Development Economics and Biocultural Justice Management: A Comparative Analysis of Regional Investment in Africa, Rights of Nature in Ecuador, and the Impacts of War on Biodiversity in Colombia in Light of the Right to Development

Pouria Mahmoudi,[1,*] - Alireza Arab[2]

[1] Master in Theoretical Economics, Faculty of Economics, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran, mahmoudi.pouria@ut.ac.ir
[2] Business Administration (Marketing), Tabaran Non-Profit University, Mashhad, Iran, alirezaarabalireza@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The fundamental question of this article is how to establish a conceptual relationship, within the framework of the theoretical economics of development, among three seemingly distinct areas — regional investment in Africa, the legal system of the rights of nature in Ecuador, and the impact of armed conflicts on biodiversity in Colombia. Focusing on the intersection between theoretical economics, development management, and biocultural justice, this study seeks to propose an analytical model for "multi-foundational development management," capable of simultaneously achieving economic efficiency, cultural justice, and environmental sustainability. The first section examines the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Investment Protocol from the perspective of the political economy of development and institutional management, in order to determine whether the free flow of capital necessarily leads to the expansion of the right to development, or whether, within the neoliberal framework, it reinforces the reproduction of structural dependency. The second section analyzes Ecuador's experience in institutionalizing the rights of nature and indigenous multiculturalism to show how biocultural management can provide an alternative developmental model based on economic and ecological coexistence. Finally, the third section, through an examination of Colombia's experience linking war, biodiversity loss, and economic reconstruction, explains the role of natural resource management and governance institutions in post-conflict sustainability. The overall conclusion is that sustainable development in the twenty-first century can only be achieved if economic theory transcends growth-centered paradigms and is redefined on the basis of biocultural justice and multi-level institutional management.

Keywords: **theoretical development economics, sustainable management, biocultural justice, right to development, regional investment, rights of nature, biodiversity**

1. *INTRODUCTION*

The concept of development in contemporary economic literature has evolved from an exclusive focus on GDP growth toward social justice, environmental sustainability, and respect for cultural diversity.{1} Classical development theories, from Adam Smith to Rostow, regarded development as a linear and quantitative process achieved through capital accumulation, industrialization, and market liberalization.{2} However, in recent decades, thinkers such as Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz, and Ha-Joon Chang have critiqued the neoliberal approach and demonstrated that development is a multidimensional concept encompassing human capabilities, effective institutions, and equitable distribution of benefits.{3}

Within this framework, the right to development, as a legal and ethical concept, emphasizes that development should be participatory, people-centered, and sustainable. Nevertheless, global experience shows that prevailing economic and managerial models still exhibit structural tensions between economic growth and environmental and cultural justice. International investment, particularly in Global South countries, has often resulted in the exploitation of natural resources and the weakening of local structures.{4}

In response, some countries, such as Ecuador, have sought to establish alternative development models based on indigenous philosophies and the rights of nature. Meanwhile, countries like Colombia face the complex challenge of post-conflict economic reconstruction while preserving biodiversity. In this context, the theoretical economics of development can provide a framework to understand these diverse experiences analytically and managerially.{5} This article is based on the assumption that the management of biocultural justice can serve as the missing link between economic theory, development policy, and environmental conservation.

2. *Theoretical Development Economics and Regional Investment in Africa: From Capital-Centric Growth to Rights-Based Development*

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Investment Protocol represents one of the most ambitious efforts for economic integration in a continent that has faced centuries of colonialism, structural inequality, and institutional fragility.{6} According to neoclassical theories, liberalization of capital and the expansion of regional trade should lead to optimal resource allocation, increased productivity, and economic growth. However, from the perspective of the political economy of development, this process, without managerial and institutional intervention, can reproduce center–periphery patterns, concentrating the benefits of investment in favor of developed countries and multinational corporations.{7}

Within the framework of developmental institutionalism (Chang, Rodrik, North), development is not the automatic result of a free market but rather the outcome of institutions designed to direct capital toward social and environmental objectives. In this sense, development management must balance economic efficiency with distributive justice. The key question regarding AfCFTA is whether its managerial and regulatory structures possess the capacity to channel investment toward endogenous development, sustainable employment, and the protection of natural resources. If African economic management fails to incorporate environmental and cultural justice criteria into its policies, the continental integration project risks repeating the same patterns of structural inequality as in the past. Therefore, realizing the right to development requires linking development theory, institutional management, and justice-oriented policies.{8}

