

From Growth to Mutual Flourishing: A Relational Challenge to Development Economics

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Abstract: Development economics has long been shaped by the assumption that progress can be understood primarily through economic growth and the expansion of individual well-being. Even approaches that move beyond income-based measures, such as the capability approach associated with Amartya Sen, continue to treat the individual as the central unit of analysis. This paper argues that such frameworks remain conceptually limited because they overlook the fundamentally relational character of human life. Adopting a conceptual and normative approach, the paper advances a relational ontology of development in which well-being is understood as emerging through social relationships, interdependence, and shared forms of life rather than as a property possessed by isolated individuals. On this basis, the paper introduces the concept of mutual flourishing as an alternative perspective on development. Rather than defining development in terms of accumulation, output, or individual capability alone, a relational perspective emphasizes the social, institutional, and ecological conditions that enable people to flourish together. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in development theory by rethinking the conceptual foundations of well-being, sustainability, and economic progress from a relational standpoint.

Keywords: Capability Approach, Development Economics, Methodological Individualism, Mutual Flourishing, Relational Ontology, Sustainability, Well-being

Introduction

Development has long been understood and measured through the lens of economic growth, with gross domestic product (GDP) functioning as its most prominent indicator. Despite major developments in development theory over recent decades, the expansion of measurable economic output continues to occupy a central place in both policy discourse and economic analysis. At the same time, however, this growth-cantered paradigm has attracted sustained criticism for its inability to

account adequately for persistent inequalities, ecological degradation, and the weakening of social cohesion—dimensions of human life that remain difficult to quantify but are nevertheless central to any meaningful conception of development (Daly, 1996; Stiglitz et al., 2010).

In response to these limitations, a number of alternative frameworks have attempted to broaden the evaluative scope of development. Among the most influential is the capability approach associated with Amartya Sen, which shifts attention away from income and resources toward the substantive freedoms individuals have reason to value (Sen, 1999). This perspective, further developed by Martha Nussbaum, represents an important normative advance insofar as it emphasizes dignity, agency, and the conditions necessary for a flourishing human life (Nussbaum, 2011). Yet despite this reorientation, such approaches remain anchored in a shared assumption that often passes without sufficient scrutiny: the individual continues to be treated as the primary unit of value and the ultimate bearer of well-being.

This paper argues that the limitation is therefore not merely empirical, but conceptual. By construing well-being primarily as something individuals possess, prevailing frameworks overlook the fundamentally relational character of human existence. Individuals do not exist prior to their social world in any meaningful sense; rather, they are formed through relationships, institutions, and shared practices. Social bonds are not external additions to well-being but part of the conditions through which it becomes possible. When these relational dimensions are treated as secondary or merely instrumental, development theory risks producing a partial and ultimately distorted account of human flourishing.

Against this backdrop, the paper advances a relational ontology of development. It proposes a shift in analytical focus from individual attainment toward what is termed *mutual flourishing*—a condition in which well-being emerges through networks of interdependence rather than residing within isolated individuals. From this perspective, development cannot be reduced to the expansion of income, output, or even individual capabilities alone. Instead, it must be understood in terms of the social, institutional, and ecological relationships that sustain shared forms of life. By bringing philosophical analysis into conversation with development economics, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on well-being, sustainability, and the normative foundations of development itself.

Methodological and Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a conceptual and normative approach to the study of development. Rather than offering empirical analysis, it engages in a critical reconstruction of dominant frameworks in development economics, paying particular attention to the ontological assumptions that underlie them. The aim is not to test hypotheses in a conventional empirical sense, but to examine how prevailing theories conceptualize well-being and to assess the adequacy of these conceptual foundations. Conceptual analysis is particularly relevant in development theory because the meaning of development itself is inseparable from normative assumptions regarding human well-being and social value.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. First, the paper critically examines growth-based and capability-oriented approaches, identifying the persistence of methodological individualism as a shared limitation (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Second, it develops an alternative framework grounded in a relational ontology, in which well-being is understood as emerging through social relations rather than residing within isolated individuals.

