

From Growth to Resilience: A Critical Gaze to the Evolution of Development Discourse

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Article Info.	Abstract
Article History Received: January 8, 2025 Accepted: March 16, 2025 Email bhuwanipn64@gmail.com Cite Neupane, B. (2025). From growth to resilience: A critical gaze to the evolution of development discourse. <i>Journal of Productive Discourse</i>, 3(1), 73–81. https://doi.org/10.3126/prod.v3i1.78468	This study offers a critical examination of the transformative evolution of development discourse—from traditional, growth-centered paradigms to more recent frameworks that incorporate sustainability and resilience. Development thinking, once dominated by modernization and dependency theories, has gradually evolved through critical insights from post-development scholars and increasing awareness of global environmental and socio-economic challenges. The concept of sustainability in development emphasizes the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental systems, while resilience highlights the capacity to adapt to and recover from disruptions. In this context, the study explores how sustainability and resilience have become central to contemporary development discourse and practice. A qualitative desk review methodology has been employed, through which relevant literature is selectively and synthetically analyzed. The findings indicate that integrating the three concepts—development, sustainability, and resilience—is crucial for addressing complex development challenges linked to climate change, inequality, and political instability. The study concludes by proposing future research directions, including the operationalization of integrated frameworks in diverse contexts and the role of local knowledge systems in advancing sustainable and resilient development pathways. Keywords: development discourse, evolution, integration, sustainability, resilience

Introduction

The notion of development has undergone a significant transformation since its emergence as a growth-centric dominant paradigm in the mid-20th century, gradually shifting toward the more recent concepts of sustainability and resilience. Initially, development was largely equated with economic growth and industrialization, marked by increases in gross domestic product (GDP), technological advancement, and modernization (Rostow, 1960). However, this growth-driven model failed to encompass critical dimensions of society, such as

equity, environmental sustainability, and cultural values, and was therefore criticized for its narrow scope. Scholars and policymakers began to recognize that economic growth alone could not address the complex challenges faced by societies, particularly in the Global South (Sen, 1999).

The limitations of the growth-centric development model became evident during its application in Latin American countries, where it faced significant criticism. This gave rise to dependency theory, which preceded post-development critiques. Frank (1967), a key

proponent of dependency theory, argued that global economic structures perpetuated inequality between developed and developing nations, fostering underdevelopment rather than progress in the latter. Development thinking was further expanded during the 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of two important approaches: the Basic Needs Approach (BNA) and the Capabilities Approach (CA), respectively.

A notable shift in the development paradigm occurred during the 1990s with the rise of the Human Development Approach, which emphasized human well-being rather than mere economic growth. During this period, post-development thinkers also began advocating for alternative frameworks to address poverty and development. Escobar (1995), for instance, critiqued dominant Western-centric development paradigms and proposed alternative models grounded in Indigenous knowledge and agency.

In response to these theoretical shifts, growing global environmental concerns led to the integration of sustainability into development discourse. Notably, the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987) played a pivotal role in popularizing the term “sustainable development,” defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. This report marked a turning point by embedding environmental, social, and economic considerations into development planning. As sustainable development was gaining traction, the concept of resilience emerged as a complementary framework—particularly within the contexts of climate change and disaster risk management. Resilience emphasizes the capacity of systems, communities, and individuals to adapt to and recover from shocks while maintaining essential functions (Folke, 2006).

Despite the proliferation of development theories, models, and critiques, the prevailing understanding of “development” appears to be faltering rather than progressing—especially in the Third World or Global South. In this context, the

present study seeks to analyze the emergence and evolution of development discourses, tracing the transition from traditional growth-centric models to more holistic approaches that incorporate sustainability and resilience. At the same time, it offers a critical lens to examine the underlying meanings embedded within these discourses, with particular emphasis on sustainability and resilience. The structure of this theme-based review article includes the following sections: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

The Review of Literature

The evolution of development discourse has been shaped by a wide range of theoretical contributions and critical reflections. Early development models, such as Rostow's (1960) *Stages of Economic Growth*, conceptualized development as a linear process driven by industrialization and technological advancement. Dependency theorist Frank (1967) offered a strong critique of modernization theory, arguing that development in the Global South was systematically hindered by exploitative global economic structures. For Frank, underdevelopment was not merely a transitional stage to be overcome but a condition perpetuated by the historical and ongoing dominance of capitalist economies. The assumptions underlying the linear, Western-centered model of development were, at best, questionable for the Global South—if not outright inappropriate.

