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic review of development scholarship, tracing its historical evolution, dominant paradigms, and critical alternatives. It synthesises debates spanning modernisation and neoliberal orthodoxy to post-development and decolonial thought, demonstrating how power, epistemology, and global inequality have shaped prevailing understandings of "progress." Moving beyond critique, the article advances a relational reframing of development that foregrounds cooperation, reciprocity, and stewardship over competition and growth. Drawing on African Ubuntu, Indian Swaraj and Sarvodaya, Chinese Confucian harmony, Islamic mīzān, and Latin American Buen Vivir, it argues that these traditions converge, at the level of practical moral reasoning, on an ontology of interdependence that challenges the individualism of mainstream models. The review concludes that rethinking development as relational ethics and commons practice is essential for addressing contemporary planetary, political, and epistemic crises, and calls for indicators and institutions capable of measuring prosperity in terms of connection, care, and ecological balance.

Keywords: development; relational ontology; decoloniality; Ubuntu; commons

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1. Introduction

Since its consolidation in the aftermath of the Second World War, "development" has remained one of the most contested and protean concepts in both scholarship and policy. Commonly equated with economic growth, modernisation, or poverty reduction, it has also functioned as a legitimising framework for diverse interventions, ranging from international aid and state-led planning to neoliberal restructuring (Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 1992). Rather than a neutral or purely technical endeavour, development is historically entangled with coloniality, global political economy, and epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain forms of knowledge and subjectivity over others (Escobar, 1995; Santos, 2014). These entanglements have generated successive waves of critique and reformulation, establishing development as a field characterised by persistent contestation rather than settled consensus.

In the early twenty-first century, intensifying polycrises, deepening inequality, democratic fragility, and accelerating planetary disruption have renewed calls to interrogate the foundational premises and metrics of development (Raworth, 2017; Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). Critical scholarship has demonstrated how mainstream approaches frequently depoliticise poverty, obscure relations of power, and translate social objectives into audit cultures and incentive structures aligned with competitive market rationality (Ferguson, 1990; Merry, 2011; Shore & Wright, 2015). Even paradigms that seek reform, including human development, participation, and sustainability, are often operationalised through benchmarking and ranking systems that normalise rivalry and scarcity (Foucault, 2008; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). At the same time, alternative perspectives have proliferated, including Buen Vivir in Latin America (Gudynas, 2011), the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999), participatory action research

(Tandon, 2008), ecological economics and doughnut frameworks (Raworth, 2017), and decolonial epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Emerging from these critiques, a growing body of thought advances relational ontologies as a counter-imaginary to the competitive moral economy that underpins dominant development paradigms. Across diverse civilisational traditions, personhood and political community are conceptualised through interdependence rather than atomised rivalry. Ubuntu in Africa (Ramose, 2002; Metz, 2011), Swaraj and Sarvodaya in India (Gandhi, 1909/1997; Kothari, 2014), Confucian notions of harmony (he) and Datong in China (Tu, 1998; Angle & Tiwald, 2017), and Islamic conceptions of mīzān (balance) and ummah (community), articulated through the maqāṣid al-sharīʿa (Auda, 2008; Nasr, 1996), each offer distinct yet resonant accounts of relational existence. When read alongside commons scholarship (Ostrom, 1990; Bollier & Helfrich, 2012) and decolonial and post-development perspectives (Escobar, 2018; Kothari et al., 2019), these traditions reframe development as the cultivation of relationships, among people, with nature, and with broader moral orders, rather than as a pursuit of positional advantage (Hickel, 2020; Dussel, 2013). This perspective situates relational ethics and commons-based practices within the broader evolution of development thought, suggesting that the most compelling reimaginings of development are those that relocate prosperity within cooperation, reciprocity, and stewardship.