This approach is based on the recognition that development theory is not only empirical in character, but also normative and conceptual. The way well-being is defined shapes both measurement and policy, influencing what counts as progress and how development priorities are organized. Revisiting the conceptual assumptions that underpin development economics is therefore necessary if its analytical and practical foundations are to be reconsidered in more relational terms.

The scope of the paper is primarily theoretical. It does not seek to provide empirical validation of the proposed framework, nor does it attempt to formulate a complete operational model of relational well-being. Instead, the paper aims to establish the conceptual coherence and relevance of a relational approach to development, while indicating some of its broader implications for measurement, policy,

and sustainability. In this respect, the discussion is intended less as a definitive framework than as a contribution to ongoing debates within development theory and political economy.

The Limits of Growth-Based Development

The dominance of economic growth as the primary measure of development has shaped both policy and theory throughout much of the modern era. Gross domestic product (GDP), in particular, has come to function as the most widely accepted indicator of national progress, offering a standardized and apparently objective way of assessing economic performance. Its appeal lies largely in its simplicity and comparability. By translating economic activity into measurable output, GDP provides governments and institutions with a convenient means of evaluating growth across different national contexts. Yet the very features that make it attractive as a metric also expose some of its most significant limitations (Daly, 1996; Stiglitz et al., 2010).

At the most immediate level, GDP offers only a partial picture of development. While it measures the total value of goods and services produced within an economy, it says very little about how the benefits of that production are distributed. Economic growth may occur alongside deep and persistent inequalities, leaving large sections of the population excluded from its gains. Likewise, GDP remains largely indifferent to the environmental costs associated with production. Patterns of growth that depend upon ecological degradation, resource depletion, or unsustainable extraction may still appear successful when evaluated purely in terms of aggregate output. In this respect, GDP often obscures as much as it reveals, presenting an image of progress that may rest upon fragile social and ecological foundations (Jackson, 2009).

Critiques of growth-based development, however, extend beyond these empirical concerns. At a deeper level, the growth paradigm rests upon the assumption that increasing material output corresponds to improvements in human well-being. Historically, this assumption carried considerable force, particularly in contexts marked by poverty and material scarcity. Yet the relationship between income and well-being is neither straightforward nor automatic. Rising incomes do not necessarily produce stronger communities, greater trust, or a deeper sense of belonging. In many societies, the pursuit of continuous growth has coincided with the erosion of communal bonds, the commodification of everyday life, and growing forms of social fragmentation that conventional economic indicators are unable to capture.

These tensions point toward a broader conceptual issue. Growth-centered frameworks tend to equate development with expansion—more production, more consumption, and more accumulation—without adequately questioning what constitutes a meaningful or flourishing life. As a result, dimensions of well-being that resist quantification, including social cohesion, relational stability, and collective identity, are often treated as secondary concerns or excluded from analysis altogether.

Importantly, then, the limitations of growth-based development are not confined to technical problems of measurement. They reflect a deeper conception of well-being that privileges material accumulation while marginalizing the relational and social conditions that sustain human life. Without addressing these underlying assumptions, critiques of GDP and similar indicators remain incomplete. Rethinking development in a more substantive sense therefore requires moving beyond growth not only as a metric, but also as a guiding framework for understanding well-being itself.

Beyond Growth: The Persistence of Individualism

In response to the limitations of growth-based models, a number of alternative frameworks have emerged with the aim of expanding the evaluative space of development and well-being. Among the most influential is the capability approach associated with Amartya Sen, whose work marked an important departure from purely income-based understandings of development. By shifting attention from resources and economic output to the substantive freedoms individuals have reason to value, the capability approach offers a more ethically grounded account of what it means to live well (Sen, 1999). In doing so, it challenges the assumption that development can be adequately measured through economic growth alone.

