

Theoretical and Fundamental

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Reconstructing the conditions of possibility for the inconsistency between theory and practice in Iran's spatial planning when regulating the relationship between national totality and regional multiplicities

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the moment in which the spatial organization of national and regional development is constituted as a plannable problem—a decisive moment in practical judgment for regulating the relationship between national totality and regional multiplicities, and in the emergence of the inconsistency between theory and practice in spatial planning in Iran. To achieve an ontological understanding of this moment, the research is conducted through a combination of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics. This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, and the analysis is carried out through an interpretive reading of development plans, spatial planning documents, laws, and institutional planning texts from their inception up to the Seventh Development Plan. The analytical process, moving within the hermeneutic circle between the historical horizon, planning texts, and the researcher's pre-understanding, led to the identification of enduring patterns of questioning and semantic tensions in the formulation of national–regional development. The findings indicate that planning has consistently sought to stabilize development as a national, steerable totality over time, while regional multiplicities have continuously introduced divergent futures and spatial uncertainties into this totality. The historical response of the planning system to this tension has not been the acceptance of two distinct spatial levels with competing policy logics, but rather the continual reconfiguration of the situation of encounter through various modes of regulating development time, ranging from spatial homogenization and the structuring of temporality to living with uncertainty, mediating national identity, and subsuming the region within the chain logic of national development. Accordingly, the inconsistency between theory and practice is neither a gap to be bridged nor merely a consequence. Rather, it constitutes the internal logic of a dominant horizon of understanding that, to maintain coherence and enable action over development time, constrains, suspends, or reabsorbs spatial differences.

Keywords

critical realism
hermeneutics
national development
planning system
regional development
spatial planning
territorial good

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1. Introduction

The establishment of a modern development planning system in Iran began with the creation of the Plan Organization and the formulation of the country's first development plan (1949), at a time when relations between national and regional forces were in a state of crisis during the 1940s. This situation can be understood as a continuation of a field of contestation rooted in the imperial mode of governance, which was reconfigured during the formation of the modern state. From the outset, development planning emerged within this historical field—one in which organizing development has always required regulating the relationship between national totality and regional multiplicities. This condition of confrontation was not a temporary occurrence. Rather, it established a lasting foundation in the relationship between planning and spatial intervention, which has been reproduced in various forms in subsequent decades.

The consequences of this historical foundation can be observed in the persistence of a long-standing incompatibility between planning theory and practice—an incompatibility reflected in the failure of development documents, spatial centralization, regional inequalities, settlement instability, and territorial conflicts. Nevertheless, the issue of the relationship between theory and practice in spatial planning is a broad domain that can be examined at different levels and in various arenas.

As Healey (2009) suggests, the relationship between theory and practice in planning can be sought in “the moment of forming and implementing complex judgments in the public sphere about what should be done and how it should be done.” This study specifically targets this level: the moment when national and regional forces—including central government institutions, local bodies, and economic and social actors—come together within the planning process to make judgments about the direction of intervention in space. At this moment, the planning system is compelled to represent both national and regional development as “wholes” that are intelligible, decisionable, and actionable. Therefore, the focus of this research is not the entire gap between theory and practice, but rather the way this practical judgment is formulated in the context of the encounter between national and regional development, the moment at which the spatial organization of development begins. Within this field, national development is stabilized as a decisionable totality. However, regional differences and inequalities constantly place it in a state of

incompleteness and urgency (Golkarami, 2025). In contrast, regional totality often fails to achieve full institutional recognition (Ahmadipour, Romina, Abdi, & Yousefi Mehr, 2025) or is constrained by viewing regional autonomy as a threat to national cohesion. Furthermore, capital-centered patterns institutionalized within formal planning have led to concentrated accumulation and weakened the possibility of forming an independent regional entity (Amirahmadi, 1986). Thus, planning—prior to any intervention—is inevitably required to articulate the relationship between these two totalities, and in practice cannot disregard it.

As a result, over several decades, two distinct yet seemingly complementary paths have emerged in organizing Iran's territorial development. The first is the path of national development planning, including development plans, economic, social, and cultural programs, annual budgets, and sectoral policies, which have been framed within two streams: “sectoral-economic” and “physical-spatial” (Sameni & Zebardast, 2023). The second is the path of regional development planning and spatial planning (land-use planning), ranging from early regional plans to pre-revolution national spatial plans, followed by regional and provincial spatial planning, and ultimately the national spatial plan as the foundation for organizing regional development (Akbari, Imani Jajarmi, & Rostamalizadeh, 2016).

At the theoretical and normative level, these two planning paths have been framed not as competing approaches, but as two complementary logics for organizing territorial development. Regional development planning is expected to act as a “supportive and integrative, supra-sectoral perspective” (Sameni & Zebardast, 2023), to assume responsibility for “integrating and coordinating spatial dimensions within sectoral policies and resolving conflicts among economic, environmental, and social development policies” (Akbari et al., 2016), and to “define the roles and functions of regions” for national planning. Conversely, national plans—through their emphasis on spatial planning, endogenous growth, social justice, and the rational distribution of resources—serve as the legal foundation supporting regional plans and aim at the “optimal use of territory and the effective utilization of the capacities of different regions of the country” (Akbari et al., 2016). However, the accumulated empirical evidence in the research literature points to a different pattern: institutional incoherence and increasing centralization

(Sarafi & Nejati Allaf, 2015; Seifoddini, Panahandehkhah, & Ghadami, 2010), spatial concentration of industrial activities (Dadashpoor & Fathejalali, 2013), the weakness of development regionalization (Dadashpoor & Dadejani, 2015), institutional conflicts (Mir Mohammadi, Kazemian, & Rezaei, 2021), the rescaling of centralization to the regional level (Sarafi & Nejati, 2015), and the instability of regional development (Ziari & Mohammadi, 2016). Additional issues include the ambiguous institutional status of spatial planning (Sameni & Zebardast, 2023), local political pressures (Salehi & Pourasghar, 2009), the persistence of a core–periphery structure (Veicy & Mehmandoost, 2013), the limited influence of regional plans on national programs (Sheikhi, 2001), the weak and stereotypical presence of a regional perspective at the national level (Sejodi, Ziari, Pourahmad, & Yasoori, 2022), and the inability of allocation systems to reduce inequalities (Godarzi & Hajiani, 2023).

Thus, a persistent structural inconsistency can be observed between the “normative principle of complementarity and systemic coordination” and the “empirical pattern of conflict, centralization, incoherence, and mutual ineffectiveness.” What is being undermined is not merely a specific policy or program. However, the very idea repeatedly emphasized in theory and official documents is the idea of complementarity, mutual support, full coordination, mutual trust, and a systemic relationship between the two paths of organizing territorial development. Accordingly, the problem addressed in this study is not simply one of implementation failure, but rather the existence of a structurally reproduced inconsistency between the normative-theoretical level and the institutional-operational level.

The significance of this issue lies in the fact that national and regional development planning, without consideration of their interaction, cannot constitute a reflective and action-oriented pursuit of the “good” for the territory. However, despite this inconsistency, it cannot be assumed that the planning system—whether in theory or practice—has fundamentally not been oriented toward the good. Therefore, the problem cannot be reduced merely to weak implementation or lack of political will. Instead, it must be referred to a deeper level of understanding of planning itself.

The persistence of this condition suggests that the national–regional encounter, as a historically structured situation, has been understood in a particular way—a mode of understanding that has

shaped both the theoretical framework of planning and the practical possibilities of intervention. In this sense, planning is not only a claim to realizing the good, but also a form of interpretive action in which the good is defined through specific interpretive horizons. Accordingly, the central research question is formulated as follows: how has the encounter between national and regional development in Iran been understood at the moment of judgment and planning action in such a way that, despite its orientation toward territorial good, it continuously reproduces the inconsistency between theory and practice?

This study aims to examine this initial moment of understanding—the moment in which the spatial organization of national–regional development is first framed as a plannable issue and subsequently repeated in different forms across historical periods. By adopting an interpretive–hermeneutic approach, the study seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions embedded in this framing and to open up the possibility of rethinking the relationship between understanding, planning, and the good.

2. Theoretical and empirical background

The issue of the gap between theory and practice—between knowledge and action—has been one of the most enduring concerns in spatial planning thought (Eizenberg, Dabovic, & Mäntysalo, 2025; Nejati & Nedae Tousi, 2025; Daneshvar, Ghaffari, & Majedi, 2019; Noorian & Esmaeili, 2023). However, the meaning of this gap has evolved alongside transformations in planning theory. During the dominance of technical–instrumental rationality and comprehensive planning, the theory–practice divide was largely reduced to a problem of “imperfect implementation,” as if planning knowledge itself were valid and failures occurred only at the stage of execution. Within this framework, the inconsistency between plans and outcomes was understood not as an epistemic crisis but as a managerial issue.

From the 1980s onward, however—concurrent with the decline of the welfare state, the weakening of modern grand narratives, and the rise of qualitative approaches in the social sciences—this gap was internalized within planning knowledge itself. The issue was no longer merely one of “application,” but rather the inadequacy of theory to comprehend the complexity of planning practice. As de Neufville (1983) notes, a theory that cannot guide the lived experience of planning not only fails to organize practice but also leads to cognitive dissonance and professional

alienation. Accordingly, planning came to be understood as a “paradigm in crisis”—a field compelled to contextualize and localize its narratives, since such narratives are developed within specific contexts and in response to particular concerns (Gunder, Madanipour, & Watson, 2017, p. 2).

Within this trajectory toward contextualized understanding, attention to power, material interests, and discourses became increasingly significant (Albrechts, 2017). Faludi, through the concept of the “planning environment” (Faludi, 1970), and Friedmann, through the idea of the “public domain” (Friedmann, 1987), demonstrated that the gap between theory and practice emerges not externally, but within the institutional and social contexts of decision-making. This shift—from knowledge to learning, and from expert authorities to ordinary people (Dobrucká, 2016, p. 149)—marked a turning point that transformed planning from a technical activity into an interactive process.

Subsequently, multiple dimensions of this transformation were articulated: epistemological (Davoudi, 2015), practical (Hoch, 2007), emotional (Hoch, 2006), ethical (Campbell, 2006, 2012a, 2012b), and political—particularly in Forester’s work (Forester, 1999, 2009, 2013). What unites these strands is an emphasis on the quality of judgment in practice—that is, the moment in which planning is realized not through predetermined rules, but within relational, intersubjective, and learning-oriented situations. In this context, phronesis (practical wisdom) emerged as a key conceptual mediator for bridging theory and practice.

This transformation, often associated with the “communicative turn,” foregrounded the concept of understanding in contrast to instrumental rationality. Within this tradition, understanding has been conceived as an intersubjective process of meaning-making in social interaction (Healey, 1992), as a form of situated practical reasoning in pragmatic readings (Hoch, 2007), and, within critical traditions, as a means of interrogating ideological forms of understanding (Harvey, 1978). Subsequent studies have shown how such understandings become shared frames of reference through institutional interactions and are stabilized via institutional structures. This trajectory led planning toward institutionalism, where the quality of place and the normative orientation of planning action are shaped within the public sphere and through evolving relationships among the state, citizens, and the economy (Healey, 1999). Gradually,

planning ideas came to be understood as cultural phenomena, giving rise to the concept of “planning culture” (Sanyal, 2005; Friedmann, 2005).

Overall, “understanding” has been seen as a pathway beyond the hegemony of instrumental rationality: a shift from defining the future to searching for it, from top-down intervention to collective learning, and from quantitative standardization to situated judgment. Nevertheless, the institutional transition from one form of rationality to another has remained difficult (Rahimi, 2015), while at the same time, evidence-based approaches—premised on the assumption that problems can be solved through seemingly neutral scientific knowledge—have regained strength (Davoudi, 2015).

A further significant shift involved the distinction between how understanding is performed and how something comes to be understood. In the first sense, understanding is an agential capacity: the planner interprets a situation, actors understand one another, and the governance system defines a problem. Studies such as the analysis of how urban development plan preparers in Tehran understand planning (Rahmani & Azizi, 2021) operate at this level.

In the second sense, however, planning itself is a historical-institutional process that determines what becomes intelligible and actionable in the first place. Here, the issue is no longer the quality of the subject’s understanding, but the mechanisms through which “the city,” “poverty,” or “informality” are constituted as planning problems. At this level, the “good” is not presupposed but is formed within the very process of understanding.

The Foucauldian tradition in planning radicalized this shift. From this perspective, understanding is not a neutral activity but a technology of power. Planning is part of a regime of governance that produces objects of intervention through classifications and standards (Huxley, 2002). “Coming to be understood” thus entails entry into a knowledge–power nexus that simultaneously constructs both reality and subjects.

Within the postcolonial tradition—particularly in strands influenced by Derridean readings—the concept of understanding is no longer treated as the discovery of an external reality, but is rethought as a differentiating and hierarchizing practice. For example, Ananya Roy (Roy, 2005) demonstrates that what is termed “informality” is not a pre-existing condition in the social world, but rather the product of epistemic and institutional boundary-making—boundaries constructed through binaries such as formal/informal,

center/periphery, and modern/non-modern. These boundaries are neither fixed nor natural; they are continually suspended, redefined, and instrumentally deployed within processes of governance and planning—a condition that can be understood as a form of the state of exception.