The AfCFTA Investment Protocol symbolizes the historical efforts of African countries to transition from structural dependency to a phase of self-sustaining economic integration—an endeavor that reflects not only economic goals but also the continent's political and civilizational aspirations. Yet, examining it from the perspective of theoretical development economics reveals that merely creating a common market or facilitating capital flows does not necessarily lead to sustainable development. Neoclassical economics, in the framework of market efficiency and comparative advantage hypotheses, assumes that if investment and trade barriers are removed, market forces will automatically allocate resources efficiently and generate economic growth. While this view may appear attractive in theory, in practice, Africa faces obstacles rooted in its colonial history and inefficient institutional structures. Development economists such as André Gunder Frank and Samir Amin warned decades ago that the historical dependency of Global South countries on the global capitalist structure results in the benefits of free trade flowing primarily to developed nations. In such circumstances, capital liberalization without effective managerial and regulatory frameworks may lead not to economic justice but to capital flight, resource exploitation, and the weakening of domestic productive sectors.{9}

Consequently, to achieve the objectives of AfCFTA, African policymakers must go beyond neoclassical perspectives and move toward developmental institutionalist models that recognize the role of the state, culture, and social structures in the growth process. From the perspective of developmental institutionalism, extensively elaborated in the works of Ha-Joon Chang, Dani Rodrik, and Douglass North, development is not an automatic market outcome but a social and institutional process in which the government, society, and private sector must operate in a coordinated developmental management framework. As Chang emphasizes, industrialized countries achieved development not through free markets but through interventionist and supportive policies; therefore, expecting spontaneous growth through capital liberalization in African countries is a form of theoretical oversimplification.{10}

Within this framework, the AfCFTA Investment Protocol can only become a tool for genuine development if Africa's economic governance structures can steer investment toward social, environmental, and technological priorities. Development management, in this sense, means establishing mechanisms to ensure that capital aligns with human development goals. For example, if foreign investment focuses solely on extractive sectors, it will lead to resource depletion and economic dependency; however, if directed toward knowledge-based industries, renewable energy, or regional infrastructure, it can strengthen the foundations of endogenous growth. In this context, the role of regional institutions such as the African Development Bank and the AfCFTA Secretariat in designing financial policies, investment dispute resolution mechanisms, and environmental standards is crucial. These institutions must be able to create a multi-level framework for justice-oriented investment management so that capital flows serve human and environmental development rather than merely profit.{11}

However, the main challenge in implementing this vision lies in the tension between global market logic and Africa's endogenous development needs. From the standpoint of development theory, the global capitalist system is based on profit maximization and efficiency, whereas the right to development emphasizes equality, justice, and sustainability. In the absence of effective institutional management, these two logics often conflict. The experience of widespread privatization in the 1990s in many African countries showed that without strong regulatory and institutional capacities, economic reforms resulted in wealth concentration and the expansion of inequality rather than public welfare.{12}

In this context, the concept of "development management" must be redefined—a management approach that does not follow market logic but is grounded in the principles of justice-oriented political economy. Such management requires rethinking the relationship between the state and the private sector, equitable redistribution of investment benefits, and transparency in economic decision-making. Theoretically, this transformation can be described as a transition from a "growth economy" to a "capabilities economy," as Amartya Sen proposes: development is not merely increasing production but expanding human freedoms and capabilities to achieve a meaningful life.{13}

Thus, if the AfCFTA Protocol aims to genuinely serve development, it must move beyond a capital-centric growth framework and become a mechanism for realizing the right to development, economic justice, and environmental protection. Achieving this goal is only possible if African policymakers believe in and institutionalize the connection between economic theory, institutional management, and justice-oriented culture in their decision-making structures.