This emphasis on human capabilities is further developed in the work of Martha Nussbaum, who advances a more substantive account of the central conditions necessary for a dignified and fully human life (Nussbaum, 2011). Beyond the capability literature itself, the broader language of empowerment, participation, and capacity-building has also shaped development policy over recent decades. Across these approaches, there is a shared effort to move beyond narrow economic measures and to place greater emphasis on human agency, institutional support, and the expansion of opportunities.

At the same time, however, these frameworks continue to locate well-being primarily at the level of the individual. Capabilities are treated as attributes that individuals possess, even where their realization depends upon social and institutional conditions. Social relations certainly matter within these approaches, but they tend to appear mainly as enabling or constraining factors rather than as constitutive dimensions of well-being itself.

This points toward a deeper conceptual limitation. Even as these frameworks move beyond growth-based metrics, they remain tied to a form of methodological individualism in which persons are ultimately conceived as discrete units whose well-being can, at least in principle, be assessed independently of the relationships that shape them. Consequently, social relations often remain analytically secondary—important insofar as they support individual flourishing, but not foundational to how flourishing itself is understood. Forms of value that are inherently shared and emergent, such as trust, solidarity, reciprocity, and collective belonging, therefore remain insufficiently theorized within these accounts.

Addressing these limitations requires more than simply broadening the range of evaluative criteria. It calls for a reconsideration of the ontological assumptions that structure development theory at a deeper level. If well-being arises within and through relationships, then it cannot be fully understood through frameworks that treat individuals as primary and self-contained units of analysis. Development must instead be approached in terms of the relational conditions that sustain human life. The following section develops this argument further by outlining a relational ontology as the basis for moving beyond both growth-based and capability-oriented approaches.

Situating the Argument in Existing Literature

The emphasis on the relational dimensions of human well-being is not entirely absent from contemporary development discourse. Across a range of intellectual traditions, scholars have drawn attention—albeit in different ways—to the social and interdependent character of economic life. At the same time, these contributions have often stopped short of fundamentally rethinking the ontological assumptions that underpin dominant approaches to development.

Communitarian and relational perspectives in social and political theory, for instance, have long argued that individuals are embedded within social contexts that shape identity, values, and agency (MacIntyre, 1981; Taylor, 1989). Such approaches challenge atomistic conceptions of the individual and emphasize the importance of shared practices, moral traditions, and collective forms of life. Their influence within mainstream development economics, however, has remained relatively limited, where methodological individualism continues to structure much of both theoretical analysis and policy thinking.

Related concerns appear within feminist and care-based approaches to political economy. Scholars working in these traditions have emphasized the centrality of interdependence, drawing attention to the role of care, social reproduction, and relational labor in sustaining both economic systems and everyday social life (Folbre, 2001; Tronto, 1993). By foregrounding forms of work and value that frequently remain invisible within conventional economic analysis, these perspectives provide an important corrective to narrowly economic understandings of development. Yet even here, relational processes are often incorporated into existing frameworks without fully challenging the deeper ontological assumptions on which those frameworks rest.

A similar tendency can be observed in the literature on social capital and well-being. Concepts such as trust, networks, and social cohesion have increasingly been used to capture the relational dimensions of development and quality of life (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). These approaches recognize that social relationships play an important role in shaping both economic outcomes and broader forms of well-being. Nevertheless, relationships are frequently treated as instrumental resources that individuals or communities can draw upon, rather than as constitutive dimensions of well-being itself.

Taken together, these strands of scholarship point toward the significance of relational life, yet relationality often remains analytically secondary within development theory. The contribution of this paper lies in moving beyond these partial incorporations by advancing a relational ontology in which social relations are not merely supportive or instrumental, but foundational to the very concept of well-being. In this respect, the paper seeks not simply to add relational concerns to existing frameworks, but to reposition relationality at the conceptual center of development itself.

A Relational Ontology of Development

By “relational ontology,” this paper refers to the view that human beings are not self-contained or isolated entities, but are fundamentally shaped through their relationships with others and with the social worlds they inhabit. From this perspective, relations are not secondary to the individual, nor are they external conditions added onto an otherwise complete self. Rather, they are integral to the formation of identity, agency, and the conditions under which well-being becomes possible. Well-being, accordingly, is not best understood as something individuals possess independently, but as something that emerges through interdependence, shared practices, and forms of social embeddedness (Taylor, 1989). This stands in contrast to atomistic ontologies, which assume that individuals exist prior to, and apart from, the relationships that shape them.

