

Appreciative inquiry and rethinking regional planning: toward co-engagement with the region

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Abstract

Regional planning in Iran has historically been shaped by a problem-oriented logic and by a framing of the region as a spatial-statistical container for technical interventions. These twin logics have reinforced the primacy of problems over possibilities and reduced the region to an objectified spatial entity. As a result, a persistent gap has been reproduced between the region and its actors, as well as between actors and the planning process, thereby weakening plan implementation and effectiveness. In response, this article adopts a conceptual research design based on documentary analysis and purposive selection of relevant literature to explore how regional planning can be rethought through Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Within this framework, the region is understood not as a pre-given entity but as an emergent socio-relational construct formed through interwoven narratives, relations, and practices, in which regional consciousness gradually emerges through interaction within multi-scalar contexts. AI shifts attention from problems to possibilities, enabling the co-production of meaning and action and reframing subjectivity as an emergent outcome of collective processes. The findings indicate that the five-stage cycle (Define, Discover, Dream, Design, Destiny) operates as a recursive process of learning, reinterpretation, and collective reconfiguration across scales, ultimately fostering action grounded in shared learning and regional awareness. The study concludes that this approach reorients planning from planning for the region toward co-engagement with the region, where both actors and the region itself are continuously co-constituted. However, this potential remains contingent upon institutional context, facilitation quality, and the management of narrative plurality.

Keywords: Appreciative Inquiry, change, positive core, region, regional planning, social constructionism

1. Introduction

Differences play a crucial role in shaping the world. These differences extend beyond humans and are also embedded within geographical spaces, forming connections between the diverse elements of regions. In Iran's history, these connections have been physically established through irrigation systems and various forms of territorial governance, serving as early infrastructure and institutional structures for managing regional interdependencies. In modern discussions, these concepts are revisited within the frameworks of spatial and regional planning. The institutionalisation of this understanding of space and relationships can be traced back to the early twentieth century, evolving from developmental regional concepts. This evolution was further consolidated through a series of regional studies and planning initiatives, including the publication of the Atlas of Urban and Regional Planning of Iran in 1971, and national and regional planning projects such as the Battelle socio-economic plan (1972) and the Setiran plan (1975) (Sheykhi, 1990: 48–51).

A growing body of literature, including Sameni (2019), Alizadeh and Amanpour (2023), Rahimi et al. (2023), and Rashnoofer (2026), which has examined these planning initiatives, indicates that spatial planning and regional planning in Iran have increasingly been marginalised within the planning hierarchy, or reduced to largely symbolic and formal-legal exercises. Sameni and Zebardast (2023: 148–155) further demonstrate that this body of work remains constrained by five interrelated sets of challenges: epistemological, legitimacy-related, methodological, substantive, and implementation-related. The dominance of a strategic, problem-oriented rationality—understood here as an emphasis on deficiencies, gaps, and problems—on the one hand, and the treatment of the region as a spatial–statistical or administrative unit on the other, can be identified as key factors contributing to this marginalisation. Within this framing, the region is reduced to a spatial container that accommodates other phenomena, thereby occupying only a secondary role within the planning process (Paasi, 2010: 2297). Iranian studies have predominantly approached the region as a pre-given, external entity upon which planning interventions are subsequently imposed. Even critical studies that have addressed the shortcomings of this field have largely confined their diagnoses to institutional dimensions, with relatively little attention paid to the ontological status of the region itself—an omission that could otherwise fundamentally reorient understandings of regional planning (Parnian et al., 2018: 179; Sharifzadegan & Dehkordi, 2010: 96–98).

Considering the region as a spatial unit, Shayan (1999: 92), in a study entitled “Determining the natural boundaries of Nahavand County using terrestrial data and digital satellite data and the need to observe this boundary in regional planning”, highlights that “if our criteria for delineating boundaries are human-based, ... a general consensus on them may not be achieved. This leads to divergence of opinions regarding a relatively identical boundary, rendering borders fluid and unstable.” Such a container-like conception of the region reduces knowledge to what is observable, measurable, and empirically accessible—an epistemological stance similar to Shayan's (1999: 90) preference for natural over human criteria in defining regional boundaries. This form of objectivism constrains the role of the human subject as one of the constitutive elements of the region, reducing it to its material and quantifiable dimensions—namely population size and