This review is guided by four central questions:

1. What paradigms and assumptions have shaped development theory and practice since the mid-twentieth century, and how have they configured power, progress, and change?
2. How have critical and decolonial perspectives challenged the epistemological foundations and geopolitical hierarchies of development?
3. What conceptual and practical alternatives, particularly relational and commons-oriented, have emerged across African, Asian, Latin American, and Arab–Islamic traditions?
4. Which tensions, blind spots, and knowledge gaps persist, especially with regard to power asymmetries, ecological limits, and the operationalisation of relational ontologies in policy and measurement?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach. Section 3 maps the theoretical foundations and paradigmatic evolution of development. Section 4 examines development in practice, including participatory and grassroots alternatives. Section 5 analyses contemporary debates and critiques concerning depoliticisation, epistemic injustice, and green growth. Section 6 develops a cross-civilisational relational reframing of development, contrasting competitive rationalities with relational traditions. Section 7 identifies knowledge gaps and emerging directions, and Section 8 concludes by reflecting on the implications of rethinking development as relational justice within planetary boundaries.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic interpretive review design to map, analyse, and synthesise major paradigms, critiques, and alternatives in development scholarship from the mid-twentieth century to 2024. Unlike conventional systematic reviews that prioritise statistical aggregation, this study is situated within the tradition of interpretive synthesis, which is particularly suited to conceptually diverse and interdisciplinary fields such as development studies (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2012). The aim is not to produce cumulative empirical generalisations but to identify patterns of thought, epistemological tensions, and emerging alternative frameworks. The review integrates insights from qualitative content analysis, thematic synthesis, and critical interpretivism through a layered analytical strategy. Rather than treating these approaches as epistemologically equivalent, they are deployed sequentially: content analysis is used for descriptive mapping of paradigms, thematic synthesis for identifying recurrent conceptual patterns, and critical interpretivism for examining underlying

ontological and epistemic assumptions. This layered approach ensures both analytical rigour and philosophical depth while resolving potential methodological tensions.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and SpringerLink. The search covered publications from 1945 to 2024, reflecting the historical emergence and evolution of development discourse. Keyword combinations were constructed using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to capture both core paradigms and critical perspectives. Examples include: "development theory" AND "modernization," "dependency theory" OR "structuralism," "neoliberalism" AND "development policy," "post-development" OR "decoloniality," "Ubuntu" AND "development," and "alternatives to development" AND "commons." In addition to database searches, backward snowballing was employed by reviewing reference lists of seminal works (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 1992; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) to identify influential contributions not captured through keyword searches. Select grey literature (e.g., policy reports and working papers) was included where it provided substantial conceptual or historical insight.

The study selection followed a PRISMA-informed screening process to enhance transparency and replicability. The initial search yielded approximately 650 records. After removing duplicates (n=70), 580 records were screened based on titles and abstracts. Of these, 400 were excluded for lack of relevance to development theory or conceptual analysis. A total of 180 full-text sources were assessed for eligibility. Following detailed evaluation, 92 sources were retained for inclusion in the final analysis. Exclusion criteria included: 1) purely descriptive policy briefs without analytical depth; 2) sector-specific studies lacking engagement with broader development paradigms; 3) duplicate or redundant conceptual arguments; 4) sources without identifiable theoretical or methodological structure. While the reduction from 650 to 92 sources reflects a significant narrowing, it was necessary to ensure conceptual relevance, analytical clarity, and diversity of perspectives.

To ensure consistency and rigour in selection, inclusion criteria were explicitly operationalised using a structured review framework. Each source was assessed against the following criteria:

Criterion	**Operational Definition**	**Assessment Approach**
Conceptual contribution	Explicit engagement with development paradigms, critiques, or alternatives	Identification of core argument or theoretical innovation
Methodological clarity	Clear articulation of research design, analytical approach, or philosophical grounding	Structured reading template
Relevance	Direct contribution to development discourse beyond narrow sectoral focus	Title, abstract, and full-text screening
Epistemic engagement	Consideration of power, knowledge systems, or alternative ontologies	Thematic coding

Each source was systematically evaluated using a standardised extraction template to minimise subjective bias and enhance comparability across studies.

To avoid assigning equal analytical weight to all sources, a qualitative appraisal framework adapted from systematic review literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Gough et al., 2012) was applied. Sources were categorised into three levels. The first level was high rigor; these sources clearly articulated methodology and strong theoretical contribution. The second level was moderate rigor; the sources had partial methodological clarity or primarily conceptual work. The third level was interpretive contributions; these were philosophical or normative texts without formal methodology. This classification did not lead to exclusion but informed the weight assigned during synthesis, ensuring that analytically robust sources were prioritised while still allowing space for influential theoretical contributions.

