

Innovations

Bourdieu's Theory and Social Development

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Abstract: *The Bourdieu's theory uniquely demonstrates the three pillars, namely Habits, Capital, and Field, with their inter-relationships, and how they impact on social development. In this context, this paper objectively attempts to establish the relationships among livelihood, social cohesion, poverty and development, by citing a possible post-war situation in general. Indicatively, this paper explores the key concepts such as development and its various types, relational aspects of development, civil war, post-war development, livelihoods, social cohesion, poverty, culture, habits, and the field. This paper effectively highlights the major development-oriented core aspects and variables within a post-war situation, and presents potential avenues for future studies, in consideration of Bourdieu's theory as the most suitable framework for exploring their relationships.*

Key Words: *Bourdieu's theory, development, livelihood, poverty, social cohesion, social capital, war, wellbeing*

1. Introduction

In the literature, Bourdieu's theory becomes plays a critical role in social development that demonstrates the dissemination of discrimination and social divisions with the non-financial assets based in culture and social phenomena. The Bourdieu's theory constructively and uniquely identifies the three pillars of Habitus, Capital, and Field, though they have inter-relationships between them. This three-pillar explanation highlights the social concerns and how they can impact on social development. In this context, this paper attempts to explore the relationships among livelihood, social cohesion, poverty and development, by citing a possible post-war situation in general.

To explore the relationship of Bourdieu's theory towards social development, potential and possible post war situation is explored in general first, and livelihood, social cohesion and poverty are next explained. This paper encompasses development (meaning, definition and types), its relationship to a potential civil-war

and post-conflict situation, livelihood, social cohesion, poverty, culture, habitus, and other relevant literature. Further, this study predominantly adopts Bourdieu's theory as the main framework for exploring the relationships among the concepts: livelihood improvement, social cohesion, poverty mitigation, and social development.

The objective of the paper is to highlight the relationships among the above said variables that can facilitate developmental studies in social sciences. This paper can contribute to initiate possible relevant future studies empirically. Hence, this paper has possible implications to that extent. This paper has been structured with the initial explanation of development, then extended with post-war conflict in general, livelihood, social cohesion and poverty. Indicatively, these concerns are next explored in the context of Bourdieu's theory to explore the relationship between Bourdieu's theory and development. Also, this paper considers the post war situation in Sri Lanka where appropriate. Finally, this paper presents a concluding remark to sum up this paper.

2. Development

Development is viewed as a positive, people-centered, and multidimensional process that goes beyond economic growth to include freedom, equity, health, education, and environmental safety (World Bank, 2004). It integrates economic, social, and environmental sustainability, which must work together to achieve genuine development (Basiago, 1999). Although the concept is complex and often debated, development generally refers to progress and positive change across social, economic, and environmental spheres (Thomas, 1999; McGillivray, 2018).

Sen (2000) argues that development should focus on improving people's freedoms and quality of life rather than only material gains. Real development is ultimately self-driven, helping vulnerable communities transform their lives meaningfully, with external support playing only a supportive role (Goulet, 2006). The United Nations (2024) views development as a multidimensional process based on economic, social, and environmental pillars, though the impacts of different types of development remain contested, reflecting the ambiguous nature of the term.

2.1 Is Development Always Positive?

Sachs (1999) argues that development is not always positive and includes both constructive and negative outcomes. The concept gained prominence after World War II, especially when President Truman's 1949 speech introduced the term "underdeveloped areas," reducing the diverse Global South into a single category. After decades of development efforts, Sachs notes that the results were disappointing, as the gap between rich and poor nations widened. By 1996, the income gap had tripled since 1960, raising doubts about whether development has

truly benefited developing countries and highlighting the ambiguity of its positive impact.

2.2 Types of Development

Development is meant when an aspect or activity relates to move on to the next level; and hence it takes form relatively. For example, when human progress is considered in terms of development, it can be termed as human development (UNDP, 2024; Taku and Shackelford, 2024). Consistently, McCayet *al.* (2022) also indicate that the varied understandings of sustainable development often create confusion. Therefore, this section covers economic development, human development and social development as most appropriate in this study.