settlement distribution. Accordingly, the central question of regional planners becomes: “What is the spatial distribution of settlements, their number, scale, functional characteristics, locational patterns, temporal–spatial distances, and so forth?” (Tala Minaei, 1975: 43). This epistemic framing is also reflected in Iran’s National Spatial Planning Scheme (1985), particularly in proposals for population relocation that disregard contextual constraints. Within this logic, human beings are implicitly treated as movable objects that can be readily displaced across space (Sheykhi, 1990: 57). Similarly, an issue of *Business Reviews* (1999: 28) defines the region as “a spatial entity with a specific content and an embodied, identifiable structure. In other words, a region is defined as a geographical domain in which space, content, and physical structure coincide.” Consistent with this definition, the same source (1999: 28) identifies land as the primary concern of regional planning, framing its objective as the identification of land resources and the determination of how these resources should be utilised to meet human needs.

Accordingly, in dominant conceptions of the region, human beings are either reduced to a minimal presence or remain persistently marginal. In contrast, returning to the early definition proposed by Patrick Geddes, the region is understood through the interplay of people, work, and place (Galland et al., 2026: 24). From a constructivist perspective, as Marek (2020: 67) demonstrates, the region is a socially constructed reality whose existence depends on the presence of regional consciousness in the minds of individuals. He argues that a deeper and more accurate understanding of the region emerges through the juxtaposition and co-articulation of multiple socially constructed realities held by diverse stakeholders. In this view, change—as an outcome of regional planning—can only be achieved when these actors demonstrate a greater willingness to realise and actualise latent potentials. This line of thought, grounded in social constructivism, plurality of meaning, and the rejection of grand narratives, opens up possibilities for rethinking regional planning. From this perspective, the region is not a purely objective, pre-given entity, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon embedded in networks of social interaction and interpretive practices among actors.

Reduction of the region to purely objectified, empirical entities leads planners within strategic and problem-oriented approaches to treat external reality as the primary basis for identifying problems. It is as if problems already exist within the region and must first be discovered. Within this framing, goals and strategic orientations are not established at the outset of the planning process but instead emerge at its later stages. Moreover, this approach is project-centred and, as a result, the broader developmental trajectory that a region may follow can be overlooked (Pantila, 1987: 23). Within this framework, not only are certain weaknesses, threats, and problems sometimes highlighted as inherent to the region—and therefore beyond the intervention capacity of planners or the planning process—so that investing time and resources in them yields little more than a vicious cycle of constraints and wasted effort; but stakeholders, organisations, officials, and individuals who play a key role in producing and transferring the knowledge required for planning may, due to individual biases and the negative framing embedded in this approach, refrain from presenting their actual experiences, while also generating potential resistance to change, complicating access to lived realities, and ultimately reducing the likelihood of transformation

(Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1026; Bushe, 2011: 9). For instance, a review of the Provincial Spatial Planning Programme of Yazd Province (2020) indicates that the limited availability of renewable water resources, the wide spatial dispersion of urban and rural settlements across the province, and unfavourable climatic conditions for road travel are identified as key weaknesses and threats facing the province. However, in the natural context of a province located within Iran's desert interior, the dispersed pattern of settlements can itself be understood as an inherent condition shaped by environmental constraints and access to water resources.

Moreover, among the necessities and objectives identified by Sheikhi (1997: 82–85) for regional planning in Iran, only the first objective—given the country's vast territory and its geographical, natural, ethnic, social, and cultural diversity—relates to the identification of potentials and constraints. The remaining objectives (including balanced development, the reconstruction of war- and natural disaster-affected regions, the control and management of urbanisation, decentralisation of decision-making, attention to remote areas, and the regulation of excessive physical expansion) are entirely problem-oriented. In all of these objectives, and even in the initial one, regional planning appears as an external undertaking—something that, from a distance and outside the region, studies it and, at best, reproduces the state of affairs as it existed prior to the emergence of the problem. Moreover, as Covey (2013) demonstrates, one effective way to achieve consciousness is to pay attention to where we allocate our time and energy. As has been shown, many of the weaknesses and threats that, in interaction with other elements, generate problems fall within the sphere of the circle of concern. These issues are largely beyond control and change, and focusing on them places planning in a passive position. However, a shift in approach towards emphasising strengths and opportunities located within the inner circles of concern—that is, the circles of influence and control—not only places regional planning in a more active position, but also, by creating a positive and constructive space, encourages greater engagement of groups and individuals in planning processes. This, in turn, facilitates increased access to socially constructed realities, enabling a move beyond a container-like conception of the region.