The analysis proceeded in three sequential stages. Stage 1 was descriptive mapping. Sources were categorised according to dominant paradigms (e.g., modernisation, dependency, neoliberal, post-development, decolonial, feminist, ecological). This stage provided a structural overview of the evolution of development thought. Stage 2 was thematic synthesis. An iterative coding process was used to identify recurrent themes, including power, epistemology, participation, sustainability, and alternative

imaginaries. Codes were refined inductively to capture overlaps, tensions, and divergences across paradigms. For example, discussions of "participation" were coded both as empowerment and as managerial control, reflecting competing interpretations in the literature. Stage 3 was critical interpretive synthesis. This final stage involved analysing the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions shaping different paradigms. Drawing on critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) and decolonial theory (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), this stage interrogated how development constructs knowledge, authority, and legitimacy.

Recognising the historical dominance of Global North scholarship in development studies, deliberate efforts were made to ensure balanced geographical representation. Sources from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and postcolonial contexts were purposively included to capture diverse epistemic perspectives. However, this purposive strategy introduces a trade-off between representativeness and strict randomness. Rather than aiming for statistical representativity, the study prioritises epistemic diversity, consistent with its interpretive and decolonial orientation.

The review was limited primarily to English-language sources due to accessibility and indexing constraints. This limitation is acknowledged not merely as a technical constraint but as indicative of broader structures of epistemic inequality in global knowledge production. Important contributions from Francophone, Lusophone, and other linguistic traditions may therefore be underrepresented.

The analysis is informed by a Global South, Ubuntu-oriented perspective, which foregrounds relationality, epistemic plurality, and the critique of colonial knowledge hierarchies. While systematic procedures were employed to enhance transparency, the study recognises that all knowledge production is situated. Reflexivity was therefore maintained throughout the review process to remain attentive to interpretive bias and disciplinary positioning. Although the study does not involve human participants, it adheres to principles of academic integrity, including accurate citation, avoidance of plagiarism, and fair representation of diverse perspectives. In line with decolonial ethics, particular care was taken to avoid decontextualising indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems.

The combination of explicit search strategy, defined inclusion criteria, structured appraisal, and staged analysis enhances transparency and allows partial replicability, which distinguishes systematic from purely narrative reviews. However, given the interpretive nature of the study and the breadth of the field, findings should be understood as analytical synthesis rather than exhaustive coverage.

3. Theoretical foundations and evolution

The theoretical landscape of development has undergone significant transformation since the mid-twentieth century, reflecting shifting geopolitical contexts, evolving epistemological assumptions, and competing ideological currents. These developments can be broadly understood through four overlapping paradigmatic formations: modernisation theory, structuralist and dependency approaches, neoliberalism, and critical and post-development frameworks. Each offers a distinct account of what development entails, how it should be pursued, and who holds authority in defining its direction.

Emerging in the immediate post–Second World War period, modernisation theory conceptualised development as a linear transition from "traditional" to "modern" societies. Grounded in Western social science, particularly Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism, it positioned the Global South as lagging behind on a presumed universal trajectory of economic growth, institutional reform, and cultural transformation (Rostow, 1960). Development was thus equated with industrialisation, urbanisation, and rationalisation, and closely associated with technocratic expertise and capital investment. While highly influential in early policy and donor agendas, this framework attracted sustained criticism for its Eurocentrism, cultural essentialism, and neglect of structural constraints, including colonial legacies and unequal trade relations. By universalising Western experience, it marginalised alternative knowledge systems and reinforced hierarchical global ordering (Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 1992).

Structuralist and dependency perspectives emerged in direct response to these limitations, particularly through Latin American scholarship. Thinkers such as Raúl Prebisch, Celso Furtado, and André Gunder Frank reconceptualised underdevelopment not as a transitional stage but as a structural

condition produced by the global capitalist system (Frank, 1969; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). In this view, peripheral economies were constrained by unfavourable terms of trade, capital extraction, and systemic dependency on core economies. Development strategies therefore emphasised state-led industrialisation and forms of economic delinking. Although these approaches re-centred questions of power, historical inequality, and global structure, they were subsequently critiqued for their tendency toward economic determinism and their limited engagement with internal social differentiation, including gendered relations and environmental dynamics (Kothari & Minogue, 2002).