Within such a framework, understanding is simultaneously productive and exclusionary: it renders certain realities visible and actionable, while marginalizing alternative ways of seeing, living, and practicing politics. To render “informality” intelligible in this sense is to transform it into a “planning problem”—one that is often framed without recognizing the logics of life, rights, and political forms embedded within it. Understanding, therefore, is not a neutral act but a form of subtle epistemic violence: a practice that organizes the social world while simultaneously rendering certain rationalities invisible. From this point, theoretical developments move toward recognizing the plurality of rationalities in the production of lived space—a space understood not as the outcome of a single rationality, but as a field of contestation and coexistence among multiple rationalities (de Satgé & Watson, 2018; Ngwenya & Cirolia, 2021; Watson, 2003). Within the project of decolonizing planning theory, this perspective has given rise to new imaginaries, including the notion of “insurgent planning,” which, in contrast to invited spaces and formal empowerment practices, emphasizes spaces produced and enacted from below (Miraftab, 2009).

Subsequently, cities of the Global South are no longer treated as deviations from planning norms, but as “dialects of planning” within the epistemology of the field—systems that are “neither abnormal nor irrational, but rather distinct forms of rationality” (Roy, 2009, p. 86). In this way, a new theoretical terrain emerges, aimed at revealing a set of unspoken narratives and marginalized experiences that have remained concealed beneath the universalizing grammars of planning, which can now provide a renewed basis for intervention and thinking about the future (Ortiz, 2022).

Within the post-Marxist tradition, planning itself has been conceptualized as an ideological apparatus for producing the imaginable world (Gunder, 2010). Concepts such as “sustainability” or “livability” do not merely describe reality; they produce fantasies of conflict resolution. In this sense, planning is not simply a response to problems, but a mechanism for rendering absences and contradictions intelligible in a particular

way. This way simultaneously enables and constrains possibilities for intervention.

Thus, an accumulative trajectory can be observed: understanding as intersubjective experience → understanding as a mechanism of power → understanding as epistemic colonization → understanding as spatial ideology.

The next step was taken within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, where understanding is conceived not as a tool of planning but as its very mode of being. Low and Sturup (2018), drawing on Heidegger, argue that the planner’s action always occurs within a condition of thrownness—that is, the possibilities for action are already pre-structured by institutional arrangements. At a broader level, the dominant social order determines both the legitimacy and the limits of planning activity.

From another perspective, Behrend (2025), building on Gadamerian hermeneutics, shows that the normative orientation of planning toward the future is grounded in understanding. Planning practice entails a combination of three levels of understanding: (1) understanding situations and interests; (2) linguistic understanding and the achievement of agreement; and (3) practical understanding of how to act in a specific situation. Here, understanding is what makes application and judgment in real situations possible. Gadamer refers to this form of knowing as *phronesis* (practical wisdom)—a type of knowledge that, while concerned with action, differs from technical expertise by placing the question of the “good” at its center (Gadamer, 2007). *Phronesis* is not a skill that can be prescribed; rather, it emerges within the situation itself and through ethical–political judgment. From this perspective, planning is not based on understanding; it is itself a form of understanding.

As a result of these developments, the relationship between theory and practice is no longer conceived as external. Planning, beyond analytical knowledge or technical skill, becomes a dynamic process of “knowing in action”: situated and provisional, collective and distributed, pragmatic and purposive, and mediated and contested (Davoudi, 2015). The planning project, as Healey (2009) suggests, is a mode of governance that seeks to organize the complex coexistence of activities across space and time, grounded in a “will to believe” in the improvement of the future. Planning methods are rooted in the historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts of countries (Daneshvar et al., 2019). They are shaped through the collective co-production of knowledge among actors (Alexander,

2022). Accordingly, planning is not merely a set of tools or documents, but a particular way of rendering situations intelligible in order to enable intervention. Focusing on the concept of understanding allows national and regional planning in Iran to be interpreted not simply as a failure of implementation or as an instrument of the state, but as a historical event of understanding. Eight decades of planning in Iran form part of the epistemology of Iranian modernity—a narrative shaped in the transition from an imperial order to a modern state, amid the unfinished experience of constitutionalism, the state-building project of the Pahlavi era, and the persistence of earlier structures in the present. Once the historicity of planning is acknowledged, plans and documents are no longer merely technocratic products or instruments of capital accumulation; rather, they can be seen as moments in which the national–regional condition was “made intelligible” in its time. Each plan has been an interpretation of the territorial good—even if, in

practice, it has led to inconsistency. Philosophical hermeneutics enables planning texts to be reread as events of understanding: attempts at practical judgment within specific historical conditions. From this perspective, the central issue is no longer planning failure per se, but the way in which the Iranian world has been understood in a manner that simultaneously opens possibilities for action and reproduces the inconsistency between theory and practice. Consequently, overcoming this inconsistency lies not in revising guidelines. However, in rethinking the mode of understanding itself—that is, in returning to the moment of practical judgment and questioning the common good. Such a reading allows contemporary planning to be seen not as a continuation of failure, but as a field for reinterpreting dominant understandings and opening new possibilities for collective action. Table 1 summarizes this trajectory from the “theory–practice gap” to “planning as practical judgment oriented toward the good.”

Table 1. The evolution of the concept of “understanding” in planning theory and its implications for this study

Theoretical phase	Central problem	Conception of “understanding.”	Theory–practice relation	Implication for planning action	Implication for this study
Technical–instrumental rationality and comprehensive planning	Implementation gap	Objective scientific knowledge of reality	Theory is correct; implementation is deficient	Planner as expert problem-solver	Planning inconsistency is seen as “implementation failure.”
Paradigm crisis and contextual turn	Inadequacy of theory	Knowledge of social and institutional context	Theory must align with experience	Attention to the planning environment and social learning	The theory–practice gap is internalized within planning knowledge
Communicative turn	Decision-making under conflict	Intersubjective process of meaning-making	Theory and practice are co-constituted through interaction	Situated and deliberative judgment	The quality of practical judgment becomes central
Institutionalism and planning culture	Stabilization of shared understandings	Product of institutional and cultural interactions	Action is shaped within institutional contexts	Planning as a form of governance practice	Planning is understood as historically and culturally embedded
Foucauldian approach	Production of problems	Technology of knowledge–power	Theory/practice as mechanisms of governance	Planning produces reality and subjects	What is called a “development problem” is historically constructed
Postcolonial Southern perspectives	Exclusion of alternative rationalities	Practice of epistemic boundary-making	Planning produces spatial hierarchies	Recognition of multiple rationalities	Iran’s planning experience is not a deviation but a distinct rationality
Post-Marxist approach	Spatial ideology	Ideological matrix producing possibility	Planning constructs the imaginable world	Production of fantasies of conflict resolution	Development concepts themselves reproduce inconsistency
Hermeneutic turn	Nature of planning action	Practical wisdom (phronesis)	Theory and practice unite in judgment	Questioning the “good” in context	Planning itself is a form of historical understanding
This study	Persistent reproduction of theory–practice inconsistency in Iran	Historical process of judgment about the territorial good	Planning as a field where historical understandings are realized	Planning action as a moment of practical judgment	Iranian planning documents are events of understanding, not merely technical failures

3. Research methodology

3.1. Methodological position

This study is theoretically grounded within the framework of critical realism. In this perspective, social reality is neither reduced to observable events nor to subjective representations; rather, it is conceived as a stratified reality in which empirical events are the outcomes of deeper mechanisms and structures (Bhaskar, 2008/1975). Accordingly, the phenomenon of the encounter between national and regional development in Iran is understood not merely as a set of policies or discourses, but as a structured situation that has been institutionalized and reproduced over time through planning institutions, rules, and practices. The formulation of the research problem follows this same logic: beginning from the observation of persistent patterns of inconsistency and seeking to refer them to deeper generative mechanisms—what critical realism describes as a movement from the empirical and the actual to the level of the real.

At the same time, critical realism emphasizes that social reality operates through meaningful human actions; therefore, access to social mechanisms is not possible without attention to horizons of understanding. Bhaskar (2005/1979), in explicating the nature of the social sciences, argues that social structures, while relatively autonomous, endure only through their reproduction in human action. Thus, explaining social phenomena requires an understanding of the meanings and interpretive horizons within which actions acquire significance. Entry into the realm of understanding and interpretation in this study is therefore not merely a methodological choice, but a necessity arising from the ontological commitments of critical realism.

In this regard, the study draws on the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics to engage with the level of understanding embedded in planning mechanisms. Philosophical hermeneutics is employed here not simply as an epistemological tool, but as an ontological approach to understanding—one that conceives understanding as constitutive of human being-in-the-world. Gadamer (1994), through the concept of the “event of understanding,” shows that understanding is not a mental act directed at an external object, but a historical event that unfolds within the horizon of interaction among tradition, language, and historical situation. In this view, understanding is part of the realization of social reality itself, not merely a means of knowing it. The incorporation of philosophical

hermeneutics into this study is therefore necessary because the object of inquiry—the national–regional encounter within the planning system—has itself been formed and sustained through historical horizons of understanding.

From this perspective, critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics are not positioned as separate layers, but are engaged within a shared ontological horizon. Critical realism enables the formulation of questions concerning generative mechanisms and enduring structures, while philosophical hermeneutics provides access to how these mechanisms come to be understood within historical contexts. In other words, while critical realism guides the movement from observable phenomena toward deeper structures, philosophical hermeneutics reveals that these structures are realized and reproduced only through historically situated horizons of understanding.

Accordingly, the trajectory of the research does not proceed from a fixed theoretical framework to an applied method; rather, it moves from an ontological problem formulation toward its historical–interpretive analysis. In this process, the research problem itself is advanced through analysis, opening up new horizons of meaning. Such an approach is consistent with the logic of critical realism’s use of retrodution, as it seeks—through the interpretation of texts and institutional formations—to identify the conditions of possibility for the emergence and reproduction of a structural inconsistency.

Within this framework, the study is situated in the Gadamerian tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. The primary focus is not on uncovering authorial intent (methodological hermeneutics) nor on exposing hidden ideology (critical hermeneutics), but on understanding the historical conditions and horizons of meaning within which the national–regional development encounter has been constituted as a plannable issue. Planning and legal texts are treated here not merely as technical documents, but as sites where horizons of understanding are stabilized and reproduced—horizons within which institutional mechanisms gain meaning and operate. As Gadamer (1994) suggests, understanding always occurs within a horizon of historically effected consciousness; therefore, this study aims to examine those historical horizons through which Iran’s spatial planning system has arrived at a particular understanding of the national–regional relationship.

This methodological position is illustrated in Figure 1.

In summary, the research process—based on the integration of these two approaches—can be schematized as follows: from the empirical observation of persistent patterns of inconsistency → to posing questions about generative mechanisms and enduring

structures ⇔ to accessing how these mechanisms have been rendered intelligible within historical contexts → to reconstructing the conditions of possibility for the emergence and reproduction of structural inconsistency.

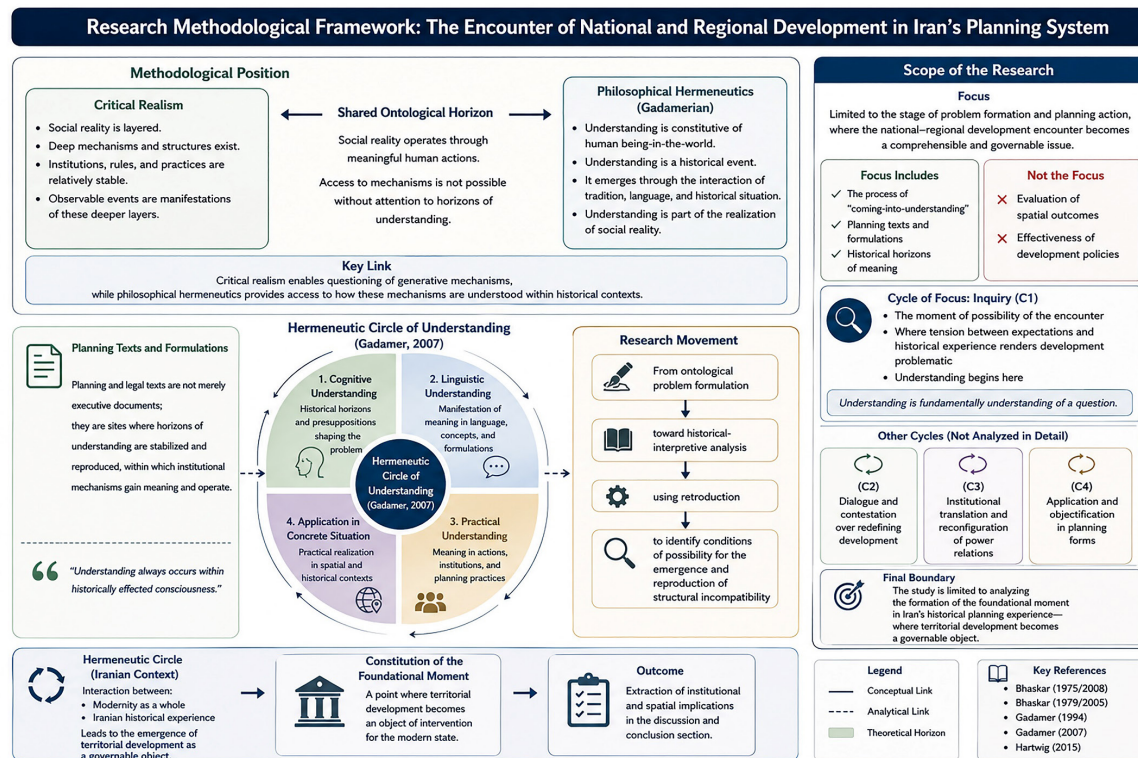


Figure 1. Ontological and methodological framework of the study: integrating critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics

3.2. Research design and analytical process

The research design is based on a cyclical interpretive analysis across three textual levels. These levels include:

- (1) theoretical and analytical texts related to development and regional planning;
- (2) historical sources and narratives of the formation of development policies;
- (3) official documents of national development plans and spatial planning.