In addition to the dual conception of the region as a container accommodating other phenomena and the problem-oriented perspective that inhibits generativity, it appears that the marginalisation of regional planning may also be rooted in cognitive biases, including meaning bias¹ and near bias² (Sullivan, 2018: 1–2). In other words, the top-down definition and imposition of objectives and programmes characterised by their spatial intangibility and long-time horizons for realisation within conventional, institutionalised regional planning—implemented in contexts detached from the social realities of the region—lead to a situation in which the meanings and sense of belonging that individuals attach to their lived experiences in relation to these plans fail to emerge. Alternatively, they result in a diminished desire among people to perceive tangible outcomes within a shorter time frame. Therefore, these cognitive biases may unconsciously provide the

¹ It means appreciating the place of your life in relation to other events and the meaning they give to your life.

² It means giving greater importance to events that occur in the near time compared to those that happen in the distant future.

conditions for the marginalisation of regional planning. However, it appears that by changing the way the region and the regional planning process are conceptualised, both can be brought from the margins to the centre, and a shift can be made towards generativity rather than the reproduction of the existing status quo.

This study attempts to articulate this shift in regional planning by drawing on the concepts and practice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which—rather than focusing on problems and deficiencies—emphasises the recognition and valorisation of existing strengths and the best of what is already present. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, as will be discussed in the following sections of this study, this approach does not imply neglecting problems; rather, it merely reframes them through a different lens. Research indicates that this shift in perspective can foster greater willingness among stakeholders to cultivate capabilities, enhance self-motivation, and, in other words, promote generativity (Hiemstra & Van Yperen, 2015: 9). Verleysen et al. (2015: 30) also show in their study that engagement in AI strongly satisfies three fundamental psychological needs—namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness—and thereby leads individuals towards flourishing. They further demonstrate that engagement in the inquiry process, along with the capacity to learn with and from others—which can also contribute to an increased level of regional consciousness—unlocks and enhances the human potential of members as a prerequisite for regional development, through strengthening their self-confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience.

Therefore, in light of the points discussed in the preceding sections regarding the necessity of a shift in perspective towards the region, and a transformation in regional planning approaches in order to benefit from the territorial advantages generated by such planning, as well as the adoption of an active and effective stance in contrast to a passive position, and the avoidance of a sectoral approach that has led to environmental, demographic, cultural, economic, physical, and spatial problems in Iran; the present study seeks to employ AI as a conceptual framework and to examine its implications and capacities for regional planning. Accordingly, the main research question of this study is: “What capacities does AI, as a conceptual approach, provide for rethinking regional planning?”

To answer the research question, a qualitative approach and documentary analysis method were employed. Since the aim of this study was to achieve a deep and integrative understanding of the foundations, concepts, and internal logic of AI, rather than to conduct a comprehensive review of all studies in this field, the focus was placed on identifying and analysing key theoretical texts instead of defining a broad statistical population. Thus, the selection of sources was carried out purposively and through a snowball sampling technique. The process began with a search using the “Appreciative Inquiry” and related keywords, and then proceeded by tracing the references of the selected studies to identify the foundational works and key theorists in this field. In this way, the temporal scope of the selected literature ranged from 1987, when the first study in this area was published, to 2025. The criteria for selecting sources included: direct focus on AI, engagement with its conceptual, philosophical, or procedural foundations, and recognition as theoretically influential within the relevant literature. In contrast, works that merely employed AI as a tool were given secondary priority in the analysis. Ultimately, a corpus of 28 English-language articles, five

books, and two Persian articles was selected for review. These texts were initially read in full and simultaneously subjected to note-taking. This process resulted in a set of textual data comprising 165 pages of analytical notes. Through repeated review of this material, open and axial coding procedures were conducted, leading to the formation of initial concepts and categories. Finally, three main themes were identified and elaborated based on the analysis: “the philosophical foundations of Appreciative Inquiry,” “the nature of Appreciative Inquiry,” and “its practice”. In the final stage, these concepts were linked to the field of regional planning in order to examine the implications and capacities of this approach within that domain.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. First, the philosophical foundations of AI are examined, as these essentially determine the researcher’s way of perceiving the phenomenon (in this case, the region). Next, the “what” and “how” of AI, including its practice, are discussed. Finally, building upon its philosophical foundations, as well as its ontology and practice, the study explores how AI can be applied in regional planning in order to facilitate its rethinking and transformation.