3. *Biocultural Management and Rights of Nature in Ecuador: An Indigenous Alternative to Neoclassical Growth Theory*

In 2008, Ecuador amended its constitution to become the first country to officially recognize the Rights of Nature.{14} This development was not merely a legal action but a theoretical shift in understanding the relationship between humans, the economy, and the environment. In the Andean indigenous philosophy, the concept of "Sumak Kawsay" or "good living" emphasizes harmony among society, culture, and nature. This approach fundamentally differs from the theoretical foundations of neoclassical economics, which defines economic growth based on the maximization of material benefits.{15}

Within the framework of Biocultural Management, development is understood as a process of reproducing both ecological and cultural systems. This means that the economic value of natural resources is only legitimate when it contributes to maintaining environmental and cultural balance. From the perspective of theoretical economics, this model can help form a type of multi-foundational economy, where natural capital, cultural capital, and social capital are considered equal in value to financial capital. At the managerial level, Ecuador's experience shows that integrating indigenous knowledge with modern science can provide a foundation for sustainable development policy. Such a model poses a serious challenge to the neoliberal paradigm, as it demonstrates that economic growth is not necessarily the measure of development; rather, the quality of society's relationship with nature and culture determines true sustainability.{16}

Ecuador's institutionalization of the Rights of Nature in its constitution represents a milestone in the theoretical evolution of development economics, as it elevated nature from the status of a "production resource" to that of a "legal subject." This shift reflects a paradigmatic change in development philosophy, fundamentally redefining the relationship between humans, the economy, and the environment. In this model, nature is no longer an object serving economic growth but is recognized as a living entity with an independent right to exist. This perspective directly conflicts with the theoretical foundations of neoclassical economics, which are based on scarcity, efficiency, and optimal resource allocation, whereas in Ecuadorian indigenous thought, nature is not a limited resource but a living, self-regulating order of which humans are a part. Philosophically, the concept of Sumak Kawsay signifies "living in balance," emphasizing coexistence and synergy between society and the biosphere rather than competition and accumulation. This interpretation provides an ethical and cultural foundation for an economy in which development is seen not as an increase in production but as the enhancement of life quality within a framework that respects ecosystems and cultural traditions.{17}

At the managerial level, Ecuador's biocultural model seeks to establish a constructive link between traditional knowledge of indigenous communities and modern scientific and institutional mechanisms. This integration is realized through public policies, educational programs, and participatory models in natural resource management. For instance, in forest and water resource management, decisions are based not solely on economic data but also on cultural, spiritual, and ecological indicators. Indigenous councils, local organizations, and civil society institutions play an active role in this process, while the government acts as a facilitator rather than an absolute decision-maker. This model represents a form of participatory multi-level governance in which responsibility for development is shared between society and the state. From the perspective of theoretical economics, this reflects the views of new institutionalists such as Douglass North and Ha-Joon Chang, who see development as the result of institutional interaction and social learning. In Ecuador, biocultural management, guided by this logic, aims to forego short-term economic gains in favor of long-term social and environmental benefits. Consequently, the measure of economic success is no longer numerical GDP growth but the system's ability to maintain balance across economic, cultural, and natural dimensions.{18}

Theoretically, this experience can lead to the emergence of a novel concept of a multi-foundational economy, a model in which natural, cultural, and social resources are evaluated as interwoven components of a whole, with no intrinsic priority of one over another. In such an economy, wealth is assessed not solely by financial capital but also by ecological health, cultural cohesion, and social justice. A direct implication of this perspective is a reconsideration of development indicators, replacing metrics such as GDP growth with measures of environmental satisfaction and cultural resilience. Moreover, this model has the capacity to provide an ethical and managerial framework for collective action against global environmental crises—from climate change to biodiversity loss. Ultimately, Ecuador's experience demonstrates that transitioning from a growth-centered economy to a life-centered economy is not only possible but, under current conditions, a theoretical and ethical necessity. Biocultural management, by linking economic rationality with cultural sensitivity, offers a model in which sustainable development is no longer a rhetorical slogan but an institutional and cultural reality embedded within society.{19}

4. *War, Biodiversity, and Economic Reconstruction in Colombia: A Test for Post-Conflict Development Management*