In addition, the growth-centric model drew criticism for neglecting the socio-political and environmental contexts in which development takes place (Sen, 1999). Mounting environmental degradation and increasing social disparities—driven by the reckless and self-serving exploitation of natural resources—became central to these critiques.

Escobar (1995), a prominent post-development theorist, extended this critique by challenging the very foundations of the modernization-based development project. Escobar argued that development discourse often functioned as a tool of Western hegemony, imposing Eurocentric

values while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems. Escobar's perspective emphasized the significance of cultural pluralism and the need to recognize diverse pathways to well-being that go beyond economic growth.

The introduction of sustainable development in the late 20th century marked a major turning point in development thinking. The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) underscored the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental systems, calling for development strategies that promote both equity and ecological integrity. Scholars such as Sachs (1999) expanded on this framework, advocating for a multidimensional approach that addresses poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation concurrently.

More recently, resilience thinking has enriched development discourse by focusing on the ability of systems to absorb, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses. Folke (2006) described resilience as a dynamic process that enables communities and ecosystems to respond to disturbances while maintaining essential functions. This approach has been especially influential in fields like climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, where responding to uncertainty and rapid change is essential (Adger, 2000).

The integration of sustainability and resilience into development discourse reflects a growing awareness of the complex, interlinked challenges contemporary societies face. Scholars such as Leach et al. (2010) argue that addressing these challenges requires transformative strategies that go beyond incremental improvements, calling for systemic change across multiple levels and sectors.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based review methodology to critically examine the evolution of development discourse, with a particular focus on the intersection of sustainability and resilience. Following Bowen (2009), this approach allows for the synthesis of a wide range of theoretical perspectives and empirical studies, facilitating the identification of key trends, debates, and gaps within contemporary discourse.

To trace the historical trajectory and conceptual shifts in development thinking, this study systematically reviews purposively selected peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and institutional publications. Sources include reputable organizations such as the United Nations (2015) and the World Bank, as well as academic databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. The literature was selected using targeted keyword searches involving terms such as *development discourse*, *sustainability*, *resilience*, *post-development theory*, and *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. The study primarily engages with literature published from the mid-20th century to the present, offering a balanced perspective that incorporates both historical and contemporary insights (Ridley, 2012).

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to identify recurring patterns and conceptual frameworks within the literature. This involved systematically coding texts into thematic categories such as economic growth, social equity, environmental sustainability, adaptive capacity, and transformative change. Additionally, the study draws on Foucauldian discourse analysis to critically examine how power relations, knowledge production, and institutional narratives shape the framing of sustainability and resilience within development discourse. Through this methodological framework, the study aims to contribute to a more critical and comprehensive understanding of development discourse, highlighting the role of academic inquiry in revealing the deeper meanings and implications of sustainability and resilience in today's development paradigm.

Results and Discussion

This study seeks to uncover key insights into the evolving discourse on development, while simultaneously offering a critical lens through which to unpack the underlying meanings embedded in development narratives. It begins by tracing the historical evolution and paradigm shifts in development theory, followed by an exploration of how sustainability has been integrated into development practices. The discussion then turns

to the emergence of resilience in response to global challenges. Additionally, the study highlights the increasing convergence of sustainability and resilience, demonstrating how these concepts are becoming more closely intertwined in development planning and policy.

Historical Evolution and Shifts in Development Paradigms

Development discourse has gradually evolved from a narrow focus on economic growth to a more holistic understanding that includes social equity, environmental protection, and cultural diversity. Early modernization theories laid the foundation for initial development goals but were soon criticized for their simplistic, linear assumptions and failure to address structural inequalities (Rostow, 1960; Sen, 1999).