(a) Economic development

Goulet (1990) describes early development theory as a linear economic growth model driven by savings, investment, and aid. Consistently, Hopkins (1991) argues that economic growth supports social investment but requires human skill development; and Islam et al. (2003) emphasize sustainable development across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Moreover, Schumpeter and Svedberg (2021) note that post-war growth technologies have reached their limits and newer digital innovations are often environmentally harmful, widening global development gaps since the mid-1960s. In this context, economic development can be referred as the financial, social, human, environmental, and technological enhancement as a whole.

(b) Human development

Goulet (1990) pioneered human development theory, shifting the focus from economic growth to people's well-being (Cowen & Shenton, 2017). UNDP (1990) defines human development as expanding choices in health, education, living standards, and freedoms.

Sen (2004) highlights the flexible, context-specific dimensions of human development and integrates human rights into this framework. Alkire (2010) argues that human development involves both expanding capabilities and the well-being outcomes resulting from using those capabilities.

(c) Social development

Chambers (1997) argues that rapid change intensifies both opportunities and risks in development, resulting in mixed outcomes for human well-being. In a social context, Peter (2001), Dowd (2019), and Waghid (2014) emphasize that equality, equity, and social justice enable inclusion, sustainable livelihoods, and empowerment, all of which can be weakened in war and post-war contexts.

Further, Parke et al. (2019) describe social development as a holistic process that advances social, cultural, economic, and emotional well-being through assets such as community networks, civic engagement, and traditional knowledge. Also, Mir et al. (2020) argue that development must go beyond economic growth to address poverty, reduce inequality, and promote dignity, rights, and equity as core dimensions of social development.

3. Post- conflict and development in general

Post-conflict situations are expected to improve citizens' lives, but Malual (2008) notes that supporting development in such contexts is difficult because conflict destroys key livelihood assets. He argues that sustainable livelihood opportunities are essential for lasting peace and poverty reduction. Limitations of relief-based aid have prompted a shift toward long-term development focused on capacity building and empowering affected communities.

Malual (2008), drawing on Lewis (1999), Satge (2004), and Anderson (1996), emphasizes that post-conflict development should shift from top-down relief to participatory approaches that empower communities, reduce dependency, and are carefully adapted to the local context. However, even after civil war, multiple forms of conflict persist, including religious, identity-based, resource-related, caste and class tensions, which continue to marginalize affected communities and weaken social cohesion and development (Köpke et al., 2021; Riskin, 2013). O'Donnell et al. (2018) note that war and ongoing conflicts severely damage livelihoods, infrastructure, and economic activities, hindering national development, while peace creates the possibility for positive progress.

4. Livelihood

Livelihoods are essential for human survival, and post-war recovery must prioritize restoring them. Ellis (2000) defines livelihoods as the use of five types of capital such as natural, physical, financial, human, and social, combined with activities and access to resources that help people overcome challenges. Bourdieu's theory also supports understanding livelihood and development dynamics (Sakdapolrak, 2014), and the World Bank (2011) stresses the need to revive livelihoods in post-conflict communities.

UNOCHA (2010) promotes "Early Recovery," linking relief to long-term development through sustainable livelihoods, community infrastructure, environmental rehabilitation, and good governance. Sustainable livelihoods are those that can withstand shocks, maintain or improve assets, and benefit future generations (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Krantz, 2001). Culture plays a key role in shaping communication, social hierarchies, and cohesion, with cultural practices

strengthening social interaction and supporting livelihood development (Swartz, 2012).