The analytical process was conducted in a cyclical yet traceable manner through four main steps:

- **Identification of problematic situations:** In the first step, conceptual tensions and inconsistencies between national and regional development were identified within analytical and theoretical sources in order to establish the initial horizon of the research question.
- **Reconstruction of the historical horizon:** In the second step, historical and narrative sources were

revisited to reconstruct the contexts in which these tensions emerged and the ways in which the development problem was formulated within the country's institutional setting.

- **Interpretive reading of planning documents:** In the third step, development plan documents were analyzed as institutional responses to the development problem, with particular attention to how the national–regional relationship was represented within them.
 - **Iterative movement across textual levels:** In the final stage, analysis proceeded through a back-and-forth movement among the three levels to achieve a coherent and stable interpretation of the logic underlying the formulation of development.
- These steps do not constitute linear stages of research, but rather iterative movements within a hermeneutic circle, through which initial understandings were continuously revised and reconstructed.

3.3. Research sources

The sources used in this study were categorized into four levels:

- Level 1: Academic texts and analytical reports that provide theoretical interpretations of the planning system.
- Level 2: Historical texts, historical sociology studies, and oral histories related to the national/regional development encounter.
- Level 3 (primary focus): Two seven-year development plans, three five-year development plans prior to the Revolution, and seven five-year economic, social, and cultural development plans after the Revolution; legislative acts of the National Consultative Assembly (pre-revolution) and the Islamic Consultative Assembly (post-revolution); spatial planning (land-use planning) studies and regulations before and after the Revolution; statutes of organizations related to development planning; and legal decisions concerning institutional changes within the planning system.

While the main analytical focus is on the third level, it is consistently interpreted in relation to the first and second levels.

3.4. Unit of analysis and logic of interpretation

The unit of analysis in this study is not the “statement” or “conceptual code,” but rather the “contextual questions and semantic tensions of development” as they are represented in different forms across texts. Accordingly, this study departs from coding-based methods, as its aim is not to extract categories from data, but to understand the relationships of meaning across texts and the ways in which institutions respond to development-related issues.

Analysis progressed when it became possible to establish meaningful connections among historical narratives, theoretical foundations, and planning formulations, and when a shared pattern of understanding development emerged across texts.

The researchers, as individuals familiar with Iran’s spatial planning system, brought pre-understandings of development and planning into the study. These pre-understandings were not eliminated but recognized as conditions of possibility for understanding. Interpretive bias was managed through: maintaining analytical memos at each stage; repeated readings of texts over time; returning to historical sources to test potential inconsistencies; and preserving semantic tensions rather than eliminating or reducing them. The logic of interpretation is presented in five steps in Table 2.

Table 2. Operational framework of hermeneutic analysis in understanding the national–regional development encounter

Analytical Step	Textual Level Engaged	Interpretive Orientation	Guiding Question	Analytical Outcome in the Process of Understanding
Identification of a problematic situation	Theoretical and analytical literature on development planning	Opening the horizon of inquiry and revealing assumptions	How has the issue of national and regional development become a problem?	Formulation of the initial horizon of understanding and definition of the field of inquiry
Reconstruction of historical–institutional context	Historical texts, narratives, and institutional transformations of planning	Situating the problem within the historical experience of Iranian modernity	Under what historical and institutional conditions has this encounter emerged?	Reconstruction of the context in which development tensions formed
Interpretation of planning texts	Development plans, laws, documents, and organizational structures	Reading texts as responses to a historical question	To what necessity or conflict do planning documents respond?	Uncovering the semantic logics underlying the formulation of development
Hermeneutic movement between part and whole	Simultaneous interaction among the three textual levels	Continuous revision and refinement of interpretation	Can different elements be understood as part of a coherent whole?	Temporary stabilization of interpretive coherence
Attainment of provisional closure of understanding	The overall interpretive whole emerging from the analysis	Evaluating coherence and adequacy of interpretation	Would adding new evidence destabilize the interpretation?	Formation of a relatively stable interpretive narrative of the encounter

3.5. Criteria of interpretive validity and adequacy

In interpretive research, validity is not established through statistical replicability but through the adequacy and coherence of the resulting understanding. Accordingly, the following criteria—

corresponding to validity, reliability, credibility, and theoretical saturation—were employed to evaluate the quality of the analysis:

- Interpretive validity: the degree to which interpretations correspond to the texts and their

historical contexts;

- Interpretive stability: the consistency of results across repeated readings of the sources;
- Interpretive coherence: the capacity of the interpretation to simultaneously explain diverse narratives and documents without generating semantic contradictions;
- Interpretive adequacy: a condition in which the inclusion of new texts does not fundamentally alter the interpretive framework.

Interpretive coherence was considered achieved when:

- (1) the interpretation could account for all examined documents;
- (2) the tension between national and regional levels remained intelligible without eliminating either dimension;
- (3) re-reading historical sources did not contradict the interpretation; and
- (4) The addition of new sources did not produce structural changes in the overall understanding.

3.6. Scope of the study

This study is limited to analyzing the stage in which the problem of judgment and planning action is formed in the encounter between national and regional development—that is, the level at which this encounter is constituted within the planning system as an intelligible and actionable issue. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the process through which this situation is “rendered intelligible” in planning texts and formulations, rather than on evaluating spatial outcomes or the effectiveness of development policies.

Within this framework, the process of “coming to be understood” is conceptualized—within the horizon of philosophical hermeneutics—through four intertwined dimensions of understanding: cognitive understanding, linguistic understanding, practical understanding, and application in concrete situations. These dimensions do not represent linear stages of research, but rather constitute aspects of the hermeneutic circle of understanding (Gadamer, 2007).

For methodological precision, this fourfold schema can be compared with the hermeneutic cycles identified within the tradition of critical realism. Roy Bhaskar distinguishes four interrelated cycles: the cycle of inquiry, engagement, inquiry-within-engagement, and inquiry-within-texts (Bhaskar, 2005/1979, pp. 168–176; Hartwig, 2015, p. 234). The present article focuses specifically on the first cycle—the cycle of inquiry

(C1)—which pertains to the level of problem formation. This cycle examines the historical presuppositions, horizons of meaning, and questions through which a development situation becomes constituted as a planning problem.

The selection of this cycle is grounded in the fact that the cycle of inquiry represents the moment of possibility for the encounter itself, where tensions between existing expectations and historical experience render a development situation problematic and initiate understanding. As Gadamer emphasizes, understanding is fundamentally the understanding of a question to which statements serve as responses (Gadamer, 2007). From this perspective, planning texts are not points of departure but historical responses to prior questions.

The remaining cycles—dialogue and contestation over redefining the meaning and transformation of development (C2), institutional translation and reconfiguration of power relations (C3), and application and objectification in the form of planning interventions (C4)—are acknowledged as part of the broader theoretical horizon but are not the focus of detailed analysis in this paper.

Focusing on the first cycle enables the study to examine the conditions of possibility for the formation of the “plannable” totality of territorial development—that is, the foundational moment without which subsequent stages of planning cannot materialize. Accordingly, the scope of the study is limited to analyzing how this foundational moment is constituted within the historical experience of development planning in Iran, where, within the hermeneutic interplay between the totality of modernity and the particularity of the Iranian experience, territorial development emerges as an object of intervention for the modern state.

The findings of this analysis provide a basis for deriving institutional and spatial implications in the discussion and conclusion sections. Furthermore, the relationship between this cycle (C1) and subsequent cycles—conceived as future phases of a broader research agenda—can be outlined as follows:

- Cycle 2 (C2): the stage in which responses to developmental uncertainty take shape through dialogue, contestation, and the collective redefinition of the problem among the state, elites, institutions, and social forces. Here, politics emerges not merely as an instrument of implementation, but as a struggle over meaning, direction, and problem definition.
- Cycle 3 (C3): the stage in which the issue shifts from

disagreement over meaning to the creation of conditions for collective action. This occurs through processes of translation—linguistic, institutional, conceptual, and political—through which positions, roles, and power relations are reconfigured, producing a shared yet provisional horizon for development action.

- Cycle 4 (C4): the stage in which knowledge and decisions generated in previous cycles are implemented in concrete situations through plans, spatial projects, and development interventions. Implementation constitutes a re-reading of context—one that may be creative, imposed, or incomplete. The outcome is the formation of a new spatial and institutional condition, which in turn becomes the subject of renewed questioning, initiating a new hermeneutic cycle (a new C1).

4. Findings: the perplexity of underdevelopment and the emergence of a transforming encounter

The perspective of this study is that national development planning and regional development planning—both in theory and in practice—are not two pre-given, independent, and fully determined entities whose interaction has only recently become problematic, requiring adjustment of their respective determinations in order to establish a better relationship. Rather, these two have been continuously constituted within a historical relation and through an ongoing encounter. What has sedimented over time is not each of them in isolation, but rather the situation of encounter between them.

The situation of encounter has deeper roots than the experience of the modern state, and its presence can be traced back to the imperial form of governance and the condition of “protected realms” (*mamālek-e mahruseh*) up to the late Qajar period. However, with Iran’s entry into modernity, the weight of this encounter gradually shifted from the logic of sovereignty—centered on organizing the relationship between the center and provinces and territories (Katouzian, 2012)—toward the logic of Iranian governmental rationality emerging with the formation of the modern state (governmentality) (Heydari, 2018), and subsequently, after World War II, toward the logic of development within a developmental state (Towfigh, 2021). This transformation, from the 1940s onward, formally assigned the task of regulating the relationship between national totality and regional multiplicities to the spatial planning system.

4.1. The Situation of encounter as the construction of temporal drawers

Iran’s defeats in the wars with Russia (1804–1828; corresponding to 1183–1206 AH in the Iranian calendar) emerged as a major governance challenge that found expression in the question: “Why are we backward?” (Towfigh, 2021). The modernization of the “country” and the implementation of infrastructural projects within the country were pursued as attempts to resolve this question in comparison with the “advanced” conditions of Western states—particularly Russia and the Ottoman Empire. This effort began during the era of Crown Prince Abbas Mirza and, after the constitutional revolution, continued through the Pahlavi I period.

This understanding of development placed Iran within a temporal relationship with other countries (“we are behind them”). Development was thus conceived as a unidirectional, accumulative, and comparable movement along a single temporal axis—a timeline into which all countries and regions could and should be inserted. This time was assumed to be universal, measurable, and comparable, interpreting underdevelopment not as a structural difference but as a temporal delay (delay in reaching a desired state) (Fabian, 2014).

Within this framework, progress was understood as achievable through a homogeneous, unified, and isotropic space–time. Accordingly, under the modern nation-state of Reza Shah, heterogeneities were suspended through processes of suppression, homogenization, and standardization. Authoritative, top-down measures sought to place the country on a developmental trajectory through the construction of a modern army, modern bureaucracy, modern property regime, modern education system, modern industries, modern agriculture, modern trade, modern transportation, and a modern culture and subject at the national scale.

The imperial condition (*mamālek-e mahruseh* Iran)—characterized by a power configuration between the Shah and provinces—was thus transformed into a taken-for-granted temporal difference between “our time of arrival” and “their time of arrival” at modernity. Modernization emerged as the response to this perceived temporal gap.

The establishment of institutions such as the Economic Council (1937) indicates a shift from understanding development as a single temporal difference between Iran and competing or colonial powers to recognizing

multiple internal temporal differences. These differences became visible through the differentiation of modernization axes within the country and the increasing power of both state and non-state bureaucratic actors associated with them. Importantly, these temporal-developmental sectors were not neutral in relation to one another; rather, as stated in Article 1 of the Economic Council Charter (1937), “economic affairs of the country must proceed according to a defined plan.”

The extension of World War II into Iran, the fall of Reza Shah, the four-year occupation of the country, and the temporary release of regional forces from military and institutional suppression led to a rupture in the assumption of a unified national developmental space embedded within a linear, coordinated temporality. Regions moved toward autonomy, introducing a deep fracture into the taken-for-granted notion of homogeneous national development.

Nevertheless, at the national level, the establishment of a planning system—after at least four years of political contestation—again emerged as a pervasive necessity, framed as “financial and economic reform in Iran,” “a prerequisite for fundamental reforms,” “a means of designing Iran’s economic and social future,” “an instrument for improving living standards and political conditions,” “a mechanism for stabilizing the national economy,” and ultimately “the only way to save Iran” (Shahvand & Saeedinia, 2019).

In continuation of the process through which modernity was understood as a temporal difference between “us” and “them,” and internal temporal differences within national development were rendered non-neutral, the First Development Plan (1948–1955) became a critical moment. This plan both rationalized and systematized the infrastructural initiatives of the Pahlavi state, which had been disrupted during the four-year Allied occupation (1941–1945), and simultaneously laid the foundation for the Second Development Plan (1955–1962), which was implemented under relatively stable conditions.

The First Development Plan (1948–1955) consisted, in essence, of a network of industries linked to agriculture, mining, and construction materials; the exploitation of mines, agricultural lands, dams, and irrigation systems (Chapters 1–3, 6–8); transportation infrastructure such as roads, railways, airports, and ports, as well as postal, telegraph, and telephone systems to connect production nodes and settlements (Chapters 9–10); and studies, research institutions, laboratories, educational centers, cooperatives,

statistical systems, and mapping activities to support these operations (Chapters 5 and 11). Simultaneously, it included the provision of basic urban and rural services to improve production conditions (Chapter 12). Collectively, these elements were expected to increase production, expand exports, and improve living standards (health, education, and livelihood) (article 1).