Modernization theories that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s defined development primarily in terms of economic growth. These theories assumed that developing countries needed to replicate the paths taken by Western industrialized nations to achieve progress. Rostow's (1960) linear model of five stages of economic growth is a key example. He proposed that all societies progress through the stages of: (1) traditional society, (2) preconditions for takeoff, (3) takeoff, (4) drive to maturity, and (5) age of high mass consumption.

Each stage was defined by specific economic and social characteristics. In the traditional stage, societies were marked by subsistence agriculture, limited technology, and static structures with minimal economic mobility. Transitioning to the second stage required infrastructure development, centralized governance, and initial investments. The third stage—takeoff—involved rapid industrialization and self-sustaining economic growth, with expanding industries and technological advancement shifting economies from agriculture to industry. In the fourth stage, economies diversified beyond initial sectors. Finally, the fifth stage brought high levels of output, widespread affluence, and increased consumption alongside improved living standards, economic security, and social services. However, this linear model failed to account for the diversity of global

societies beyond the Euro-American context and ignored the varied levels and conditions of development worldwide.

Dependency Theories as a Critique of Modernization

In contrast to modernization theory, dependency theory offered a structural critique, arguing that global economic inequalities were the result of exploitative relationships rather than stages of development. Frank (1967) argued that modernization reinforced global inequality by creating economic dependencies between the so-called developed (core) and developing (periphery) nations. In this core-periphery structure, developed nations extracted raw materials from the periphery at low cost and exported finished goods back, resulting in a one-sided economic relationship that perpetuated underdevelopment in peripheral countries. In this model, the core remains wealthy and dominant, while the periphery remains dependent and disadvantaged.

Basic Needs Approach

The 1970s saw a shift in development thinking with the emergence of the Basic Needs Approach (BNA), which responded to the limitations of growth-centric strategies. Haq (1976) argued that traditional development models failed to meet the fundamental needs of the poorest populations. He proposed a paradigm focused on fulfilling basic human needs—such as food, shelter, health care, and education—rather than merely pursuing increased production and economic output.

Haq also emphasized employment opportunities and institutional reforms aimed at addressing poverty and inequality. Haq advocated for a new international economic order that would improve the political and economic bargaining power of poorer nations. Rather than being framed as acts of charity, resource redistribution and global support were seen as rights of the underprivileged. Haq also criticized Eurocentric development models, advocating instead for a more inclusive framework that considers the diverse needs and cultural contexts of developing countries. This shift

sought to create a more equitable and sustainable model of development rooted in human dignity and justice.

Capability Approach

In the 1980s, the Capability Approach emerged as an alternative to traditional welfare economics. Developed by [Amartya Sen \(1999\)](#), this approach emphasized what individuals are actually able to do and be—their capabilities. Sen challenged the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in dominant development theories, particularly the idea that all societies must follow the same Western path to modernity. Sen critiqued the rigid dichotomy between modern and traditional societies and highlighted the need to consider external and structural factors that affect development.

The Capability Approach focuses on expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities to lead lives they have reason to value. It reoriented development thinking towards human empowerment, well-being, and justice, and called for the dismantling of barriers to opportunity, such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to education and health care. This represented a paradigm shift in how development was understood and pursued.

Human Development Approach

Building on the Capability Approach, [Sen and Nussbaum \(1993\)](#) proposed the Human Development Approach, which prioritized the expansion of people's freedoms and capabilities over mere economic growth. This framework emphasized key dimensions of human well-being, including access to education, health care, political participation, and social inclusion. Rather than viewing individuals as passive recipients of aid, this approach positioned them as active agents of change in their own development processes.

Structural Adjustment Programs

The 1980s and 1990s marked another shift in the global development paradigm. This period saw the rise of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which reflected an appropriation of development structures to align with the interests of developed countries. These programs were

introduced and promoted by international financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). SAPs emphasized macroeconomic stabilization, market liberalization, and fiscal austerity as key pathways to development.