5. Social cohesion

Social cohesion is commonly viewed as multidimensional, involving both equality and social capital, reducing social exclusion and strengthening social relationships (Jenson, 2010). However, defining social cohesion remains difficult due to diverse interpretations linking it to social equality, economic growth, territorial development, collective efficacy, trust, well-being, and belonging (Vergolini, 2011; Moustakas, 2023). It reflects the connectedness and solidarity within a community and aims to create social balance and prevent social fractures (Manca, 2014).

Social integration is seen as a process leading to social cohesion, which can be understood as a shared moral community enabling trust among citizens (Larsen, 2014). In contexts of conflict, external threats can increase internal unity, while in post-war societies, cultural traditions and livelihood practices help rebuild social cohesion and support social development (Markides & Cohn, 1982; Ullah, 2024).

6. Poverty

Chambers et al. (1981) highlighted poverty as a global social issue and especially severe in developing countries, particularly in rural areas where its intensity is self-evident. Reflecting a philosophical perspective, Arnold (2018) cites Socrates, noting that poverty is not simply the reduction of material wealth, but the expansion of human greed, suggesting that while material needs matter in an imperfect world, the true value lies in the goods of the soul.

Reinert (2023) adds that poverty is defined by the lack of essential facilities to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, clean water, shelter, healthcare, sanitation, education, and recreation, indicating that poverty represents adverse living conditions that challenge the broader indicators of well-being (Semasinghe, 2015).

6.1 Poverty as a Social Problem

Suter et al. (2017) state that poverty, a major social issue since the nineteenth century, remains one of the most critical global challenges today, affecting both the Global North and South. Since the rise of sociological studies on social problems, poverty has been a central focus. Many issues such as crime, violence, substance abuse, family breakdown, and suicide are often seen as closely linked to and influenced by poverty.

6.2 Worldwide Poverty

Todaro and Smith (2009) highlight stark global inequalities, where a small portion of people live with comfort, security, and good health, while many, especially in the

poorest third, face inadequate food, shelter, poor health, illiteracy, and unemployment with limited opportunities for improvement. They note that over 40% of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day, reflecting severe absolute poverty. The World Bank (2024a) similarly reports around 700 million people living below the extreme poverty line of \$2.15 per day, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, conflict-affected regions, and rural areas, making poverty a major global social challenge.

6.3 Poverty in Developing Countries

The major causes of conflict in most of these countries is due to unequal access to resource, economic, political and social service. According to Steward *et al.* (2002), the wars in developing countries have heavy human, economic, and social costs and are a major cause of poverty and underdevelopment. Consequently, addressing the root causes and enabling transitions from conflict to peace is essential for fostering development and reducing poverty (Malual, 2008). Pillay, *et al.* (2023) mentioned that in 1995, the World Social Summit convened in Copenhagen concluded that poverty is a major threat to the future of humankind in developing nations.

6.3.1 Poverty in Asia

The Multidimensional Poverty Analysis (2022) notes that Asia is highly diverse, with major gains in poverty reduction over the last three decades, especially in Southeast Asia due to economic reforms and regional integration. Asia's share of global extreme poverty dropped from 52.7% in 1990 to 2.9% in 2019, largely driven by China, though South Asia and many Pacific countries lag behind and still face high income and multidimensional poverty. According to the World Bank (2024b), Faris Hadad-Zervos highlights a twofold strategy for developing nations: maintaining macroeconomic stability through reforms and promoting private investment and capital inflows to support growth and reduce poverty.

6.4 Identical Relational Aspects to Poverty

This section attempts to explore the connectedness with various features of poverty in relation to other aspects. This would help understand the poverty sociologically.

(a) War and poverty

Good hand (2001) and Marks (2016) emphasize the strong link between poverty and conflict, noting that poverty increases the risk of civil war, while armed conflict weakens governance and economic performance, making renewed conflict more likely. Similarly, Sarvananthan (2007) describes a reciprocal relationship, where

poverty can both fuel conflict and result from it, often worsening living conditions and even leading to starvation.