The ascendancy of neoliberalism in the 1980s marked a further reconfiguration of development thinking. Driven by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, structural adjustment programmes promoted market deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity across much of the Global South. Within this paradigm, the role of the state shifted from that of a developmental agent to a facilitator of market efficiency (Harvey, 2005). The consequences were profound: rising inequality, weakened public institutions, and the erosion of social protections. These outcomes generated widespread critique from both scholars and grassroots movements, who argued that neoliberal development depoliticised poverty and displaced collective rights in favour of individualised, market-oriented solutions (Ferguson, 1990; Cornwall & Brock, 2005).

Dissatisfaction with income-based and GDP-centred models of development also gave rise to alternative evaluative frameworks. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach reframed development as the expansion of substantive freedoms, enabling individuals to lead lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). This perspective introduced a normative emphasis on agency, choice, and well-being, and informed the construction of the Human Development Index. Martha Nussbaum (2011) extended this framework through a feminist lens, articulating a set of core capabilities intended to address structural inequality. Despite its influence, the capabilities approach has been criticised for its relatively limited engagement with power relations and its continued grounding in liberal individualist assumptions (Dean, 2009).

More radical critiques have emerged from post-development and decolonial scholarship, which question the very premise of development as a universal project. Escobar (1995) conceptualises development as a discursive formation rooted in colonial logic, producing and governing the "Third World" as a space of deficiency. Similarly, Santos (2014) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocate for epistemologies of the South that recognise diverse ways of knowing, being, and organising social life. These perspectives move beyond reformist critique, calling for a fundamental rethinking of development through relational ontologies, ecological balance, and the recovery of indigenous cosmologies. The emphasis shifts from improving development to pluralising it, foregrounding the possibility of multiple coexisting futures rather than a singular, universal trajectory.

This historical and theoretical trajectory underscores that development has never been a stable or neutral concept. Instead, it constitutes a dynamic field of contestation in which paradigms reflect underlying configurations of power, normative commitments, and competing visions of the good life. Recognising this evolution is essential for engaging contemporary debates and for imagining pathways that move beyond the limitations of dominant models.

4. Development in practice

Although development theory has undergone substantial rethinking, the translation of paradigms into policy and practice remains marked by persistent contradictions. Across contexts and historical periods, development practice has often functioned as the site where transformative aspirations confront entrenched realities of power, politics, and inequality. This section examines dominant and alternative forms of development practice as implemented by states, international institutions, and grassroots actors, with particular attention to their epistemic assumptions, institutional configurations, and implications for local agency.

Historically, development practice has been dominated by state-led interventions and donor-driven projects structured around predefined goals, logframes, and performance metrics. Rooted in modernisation and neoliberal paradigms, these approaches tend to frame development as a technical problem requiring expert solutions, frequently marginalising local knowledge and overlooking complex

social dynamics (Li, 2007; Mosse, 2005). Ferguson's (1990) analysis of a World Bank project in Lesotho demonstrates how development interventions can operate as "anti-politics machines," obscuring political contestation, expanding bureaucratic authority, and misrepresenting the lived realities of local communities. Related critiques highlight the rise of audit cultures in development practice, where success is assessed through indicators rather than substantive social outcomes (Merry, 2011). The expansion of NGO-isation has further professionalised development delivery, often reproducing donor priorities and fostering institutional competition at the expense of long-term transformation (Banks et al., 2015). In many contexts, this has resulted in parallel governance structures that weaken democratic accountability.

In response to these limitations, the 1990s saw the emergence of participatory development approaches aimed at restoring agency and centring local knowledge. Pioneered by Chambers (1997), participatory methods sought to reposition communities as active contributors to development processes rather than passive beneficiaries. However, this shift has been subject to sustained critique. Cooke and Kothari (2001) caution against the "tyranny of participation," whereby the language of inclusion can mask enduring power asymmetries and reinforce managerial control. Persistent challenges, including tokenism, elite capture, and performative consultation, continue to shape participatory spaces (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Nevertheless, initiatives such as participatory budgeting, community mapping, and co-production demonstrate that meaningful participation is achievable when linked to broader processes of political mobilisation and institutional transformation (Cornwall, 2008).