This network can be understood as a relatively shallow structure lacking a complex spatial hierarchy, intended to be implemented within regions independently of hierarchical bureaucracies (ministries), while maintaining a mechanical cause-and-effect relationship among its components over seven years (contrary to conventional sectoral interpretations). In this sense, regions—despite being subject to strong political claims from the national level during the territorial reconfigurations of the 1940s—simultaneously operated within proximity to both communist and capitalist logics.

With this background, the planning system comes to understand the complex national/regional encounter in such a way that regions are not merely spatial units that are backward or advanced, but rather temporal pits. These are situations in which the linear and accelerated movement of national development, when confronted with institutional constraints, human capacities, or infrastructural and social limitations, is forced to slow down, temporarily pause, or undergo reconfiguration. These temporal pits may function both as retardants and accelerators. However, by drawing development into themselves, they inevitably impose a pause and require additional time for intervention to become feasible. This temporal pause can itself be interpreted as a mode of development governance, in which the state, rather than proceeding uniformly, is compelled to phase, prioritize, and temporalize its interventions to align developmental trajectories with the actual capacities of implementation and social reproduction (Li, 2007; Scott, 2020).

As a result, the non-neutrality of sectoral and regional temporalities in the development process becomes evident. In this condition, the situation of encounter between national and regional development is understood as a set of temporal drawers—institutionalized cuts in developmental time that are temporarily stabilized through indicators, administrative divisions, planning documents, and multi-level governance arrangements. These drawers make it possible to reduce qualitative heterogeneities

in capacities and constraints to comparable, prioritizable, and governable temporal hierarchies, thereby organizing developmental time in an administrative and managerial form. Within development plans, these temporal drawers are expressed through simplified binaries: the division of the country into more developed and less developed regions; more and less privileged areas; leading urban, productive, or political centers versus other locations; and deprived, emerging, or declining regions. These interpretations assign a specific meaning to development as a “process,” such that within this linear temporality, parts of the whole—through compensatory investment and institutional intervention—are required to pause to bring a temporal pit closer to the dominant rhythm of development at a faster-than-average rate. At the same time, the average rate of development itself (the quantitative growth rate of economic and social indicators in five-year plans) is expected to approach an ideal rate assumed to have already been achieved

elsewhere, namely in the West. Within this acceleration, temporal drawers—understood as temporally emptied nodes stripped of spatial complexity and social embeddedness—are reduced to development indicators. As noted, “an important method for evaluating inclusive development in development plans is the assessment of changes in the comprehensive development index; that is, evaluating an index that measures development changes in the country with a focus on inequality and justice” (Naqvi, Pourezzat, Zolfagharzadeh, & Kazmi, 2025). Moreover, the construction of a nested hierarchy of temporal drawers becomes the very foundation for thinking about the national/regional development encounter: “the level of economic security in the county is highly influential in ensuring economic security at the provincial level, and its realization at the provincial level provides the basis for increasing national economic security” (Dorostkar, 2021).

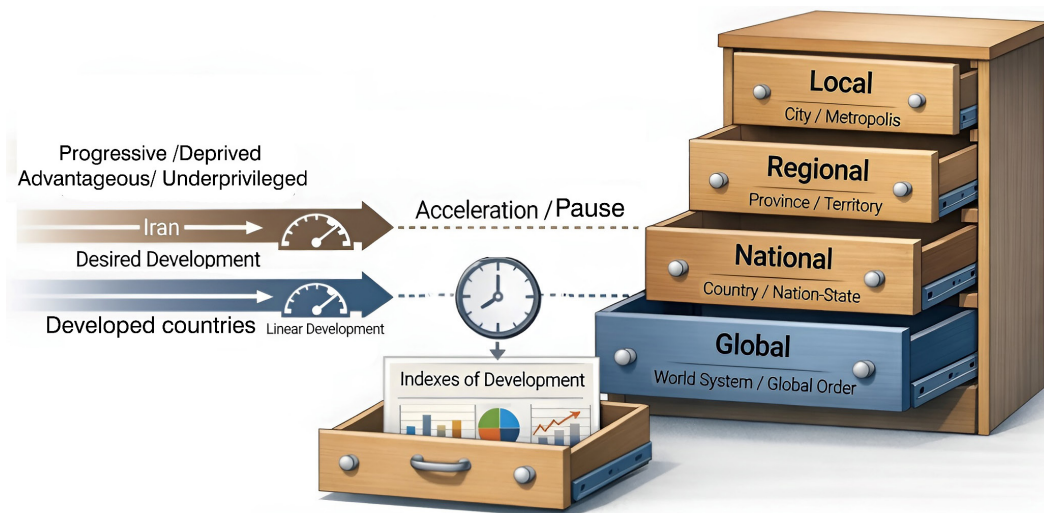


Figure 2. The situation of national/regional development encountered in the construction of temporal drawers

In the First Development Plan (1948–1955), another important development occurred that brought the technical–expert process of plan preparation into the domain of national–regional politics: more than one-third of the allocated budget for these projects was directed to the county (shahrestan) level (Law on the Implementation of the Development Plan, 1949, Article 2). Whether this allocation resulted from increased sensitivity at the county level and its parliamentary representatives, or from the structure of the project network itself, or from cost–benefit evaluations of implementation (especially in light of

the rejection of World Bank loans and the interruption of oil revenues during Mossadegh’s premiership, 1951–1953), it led to the formation of a procedural pattern in which the configuration of these temporal drawers, combined with annual budgeting, became stabilized through negotiations between parliament and the government.

Initially, it was assumed that through one or several projects, or through financial redistribution (First Development Plan), a short temporal pause would enable the synchronization of developmental speeds. In the Second Development Plan (1955–1962), the

conditions for entering a temporal drawer—understood as a mechanical interaction between constraints and capacities—became more structurally embedded. The National Assembly mandated the government “to undertake all necessary operations for the development of the country, the improvement of cultural and living standards, and the general welfare of the population” (Article 1). In this formulation, four dimensions—“state,” “country,” “individuals,” and “public”—were added to the configuration of temporal drawers of development.

In the Third Development Plan (1962–1967, Articles 17 and 18), and more significantly in the Fourth Development Plan (1968–1972, Chapter 4: Regional Development and Growth Poles), policies of poverty reduction and the establishment of growth centers and development poles were introduced, expanding temporal territorialization into an institutionalized form. In this framework, national development required longer temporal pauses within these spatial units in order for development to “spill over” from growth centers through concentrated investment.

Even during the peak of oil revenues (Fifth Development Plan, 1973–1977), institutional constraints, environmental capacities, and human resource limitations continued to force national development into longer temporal pauses at the regional level. This eventually led to the preparation of provincial development plans, in which temporal pauses were

formally aligned with national planning cycles—at least on paper, as outlined in Chapter 7 (Special Provincial Development Programs). In this way, the situation of national/regional development encounter came to be understood as a temporal alignment between regional development and national development.

Debates on this form of temporal–institutional territorialization ranged from concentrated investment in underdeveloped and “potential” regions to endogenous development approaches, institutional reforms, neo-regionalism, local governance, and good regional governance. In the initial moment of perplexity underlying the establishment of the planning system, regional development was understood as the temporal pause of national development caused by temporal pits. Thus, the situation of encounter was conceptualized as the construction of temporal drawers along both the width (constraints) and length (capacities) of development. In simpler terms, regional development was not an independent project but rather a temporal articulation of national development’s encounter with territorial heterogeneity.

The movement of the research from an ontological formulation of the problem—or an initial sense of perplexity—toward a historical–interpretive analysis of this national/regional developmental encounter is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Co-constitution of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing the “emergence of temporal drawers.”

Analytical component	→	Critical realism dimension	↔	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension	→	Result of integration
Initial question		Observation of stable institutional responses to crisis		Understanding “backwardness” as a temporal difference		Transformation of historical difference into a development problem
Temporalization of development		Identification of time as the organizing principle of intervention		Reconstruction of the horizon of “linear developmental time.”		Formation of time as a governing mechanism
Concept of regions		Identification of pauses and institutional slowdowns		Understanding regions as “temporal pits.”		Emergence of “temporal drawers” as a mechanism
Planning institutionalization		Identification of temporal stabilization in indicators and plans		Interpretation of planning texts as carriers of meaning		Institutionalization of developmental time
Historical transformation		Reproduction of the mechanism across periods		Tracing meaning shifts across planning regimes		Structural continuity with varying manifestations
→ “Temporal drawers” are a generative mechanism that can only be realized and reproduced through historically embedded horizons of understanding within the language and practices of planning.						

4.2. The Situation of encounter as dynamic reconfiguration of temporal drawers

The first two decades of establishing the planning system (1940s and 1950s), particularly the implementation process of the First and Second Development Plans, represent—both in terms of design, execution, and outcomes—an integrated, technically oriented, project-based form of planning. This system was carried out by a newly established organization that was institutionally separate from the executive branch of government (at both central and local levels) and aimed at increasing national wealth. These infrastructural operations were financed through oil revenues and foreign loans, and were implemented independently of the country's existing economic structure. Geographically, they were distributed across different regions of the country, while socially, they entered into local contexts in a largely coercive, top-down, and directive manner. Within these plans, it was merely stipulated that a portion of resources be distributed at the county level, and that “development operations across provinces and counties be allocated according to local conditions, natural capacities, and available resources” (Second Development Plan, Article 7).

However, with institutional changes in the Planning Organization in the late 1950s, the planning system—particularly from the Third Development Plan onward—adopted a more comprehensive perspective, aiming to guide quantitative changes toward qualitative transformation rationally. A distinction was introduced between national and local projects, some of which could now be delegated to provincial governors and local administrative units (Article 17). This shift occurred at a time when the Planning Organization was required to delegate implementation responsibilities to line ministries and public agencies (Article 16), and when the organization—now directly under the Prime Minister (Article 9)—was also granted authority over determining the state's current expenditures (Third Development Plan, 1962–1967).

From the Third Development Plan to the implementation of the Fourth Development Plan (1968–1972), which marked the peak of regional planning alongside national planning, the national/regional encounter acquired a decisive form. As noted, “provincial programs under both the Third and Fourth Development Plans (Article 17) primarily refer to small-scale local projects such as secondary roads, schools, clinics, urban and rural social services, irrigation, and agriculture, and not all projects that are

merely geographically located within a province” (Nili & Karimi, 2017).

Within this understanding of the encounter, distinctions such as main and subsidiary, large and small, or central government versus provincial administration are not separate categories but rather continuations or repetitions of one another. This categorization—based on implementation capacity and budget scale—generated ambiguity, tension, and contestation in distinguishing the national from the local, thereby limiting its expansion into other domains. It gradually became a central concern of policy debates and planning discourse in defense of regional and local governance (Barakpour & Asadie, 2022).

To understand how the planning apparatus interpreted the situation of encounter at this moment, attention must be directed to the transformation initiated in the Third Development Plan: the adoption of a comprehensive approach and the placement of the Planning Organization under the Cabinet. This coincided with the simultaneous emergence of sectoral planning (as executive agencies established their own planning offices) and regional planning (including regional development schemes, growth poles in agriculture and industry, and tourism corridors, as well as the establishment of specialized regional development organizations).

Through this sectoral differentiation—and the pre-existing hierarchical structure of executive institutions—national development could gradually reproduce and institutionalize its qualitative continuity in localized and procedural forms. This transformation in the mode of engagement with development, and the recognition of its qualitative dimensions, can be observed in the objectives of the Fourth Development Plan (Article 1): “accelerating economic growth; reducing dependence on foreign imports; diversifying export commodities; achieving a more equitable distribution of income; and improving administrative services.”

In the revised Fifth Development Plan (1973–1977), this simultaneity and interdependence between sectoral planning and regional planning is explicitly institutionalized in the section on “General Policies and Administrative Guidelines of the System,” which includes: “expansion of regional planning and delegation of authority; establishment and strengthening of decentralization within the framework of the constitution; creation of local executive systems; and strengthening of local

organizations administered by elected representatives of the people.”

In the acceleration of national development during the 1960s, alongside the increasing inflow of oil revenues and the consolidation of a development-oriented discourse (as a form of repetition and qualitative continuity), the situation of encounter—understood as temporal drawers produced within the planning system—does not remain in a fixed or closed state. Rather, at different historical moments, these drawers begin to open.

The opening of temporal drawers implies that national development, in order to sustain its qualitative continuity, must allow for a controlled practice of interaction between regional constraints and capacities. This interaction is not achieved through command, but through facilitation, participation, and mutual learning. Such a condition produces a form of scalar differentiation in which regional time is allowed to operate according to its own rhythms, forces, and singularities. At the same time, national development is reproduced through fragmented, interrupted, failed, and reinitiated trajectories.

Policies and interventions such as “financial and technical assistance to private investors,” “rural development,” “disease control,” and “administrative training” (Third Development Plan), or “regional development,” “marketing,” “electricity transmission and distribution,” and “urban management improvement” (Fourth Development Plan), as well as emphasis on “participatory institutions,” “regional development banks,” and “delegating work to the people” (Fifth Development Plan), represent instances of such moments of opening. These are moments in which national development, in order to proceed, is compelled to accept heterogeneity and multi-temporality.

However, at the level of central development governance, in order to preserve its rational-normative form and to prevent dissolution into the multiplicity of local experiences, there is simultaneously a need to close or re-close temporal drawers. The closing of temporal drawers implies that the interaction between constraints and capacities is no longer left to regions themselves, but is instead managed and directed from above. In this condition, regional time is ultimately reduced to national developmental time.