2. Philosophical foundations of Appreciative Inquiry

In the encounter with phenomena, two fundamental questions are always raised, and the manner in which they are answered shapes the framework of our understanding: first, the question of what things are (“what is the nature and essence of reality?”), and second, the question of how we come to know them (“how do we know what we know?”). These questions correspond respectively to the domains of ontology and epistemology, and they determine the theoretical foundations of any practical approach, while defining the relationship between the knower (subject) and the known (object).

With the dominance of the natural sciences and empiricist thought, the assumption emerged that natural and social laws pre-exist and govern reality in a deterministic and directive manner. Accordingly, reality was conceived as an objective entity, independent of the mind and discoverable through observation. The gradual expansion of this way of thinking into other disciplines also shaped the foundations of institutionalised regional planning (Galland et al., 2026: 7–8). Within this framework, the region was likewise understood as an external, pre-given, and measurable reality that could be identified and managed through scientific tools and mathematical models. However, the emergence of a crisis in the effectiveness of this form of planning—particularly what Friedmann (1987: 300) refers to as a recognition crisis—opened the way for a more fluid understanding of knowledge formation.

Consequently, within social contexts, there is no single empirical truth “out there” waiting to be discovered; rather, truth is rooted in multiple realities and is contingent upon contexts of perception, dialogue, and shared understanding among individuals, possessing a fundamentally situated nature (Beauregard, 2020: 31; Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 166; Coghlan et al., 2003: 8). Therefore, it is essential to encounter otherness, to respect cultural and contextual protocols, and to take into account the constructed nature of realities and their dependence on social life and the human mind. This opposition emerges as a critique of essentialist claims, particularly when a

phenomenon—despite being socially constructed—is, for various reasons, presented as something fixed and unchangeable (Chaparak, 2008: 129).

Within this framework, the region is no longer understood as a purely objective and external entity; rather, it is a phenomenon formed and reproduced through individuals' cognition, perception, and interactive practices. In this regard, Marek (2020: 47, 67) demonstrates that mental representations of the region are essential to its existence and being. He argues that regions, as social realities, exist only within people's knowledge and consciousness. This socially constructed regional consciousness can influence the identity of the region, and consequently its very existence, by contributing to its continual reproduction into the future. From this perspective, the region is not a "thing" but a process shaped through social interactions, dialogue, and shared meaning-making practices. This view constitutes a direct critique of the positivist approach that is particularly dominant in institutionalised regional planning, in which the region is treated as independent of actors—namely, the people.

This perspective on phenomena—and, in this study, on the region—which is grounded in social constructivism, constitutes the main philosophical foundation of AI. In fact, within a constructivist framework, the region is no longer merely a backdrop or container for research and planning interventions; rather, it becomes an integral part of the social driving force itself. Soja (1989) argues that people's lives are filled with intricate networks of interdependent and overlapping spatial structures that carry both functional and symbolic significance. These structures are deeply embedded in the social fabric and, in turn, shape actions, ideas, and decisions, which themselves lead to functional and conceptual divisions of space (Murphy, 1991: 32). Social constructivism, with its emphasis on social rationality, argues that ways of knowing and ways of doing are inherently intertwined. The ontology of social constructivism is idealist in nature. Within this ontological stance, the external world consists of representations that are themselves products of the human mind. Anything that is considered real is so only because we believe it to be real. Reality is what human beings construct or create; it is the creative activity of individuals that shapes the world of objects (Blaikie, 2015: 34–35; Bounds, 2011: 22). Therefore, any attempt at regional change and development necessarily requires attention to processes of meaning production, collective perceptions, and the narratives that actors construct about their own region. Accordingly, change within the region and generativity as higher-order objectives of regional planning depend, under this approach, on transforming the ways in which the true constructors of the region perceive it. If positive assets and potentials are cultivated within these mental frameworks, external realities will tend towards generativity; whereas if deficiencies and problems dominate these mental constructs, external realities may merely reproduce the pre-existing condition prior to the emergence of those problems.