Beyond institutional reforms, communities across the Global South have increasingly developed autonomous and culturally grounded approaches to development that resist external validation. Examples include Buen Vivir in Latin America (Gudynas, 2011), Ubuntu-informed practices in Southern Africa (Ramose, 2002), and Zapatismo in Mexico. These approaches foreground relationality, collective well-being, and ecological balance, challenging the universalising assumptions embedded in dominant development models. They emphasise territorial autonomy, ancestral knowledge, and interdependence, and frequently intersect with feminist, ecological, and indigenous movements that reconceptualise development as a process of social, cultural, and environmental regeneration rather than solely economic transformation (Shiva, 2005; Escobar, 2018). Although often marginalised within mainstream discourse, such practices demonstrate that development can be reimagined from below as a plurality of coexisting pathways rather than a singular trajectory (Santos, 2014).

Contemporary development practice is further shaped by the urgency of climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological limits. The incorporation of climate resilience, green growth, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into development planning reflects an important shift in global priorities. However, these frameworks also generate new tensions. Critics argue that the SDG agenda frequently reproduces productivist and growth-oriented logics, privileging institutional legitimacy over transformative change (Biermann et al., 2017). Similarly, climate finance and adaptation initiatives risk reinforcing new forms of dependency and exclusion if not grounded in principles of climate justice (Bond, 2012). Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond incremental "greening" strategies towards transformative sustainability, in which social equity, ecological integrity, and intergenerational justice are treated as inseparable dimensions of development.

Development practice, therefore, constitutes a deeply contested terrain in which technical interventions intersect with political, cultural, and epistemological struggles. Whether driven by states, donors, non-governmental organisations, or grassroots movements, the effectiveness and justice of development interventions depend on how they engage with questions of power, voice, and planetary limits.

5. Contemporary debates and critiques

As development theory and practice continue to evolve, they remain subject to sustained scholarly contestation. While some debates focus on the effectiveness and ethical implications of existing paradigms, others engage more fundamentally with development's epistemological foundations, colonial continuities, and ecological consequences. Four interrelated strands of critique are particularly prominent: the depoliticisation of development, the persistence of epistemic injustice, the contradictions of green development, and tensions between universality and pluriversality.

A central line of critique concerns the depoliticisation of development, the tendency to frame development challenges as technical problems amenable to expert intervention rather than as outcomes of political and economic power relations. Ferguson's (1990) concept of the "anti-politics machine" remains foundational in this regard, demonstrating how development institutions obscure conflict, governance failures, and historical injustices through apolitical diagnostics and managerial solutions. Contemporary expressions of this critique extend to evidence-based policy, data-driven governance, and results-based management, which, despite their apparent neutrality, often suppress structural questions of inequality, redistribution, and democratic participation (Li, 2007; Mosse, 2013). By recasting development as an administrative domain rather than a contested political process, these approaches risk reinforcing existing power structures while claiming technical objectivity.

A second strand of critique highlights the persistence of epistemic injustice within development discourse. Despite rhetorical commitments to inclusion, dominant frameworks frequently marginalise non-Western knowledge systems, worldviews, and lived experiences (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Although concepts such as participation, indigenous knowledge, and "local voices" are increasingly invoked, their incorporation often remains constrained by institutional logics that limit genuine redistribution of epistemic authority (Escobar, 2018). As a result, the inclusion of Global South perspectives can become tokenistic, instrumental, or extractive, rather than transformative. Decolonial scholars argue that achieving justice in development requires more than representational inclusion; it necessitates a reconfiguration of the epistemological foundations of the field, allowing for the coexistence of diverse ontologies and rationalities beyond the Western liberal-modernist canon (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

A third line of critique concerns the growing prominence of sustainability within development policy, particularly through frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While this shift reflects increased recognition of ecological limits, the dominant sustainability paradigm, often framed in terms of green growth, has been criticised for attempting to reconcile continued economic expansion with environmental constraints, a tension widely regarded as untenable (Hickel & Kallis, 2020). Degrowth scholars contend that addressing ecological crises requires confronting global patterns of overconsumption and structural inequality, advocating for reduced resource use in high-income contexts alongside redistribution, care-based economies, and localisation. In contrast, prevailing institutional approaches tend to favour market-based mechanisms, such as carbon trading and green finance, which critics argue commodify nature and defer more substantive transformation (Bond, 2012; Biermann et al., 2017).