As a result, scalar differentiation is gradually blurred and reduced to administrative-political divisions, such that local political agency and contestation can only be expressed within formally defined national

frameworks. Policies such as land reform, master planning, planning and statistics (Third Development Plan), cadastral systems, water resource monitoring, and literacy campaigns (Fourth Development Plan), as well as emphasis on “national cohesion,” “expansion of insurance coverage,” “housing provision,” and “environmental protection” (Fifth Development Plan), reflect this logic. In this logic, development sustains itself through continuity, homogeneity, and top-down multi-scalar transmission pathways, privileging similarity over difference.

Although in certain periods of Iran’s planning history attempts have been made to open temporal drawers at the regional scale—for example, through regional planning schemes in the Fourth Development Plan, independent provincial development planning in the Fifth Development Plan, pre-revolution spatial planning studies (e.g., Set-IRAN regional planning), emphasis on region-specific capacities in the First and Second Post-Revolution Development Plans, the establishment of provincial planning councils in the Third Development Plan, and provincial spatial planning studies in the 2000s—these moments have largely remained temporary, limited, and controlled interruptions within the dominant logic of national development.

The subordination of regional plans to macro-level plans (Sejodi, Ziari, Pourahmad, & Yasoori, 2022) becomes an institutional assumption. Similarly, “centralized decision-making structures and sectoral development approaches constitute the main drivers of regional development” (Sedighi et al., 2019). In these conditions, the opening of temporal drawers has rarely implied a genuine delegation of developmental temporality to regions; rather, it has occurred in experimental, provisional, and conditional forms, constantly subjected to pressures of re-synchronization and re-stabilization.

As noted, “the centralized decision-making structure and sectoral approach to development constitute major obstacles to the formulation and implementation of appropriate regional development policies... legal and institutional arrangements for local and regional development have increasingly become instruments for implementing national-level decisions and policies” (Farajirad, Kazemian, & Rokneddin Eftekhari, 2013). Consequently, although regional development occasionally appears as a potential field of scalar differentiation, the dominant tendency has been toward re-closing temporal drawers or maintaining them in a semi-open state. This pressure emerges

from the need to preserve formal coherence, institutional control, and alignment with national developmental temporality. The movement of the research from an ontological

sense of perplexity toward a historical–interpretive analysis of this national/regional encounter is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Co-constitution of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing the “dynamic regulation of temporal drawers.”

Analytical component →	Critical realism dimension ⇄	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension →	Result of integration
Transformation of development understanding	Identification of changes in developmental mechanisms	Reconstruction of development as multi-temporal and discontinuous	Development as a conditional and situated process
Transformation of planning	Change in institutional modes of planning practice	Shift from project execution to a comprehensive planning horizon	Transition from static structure to dynamic mechanism
National–local project differentiation	Emergence of differentiated implementation scales	Interpretation of scales as distinct meaning horizons	Formation of a multi-scalar developmental system
Opening of temporal drawers	Activation of participatory and regional mechanisms	Interpretation of local experiences as learning moments	Emergence of openness within development logic
Closing of temporal drawers	Institutional pressure toward homogenization	Recognition of the need for national coherence	Re-centralization and re-synchronization
Regional experiments	Temporary interruptions in the dominant structure	Interpretation of openings as historical possibilities	Semi-open temporal configurations
Historical dynamics	Reproduction of the mechanism across periods	Transformation of interpretive horizons over time	Structural persistence with shifting expressions
→ “Opening and closing of temporal drawers” is a generative mechanism emerging from the tension between centralization and decentralization. It is realized and reproduced through historically embedded interpretive horizons shaped by the dual logic of multi-temporality and homogenization in development.			

The Situation of encounter as a mechanism for constraining the temporal “drawers” of accumulation and depletion

This time, the formulation of the problem does not emerge from backwardness, nor from synchronicity, but from the anti-developmental effects internal to development itself.

National development plans, at least up to the Fifth Development Plan, explicitly addressed the necessity of equity in opportunities, income, employment, and the reduction of disparities between urban and rural life. This necessity was primarily formulated at the level of individuals and social groups. However, this understanding of justice and development requirements still lacked a coherent inter-regional perspective. The disparities that gradually emerged in the spatially homogeneous map of the country and in the logic of integrated development could no longer be explained or compensated for at the individual level; they signaled the emergence of problems operating at spatial and regional scales.

This form of development was expected to cascade uniformly across the country, ensuring that the entire territory benefited from high economic growth. Although it achieved certain successes at the national

level—including GDP growth rates of 9.3% during the Third Development Plan and 13% during the Fourth Development Plan—it simultaneously revealed the inefficiency of this assumption in the face of old and emerging inter- and intra-regional imbalances. As reported by the Set-IRAN Spatial Planning Study (1974, Vol. 1), these included: rapid growth of socio-economic inequalities, the breakdown of traditional urban and rural structures, urban growth concentrated in major cities, the marginalization of vast territories, accelerated rural-urban migration, the increasing economic dominance of Tehran, and widening interregional gaps. This situation demonstrated that development is neither a neutral phenomenon nor necessarily accompanied by homogeneous positive outcomes. As noted in development literature, “disruptions in growth cycles and their lack of continuity in many countries, alongside failure to reduce poverty or even increased inequality during growth, have raised doubts about these prescriptions; economic growth may not affect all groups equally and may leave some behind” (Naqvi et al., 2025).

Importantly, the emergence of these imbalances and inequalities occurred for the first time under conditions of peak economic growth and on the eve of

unprecedented oil revenues—namely, in the late Fourth Development Plan and during the preparation of the Fifth Plan. Thus, spatial inequalities and imbalances were no longer seen as mere side effects of growth, but as serious obstacles to the continuation of growth and the achievement of national development goals. It was explicitly stated that “in the long term, barriers to growth must be removed in all regions for national objectives to be realized.” Furthermore, reflecting on the rapid economic expansion of the previous decade, the Plan highlighted the “necessity of balanced provincial development and coordination, particularly given the increase in government revenues for development activities” (Fifth Development Plan, 1973, chapter on Special Provincial Development Programs).

At this stage, during the revision of the Fifth Development Plan, a new awareness emerged within the planning system: sectoral imbalances and regional disparities could become interlocked and mutually reinforcing. Therefore, it was no longer possible to address one without the other (Fifth Development Plan, 1973, chapter on Basic Objectives, Policies, and General Guidelines). Inequality, which up to the Fourth Plan had been understood mainly as a “difference” between groups or regions, was qualitatively transformed from the Fifth Plan onward: either regions had become saturated due to excessive concentration and density, turning into obstacles to further national development, or they were so deprived that they experienced depopulation and migration, triggering a chain of negative consequences (Spatial Planning, 1974, Vol. 1, p. 1). In both cases, inequality became a “dynamic disturbance” in the trajectory of national development—particularly in a context where dominant ideologies, whether in the form of the pre-revolutionary “Great Civilization” or post-revolutionary aspirations for justice, imposed maximal expectations on national development.

In response, the necessity of state intervention—through both the Planning Organization and development policies that simultaneously address sectoral and spatial dimensions—gradually took shape in planning and spatial development documents. It was stated that “five-year plans must not only reflect the volume of activities in various sectors or regions, but must also include plans and programs adapted to specific viewpoints (urban areas, development axes and poles, densely populated regions, peripheral areas, etc.)” (Spatial Planning, 1974, Vol. 1, p. 156). These “specific viewpoints” are precisely the nodal points where sectoral imbalances and regional

disparities intersect—both as sources of disruption in national development and as its consequences.

As a result, development gradually became a multi-directional and multi-spatial phenomenon. The distinction between urban and rural development emerged as two separate trajectories or strategies. The country was divided into eastern and western axes with differentiated development strategies, and increasing attention was given to regional centers and growth poles. Southern coasts and Makoran, coastal hinterlands, dry ports, energy-specialized zones, strategic regions, environmentally sensitive areas, disaster-prone zones, drought-affected regions, and areas prone to ethnic or social fragmentation. This diversification of themes and spaces indicates that national development can no longer be understood as a single, homogeneous pathway. The encounter between national and regional development thus enters a phase in which the region is no longer merely the periphery of implementation, but one of the main arenas in which the possibility—or impossibility—of sustaining national development is redefined.

In this third formulation of the problem, although the planning system still operates within a temporal understanding of development, it encounters a new form of qualitative perplexity. In contrast to the integrated perspective, which located the main problem in the asynchronicity of development components and assumed it could be resolved through rational adjustment of temporal “drawers,” it now becomes evident that growth and development themselves can internally generate disruption, inequality, and blockage. Development is no longer halted merely due to backwardness or misalignment; rather, it produces, through its own accelerated movement, obstacles that threaten its continuation. Therefore, the encounter between national and regional development must again be reformulated: not merely as the regulation of temporal mismatches, but as the management of anti-developmental consequences of accumulation, concentration, and depletion within regional temporal “drawers.” In this understanding, regions are no longer simply temporal pauses in national development; they become fields in which the negative feedback effects of development emerge earlier and more intensely, compelling national development to redefine its relation to them in order to sustain itself. The movement of the research from an ontological sense of perplexity toward a historical–interpretive analysis of this national/regional encounter is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. The co-operation of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing the “temporal drawers of accumulation and depletion.”

Analytical component	→	Critical realism dimension	↔	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension	→	Result of integration
Problem reconfiguration		Emergence of unintended consequences of economic growth		Shift from backwardness to the anti-developmental nature of development		Redefinition of development as a contradictory process
Spatial inequality		Accumulation of capital and population in some regions and depletion in others		Reinterpretation of justice from the individual to the spatial level		Formation of unequal spatial fields
Failure of the trickle-down model		Inefficiency of growth distribution mechanisms		Semantic critique of the idea of homogeneous growth		Collapse of the assumption of developmental homogeneity
Concentration and migration		Mechanisms of accumulation and population depletion		Understanding the lived experience of core and peripheral regions		Production of saturated poles and emptied regions
Sectoral–regional entanglement		Mutual reinforcement of sectoral and regional mechanisms		Networked understanding of development and inequality as a complex, multi-layered condition		Production of negative feedback loops in development
Emergence of problem regions		Concentration of negative effects in specific spaces		Interpretation of the region as a field of developmental experience		Transformation of the region into a site of developmental crisis

→ “Temporal drawers of accumulation and depletion” is a generative mechanism responding to the need to contain development itself, made possible through a transformation in the horizon of understanding—from growth toward a realizable and reproducible sustainability..

4.4. The Situation of encounter as the construction of generative structures of time

In continuity with the preceding “perplexities,” each of which sought to render the dynamics of development intelligible through temporal adjustments, asynchronicities, and the opening and closing of temporal drawers, the fourth perplexity begins at the point where the accumulation of these very experiences becomes the object of inquiry. After the formulation and implementation of four development plans and the continuation of modernization processes that had begun for “Iran” at the start of the century, the planning apparatus—now from a higher vantage point—confronts the question of what overall configuration has emerged from these transformations: how the territory has changed, what form it has taken, and what future lies ahead. This question is first systematically articulated in the Set-IRAN Spatial Planning Studies (1974) and is repeatedly reactivated in later periods, including after the 1979 Revolution, the eight-year war, and international sanctions.

The increase in oil revenues from the First Pahlavi period to the end of the Fourth Development Plan was accompanied by economic growth and a relative achievement of planning objectives. The sudden surge in oil revenues between 1973 and 1977, according to the prior linear logic, should have accelerated this trajectory even further. However, it is precisely at this

point that the question of the “overall outcome” of development emerges: development is no longer understood as the arithmetic sum of growth processes. However, it requires a new kind of emergent totality—one that arises from the composition of transformations rather than their simple continuation.

In the revised Fifth Development Plan (1973–1977), influenced by Bethel’s regional development proposals (1972) and the Set-IRAN spatial planning framework (1974), this conceptual shift becomes clearly visible through the emphasis on “Iran.” The central question is no longer merely the achievement of sectoral targets, but what kind of country and territorial formation is being produced; as stated, “Iran should be led, at an accelerated pace, toward the era of the Great Civilization” (Fifth Development Plan, 1973, Part One: Economic and Social Overview). In this horizon, Iran is not merely a component of global development. However, it is understood as a generative whole with the capacity for agency alongside other regional and global powers—a conception that had no clear place in earlier development plans and which, after the Revolution, is institutionally reformulated in documents such as Vision 2025, with the objective of attaining regional leadership.

It is within this context that “the spatial distribution of people and activities should no longer be regarded as the inevitable outcome of economic mechanisms, but

rather as a subject in its own right for reflection” (Set-IRAN Spatial Planning, 1974, Vol. 1). This statement indicates that development planning, for the first time, problematizes development itself: how can it be demonstrated that accumulated transformations have resulted in the developedness of the territory? Short-term economic logic and quantitative calculations—even when aimed at “coordination and balance in the economy” (Fourth Development Plan)—prove unable to answer this question. In contrast, spatial planning opens a horizon that “clearly goes beyond the awareness of individual ministries or sectoral capacities within existing administrative divisions (provinces and municipalities) and requires a form of insight capable of integrating different systems” (Spatial Planning, 1974, Vol. 1).

In this perplexity, the planning apparatus moves away from an inductive understanding based on fragmented experiences toward a structural and holistic mode of comprehension. Structure, in this sense, is an emergent property that confers causal power on the whole and cannot be reduced to individual components or their isolated capacities. This transition from experience to structure requires theoretical and/or politico-ideological mediation: theories and ideologies concerning Iran, development, spatial planning, urban and rural society, social welfare, and territorial justice—frameworks whose foundations were gradually formed from the 1960s onward through intellectual and institutional struggles. As early as the 1960s, research at the Institute for Social Studies sought to understand the logics of rural, nomadic, and urban life in order to render development policy

possible (Tofigh, 2019).