The epistemology of social constructivism is constructivist in nature. According to this epistemological stance, knowledge is neither discovered from an external reality nor independently produced by reason apart from that reality. Rather, knowledge is the outcome of people being compelled to make sense of their encounters with the physical world and with other people. Social constructivism focuses on the collective production and transmission of meaning. Thus, although

it—like rationalists—regards social reality as a structure of ideas, unlike them, who locate the origin of these ideas in innate structures of the mind, it holds that the source of ideas lies in intersubjective activities and in the meaningful practices of human beings in their everyday lives (Blaikie, 2015: 41–43). Our knowledge of what we believe to be true, and the way in which we come to know it, shape our actions and our responses to change. Constructivists argue that any form of knowledge is constructed through processes of selection and structuring (Mohammadpour, 2022: 246). Constructivism replaces the individual as the centre of knowledge with relationships. It moves from “I think, therefore I am” to “We are in relationship; therefore, I am”, and understands the production and reproduction of human beings, their values, their practical and tacit knowledge, and their societies as being embedded in dialogical and interactive processes (Cooperrider & Avital, 2015: XVI; Creswell, 2016: 42). Constructivists argue that meanings cannot be predetermined by a third party; rather, they emerge only within reciprocal relations, and even then, meanings are multiple, partial, and dynamic (Bushe, 2011: 18). When we speak with one another, we are simultaneously constructing the world we see and think about. Accordingly, the words exchanged in these dialogical, interactive, and constructivist processes among human beings are world-creating and anticipatory of the next moment. Thus, it is expected that by changing the way we speak, we can create the conditions for transforming the world itself (Bushe, 2000: 2; Bushe, 2011: 7; Stavros et al., 101–102). They also maintain that research only acquires meaning within a discursive community, and that social science research, in particular, constructs the very world it studies. Consequently, social constructivists do not regard theories or methods as representations of “truth”, but rather as human constructions that make it possible to see and do certain things (Bushe, 2012: 14). This co-construction and collaborative “building” gives life to learning, leads to generativity, and can create the conditions for change (Grieten et al., 2017: 10). From this perspective, it appears that the understanding of the region is also a participatory, interpretive, and context-dependent process in which social actors play an active role in defining and redefining regional realities.

AI, as both a paradigm and a methodology, grounds its philosophical foundations in social constructivism. Based on the belief that knowledge is constructed through processes of selection and structuring, and on the assumption that our capacity to create new and better environments is limited only by our imagination and collective will, it departs from conventional problem-oriented approaches. Instead, it emphasises values and opportunities and, rather than seeking to discover what already is, aims to enable collectives to articulate and envision what might be. In this process, changes in actors’ perceptions and discourses lead to transformations in social reality and, consequently, in the region. The region thus shifts from a pre-given “being”, independent of human perception, to an ongoing “becoming” embedded in social interactions. Accordingly, regional planning is not merely a technical, expert-driven activity; rather, it is a social and interactive process in which actors, through the joint redefinition of reality and their co-engagement with the region, create new pathways for development and generativity. AI, when combined with regional planning, can—on the basis of the aforementioned philosophical foundations—function as a mediating mechanism. Through the reconfiguration of perceptions, narratives, and dialogical

patterns, it enables the formation of such co-engagement, elevating it from the level of passive or marginalised participation to that of generative and collective agency.

After presenting the discussions related to the conceptual framework of AI and its relation to the concept of the region, the study proceeds to examine what exactly AI is, followed by an elaboration on its practice.

3. What is Appreciative Inquiry?

AI was introduced in the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva as an alternative approach to conventional problem-oriented models. This approach, whose first theoretical formulation was developed in Cooperrider's dissertation (1986) and in the article by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), reverses the deficit- and problem-focused perspective centred on identifying problems and shortcomings, and instead adopts a life-affirming stance. In this framework, the understanding of reality does not emerge through the analysis of problems, but rather through the reinterpretation of what already works well and the exploration of its potential for expansion (Stavros et al., 2016: 99; Coghlan, 2003: 7). This approach stands in contrast to conventional problem-solving perspectives that have shaped a significant portion of planning literature, including regional planning, and which are primarily focused on identifying deficiencies, analysing them, and proposing corrective solutions. In this sense, it can also be regarded as a basis for rethinking dominant assumptions in regional planning.