At a more fundamental level, development itself is increasingly interrogated as a normative project. Post-development and decolonial perspectives question whether development, even in its more inclusive or reformist forms, can be disentangled from its colonial genealogy and universalising assumptions (Escobar, 1995; Sachs, 1992). These critiques call for a shift from development conceived as a singular pathway to pluriversality, understood as the coexistence of multiple worldviews, futures, and knowledge systems. This orientation challenges the ethical premise of "developing" others according to predefined standards of progress, instead foregrounding autonomy, dignity, and relationality. It further suggests that development practice must accommodate refusal, difference, and sovereignty as legitimate dimensions of social transformation (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018).

Taken together, these critiques reposition development not merely as a technical or economic field, but as a site of ethical, political, and epistemic struggle. Any meaningful rethinking of development must therefore engage critically with its embedded assumptions, asymmetrical power relations, and global-local tensions. Only through such engagement can genuinely transformative alternatives begin to emerge.

6. Beyond competition: relational ontologies and the ethics of development

A persistent assumption underlying much of post-war development thinking is that progress emerges through competition, between states seeking comparative advantage, firms pursuing market share, and individuals investing in their own productivity. This competitive ontology has been institutionalised through economic theory and policy frameworks, particularly within modernisation and neoliberal

paradigms, which frame development as a process of accumulation, efficiency, and growth (Harvey, 2005; Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Even reform-oriented approaches, such as human development and sustainability, often reproduce these logics through benchmarking systems, rankings, and performance indicators that encourage comparison rather than coexistence (Foucault, 2008; Merry, 2011; Shore & Wright, 2015). As a result, development becomes a moral economy of rivalry, privileging visibility, quantification, and positional advantage over relational well-being (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Power, 1997).

In response, a growing body of scholarship has foregrounded relational ontologies as an alternative conceptual foundation. These perspectives conceptualise human existence as fundamentally interdependent rather than atomised, challenging the individualism embedded in mainstream development discourse (Escobar, 2018; Santos, 2014). However, it is necessary to proceed with conceptual caution. The relational traditions often invoked in this context, including African Ubuntu, Indian Swaraj and Sarvodaya, Confucian harmony, Islamic mīzān, and Latin American Buen Vivir, emerge from distinct theological, historical, and cultural contexts. They do not constitute a unified philosophical system. Accordingly, the argument advanced here is not one of ontological equivalence but of functional convergence at the level of practical moral reasoning.

This convergence becomes evident in how these traditions address shared human challenges, including inequality, social fragmentation, and ecological imbalance. For instance, Ubuntu foregrounds mutual recognition and social harmony as the basis of justice (Ramose, 2002; Metz, 2011), while Gandhian thought emphasises ethical self-restraint and the welfare of all (Gandhi, 1909/1997; Kothari, 2014). Confucian philosophy frames social order through relational roles and moral cultivation aimed at harmony (Tu, 1998; Angle & Tiwald, 2017), whereas Islamic thought conceptualises justice as balance (mīzān) sustained through redistribution and moral economy (Auda, 2008; Chapra, 2008). In Latin America, Buen Vivir similarly articulates development as collective well-being grounded in ecological and social interdependence (Gudynas, 2011). While these traditions differ in metaphysical grounding, they converge in their rejection of competition as the primary organising principle of social life and instead prioritise reciprocity, balance, and shared responsibility (Escobar, 2018; Kothari et al., 2019).

Ubuntu provides a particularly compelling entry point for operationalising relational ontology within development practice. Its foundational proposition, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, suggests that personhood is constituted through relationships with others (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 2002). In this framework, poverty is not merely a lack of income but a condition of relational deprivation, characterised by exclusion, marginalisation, and weakened social bonds (Metz, 2011). Development, therefore, is not simply about resource distribution but about restoring and strengthening the fabric of social life. This has significant practical implications. Ubuntu-oriented approaches would prioritise participatory governance, collective decision-making, and restorative justice mechanisms over technocratic interventions.

Such an approach also challenges dominant measurement systems. Conventional indicators, such as GDP or productivity, capture aggregate outputs but fail to account for relational well-being (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). In contrast, an Ubuntu-informed framework would assess development through the quality of social relations, including levels of trust, inclusiveness of decision-making, and the extent of mutual care (Letseka, 2013; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Empirical practices such as participatory budgeting, community-based dispute resolution, and cooperative economic structures illustrate how relational principles can be institutionalised (Utting, 2015; Bollier & Helfrich, 2012). These practices re-politicise development by embedding it within lived social processes rather than abstract technical systems.