In the 1974 spatial planning project, this shift is materialized in concepts such as “urban world,” “rural world,” “territorial image,” and “a long-term vision of Iran,” where heterogeneous transformations combine to produce an emergent phenomenon. The concept of the “urban region”—particularly in the case of Greater Tehran—is introduced as a substitute for the conventional notion of the city, offering a new framework for coordinating infrastructure growth, industrial development, urban equipment, and housing (Spatial Planning, 1974, pp. 112–116). Urban regions, with their hierarchical structures and differentiated functions, appear as emergent totalities for which new objectives are defined, such as regulating comprehensive urbanization policies, improving urban planning systems, and establishing balance among cities (Fifth Development Plan, 1973, Urban Development Section, General Objectives). Examples such as development corridors, the Makoran region, or, conversely, peri-urban zones, all indicate this moment in which the encounter between national and regional development is no longer understood in terms of temporal alignment or scalar adjustment, but in the horizon of the emergence of structures that themselves produce and orient the time of development (the national/regional encounter is thus understood in terms of “generative totalities of time”). The movement of the research from an ontological sense of perplexity toward a historical-interpretive analysis of this national/regional encounter is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. The co-operation of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing “the construction of generative structures of time.”

Analytical component	→	Critical realism dimension	↔	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension	→	Result of integration
Questioning development as a whole		Emergence of macro-structures from accumulated change		Understanding development within a territorial totality horizon		Formation of emergent developmental totalities
“Iran” as a whole		Stabilization of the national structure at the causal level		Transformation of territory into a historical horizon of meaning		Territory as an active developmental agent
Role of theory and ideology		Conditions of possibility for activating structures		Role of pre-understandings in shaping reality		Linkage of knowledge, power, and structure
Urban/rural worlds		Differentiation of spatial structures with distinct functions		Interpretation of reality through macro-narratives		Production of structured spatial orders
Emergence of urban regions		Formation of new structural spatial units		Re-definition of the city as a spatial totality		Institutionalization of spatial hierarchies
Emergence of spatial planning		Formation of coordinating structural mechanisms		Reinterpretation of development as a territorial image		Construction of planning-based structural frameworks

→ “Construction of socio-spatial generative structures of time” is a generative mechanism that produces causal pathways through structures, realized and reproduced through an understanding of development as a historical-structural process.

4.5. The Situation of encounter as living with structural uncertainties

In continuation of the perplexity that led to the discovery of generative structural totalities of time, we now encounter another form of perplexity that emerges from within the same temporal logic of development, yet significantly shifts its horizon. If in the previous perplexities the central concern was how to move, regulate, or stabilize developmental time, here the question becomes why and how emergent structures of development themselves become sources of uncertainty, multiplicity of futures, and temporal instability. This perplexity becomes particularly pronounced in the post-1979 period. However, its roots must be traced in Iran's geopolitical and territorial history and in its long-standing intersections between local, national, and international scales.

Within this horizon, development is no longer confronted merely with inequality or the anti-developmental effects of growth, nor only with the necessity of regulating temporal drawers between the national and the regional. Instead, it faces the fact that the very structures produced by development—such as the oil-based economic system, infrastructural networks, or settlement patterns—operate in ways that open divergent and sometimes contradictory futures for both national and regional development. In other words, development enters a phase in which “time” is no longer linear, predictable, or merely adjustable, but becomes fluid and unstable due to the interweaving of scales.

A clear illustration of this condition can be found in the planning and governance structure of the country, which is shaped around oil relations and simultaneously destabilized by the volatility and uncertainty of oil revenues. From the 1970s onward, this structure is caught in an internal contradiction: on the one hand, oil enables extensive intervention and national planning; on the other, it destabilizes temporal horizons and renders developmental trajectories uncertain. Within this context, regional development gradually moves toward identifying “drivers” of development—drivers that, precisely because they sit at the intersection of local, national, and international scales, simultaneously carry both growth potential and sources of uncertainty. This is why regional development can open a wide spectrum of possible futures for national development: from de-concentration and spatial balance to intensified inequality, environmental degradation, and increased

rural–urban migration (Sharifzadegan, Nedae Tousi, & Piryan Kalat, 2021).

At this stage, the encounter between national and regional development is no longer understood as a linear or hierarchical relation, but rather as a multi-scalar structural entanglement. Iran's geopolitical history demonstrates that this entanglement has deep roots: from the late Qajar period, when global powers could exert pressure on the national level through bargaining with or influencing local rulers, to the reverse situation in which agreements with the central state were used to shape local interests. Ports, border cities, oil-rich regions, fertile plains, and nodal urban centers have historically functioned as points where the local scale is elevated to the international level and vice versa.

Within such a context, any transformation in territorial exploitation—from agricultural and industrial growth to transport infrastructure development and the expansion of major metropolitan centers such as Tehran—depends on how these scalar intersections and the concentrated forces around them are manipulated. Institutions play a key role in this process: traditional institutions rooted in local relations interact with or come into conflict with modern institutions in education, judiciary, and welfare, generating responses at both local and national levels. In particular, transformations in property relations—linking local powers to the national state and even to foreign actors—demonstrate that every structural change must necessarily pass through this local–national–international intersection.

After the 1979 Revolution, this condition became more acute. Development and modernization—both of which had already undermined traditional structures—lead to a full-scale revolution that assumes responsibility for reconstructing those very structures. The First (1989–1993) and Second (1995–1999) Development Plans of the Islamic Republic of Iran, continuing earlier experiences such as oil nationalization and the White Revolution, remain deeply engaged in this project of structural transformation. After the eight-year war, they are redefined through adjustment policies and reintegration into the global economy.

Within this horizon, competitiveness also acquires a multi-scalar and intersecting character: national competitiveness in the international arena is not possible without activating and organizing interregional competition within the country. In contrast, regional competitiveness itself cannot be meaningfully defined

outside national frameworks and the country's position in the global system (Shafie Haghshenas & Dadashpoor, 2023). Thus, the encounter between national and regional development is understood as thresholds of scalar transformation—thresholds at which flows of value, power, capital, and uncertainty move across scales and generate divergent possible futures (National Spatial Planning Policies, 2011).

Ultimately, this new perplexity directs development toward foresight and scenario-building, where variables previously assumed to be fixed are now treated as fluid and influential factors. Drivers and uncertainties—whether international or local in origin—simultaneously shape both national and regional development and destabilize the previous top-down logic.

In this perplexity, the encounter between national and regional development is understood not as a

hierarchical or adjustable relation, but as a multi-scalar structural entanglement in which flows of value, power, capital, uncertainty, and futurity can move from local to national, national to transnational, and vice versa. Regional development is no longer merely an arena for implementing national policies; it becomes a threshold in which national futures are produced, intensified, or diverted. From this perspective, understanding the situation of encounter between national and regional development is realized not through stabilizing a single trajectory, but through living with structural uncertainty and continuously redefining relations across scales.

The movement of the research from an ontological sense of perplexity toward a historical-interpretive analysis of this national/regional encounter is summarized in Table 7.

Table 7. The co-operation of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing “living with structural uncertainties.”

Analytical component	→	Critical realism dimension	↔	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension	→	Result of integration
Future as a problem		Multiple causal mechanisms produce the future		The future is an open and unfinished interpretive horizon		Structural multi-futurity
Development structures		Structures generate unpredictable consequences		Meaning emerges within unstable historical horizons		Structure as a source of uncertainty
Competitiveness		Scales have cross-cutting causality		Meaning depends on scale and context		Multi-scalar competitiveness
Institutions		Institutions are mechanisms of producing outcomes		Institutions carry historical pre-understandings		Institution as mediator of structure/meaning
Local-national-global scales		Open systems with multi-level causality		Multi-layered and shifting interpretive horizons		Scalar entanglement
Transition thresholds		Changes in structural modes of operation		Interpretation of historical transition moments		Emergence of divergent development paths
Scenario and foresight		Structural outcomes are non-deterministic		Future interpreted through multiple horizons		Production of conflicting futures
→ “Living with structural uncertainties” is a generative mechanism in which the social world is understood as an open and non-closed system, realized and reproduced through the always-incomplete nature of understanding.						

4.6. The Situation of encounter as engineering developmental time through national identity

The sixth perplexity, in continuity with the preceding ones, does not arise from the failure of growth, nor from its anti-developmental tendencies, nor merely from the causal power of structures or the uncertainties of futures. Rather, it emerges from the possibility of sustaining structural transformations without the collapse of territorial totality and national identity. If in the fourth perplexity development shifted from experience and induction toward structure and

emergence, and in the fifth it was confronted with multiplicity of futures and scalar intersections, here the central question is how, under conditions of saturation, exclusion, sanctions, and geopolitical pressure, the components of a system can be repeatedly transformed without the coherence, unity, and authority of the whole disintegrating.

At this moment, a systems-based perspective becomes dominant in development planning, but it is combined with a form of identity-centered thinking and an emphasis on territorial totality. Development is no

longer merely a project of progress or even structural reform; it becomes a matter of simultaneously preserving stability and enabling change. Elements and relations within the structure may be subjected to redesign and engineering, but the framework, the overarching configuration, and the “essence of the whole” must remain stable. Consequently, the encounter between national and regional development is understood not in terms of conflict, but in terms of mediation.

One important expression of this mediation is the recognition of regional identities within a unified national framework. In the post-1979 five-year development plans, regions are no longer merely repetitions or extensions of national development. However, their diversity and differentiation are still recognized only within the national framework. Whenever regional development—particularly endogenous regional development—is discussed, concepts such as cohesion, solidarity, and national integration are simultaneously invoked. Here, national identity functions as a “temporal anchor”: it allows the temporal drawer to open without letting the system drift apart. This simultaneously responds to regional demands and attempts to contain potential centrifugal tendencies.

This logic is also visible in the institutional definition of resources. In the Second Development Plan (1995–1999), “national public and dedicated revenues” are defined as revenues deposited into the treasury and used for national projects, compensating for provincial budget shortages, and achieving regional balance (Article 1, Note 2, Clauses 3 and 4). In this way, the national character of resources becomes an instrument for regional adjustment and equilibrium. The same logic continues in the Islamic Consultative Assembly law (2001) for the implementation of Article 48 of the Constitution, where eliminating regional discrimination, achieving balanced growth based on capacities, spatial distribution of economic activities, and optimal use of comparative advantages are all formulated within a “national space.”

During this period, “national space” becomes the primary horizon for interpreting development. In the Vision 2025 document (2005), Iran and Iranian society are envisioned as “developed,” while development must simultaneously be consistent with the country’s cultural, geographical, and historical conditions and grounded in Islamic, national, and revolutionary values. Thus, regional development is defined not outside the national framework, but within a shared

field of meaning and value.

From the Third Development Plan (2000–2004) onward, under the dominance of economic adjustment policies, a significant shift occurred in the understanding of spatial inequality. The focus moves from distributive equality toward regional balance, and the objective is defined as the harmonization of the spatial system of activities (Ghaffaryfard, 2019). This shift implies the acceptance of regional differences, provided that these differences do not threaten the coherence of the whole.

This logic becomes even more explicit in higher-level strategic documents, particularly the Sixth Development Plan (2016–2021), which defines national and transnational roles for regions based on their comparative advantages, decentralization alongside the preservation of national policy-making authority, strengthening growth poles and development hubs to enhance national integration, and improving cohesion and reducing regional imbalances (Parliament Research Center, 2016, Report No. 14955). Within this framework, regional development is seen both as an instrument for enhancing the country’s international position and as a mechanism for strengthening internal cohesion. Repeated emphasis on “increasing convergence and strengthening national identity in the design and implementation of national and regional projects, and specialization of economic functions based on regional capacities and comparative advantages to reinforce interregional interdependence and national integration” (National Spatial Planning Guidelines, 2017, Article 1), as well as “strengthening convergence, national integration, unity and social bonds through raising the level of development across regions; regulating the relationship between state and society with regard to unity, national security, and ethnic and religious diversity” (General Spatial Planning Policies, 2011), demonstrates that the national level assumes the role of a mediating structure for controlling diversity and change.

Ultimately, in this sixth perplexity, national and regional development are positioned in a reciprocal but mediated relationship. The region is not a space of full autonomy, but a field for activating capacities, a site for testing structural change, and a zone for absorbing systemic pressures. The national level, in turn, is not merely a command structure, but a guarantor of cohesion, a regulator of diversity, and a stabilizer of temporal and spatial divergences. Thus, the encounter between national and regional

development is understood as the systemic management of change within stability—a process of reconstructing totality in a context where development is no longer linear progress, but continuous survival and reconfiguration under conditions of uncertainty.

The movement of the research from an ontological sense of perplexity toward a historical–interpretive analysis of this national/regional encounter is summarized in Table 8.

Table 8. The co-operation of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing “engineering developmental time through national identity.”

Analytical component	→	Critical realism dimension	↔	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension	→	Result of integration
Continuity without collapse		Reproduction of structure within change		Preservation of shared historical horizon		Continuous reform without systemic breakdown
National identity		Institutional mechanism of cohesion		Stabilization of the shared meaning horizon		Identity as a temporal anchor of development
National space		Structural framework of resource distribution		Shared interpretive horizon of development		Territorial integration of meaning and institutions
National resources		Mechanism of regional balancing		Shared meaning of justice and solidarity		Reduction of spatial divergence
Acceptance of regional difference		Functional specialization of regions		Understanding difference within totality		Diversity within cohesion
Interdependence of regions		Systemic integration mechanism		Mediation of local and national horizons		Formation of a coherent national network
National policymaking		Macro-level regulatory mechanism		Shared horizon of meaning		Governance of change at the national level
→ “Engineering developmental time through national identity” is a generative mechanism operating under conditions of uncertainty, aimed at structural reconfiguration. It is realized through an understanding of development as the historical continuity and survival of a totality that must be continuously reproduced while transforming.						