However, these programs were widely criticized for exacerbating poverty, causing economic instability, and producing adverse social effects—rather than achieving the long-term growth and stability they promised. [Syster \(2022\)](#) argues that SAPs imposed uniform neoliberal policies that undermined the sovereignty of borrowing countries and disproportionately benefited Western nations at the expense of low-income countries. This critique aligns with a Foucauldian perspective on institutional discourse, which highlights how such programs exert control and surveillance over developing nations. These interventions shape both economic policies and social structures in ways that reflect and reinforce neoliberal ideologies, emphasizing the power dynamics and implications for national sovereignty and social welfare.

Post-development Critique of Development

Post-development critiques have drawn attention to the limitations of the dominant, growth-oriented development paradigm, emphasizing how historical exploitation and cultural hegemony have shaped global development narratives ([Escobar, 1995](#)). Drawing on the works of Foucault (1972) and Said (1978), Escobar argues that the very concept of the “Third World” was produced through the discourse and practices of development that emerged after World War II. Escobar maintains that framing development as a discourse allows for a critical examination of its underlying domination, as well as its conditions, possibilities, and often inescapable consequences—particularly in the Global South.

[Escobar \(1995\)](#) further challenges traditional development models, calling for a shift away from Western-centric, linear, and growth-driven frameworks. Instead, Escobar advocates for context-specific, localized approaches that prioritize well-being, sustainability, and social justice. Escobar

critiques the hegemonic dominance of traditional paradigms for ignoring local knowledge and cultural contexts, and for imposing external models that often lead to cultural misunderstandings and failed interventions. Escobar emphasizes the importance of community agency and asserts that development should be led by the people it aims to serve. Escobar's critique encourages the use of diverse, culturally grounded strategies that respect local narratives and practices—especially in rural areas of countries like Nepal.

From a related but distinct perspective, Mignolo and Walsh (2018) propose a decolonial approach to development, which aims to address the enduring legacies of colonialism and imperialism in shaping global inequalities. Decoloniality calls for dismantling Western-centric knowledge systems and power structures and advocates for embracing diverse epistemologies and ontologies within development discourse.

Feminist scholars Zacharenko and Elomäki (2022) have introduced a gender-centered critique, advocating for a development approach that emphasizes gender equality, social reproduction, and care work. Their framework challenges traditional Eurocentric economic models by highlighting the need to recognize and value unpaid care work, and by addressing persistent gender-based inequalities in access to resources and opportunities.

In alignment with post-development critiques, Pimbert and Uhnák (2019) promote frameworks such as agroecology and food sovereignty, which aim to create sustainable and equitable food systems as alternatives to industrial agriculture. These approaches emphasize small-scale, community-based farming, ecological sustainability, local knowledge, and the rights of communities to control their food systems. Such alternative paradigms offer varied and inclusive perspectives for addressing poverty and development, challenging conventional frameworks in favor of more sustainable, participatory, and context-specific strategies.

Sustainable Development as a Discourse

Sustainability has become a central focus in contemporary development discourse, largely due to growing awareness of environmental degradation and social inequality. Historically, this shift can be traced back to the [Brundtland Report \(1987\)](#), which played a foundational role in shaping the modern understanding of sustainable development. The report asserted that genuine sustainability must balance environmental protection, social inclusion, and economic viability (WCED, 1987). This integrative approach remains highly relevant and has since been institutionalized through global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which highlight the interconnected nature of environmental, social, and economic goals.

Using Foucault's (1980) concept of power/knowledge helps illuminate how sustainability has been framed and disseminated by influential institutions such as the United Nations. The SDGs promote specific narratives that interweave environmental, social, and economic objectives. These narratives are propagated through education, media, and policy, reinforcing a particular vision of development. From a discourse analysis perspective, sustainable development is not just a set of practices—it is also a powerful framework that shapes how we conceptualize development itself. The emphasis on balancing different domains—environmental, social, and economic—constructs a model in which progress in one area is viewed as dependent on progress in others. This interdependence informs how development policies are formulated and implemented, influencing global development agendas and national strategies alike.