However, the application of relational ontologies must be approached critically. As feminist and decolonial scholars have noted, concepts such as "community" and "harmony" can obscure internal inequalities and power asymmetries (Mohanty, 2003; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Relational frameworks can be appropriated to justify patriarchy, exclusion, or hierarchical authority if not anchored in principles of justice and accountability. Ubuntu itself has been critiqued for its potential to be mobilised in ways that suppress dissent or overlook gender inequalities (Metz, 2011; Mangena, 2012). A critical relational approach must therefore remain attentive to the ways in which relationality is lived, contested, and negotiated in practice.

This brings into focus the role of the state, which remains underdeveloped in many relational accounts of development. A relational paradigm does not imply the withdrawal of the state but its transformation. Rather than functioning solely as a regulator of markets or provider of services, the state becomes a facilitator of relational infrastructures, supporting commons-based governance, enabling participatory institutions, and safeguarding collective resources (Ostrom, 1990; Utting, 2015). At the same time, the state must ensure that relational practices do not devolve into exclusion or elite capture, maintaining a commitment to equity, rights, and accountability (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999).

A key concern raised in contemporary critiques is whether relational approaches can avoid the depoliticisation that characterises mainstream development. Development institutions have often framed poverty as a technical problem, obscuring underlying power relations and structural inequalities (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007). Relational ontologies offer a potential corrective by foregrounding the social and political dimensions of development. Ubuntu, for example, shifts the focus from delivering outcomes to negotiating relationships, from implementing policies to co-producing solutions. In doing so, it reintroduces politics as a central dimension of development, emphasising voice, recognition, and collective agency.

At the same time, the translation of relational philosophies into contemporary policy contexts remains uneven and contested. The invocation of Ubuntu in post-apartheid South Africa illustrates both its promise and its limitations. While it informed discourses of reconciliation and nation-building, persistent inequalities and governance challenges highlight the difficulty of institutionalising relational ethics within complex political economies (Gade, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Similar tensions can be observed in other contexts where relational principles are invoked rhetorically but not substantively embedded in institutional practice.

In sum, relational ontologies offer a powerful critique of competitive development models and open space for alternative imaginaries grounded in interdependence, reciprocity, and care. Their significance lies not in providing a universal blueprint but in demonstrating that development can be organised around fundamentally different moral and social principles. The challenge moving forward is to translate these insights into context-sensitive institutional forms while remaining critically attentive to issues of power, inequality, and political contestation. Only through such an approach can relationality move beyond rhetoric to become a meaningful foundation for rethinking development.

7. Knowledge gaps and emerging directions

Despite decades of theorisation and reform within development studies, significant gaps persist, particularly in relation to power dynamics, epistemic justice, planetary limits, and the operationalisation of alternative frameworks. Addressing these gaps is essential if development discourse is to move beyond critique towards meaningful transformation.

Although the literature widely acknowledges the political nature of development, there remains limited sustained inquiry into how power operates within and across development institutions, including donor agencies, governments, and international financial organisations. Questions of institutional reflexivity, elite capture, and internal resistance to change are frequently underexplored (Eyben et al., 2015). Greater empirical and ethnographic engagement is required to examine how power is reproduced, negotiated, and occasionally subverted within these spaces, as well as how reform efforts unfold in the presence of entrenched interests and bureaucratic rationalities.

Decolonial and post-development scholarship has significantly advanced critiques of Western epistemological dominance; however, translating epistemological pluralism into practice remains a major challenge. There is limited methodological guidance on how diverse ways of knowing can be incorporated into policy and practice without being assimilated into dominant frameworks or reduced to instrumental value (Santos, 2014). Future research must therefore interrogate what constitutes legitimate knowledge within development processes, who possesses the authority to define problems and solutions, and how dialogical engagement across epistemic boundaries can be meaningfully facilitated (Walsh, 2018).