4.7. The Situation of encounter as the transmutation of regional spatiality in the chain logic of national development

In the continuity of Iran’s development planning trajectory—from the Third Development Plan (2000–2004) to the Sixth (2016–2021)—one can observe a gradual logic of administrative decentralization and the consolidation of regional planning at the provincial management scale. The delegation of executive authority, the establishment of provincial branches of the Planning and Budget Organization, and the emphasis on provincial income–expenditure systems all indicate that the “regional question” has been recognized as a distinct level of development policymaking. Within this framework, national and regional development were placed in a mediating relation: neither fully equivalent nor entirely subsumed.

However, with the entry into the Sixth Development Plan (2016–2021) and especially the Seventh Development Plan (2024–2028), signs of a new form of perplexity emerge. This perplexity is neither a return to center–periphery antagonism nor a revival of classical centralization; rather, it stems from a

transformation in how spatiality of development is understood in the present. At this stage, national development appears to no longer be concerned with defining an independent notion of regional development, as if it has delegated it to provincial administration (Article 26 of the Sixth Plan and Article 17 of the Seventh Plan) and moved toward a different form of articulation.

This new articulation can be described as a “shift from territorial spatiality to chain-based spatiality.” In this logic, development is no longer organized around regions as spatial–identity units, but around functional economic chains: energy, industry, logistics, maritime systems, agriculture, and value-added networks (Sixth Development Plan, Articles 31, 33, 44, and 64; Seventh Development Plan, Articles 33, 45, 47, 48, 57, 99, and 102). Space is no longer an autonomous “region,” but a “node within multiple chains.” In this sense, regional development is understood not at the policy level, but as the functional positioning of each place within national and transnational flow networks.

Within this framework, chains perform two simultaneous functions. On the one hand, they offer an implicit response to regional disparities: less-

developed regions are no longer addressed through standalone projects, but through their integration into national chains. On the other hand, chains serve as instruments for redefining Iran's position in regional and global economies; the national border is no longer the endpoint of space but becomes a point of connection to transnational value chains. In this way, national development is redefined as a network of chains, and regional development as the spatial distribution of value-added within this network.

However, it is precisely here that the core of the seventh perplexity emerges. If national development is a network of chains, then its strength is determined by its "weakest link." This implies that spatial inequality is no longer merely an ethical or distributive concern, but a systemic risk to national development as a whole. However, the Seventh Plan is marked by a paradox at precisely this point: chains are inherently spatial, yet regional spatiality as an independent issue remains largely invisible in the text.

The explicit absence of concepts such as "regional development," "spatial inequality," and "regional spatial planning" in the Seventh Development Plan is not accidental, but meaningful. The plan is based on a kind of flat, homogeneous national spatiality; the territorial surface is treated as a unified plane in which differences are assumed and administratively delegated to provinces. Here, the province replaces the region, without the region being recognized as a

functional or spatial unit in its own right.

As a result, the relation between national and regional development in this historical moment is neither oppositional nor integrative, but transformative in a more radical sense: a process of transmutation. Regional development is absorbed into the logic of national development without being able to appear as an independent, problematized, or governable subject. This is not the outcome of an explicit theoretical choice, but rather the product of structural pressures in the last decade: growth crises, sanctions, resource constraints, the failure of previous spatial planning experiments, the dominance of sectoral thinking, and the political sensitivity of the notion of "region."

Thus, the seventh perplexity can be understood as the moment in which developmental time reaches a point where, in order to preserve national continuity, spatial complexity is suspended. National and regional development are neither separated nor properly connected; rather, they are dissolved into one another, with the fundamental risk that the weakest spatial links will eventually manifest themselves as national crises.

The movement of the research from an ontological sense of perplexity toward a historical-interpretive analysis of this national/regional encounter is summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. The co-operation of critical realism and philosophical hermeneutics in reconstructing "the transmutation of spatiality in the chain logic of national development."

Analytical component	→	Critical realism dimension	↔	Philosophical hermeneutics dimension	→	Result of integration
Shift to chain spatiality.		Formation of network causal structures		Transformation of spatial understanding from place to flow		Space as a functional network
Absence of the region concept		Reduction of the analytical level in the structure		Invisibility of a meaning unit		Weakening of spatial inequality intelligibility
Value chains		Interdependence of system components		Reinterpretation of meaning in networks		Networked development system
Weakest link		Structural system vulnerability		Understanding fragility in a horizon of meaning		Inequality as a national systemic risk
Homogeneous national space		Macro-level concentration		Homogenization of interpretive horizons		Weakening of spatial differentiation
Absorption of the region into the nation		Structural incorporation		Integration of local horizons into totality		Reduced regional autonomy
Structural pressures		Material and institutional constraints		Interpretation of crisis conditions		Emergence of survival strategies
→ "Transmutation of spatiality in the chain logic" is a generative mechanism that suspends spatial complexity and simplifies structure through the replacement of interpretive differentiation with administrative meaning, enabling continuity under conditions of systemic constraint.						

Overall, the encounter between national and regional development in Iran is not a fixed relation, but a historical process of construction, regulation, containment, production, instability, identity engineering, and ultimately the networked reconfiguration of space. Within this process, the

region is gradually transformed from an autonomous spatial unit into a node within national and transnational chains. The evolution of how this encounter has been understood across different historical periods is summarized through seven problem-formulations or “perplexities” in Table 10.

Table 10. Synthesis of the seven perplexities in understanding the national–regional development encounter

Main framing of the national/regional encounter	Core problem (perplexity)	Dominant temporal logic	“Region” in development thinking	Implications for planning systems
Construction of temporal drawers	Why are we “lagging,” and how can different speeds be synchronized?	Linear, homogeneous, adjustable time	A temporal pause in national development; “time gaps.”	Indicator-based planning, developed/underdeveloped regional classification, and delayed budget allocation
Dynamic regulation of temporal drawers	How can national development sustain its qualitative trajectory?	Multi-rhythmic but controllable time	Limited and conditional field of experimentation	Opening/closing of planning drawers, partial decentralization, sectoral–regional coordination
Containing accumulation and depletion drawers	Why does growth itself generate inequality and blockage?	Accelerated time with negative feedback	Site of anti-developmental effects	Attention to spatial imbalance, spatial planning, growth poles, and development axes
Emergence of generative temporal structures	What is the overall outcome of development? What totality is being produced?	Emergent and irreducible time	Spatial–structural totality (Iran, urban regions)	Shift from experience to structure, spatial planning, territorial theorization
Living with structural uncertainty	Why has the future of development become multiple and unstable?	Fluid and uncertain time	Threshold of scalar transformation and drivers	Foresight, scenario-building, local–national–transnational entanglement
Engineering time through national identity	How can structural change continue without collapsing the whole?	Mediated and stabilized time	Controlled field of diversity within unity	National identity as a temporal anchor, regional balance within the national framework
Transmutation of regional spatiality in chain logic	How does national development think without the region?	Compressed and crisis-driven time	Functional node within chains	Absorption of region into value chains, invisibilization of spatial inequality

5. Discussion

5.1. The inconsistency between theory and practice as a consequence of the temporal understanding of the national–regional development encounter

The findings of this study indicate that the structural inconsistency between theory and practice in the planning encounter between national and regional development is not merely the result of implementation weaknesses, institutional inefficiency, or lack of political will. Rather, it is a direct consequence of a specific mode of “understanding” this encounter within the historical context of Iranian modernity. This mode of understanding, reconstructed across the seven historical perplexities, is fundamentally temporal. That is, the national/regional relation has not been primarily conceptualized as a spatial, institutional, or political relation, but rather as a

problem of regulating, accelerating, suspending, or containing the time of development (the dominance of temporal understanding of development over its spatiality).

Within this specific historical context, Heydari (2018), through a genealogy of governmentality in the present, shows that “the governance of bodies and populations becomes meaningful only through the governance of pathways, and this ultimately serves one goal: the governance of time,” and further demonstrates how the ontological rupture between classical and modern temporal regimes transforms time into a governable object through its fragmentation into manageable units. In this framework, the transition from “long durations” to “short, administrable temporal segments” becomes a central problem of Iranian developmental governance.

Within the emergence of the modern state and the

earliest perplexities, the national/regional encounter is understood in terms of “temporal drawers”: regions are not conceptualized as spaces with their own logics, but as temporal delays or pauses within the trajectory of national development. From the outset, this understanding reduces regional development to a provisional and compensatory project—an intervention designed to restore temporal homogeneity at the national scale. In this horizon, the gap between theory and practice is not problematized; it appears self-evident, since theory is assigned the task of designing the macro-temporal trajectory of development, while practice is responsible for managing local asynchronies.

In subsequent perplexities, as the experience of development becomes more complex, this temporal understanding is neither abandoned nor fundamentally broken, but rather expanded. Dynamic regulation of temporal drawers, containment of the anti-developmental effects of growth, and even the emergence of generative temporal structures all represent attempts to preserve the primacy of national developmental time in the face of an increasingly problematic spatial dimension. During these stages, regional planning becomes theoretically richer—from spatial planning to endogenous development, from growth poles to local governance—yet it continues to operate within a framework that prevents the region from emerging as an independent level of meaning production, power, and futurity.

The key point is that within this configuration, the theory–practice gap is not a defect but a function. Theory produces macro horizons, ideals, and totalities, while practice, by reducing them to administrative divisions, sectoral projects, and localized interventions, enables the continuity of the system. The two are not in opposition but in an asymmetric complementary relation: theory operates without binding itself to spatial consequences, while practice operates without access to the internal logic of theory.

In the sixth perplexity, this logic becomes intertwined with national identity and territorial cohesion, acquiring a new meaning. Regional development is formally recognized, but only insofar as it functions as a stabilizing “anchor” for national development. Within this framework, any spatial autonomy, institutional differentiation, or divergent developmental path is potentially perceived as a threat to the integrity of the whole. As a result, planning practice is necessarily oriented toward containment and suspension, while theory continually

retreats into abstraction.

This logic reaches its culmination in the seventh perplexity. With the transmutation of regional spatiality into the chain logic of national development, the theory–practice gap is no longer even problematized. Regional development is not eliminated at the conceptual level but dissolved within it: the region becomes a link in a chain, the province an administrative unit, and spatial inequality a systemic risk. At this point, theory and practice appear to converge, but this convergence is achieved through the erasure of the region as an autonomous field of thought and action.

As Yousefvand and Hemmat (2025) argue, “development, on the one hand, is the result of the fusion of horizons and consensus among institutional actors, and on the other hand, the product of balanced interaction between state, market, and society, yet remains trapped in a structural inconsistency between theory and practice.” From a deeper hermeneutic perspective, it can be argued that this inconsistency in spatial planning in Iran is not accidental, but the product of a dominant historical understanding: one that conceptualizes development primarily as a temporal process, while treating space as derivative, secondary, and ultimately suspendable.

As long as the encounter between national and regional development is understood within this temporal horizon—and as long as development is conceived as a linear process through which society moves from underdevelopment to development via gradual quantitative and qualitative transformations (Omidali, Fanni, & Shafie Sabet, 2022)—the gap between theory and practice will not only be inevitable, but also rationalized and even functionally necessary.

5.2. The reproduction of the theory–practice inconsistency in the situation of encounter of national and regional development

The findings of this study indicate that the encounter between national and regional development in Iran, at the moment of judgment and planning decision-making, has consistently been understood within a specific logic of time. This logic, rather than resolving conflict, has shaped the horizon of planning in a way that enables the coexistence (rather than coordination) of national and regional development. Each of the “seven perplexities” identified in the history of development planning in Iran corresponds to a specific moment in the construction of this encounter.

However, the central question is why these successive modes of understanding, despite apparent changes in policies, concepts, and tools, have failed to produce a genuine integration of theory and practice.

The historical-conceptual analysis presented here shows that the planning system in Iran, although consistently emphasizing in theoretical discourse the necessity of coordination between national and regional development, has in practice been governed by a form of planning rationality that interprets spatial heterogeneity not as an opportunity, but as a problem or disturbance. Consequently, at the moment of decision-making, there is a persistent tendency toward simplification, temporal homogenization, and reduction of heterogeneity to administrative units (such as provinces), which overrides scalar differentiation, multiplicity of futures, and contextual embeddedness in planning.

Moreover, despite the fact that planning thought in each of the perplexities has transformed (from temporal drawers to value chains), these transformations have largely remained at the level of conceptual articulation and policy language. At the level of institutions, power relations, financial structures, and resource allocation patterns, historical continuities have remained largely intact. This can be described as the transmutation of concepts within stabilized decision-making mechanisms—a process in which new planning concepts, such as endogenous development, regional balance, or regional value-added, are absorbed into a centralized decision-making system instead of transforming practice itself. As Farhangdoust and Hanaee (2026) show, discursive shifts from governance to governability at the textual level, due to the persistence of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, lead to practical contradictions and inefficiencies.

Another key point is that, in this encounter, developmental time has itself become a tool for organizing spatial power. In other words, what has been practically understood as regional development is not a localized model of planning, but rather an arrangement for phasing, delaying, or suspending the national development project. The region, instead of becoming a subject of planning, has become a site for regulating the speed and depth of national intervention.