(b) Corruption and poverty

Negin et al. (2010) argue that corruption both drives poverty and blocks efforts to reduce it by weakening economic growth and damaging public institutions, while poverty itself can encourage corruption. Corruption is a complex issue with serious economic and social consequences, particularly harming the poorest communities (Rontos & Vavouras, 2015; Kumaran, 2020; Salahuddin et al., 2020). Effective democratic governance is expected to reduce corruption, which is broadly defined as the misuse of entrusted power for personal gain (Knights, 2018; Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020; Transparency International, 2024). The World Bank (2024c) highlights that corruption disproportionately burdens the poor by increasing costs and restricting access to essential services like health, education, and justice.

(c) Poverty and development

In a Bourdieusian sense, rural communities operate within a socially constructed and historically shaped “rural field,” where constant struggles over economic and social resources occur (Warde, 2004; Arnot & Naveed, 2017). Poverty, especially in developing countries, is a multidimensional issue reflected in poor health, low education, inadequate income, low living standards, disempowerment, and insecurity (Alkire, 2010; Ferreira, 2011).

Social cohesion is also multidimensional and has a negative relationship with poverty, where stronger cohesion reduces poverty and its impacts (Ariely, 2014; McLeigh et al., 2018). However, it is less explored in developing contexts, requiring a multidimensional approach (Usman & Olagunju, 2017). Community culture and habitus influence economic conditions and civic engagement, with marginalized groups often relying on patronage for survival, limiting participation (Pettit, 2016). Overall, Bourdieu’s theory provides a suitable framework for examining the interactions between livelihood, social cohesion, poverty, and social development in this study.

7. Theoretical overview of bourdieu’s theory (1930 – 2002)

Brosnan (2010) highlights that Bourdieu’s influential sociology of culture focuses on how power operates through social stratification. Bourdieu examined how culture is produced, reproduced, and transformed, showing its link to social inequality and power, especially through different forms of capital such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Claridge, 2015). His theoretical framework centers on three interconnected pillars: habitus, capital, and field, which together explain how

individuals and groups navigate social structures (Bourdieu, 2013; Brosnan, 2010; Albright et al., 2018).

Figure 1: Habitus in Bourdieu's Theory

Habitus

- *Habitus is the generative scheme (or set of dispositions) that agents acquire primarily in their childhood, but also in other social contexts (e.g., medical school).*
- *Habitus is structured by an agent's past and present circumstances such as, his/her formal (e.g., institutionally provided training) and informal education (e.g., exposure to the worldviews of others).*
- *Habitus is structuring in that it influences an agent's current and future decisions (e.g., especially choice). It is not random but is, instead, an agent's internalized schema of perceptions, appreciations, and actions. It is the embodiment of social structures that an agent unconsciously absorbs and enacts in daily life.*

Bourdieu (1989) emphasizes habitus as a foundational concept in his theory of practice. He defines it as a deep-seated structure that shapes thought and behavior, influencing practice without directly determining it. In outline of the Theory of Practice, Bourdieu characterizes habitus as a system of enduring and adaptable dispositions – an acquired set of generative principles formed under specific social conditions.

The habitus generates thoughts, perceptions, and actions that correspond to these conditions, thus potentially reflecting the formation of social capital, which cannot be assessed in monetary/numerical term. In this context, it is possible to argue that such a social capital can be included in the form of habitus.

Bourdieu (1986, 1989) identifies four interconnected forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. These forms of capital collectively influence livelihoods and development. Since social capital consists of intangible values, perceptions, and actions, it can be understood as part of the habitus of a society. Although it cannot be measured quantitatively, it is closely related to habitus, which Bourdieu defines as a key pillar for analyzing the structure of society. Therefore, the non-quantifiable aspects of social capital can be conceptualized as part of a society's habitus.