While gender has been formally integrated into many development agendas, intersectionality, understood as the interrelation of gender, race, class, ability, and geography, remains insufficiently addressed in both theoretical and applied contexts (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003). Further research is needed to examine how structural inequalities are experienced, negotiated, and resisted in specific settings, and how development interventions can move beyond inclusion towards genuinely transformative change for marginalised groups. Approaches such as feminist political ecology and care ethics offer valuable conceptual and practical insights, yet remain underutilised in mainstream development discourse (Elmhirst, 2015).

The intensification of climate crises has exposed the limitations of prevailing sustainability paradigms. Although concepts such as green growth and resilience have gained prominence, they often fall short of addressing the structural transformations required for ecological sustainability. Research on degrowth, post-carbon economies, and climate justice remains uneven and fragmented, particularly in its engagement with Global South contexts (Hickel, 2020). There is a clear need for interdisciplinary and transregional studies that examine how different societies are reconfiguring notions of prosperity beyond GDP, and the institutional, cultural, and material conditions necessary to support such transitions.

Finally, while the notion of pluriversality, the coexistence of multiple ways of being and knowing, has gained increasing traction, its practical implications remain underdeveloped. Questions of governance, pedagogy, legal pluralism, and intercultural translation remain insufficiently explored. What forms might development policy take if grounded in ontologies of relationality, reciprocity, or spiritual responsibility? Existing case studies from indigenous, feminist, and Afro-descendant communities provide important insights, yet require broader synthesis and theoretical integration (Escobar, 2018; Kothari et al., 2019).

Advancing development research therefore requires bridging normative ambition with methodological innovation. This entails a commitment to complexity, reflexivity, and transdisciplinarity, alongside a willingness to engage with the tensions between universality and difference, scale and specificity, and critique and construction. Only through such an orientation can development be reconfigured from an apparatus of intervention into a space of co-creation and shared flourishing.

8. Conclusion

The concept of development, once widely regarded as a neutral and universally desirable pathway to social progress, has evolved into a deeply contested terrain shaped by competing paradigms, normative

tensions, and historical legacies. This review has traced the trajectory of development thinking from its post-war modernisation foundations, through structuralist and neoliberal reconfigurations, to the emergence of critical, feminist, ecological, and decolonial perspectives. Taken together, these shifts underscore that development is not merely an economic or technical undertaking, but a profoundly political and epistemic project, one that has frequently obscured power asymmetries while advancing a singular vision of modernity.

What emerges is a field characterised by a persistent tension between two orientations: a reformist impulse seeking to render development more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable, and a transformative imperative aimed at interrogating and reconfiguring its underlying assumptions. This tension reflects broader questions concerning knowledge, justice, and the conditions of planetary life. In its dominant forms, development remains entangled in Western-centric teleologies, colonial epistemologies, and extractivist economic logics. While efforts to mitigate these limitations through participatory approaches, gender mainstreaming, and sustainability frameworks are significant, they often leave foundational structures largely intact.

At the same time, alternative visions continue to gain traction. Across the Global South and beyond, communities, scholars, and social movements are articulating development imaginaries grounded in relationality, care, dignity, autonomy, and ecological balance. These perspectives challenge the assumption of a singular developmental trajectory and instead foreground the possibility of multiple, coexisting futures. In this sense, development is more productively understood not as a universal endpoint but as a pluriversal dialogue, one oriented towards negotiating difference with humility, rather than imposing uniformity.

The analysis presented here has identified several critical gaps that warrant further scholarly attention, including the politics of institutional transformation, the practical operationalisation of pluriversality, the deepening of epistemic inclusion, the integration of intersectional justice, and the reconfiguration of development in the context of post-growth and climate-constrained futures. Addressing these gaps will require not only transdisciplinary engagement and methodological innovation, but also a sustained commitment to engaging voices and knowledge systems historically marginalised within development discourse. It also calls for renewed reflexivity among scholars and practitioners concerning the purposes, beneficiaries, and consequences of development interventions.

Rethinking development, therefore, extends beyond policy reform. It entails confronting a broader civilisational question: what it means to live well, collectively and sustainably, on a finite and fragile planet. No single framework, region, or intellectual tradition can provide a definitive answer. Rather, such understanding must emerge through a collective process of reflection and practice, one that recognises plurality as a condition of justice. In this sense, the future of development lies not in convergence towards a singular model, but in the ongoing effort to imagine and enact a world in which many worlds can coexist.

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