Colombia is one of the world's most biodiverse countries, yet decades of armed conflict between the government and insurgent groups have led to extensive destruction of ecosystems, displacement from forested areas, and pollution of water resources.{20} In the post-peace agreement period, the government faced the dual challenge of economic reconstruction and environmental restoration. From the perspective of theoretical economics, this situation exemplifies the tension between short-term growth and long-term sustainability. Policymakers often aim to revive economic growth by rapidly attracting foreign investment and exploiting natural resources, but this approach, in the absence of effective environmental management, can result in the depletion of natural capital.{21}

Within the framework of post-conflict development management, reconstruction must be based on the restoration of social and environmental capacities. As economists like Joseph Stiglitz argue, "natural capital" must be accounted for in the national development balance sheet, because its loss reduces the economic capacity of future generations. Colombia's experience has shown that sustainable peace is impossible without managing natural resources and involving local communities in decision-making processes. From this perspective, the right to development entails the right of people to determine the path of economic reconstruction according to their cultural and environmental priorities. Consequently, development management must be designed not only to accelerate economic growth but also to restore the ecological and cultural foundations of society.{22}

The post-2016 peace agreement reconstruction in Colombia demonstrated that economic recovery in communities long affected by violence and civil war cannot rely solely on financial investment; it requires rebuilding social trust, revitalizing local institutions, and redefining the relationship between humans and nature. One of the country's key challenges has been the conflict between resource-extractive development models and the need to protect biodiversity. Forested areas previously controlled by insurgent groups became sites of competition among extractive companies and industrial agriculture following the withdrawal of armed forces. This led to excessive deforestation, land-use change, and the weakening of indigenous livelihoods. From the perspective of development economics, this process represents a form of "institutional failure", as the government weakened regulatory structures and prioritized short-term economic opportunities over long-term sustainable growth instead of designing institutions capable of guiding economic growth toward sustainability. Focusing solely on restoring growth, without environmental considerations, reproduced the patterns that had previously fostered social conflict and economic grievances.{23}

From a development management standpoint, post-conflict economic recovery must be based on "endogenous and community-centered" models, which rely not on external capital injection but on empowering local communities and restoring natural capital. Colombia faced fundamental questions in this process: Who should decide how natural resources are used? Can development be sustainable under a centralized state model, or does it require multi-level governance? According to contemporary development economics, particularly the institutionalist approaches of Douglass North and new institutional economists, sustainable development occurs when institutions structure the "rules of the game" so that the short-term interests of dominant groups do not conflict with the long-term interests of society.{24}

In Colombia, much of the land allocated for agriculture or extraction after the war was actually home to rare animal and plant species whose natural capital had long-term economic value. Yet policymakers, ignoring this environmental capital, promoted projects that appeared to generate employment but in practice led to soil erosion, water pollution, and ecosystem degradation. {25}

In this context, the role of local and indigenous communities in reconstruction gained particular importance. Colombia's Amazonian and mountainous regions are home to communities that have preserved centuries of traditional ecological knowledge, yet their voices are often marginalized in formal policymaking. Genuine participation by these communities can offer a new model of **post-**conflict development management, based on the coexistence of economy, culture, and nature. Local small-scale initiatives in the Meta and Chocó provinces have shown that when economic decisions are made in consultation with local councils and in consideration of ecological capacities, reconstruction can simultaneously restore ecosystems and reduce poverty. {26}

This approach can be seen as a practical application of biocultural justice in development management, as it respects the cultural identity of indigenous communities while treating the continuity of natural life as a fundamental element of development. From the perspective of theoretical economics, such a model responds directly to criticisms of neoclassical growth models, which historically excluded the environment from economic analysis. Colombia's experience demonstrates that peace and development are sustainable only when a form of **coexistence** between humans and ecosystems is established, in which economic growth is not the ultimate goal but a natural outcome of balancing human, natural, and cultural capital. {27}

5. *Conclusion*

A comparative analysis of the experiences in Africa, Ecuador, and Colombia demonstrates that sustainable development in the Global South is impossible without rethinking the theoretical foundations of economics and transforming management practices. Development theory can support the realization of the right to development only if it moves beyond purely quantitative, growth-centered frameworks toward qualitative concepts such as biocultural justice, institutional governance, and natural capital.