The Rise of Resilience in Response to Global Challenges

While the concept of sustainability continues to gain relevance in the present world, resilience thinking has also emerged as a new approach for addressing contemporary global challenges. Although both concepts aim to confront complex issues, they originated at different times and

with distinct intentions. Resilience has become especially important in responding to climate change, natural disasters, and socio-political instability.

Unlike traditional development models that prioritize stability and control, resilience emphasizes adaptability, learning, and transformation in the face of uncertainty (Folke, 2006; Adger, 2000). This approach has influenced development policies by equipping communities to better respond to and recover from disruptions, thereby supporting long-term sustainability in uncertain conditions.

Notably, both sustainability and resilience seek to address global challenges holistically, but they do so with different emphases. Sustainability focuses on maintaining equilibrium across various sectors, whereas resilience centers on the capacity to adapt and transform. Together, these discourses inform development practices by highlighting different strategies for managing and governing Third World countries.

Drawing on Foucault (1997), resilience thinking as a discourse introduces a new form of governance, encouraging communities to self-organize and adapt to challenges. This aligns with Foucault's concept of governmentality, where power operates through shaping the capacities of individuals and communities to govern themselves. Development policies now incorporate resilience frameworks that guide populations toward specific behaviors and practices. A Foucauldian discourse analysis thus provides a deeper understanding of how sustainability and resilience intersect and shape contemporary governance.

Underlying Meanings in Third World Development

Foucault's discourse analysis reveals how development discourses like sustainability and resilience serve as mechanisms of control over Third World countries. These discourses can be seen as promoting norms and values aligned with Western interests, thereby perpetuating subtle forms of domination.

Furthermore, Foucauldian analysis uncovers how individuals and communities in the Global South internalize these narratives, shaping their identities and perceptions of progress. In adopting sustainability and resilience frameworks, they may unknowingly overlook alternative, locally grounded development models.

By examining the interrelationship between sustainability and resilience through a Foucauldian lens, we can better understand how power and knowledge influence development discourses and practices in the Third World.

Synergies and Tensions between Sustainability and Resilience: A Discourse Analysis

Sustainability and resilience are often discussed together, yet scholarly literature reveals both synergies and tensions between the two. Sustainability is rooted in long-term goals and intergenerational equity, while resilience emphasizes flexibility and rapid adaptation to immediate challenges (Leach et al., 2010). Alibašić (2022) critically explores the interaction between these concepts, particularly in the context of climate resilience planning in local governments. Alibašić argues that integrating resilience policies into local governance can help achieve both sustainability and resilience objectives.

This dual approach highlights the potential compatibility between promoting long-term sustainability—such as ecological stability and fairness for future generations—and building resilience to pressing issues like climate change. Embedding resilience strategies within sustainability frameworks allows communities to design systems that are both stable and adaptable. However, integration is not without challenges. The immediate demands of resilience may sometimes clash with the slow, cumulative nature of sustainability goals. Alibašić's analysis offers a nuanced perspective on balancing stability and adaptability, enriching discourse on how to navigate the synergies and tensions between these two paradigms.

Conclusion

The evolution of development discourse—from traditional economic growth models to more holistic frameworks encompassing sustainability and resilience—reflects a significant shift prompted by global challenges. Drawing on Foucault's discourse analysis, it becomes evident that early development theories, focused primarily on economic growth and industrialization, have been critically reevaluated in the face of environmental and social crises, necessitating broader, more inclusive approaches.

Sustainability emphasizes the interdependence of economic, social, and environmental systems, while resilience focuses on adaptability and the ability to recover from shocks and stressors. The integration of these discourses is essential for addressing urgent issues such as climate change, socio-economic inequality, and political instability. Within development policies, sustainability and resilience function as powerful tools for shaping knowledge and governance in the Third World, defining what counts as 'progress' and prescribing how societies should be structured. Academics play a crucial role in interrogating these narratives. By contextualizing concepts within historical and socio-political frameworks, they reveal the power dynamics at play and influence policymaking through interdisciplinary engagement. Their critical work ensures that development models are not only effective but also equitable—paving the way for sustainable and resilient futures.

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