Ultimately, the persistence of this condition can also be traced to the epistemological level of planning. Theories that conceptualize national and regional development as complementary, synergistic, or

mutually reinforcing levels have not been translated into frameworks capable of engaging with the tensions, uncertainties, and real multi-temporality of development. As a result, the theory–practice gap does not arise from the absence of theory, but from the dominance of a reductive and flattening logic in understanding the encounter. This “inability” is rooted in the fact that, in our contemporary knowledge system, the explanation of Iran’s historical condition has been structured around two macro approaches: an orientalist approach (Eurocentric in orientation) and a nativist approach, which is a reactive response to the former. Both approaches are based on the construction of the “other” and operate through essentialist assumptions. They pay limited attention to the complexity and multi-layered nature of historical reality (Roshani & Sarrafi, 2021).

Within this “ideology of transition,” regional development is ultimately reduced to the regionalization of national development (Sarraf, 2000), while regional identities are defined solely through national development frameworks, rendering national and regional development equivalent and homogenized. As Towfigh and Yosefi (2021) demonstrate, what operates within the power–knowledge nexus is a rigid and exclusionary totality that produces a flattened representation of governance, resulting in what they call “peripheral blindness and general blindness.” Within this framework, identity is constructed in relation to a predefined desirable model—either Western progress or a return to an essentialized authenticity.

Thus, it can be concluded that the answer to the central research question does not lie in implementation inefficiency or lack of political will. Rather, it is rooted in the formation of a stable and historically embedded configuration of the national–regional development encounter—a configuration that, despite apparent changes, has persistently suspended the integration of theory and practice and thereby transformed the possibility of territorial well-being into an open-ended and unresolved question.

5.3. Reconstructing the conditions of possibility for the formation and reproduction of structural inconsistency across three levels

The central question now is on what foundations this temporal understanding and these mechanisms of reproduction have been established in such a way that, despite decades of changes in concepts, policies, and instruments, they have remained stable. The

findings of this study indicate that these conditions of possibility can be reconstructed through the articulation of three interrelated levels: the historical–structural level, the ontological–conceptual level, and the interpretive–hermeneutic level.

At the first level, namely the historical–structural level, the conditions of possibility for inconsistency must be sought in the formation of development planning within a historical field marked by the conflict between national totality and regional plurality. As shown in previous sections, the establishment of a modern development planning system in Iran did not occur in a vacuum, but rather within a pre-existing spatial organization of power structured by center–periphery relations and the centralizing logic of the modern state. In this context, development was from the outset defined as a project of temporal and spatial homogenization at the national level. At the same time, the territorial reality was always accompanied by regional heterogeneity, historical differences, and spatial tensions. The early “time-drawers,” the opening and closing of regional opportunities, capital concentration, the formation of oil-based economic structures, and the development of national infrastructure all indicate that development did not proceed toward the elimination of differences, but rather toward the reproduction of new forms of inequality and differentiation. From this perspective, the inconsistency between theory and practice cannot be reduced to mere implementation failures; rather, it must be understood as a logical outcome of development emerging within a field that has been historically defined by the tension between national unity and regional diversity.

At the second level, the ontological–conceptual level, the conditions of possibility for inconsistency lie in the way foundational concepts of planning—namely time, scale, and territorial totality—have been configured. As demonstrated in earlier sections, development planning has been compelled to translate spatial heterogeneities into temporal differences in order to render intervention possible; that is, regions have been understood not as entities with autonomous logics, but as different moments within a unified developmental time. This configuration enables measurement, planning, and resource allocation, yet simultaneously reduces qualitative territorial differences to quantitative distinctions and subordinates the region to the national totality. With the increasing complexity of development experience, this temporal logic has been extended in the form of

generative structures of time, multi-scalar arrangements, and uncertainty management mechanisms. In this way, development time has ceased to be merely an administrative tool and has become a structural element in the spatial organization of power. Structural inconsistency at this level arises from the fact that the very concepts that enable intervention simultaneously stabilize the limitations of that intervention; thus, any attempt at national–regional coordination inevitably operates within the same conceptual framework that produces the inconsistency in the first place.

At the third level, the interpretive–hermeneutic level, the conditions of possibility for inconsistency are embedded in the horizons of meaning within which development planning itself operates as a mode of understanding the territory. The findings show that development has been articulated within the horizon of “national good” and the normative ideals of progress, territorial integration, and national cohesion—a horizon in which national totality becomes the ultimate reference point for meaning and decision-making. Within this framework, the region is not treated as a subject with its own interpretive horizon, but rather as a problem requiring regulation, correction, or coordination. As a result, spatial and institutional conflicts are often reduced to technical or managerial issues, limiting any fundamental engagement with their historical and structural roots. At the same time, with the increasing complexity of development and the emergence of structural uncertainties, planning has been confronted with multiple and unpredictable futures—futures that are difficult to grasp within a linear and controllable temporal logic. Planning thus finds itself in a condition where it must live with structural uncertainty, while its normative horizon remains anchored in the possibility of controlling and directing the future.

The synthesis of these three levels demonstrates that structural inconsistency between theory and practice in the national–regional development interface is not located at a single point, but is continuously reproduced through their interrelation. At the historical–structural level, inconsistency emerges from the very field in which development is constituted. At the ontological–conceptual level, it is stabilized through the concepts that enable intervention, and at the interpretive–hermeneutic level, it is sustained within the horizons of meaning that guide planning action. From this perspective, the gap between theory and practice is not a defect to be corrected, but a

structural condition reproduced through the historical modes of understanding the national–regional interface in Iranian development planning.

Consequently, answering the main research question requires reconstructing these multi-layered conditions of possibility. What sustains structural inconsistency is not merely the persistence of policies or institutions, but the continuity of an interpretive horizon in which development is understood as a temporal, national, and controllable process. At the same time, territorial reality remains multi-scalar, heterogeneous, and inherently unpredictable. Reconsidering the relationship between theory and practice in development planning, therefore, necessitates a rethinking of these very conditions of possibility—conditions in which understanding, structure, and action continuously produce and reproduce one another.

6. Conclusion

This article, by focusing on the “modes of understanding the interface between national and regional development,” has shown that the persistent inconsistency between theory and practice in development planning in Iran does not stem from a lack of knowledge, implementation failure, or institutional discontinuity. Rather, it is rooted in the prior establishment of a specific interpretive framework within the planning system itself—an epistemic and hermeneutic framework grounded in the Iranian experience of modernity and a temporal understanding of development.

Within this framework, planning has consistently sought to stabilize development as a nationally governable totality unfolding in time. At the same time, regional plurality continuously introduces divergent futures, uncertainties, and centrifugal pressures into this totality. The historical response of the planning system to this tension has not been to recognize national and regional development as two distinct spatial levels or independent policy logics. Instead, it has repeatedly reformulated the interface through various mechanisms of temporal regulation: at times through spatial homogenization, at times through temporal structuring of development, at times through living with uncertainty, at times through mediation via national identity, and ultimately through the absorption of the regional into networked and chain-based logics of national development.

Accordingly, at the moment of planning decision-making, national development is consistently stabilized

as the decisive horizon. In contrast, regional development is either deferred, mediated, or dissolved into other levels of intervention. What is reproduced, therefore, is not a bridgeable gap between theory and practice, but the persistence of a “mode of understanding” in which spatial difference must be managed, suspended, or reabsorbed in order to preserve systemic coherence and enable action in developmental time. Within this mode of understanding, theory functions as a means of meaning-making, legitimation, and intelligibility of developmental interventions, whereas practice—under the pressures of survival, growth, cohesion, and resource constraints—remains bound to the imperative of sustaining the temporal progression of national development. From this perspective, the inconsistency between theory and practice is not merely a logical outcome. However, it has itself become a form of practical rationality through which territorial “good” is understood: a good that is sought not in a stable balance between national and regional scales, but in the continuous reproduction of national totality in the face of its spatial incompleteness.

The historical analysis of the “perplexities” demonstrated that although the modes of understanding the national–regional interface have changed—from temporal drawers, dynamic adjustments, generative structures, drivers and levers, identity-based mediation, to network and chain logics—one constant has remained: the dominance of temporal understanding over spatial understanding. Space has been reduced either to indicators, to containers of implementation, to causal structures, or ultimately to functional “links” within national and transnational chains. In none of these configurations has regional spatiality been fully recognized as an independent, problematized, and governable logic of development policy. In the seventh perplexity, this logic reaches its culmination: regional development is neither explicitly negated nor formally integrated, but implicitly dissolved within chain-based national development. The absence of the concept of “region” in recent development plans does not indicate its irrelevance, but rather signals the taken-for-granted nature of this dissolution. In this condition, national and regional development no longer even appear as distinguishable problems; the region becomes merely a site of functional allocation rather than a subject with its own developmental trajectory, temporality, or logic.

The article argues that the consequence of this mode of understanding is a latent fragility within national development itself. Since developmental chains are only as strong as their weakest spatial link, the invisibilization of regional inequalities and spatial fractures does not eliminate them, but rather defers their re-emergence in the form of national crises. In this framework, the absence of an explicit spatial policy is not a technical gap, but the logical outcome of an understanding that conceives development primarily as a temporal project.

Ultimately, if structural inconsistency between theory and practice is to be addressed, it is insufficient to reform implementation tools or improve institutional coordination merely. The problem lies at a deeper level: the interpretive horizon that frames development as a homogeneous, temporal, and governable totality must itself be reconsidered. As long as development planning remains grounded in the assumption that territorial plurality can be governed through a single, linear, and hierarchical logic, structural inconsistency between theory and practice will continue to be reproduced. The significance of this study, therefore, lies in demonstrating that this inconsistency does not arise externally to planning, but emerges from within the historical logic of development planning itself and from the very modes through which the national–regional interface is understood.

This study proposes that national and regional development should not be understood in hierarchical or substitutive terms, but rather as an encounter relationship that can simultaneously generate conflict and serve as a source of institutional learning. Accordingly, the main conclusion of the research is that moving beyond the repeated cycle of developmental failures requires a shift from transitional planning to an interactive and situated understanding of development—an understanding in which the region is not a peripheral appendage of national development, but the very field in which national development is enacted, understood, and redefined.

Within such a framework, successful development emerges from the alignment of national rationalities with the spatial–social capacities and logics of regions. Therefore, opening an alternative horizon for regional development in Iran requires moving beyond purely institutional reforms or technical adjustments, and instead engaging a deeper level of inquiry: a rethinking of the very mode through which the national–regional

development interface is understood. Only by suspending the taken-for-granted dominance of temporal reasoning and problematizing the spatiality of development can a genuine form of integration—rather than assimilation or dissolution—between the national and regional scales be conceived. This does not imply the negation of national cohesion, but rather constitutes a condition for its sustainability in a world where spatial, scalar, and networked pressures are increasingly intensified.

The study explicitly acknowledges that its own interpretation is conducted within the same historical mode of understanding that it seeks to critique. Even the formulation of the research problem is grounded in a body of knowledge that is itself a product of Iran’s planning tradition and modern developmental experience. For this reason, becoming aware of its own assumptions and pre-understandings is not a final step, but an open-ended process that requires further dialogue with the intellectual tradition that has shaped both the planning system and earlier reform efforts.

The study also recognizes several limitations. First, its focus on a specific historical moment in which theory and practice become misaligned limits the generalizability of its findings across all dimensions of spatial planning in Iran. Second, access constraints to a comprehensive set of official planning documents may have affected the depth of interpretive analysis. Third, the absence of a fully interdisciplinary collaboration has limited the analytical thickness of the study, even though insights from other disciplines were incorporated; this inevitably shaped the scope and sensitivity of the interpretation.

This article has not been able to fully demonstrate how, within each of the identified “perplexities,” the act of “domesticating” the encounter continuously reproduces new forms of perplexity, thereby extending its historical trajectory into the present. Each of these perplexities may therefore constitute an independent research agenda for future studies. Moreover, if the inconsistency between theory and practice is understood not merely as a dysfunction but as part of the very mode through which development is comprehended, then future research should shift its focus from resolving this inconsistency toward examining the mechanisms through which it is produced and reproduced.

In this regard, the three analytical levels developed in this study can serve as the basis for future research agendas:

- At the historical–structural level, future research may examine how this specific configuration of the national–regional interface has been stabilized and reproduced across different historical periods, and which institutional, economic, and political forces have contributed to its continuity. Attention to moments of rupture, crisis, or institutional reconfiguration may clarify whether this logic can be transformed or whether it re-emerges in new forms.
- At the ontological–conceptual level, an important line of inquiry concerns how this inconsistency is stabilized through planning concepts themselves—concepts through which spatial heterogeneity is translated into manageable forms (temporal, scalar, or administrative). Examining these conceptual translations can reveal how the language of planning simultaneously enables certain forms of action while foreclosing others.
- At the interpretive–hermeneutic level, future studies may focus on how this logic is internalized in the practices and perceptions of planners, policymakers, and other actors as something self-evident and rational. Investigating the lived experience of planning and practical judgment can show how inconsistency is not perceived as a problem, but rather as part of the accepted rationality of action, thereby reproducing itself.
- Finally, a key direction for future research lies in developing an integrated level of analysis that articulates the interrelation of these three dimensions within a coherent theoretical framework. Such an effort could contribute to the formation of a locally grounded theory of spatial development planning—one that does not presuppose full harmony between national and regional levels, but instead engages from the outset with tensions, heterogeneities, and structural uncertainties as constitutive elements of planning itself. Within this horizon, planning would be redefined not as a project aimed at eliminating inconsistency, but as a mode of understanding, managing, and even productively engaging with it in order to open up more plural possibilities for territorial development.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have made equal contributions to the writing of this research.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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