The AfCFTA Investment Protocol in Africa has the potential to become a driver of economic integration, but only if investment management is guided by principles of environmental and cultural justice. Ecuador's experience shows that the Rights of Nature and biocultural management can provide a theoretically valid alternative to neoliberal development. Meanwhile, Colombia's post-conflict reconstruction reminds us that economic recovery without participatory governance and biodiversity preservation merely reproduces unsustainability.

It can be concluded that multi-foundational development management offers a novel framework for understanding the relationship between economy, culture, and nature. This model, grounded in development economics and institutionalism, emphasizes the interconnection among economic efficiency, cultural justice, and environmental sustainability. The future of global development depends on acknowledging that humans are not masters of nature but a part of it—and that true development is the sustained harmony between the two.

Thus, the concept of multi-foundational development management can be understood as both a theoretical and practical effort to move beyond the binary paradigm of economy and environment. In this framework, development is not merely an economic process but a multi-level system of institutional, cultural, and environmental interactions, requiring cognitive and managerial coordination among diverse actors. Such management must operate according to three fundamental principles: first, embracing diversity as a source of institutional innovation; second, redefining efficiency beyond financial productivity; and third, linking economic policies with ecological capacities. In this context, development institutionalist theories play a crucial role in designing mechanisms that align public interests, private incentives, and environmental goals.

From a managerial perspective, this requires a shift from centralized models to networked, multi-level governance, where decision-making is distributed and based on local knowledge and social participation.

Theoretically, this approach redefines the concept of capital and development. In classical economics, capital is mostly limited to production tools and material assets, whereas in development theory, natural, social, and cultural capital are inseparable components of the foundation of well-being. Multi-foundational development management aims to balance these various forms of capital, preventing the dominance of one dimension over others. For example, within the AfCFTA framework, this perspective can guide investment policies that evaluate not only economic returns but also the social and environmental impacts of projects. In Ecuador, applying this logic in national planning ensures that economic activity is measured in relation to the Rights of Nature and cultural heritage. In Colombia, it can provide a basis for post-conflict economic reconstruction, treating biodiversity and indigenous knowledge as strategic assets. From this perspective, sustainable development is no longer a descriptive concept but a managerial process requiring institution-building, multi-dimensional assessment, and continuous social learning.

Finally, the theoretical significance of this approach lies in its ability to link development ethics with economic logic. If modern economics rests on profit maximization, multi-foundational development management emphasizes “optimization of coexistence”, creating a dynamic balance between human needs and ecological capacities. This perspective is not opposed to market logic but seeks to reform and redirect it so that environmental and cultural values are integrated into economic mechanisms. In today’s world, where climate crises, economic injustice, and cultural erosion have reached unprecedented levels, this framework offers a theoretical basis for rethinking global development and investment policies.

Adopting this logic, especially in the Global South, provides an opportunity to redefine development not by imitating Northern models, but based on local capacities, cultural knowledge, and participatory management. In other words, true development in the twenty-first century can only be achieved when economic theory, environmental ethics, and strategic management converge in a single, dynamic system—one that positions humans not above nature, but within it.

REFERENCES

[1] Henrÿ, Hagen. "From the role of cooperative law for development to sustainable development and cooperative law." Cooperativismo & Desarrollo 33, no. 131 (2025).
[2] Ucak, Ayhan. "Adam Smith: The inspirer of modern growth theories." Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences 195 (2015): 663-672.
[3] Oppenheim, Lois Hecht. "Globalization, Mindfulness and Community." PURUSHARTHA-A journal of Management, Ethics and Spirituality 5, no. 2 (2012): 55-65.
[4] Hamzani, Achmad Irwan, Achmad Soeharto, Taufiq Taufiq, Dwi Edi Wibowo, and Anik Kunantiyorini. "Balancing Utilitarianism with Access to Environmental Justice: An Indonesian Case Study." Environmental Policy and Law (2025): 18785395251374205.
[5] Simion, Radu. "CONSIDERING GEOENGINEERING IN AN ETHICAL BIOCULTURAL FRAMEWORK." Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai-Philosophia 68, no. 2 (2023): 15-32.
[6] Jodyvash, M. (2025). The Investment Protocol of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the

Right to Development: An Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges Ahead. Law and Development Review.