In the problem-solving approach, it is assumed that something is broken, fragmented, or incomplete and therefore needs to be repaired. Accordingly, problem-solving functions, in conjunction with the brain, are based on decomposition and separation (Bushe, 2000: 3). By definition, a problem implies that one already possesses some knowledge of what "should be"; thus, inquiry is guided by an instrumental goal tied to what is already known. In this sense, within many dominant formulations, the problem-solving approach tends to take on a conservative orientation: as a form of inquiry, it is inclined towards producing and reproducing a closed world of knowledge. Within this framework, the objective is merely to correct deviations in existing performance (horizontal development), while the possibility of creative, passionate, imaginative, and generative theorising is reduced. This, in turn, appears to be one of the factors contributing to the marginalisation of regional planning initiatives. Zali (2019: 274), in his proposed regional planning process, assigns the second stage to the extraction of key regional issues and the discussion of the region's strengths and weaknesses in relation to these issues. In such a situation, the entire focus is directed towards how to solve problems; and when problems occupy the mind, the possibility of moving a step beyond them does not emerge. Consequently, positive points, capabilities, and opportunities are marginalised, and a transformative reality cannot be realised (Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1020; Coghlan et al., 2003: 7). Moreover, this approach fosters the perception that only external experts can act as saviours, while the opportunity that could connect people to one another is lost and replaced by external linkages (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993: 4). Consequently, within such a framework, regional planning becomes less oriented towards the creation of new conditions and remains engaged in the reproduction of pre-problem states and the

management of the existing situation. In this context, no endogenous process of transformation for regional change emerges.

The separationist nature of the problem-solving approach, as a source of the recognition crisis, is another key issue. This perspective assumes that the world exists outside our consciousness; therefore, problems are not a shared condition for everyone, but rather belong to individuals, groups, organisations, regions, or their respective stakeholders. In regional planning, this view is reflected in the distance between planners and the lifeworld of local actors. By breaking down unity, it turns the planner into a separationist, externally positioned and emotionally detached inquirer. This outsidership hinders the formation of valid and empathetic dialogue, intensifies biases among individuals, and not only prevents the expression of realities and reinforces existing biases, but also reduces motivation for change (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987: 148–151; Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1024). Sameni and Zebardast (2023: 153) also show that the dominance of personality-dependent approaches on the one hand, and the absence of think tanks, as well as platforms for dialogue, interaction, and consensus-building, along with neglect of the role and position of local governments on the other hand, are among the factors that have marginalised regional planning. They (2023: 154) further point to the high share of non-indigenous and non-resident consultants in the provinces, which can lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of regional planning interventions.

In contrast, AI, as a form of action research, seeks a cultural transformation—from a culture that primarily perceives itself in negative terms to one that recognises itself as having the capacity to enrich and enhance the quality of life for all its stakeholders, thereby moving towards a more appreciative self-construction (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003: 478). By placing the heart at its centre and emphasising the theory of conscious collective action, it opens itself through exploration and inquiry to the recognition of new capacities and possibilities. Through expressions of appreciation, the enhancement of value, and a commitment to fully knowing and deeply understanding, it seeks those elements that give life to living systems—health, vitality, and excellence—or that have the potential to do so (Cooperrider et al., 2008: 1). The application of this method in regional planning shifts the logic from focusing on deficiencies towards activating internal capacities and life-giving assets. It relocates the goal to the very beginning of the planning process and conceptualises the identification of the most optimal and effective state of the region and its components as grounded in collective agency (Pantila, 1987: 23).

AI focuses on changing how people think and on supporting self-organising processes that emerge from circulating new ideas (Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 161–163). This approach understands change as contingent upon a shift in individuals' mindsets and, for this reason, under the principle of simultaneity, it treats inquiry or data collection not merely as an instrument for achieving change, but as an end in itself. Based on the assumption that we live in a world that is created by the questions we ask, it views the beginning of change as simultaneous with the beginning of inquiry (Lewis, 2016: 126). In this view, as Davoudi (2015: 316) argues, knowing is not considered merely an instrument in planning, but planning itself is understood as an act of knowing.

Accordingly, knowledge in regional planning is no longer solely a process based on statistics and models, and knowledge is no longer seen as something exclusively possessed by planners. Knowledge and action become intertwined, and the planner shifts from an external analyst and knowledge-holder to a facilitator of collective processes at the regional scale. Within this framework, regional change and generativity begin with a transformation in mindsets. The root of this shift lies in the inquiry's underlying assumption that individuals are oriented towards that which energises and gives them life (Rogers & Fraser, 2003: 77). Accordingly, AI makes it possible to move away from viewing the region as a patient in need of diagnosis—akin to a medical model—and instead positions the researcher or planner as a talent scout who looks at the region from within, as a kind of miracle filled with capacities. These capacities are to be discovered through the stories and narratives of people about times when the region was at its best and most vibrant. This precisely constitutes the key and transformative innovation of AI for regional planning. This approach does not imply neglecting issues, problems, or shortcomings; rather, based on the assumption that behind every negative image there is a positive one, it seeks to approach them from a different angle (Coghlan et al., 2003: 7; Bushe, 2012: 15–16). In other words, it transforms problems into their positive opposites. AI achieves this by focusing on existing exceptions within problematic situations, and then exploring and building upon the underlying causes of these exceptional successes (Messerschmidt, 2008: 455–456).