Seen in this light, the limitations of both growth-based and capability-oriented approaches reflect a deeper conceptual issue: an insufficient account of the human person. Despite their differences, these frameworks continue to rely upon an individualist understanding of well-being, whether expressed in terms of income, utility, or capabilities possessed by discrete individuals. What tends to recede from view in such approaches are the relational conditions through which human life is actually lived and sustained.

A relational ontology begins from a different premise. Persons do not simply enter into relationships after their identities are formed; rather, personhood itself emerges through social interaction, shared norms, and structures of interdependence. This understanding resonates with relational traditions in philosophy, particularly the dialogical thought of Martin Buber, for whom human existence is fundamentally constituted through relation. Social bonds are therefore not incidental to human flourishing but constitutive of it. From this standpoint, well-being cannot be reduced to individual attainment alone. It takes shape within relationships that provide continuity, recognition, and meaning to human life.

This shift carries important implications for development theory. If human beings are relationally constituted, then the quality of relationships—expressed through trust, reciprocity, care, and collective belonging—must occupy a central place in any account of well-being. Development cannot therefore be adequately understood through aggregative measures that overlook the relational structures enabling such outcomes. Many of the goods most essential to human flourishing, including social cohesion, solidarity, and shared identity, are inherently relational in character and lose much of their meaning when reduced to individualized units of analysis.

Reconceptualizing development in relational terms thus requires moving beyond the evaluation of isolated outcomes toward a broader concern with relational structures and patterns of interdependence. It calls attention to the ways economic, social, and cultural systems shape the possibilities for shared life, enabling some forms of flourishing while constraining others. From this perspective, development is not simply the expansion of individual advantage, but the cultivation of relational conditions under which human beings are able to flourish together.

From Development to Mutual Flourishing: Toward a Relational Model

If the limitations of prevailing development paradigms stem from their individualist foundations, then any meaningful alternative must begin by reconsidering the very aim of development itself. Rather than defining development primarily in terms of expanding output, income, or even individual capabilities, a relational perspective shifts attention toward the conditions under which people are able to flourish together. The movement from growth to what this paper terms *mutual flourishing* therefore represents more than a change in emphasis. It points toward a broader reconfiguration of how development, well-being, and social progress are understood.

7.1 Rethinking Measurement

A relational perspective raises important questions about the adequacy of conventional indicators such as GDP and composite indices built around aggregated individual outcomes. If well-being is constituted relationally, then development cannot be evaluated solely through measures of income, productivity, or individual attainment. Attention must also be given to the quality of social relationships, including trust, reciprocity, participation, and the strength of communal and institutional ties (Putnam, 2000).

To some extent, emerging approaches within social capital and well-being economics already gesture in this direction. Yet these frameworks often continue to treat relationships instrumentally—as resources that individuals or communities can mobilize—rather than as constitutive dimensions of well-being itself. A relational framework, by contrast, places these dimensions closer to the center of evaluation, suggesting that the health of social relationships is not merely supportive of development, but partly constitutive of it.

7.2 Reorienting Policy Priorities

The implications of this shift extend directly into the realm of policy. Development policy, from a relational standpoint, cannot focus exclusively on maximizing income or expanding individual capabilities. It must also concern itself with sustaining the social conditions that make cooperative and interdependent life possible. This includes long-term investment in public goods and social infrastructure—education, healthcare, systems of social protection, and civic institutions—that foster trust, participation, and reciprocity.

Reducing inequality likewise takes on renewed significance within this framework. Inequality matters not only because of its distributive consequences, but because severe social fragmentation can weaken the relational fabric upon which shared well-being depends. From this perspective, development policy becomes concerned not simply with economic advancement, but with the conditions necessary for sustaining social life itself.