[7] Darity Jr, William, and Lewis S. Davis. "Growth, trade and uneven development." Cambridge Journal of Economics 29, no. 1 (2005): 141-170.

[8] Chigudu, D. "HUMAN SECURITY, MIGRATION, AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA)." Applied Ecology & Environmental Research 23, no. 2 (2025).

[9] Gonzalez, Carmen G. "Deconstructing the mythology of free trade: critical reflections on comparative advantage." Berkeley La Raza LJ 17 (2006): 65.

[10] Chang, Ha-Joon. "Institutions and economic development: theory, policy and history." Journal of institutional economics 7, no. 4 (2011): 473-498.

[11] Kuhlmann, Katrin, and Akinyi Lisa Agutu. "The African Continental Free Trade Area: Toward a new legal model for trade and development." Geo. J. Int'l L. 51 (2019): 753.

[12] Founou-Tchuigoua, Bernard. "The state subregion in the future of Africa." Social Justice 23, no. 1/2 (63-64 (1996): 151-169.

[13] Spatscheck, Christian. "Creating capabilities: The human development approach." (2012): 413-415.

[14] Jodyvash, M. (2025). The role of cultural pluralism in Indigenous peoples' defense of nature's rights: A case study of Ecuador. Oñati Socio-Legal Series.

[15] Altmann, Philipp. "Sumak Kawsay as an element of local decolonization in Ecuador." Latin American Research Review 52, no. 5 (2017): 749-759.

[16] Burke, Leonie, Isabel Díaz-Reviriego, David PM Lam, and Jan Hanspach. "Indigenous and local knowledge in biocultural approaches to sustainability: a review of the literature in Spanish." Ecosystems and people 19, no. 1 (2023): 2157490.

[17] Ecuador: the 2008 Constitution." Latin American Perspectives 43, no. 1 (2016): 158-174.

[18] Esbach, Michael S., Carlos Urgilés-Verdugo, Wendy R. Townsend, and Carlos Yiyoguaje. "Hunting for sustainability: Indigenous stewardship in the Cofán territory of Zábalo." Conservation Letters 17, no. 6 (2024): e13065.

[19] DeRoy, Bryant C., and Chris T. Darimont. "Biocultural indicators to support locally led environmental management and monitoring." Ecology & Society 24, no. 4 (2019).

[20] Jodyvash, M. (2025). Armed Conflicts and Their Impact on Biodiversity Preservation in Colombia: A Legal and Ethical Analysis. Mex. L. Rev., 18, 25.

[21] Krause, Torsten, Nicola Clerici, Jesica Murcia López, Paula Andrea Sánchez, Sandra Valencia, Juanita Esguerra-Rezk, and Kristina Van Dexter. "A new war on nature and people: Taking stock of the Colombian Peace agreement." Global Sustainability 5 (2022): e16.

[22] Morales-Muñoz, H., Löhr, K., Bonatti, M., Eufemia, L., & Sieber, S. (2021). Assessing impacts of environmental peacebuilding in Caquetá, Colombia: A multistakeholder perspective. International Affairs, 97(1), 179-199.

[23] Krause, Torsten. "Reducing deforestation in Colombia while building peace and pursuing business as usual extractivism?." Journal of Political Ecology 27, no. 1 (2020): 401-418.

[24] Eufemia, L., Pérez, P., Rodriguez, T., Lozano, C., Bonatti, M., Morales, H., ... & Sieber, S. (2023). Governance in post-conflict scenarios: Assessing models of community-based governance in the departments of Caquetá and Cesar (Colombia). Territory, Politics, Governance, 11(8), 1553-1575.

[25] Guerrero-Pineda, C., Iacona, G. D., Mair, L., Hawkins, F., Siikamäki, J., Miller, D., & Gerber, L. R. (2022). An investment strategy to address biodiversity loss from agricultural expansion. Nature Sustainability, 5(7), 610-618.

[26] Randazzo, E. (2019). Post-conflict reconstruction, the local, and the Indigenous. In Handbook on Intervention and Statebuilding (pp. 30-40). Edward Elgar Publishing.

[27] York, N. D. (2025). Understandings and critiques of biocultural diversity conservation and future recommendations for conservation actors. Conservation Biology, e70131.