Figure 2: Capital in Bourdieu's Theory

Capital

- *Capital are the resources that agents compete to acquire and, through their acquisition, gain power and/ or social standing. Determining what qualifies as legitimate capital is part of the struggles that agents participate in within a field.*
- *Multiple forms of capital exist – economic (having monetary resources – e.g., A research grant), social (having the “right” social network – e.g., collaborating with a famous researcher), and cultural (having knowledge – e.g., a fellowship in a prestigious specialty),*
- *Any resource can be demanded a form of capital if it is widely valued and sought after within the field.*

According to Bourdieu (1980, 1989), a field has been referred as a system of social positions, which have been established through culture in terms of social norms, values, traditions, customs, and thoughts (see Figure 3). Hence, it is potentially possible to demonstrate that the field can consist of culture of a society.

Figure 3: Field in Bourdieu's Theory

Field

- *A field is a social space where agents (individuals or groups) interact and participate in exchanges and events. Agents occupy social positions within the hierarchy of the field. Higher positions are acquired by agents whose professionalism and personal characteristics are perceived by other agents as prestigious or valuable. This endows the agents with high levels of power (refer to capital).*
- *A field is a space of competition where social agents act – both consciously and unconsciously – to acquire power, or to maintain or change their social position.*
- *Each field has its own rules, traditions, and history. It is continually evolving because of the constant struggle among agents to acquire power.*

7.1 Livelihood, Social Cohesion, Poverty and Social Development in Bourdieu's Theory

Social institutions and culture shape internal social dynamics, and cultural processes develop through their own mechanisms. Using Bourdieu's 3-pillar framework and incorporating Ellis's livelihood components, it is shown that habitus relates to livelihood behaviors and strategies. These behaviors are shaped by socialization through family, education, religion, politics, peers, and cultural norms. Such social and cultural experiences influence how people adapt to economic changes, face

challenges, and identify opportunities for poverty reduction, ultimately shaping their habitus toward development.

Capital – Poverty and Social Cohesion

This theory explains the link between poverty and social cohesion by showing how economic, social, and cultural resources, along with community networks, support poverty reduction through livelihood activities. Sharing resources, cultural interaction, and mutual understanding between communities' help build knowledge, reduce poverty, and strengthen social cohesion.

Field – Social Development

Community leaders (e.g., community-based organizations), religious figures (e.g., priests), and youth and women's group leaders (e.g. youngsters' associations, youth clubs, sports clubs and etc.) highlight the role of power dynamics in community development projects, often leading to internal and external conflicts as individuals pursue their own interests. Conceptually, Bourdieu's Habitus, Capital, and Field, combined with livelihood components, interact with social cohesion and wellbeing, showing a clear relationship between these elements.

7.2 Bourdieus' Theory and Its Relevance for Social Development

Bourdieu's theory offers a strong framework for analyzing how social structures, cultural capital, habitus, and field shape livelihoods, social cohesion, poverty, and social development. In post-war contexts, where conflict, disasters, and socio-political challenges affect marginalized communities, his concepts help explain how historical inequalities and institutional barriers influence people's livelihood strategies and access to resources (Nel & Righarts, 2008; Ellis, 2000).

Habitus clarifies how cultural background shapes economic practices, while livelihood assets can be understood within this framework. Social cohesion and poverty can be examined as mediating factors that influence development outcomes. Bourdieu's idea of "field" further reveals how factors such as ethnicity, caste, gender, and religion affect power dynamics and resource access, ultimately impacting development. Overall, Bourdieu's framework provides valuable insight into the interconnected processes of livelihood improvement, poverty reduction, and community cohesion.

8. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this paper reviews comprehensively key concepts such as development and its various types, relational aspects of development, civil war, post-war development, livelihoods, social cohesion, poverty, culture, habitus, and the field. This analysis has effectively highlighted the major aspects and variables

involves in determining development within a post war situation. The explanation focuses on how Bourdieu's theory as the most suitable framework for exploring the relationships among the core variables of development. In this context, this paper attempts to structure potential relationships among livelihood, social cohesion, poverty and development to facilitate and derive potential conceptual framework(s) as a guide for future study in relation to the Bourdieu's theory.

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