7.3 Economic Systems and Relational Outcomes

A relational approach also invites a broader reassessment of economic systems and the forms of social life they encourage. Markets undoubtedly play an important role in coordinating economic activity, yet their expansion into all domains of life may also erode relational goods by intensifying competition, commodification, and social fragmentation (Polanyi, 1944). Evaluating economic systems therefore requires attention not only to efficiency or output, but also to the kinds of relationships they produce and sustain.

This does not necessarily imply a rejection of markets, but rather a reconsideration of their limits and social embeddedness. A more balanced relationship between markets, states, and communities becomes necessary if economic organization is to support both material well-being and forms of social interdependence essential to human flourishing.

7.4 Relational Sustainability

A relational framework also deepens contemporary discussions of sustainability. Environmental crises are not simply technical or resource-management problems; they are also linked to patterns of

disconnection between human activity and the ecological systems upon which life depends. A relational perspective addresses this by emphasizing responsibility, reciprocity, and long-term interdependence.

Ecological economists have already questioned the viability of growth-centered development within finite ecological limits (Daly, 1996; Raworth, 2017). A relational ontology extends this insight further by situating human economies within broader networks of life and mutual dependence. Development, in this sense, becomes inseparable from the task of sustaining relationships—among individuals, communities, institutions, and the natural world—over time.

Taken together, these shifts articulate a vision of development grounded less in accumulation than in the cultivation of shared life. Mutual flourishing thus emerges as both a conceptual and normative alternative to dominant paradigms, reorienting development economics toward a framework in which value is relational, well-being is co-constituted, and progress is assessed not simply by what individuals possess, but by how they are able to live together.

Conclusion

Contemporary development theory continues to be shaped, often implicitly, by forms of methodological individualism, even where it seeks to move beyond narrow growth-based measures of progress. This paper has argued that the limitations of such approaches are not merely technical or empirical, but rooted in deeper assumptions about the nature of the human person and the meaning of well-being itself. The problem, therefore, is not simply that existing frameworks measure the wrong things, but that they begin from an insufficient understanding of how human flourishing actually takes shape.

By advancing a relational ontology, the paper has proposed an alternative way of thinking about development—one that understands well-being not as a property possessed by isolated individuals, but as something that emerges through relationships, interdependence, and shared forms of life. On this basis, the idea of *mutual flourishing* has been introduced as a way of reimagining development beyond the language of accumulation and individual attainment. Development, from this perspective, concerns the conditions that enable people to live meaningfully together, sustain relationships of reciprocity and care, and participate in forms of collective life that support human flourishing.

The implications of such a perspective extend beyond theoretical debate. They raise broader questions about how development is measured, how policy priorities are framed, and how economic systems are evaluated. More importantly, they suggest that development cannot be adequately understood apart from the social and ecological relationships that sustain human life. Once these relational foundations are taken seriously, questions of value, sustainability, and economic organization begin to appear in a different light.

At the same time, this study remains primarily conceptual in scope. It does not attempt to provide empirical validation of the relational framework proposed here, nor does it offer a comprehensive model for measuring relational well-being. These limitations also point toward important avenues for future research. Further work is needed to explore how relational concepts might be operationalized empirically, how they function across different institutional and cultural settings, and how development policy might more meaningfully incorporate relational dimensions of social life.

Ultimately, to rethink development is also to rethink the way human beings are understood within development theory itself. Human flourishing does not occur in isolation. It emerges within relationships, institutions, communities, and ecological systems that shape the possibilities of shared life. In this sense, a relational approach does not simply modify existing development paradigms; it invites a different understanding of what development is for, and of what it means for people to flourish together.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that they have no personal or financial relationships that could influence

their work on this paper and have no competing interests.

Disclosure and Ethics Statement

The authors declare that AI-assisted tools, including Grammarly, were used to improve clarity and grammar. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions in this manuscript were conceived, developed, and finalised by the authors, with AI support used only for drafting and editing purposes. This study is based entirely on available publications and secondary sources. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required for this study

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