The application of AI in regional planning helps identify the positive core of the region by referring to its underlying mental constructs. This positive core consists of a set of values and beliefs that serve as keys to empowerment for achieving goals and, more broadly, for enabling change. It is the dimension of regional stakeholders' lived experience that fosters a sense of attachment and positivity towards the region and the parts of it in which they work and operate. The difficulty lies in the fact that this positive core is often obscured by the demands of everyday life. One of the aims of the appreciative approach is to bring this positive core to the surface, raise it to the level of regional consciousness, and harness its generative power for the creation of a new and better future (Lewis, 2016: 123–125). AI constitutes the foundation of generativity from three perspectives: first, as a deep awareness of the complex capacity to interpret the meaning and value of utterances or actions; second, as the affirmation of the meaning and value of such utterances and actions; and third, as the enhancement of their meaning and value. In appreciating the speech and actions of others, we also enhance the value of our relationships (Cooperrider & Avital, 2015: xviii), which can lead to the strengthening of social capital and institutional capacities in regional planning processes. Accordingly, AI can increase the value of relationships among actors, and thereby not only serve as a response to the lack of think tanks and platforms for dialogue and interaction in regional planning processes (Sameni & Zebardast, 2023: 153), but also, by transforming prevailing patterns of discourse, reinforce the belief in the existence of latent capacities that are merely awaiting recognition.

Inquiry is the key to moving towards appreciative consciousness. AI strengthens a system's capacity to understand, anticipate, and enhance its own potentials and possibilities by asking unconditional positive questions. Inquiry is a generative dance between knowledge and knowing,

and AI emphasises this relational dimension of knowledge creation. The power of inquiry—which must be learned and emphasised—is fundamentally about freedom, curiosity, and creative question-formation. Its spirit encompasses what Whitehead once called an “adventure of ideas”. Inquiry can take us to the boundaries of the unknown and beyond; it is the driving engine of human development and the expansion of limits. This process encompasses exploratory systems through which people make sense of their experiences in the world, organise their knowledge about it, and relate to the world. Appreciation emerges simultaneously with inquiry and the adventure of ideas. It is a way of knowing, valuing, and enhancing worth. It creates a language and space for agency that embraces differences, affirms tensions, and helps generate new cultures in which diverse values are heard and respected. What is urgently needed is a new form of transformative dialogue capable of fostering organisations within “multi-voiced” communicative contexts (Stavros et al., 2016: 98; Cooperrider & Avital, 2015: xvi–xxi).

Motawef (1997: 48–54), emphasising the centralised and top-down nature of regional planning in Iran, notes that within such a system planners consider themselves independent of studying and utilising local resources in the planning process. However, with the emergence of signs indicating the eventual depletion of oil reserves in the future, the need to pay greater attention to other resources has become increasingly evident. This necessity directs attention towards regional and local studies in order to achieve a better understanding of the capacities of different regions. Accordingly, the need to involve local people in regional development planning is felt more than ever, since it is human agency that connects the diverse elements of a region to one another through its activities. Moreover, the deeper and more complete human understanding of these elements and surrounding assets becomes, the more refined and effective the outcomes of human activity will be, and the better the environmental elements will be utilised. He further emphasises that improved knowledge—which can be framed within the concept of regional consciousness—also leads to better maintenance and sustainability of these elements. Inquiry and the adventure of ideas have the capacity to bring this tacit knowledge to the surface and transform it into part of regional consciousness and a deeper understanding of the region. In this sense, AI is not merely a technique, but rather a horizon for rethinking the very way of knowing and for moving beyond planning for the region towards planning with the region.

4. Formulating the practice of Appreciative Inquiry

This section formulates AI at different levels in order to understand its practical application and then expand it into regional planning and transition towards co-engagement with the region. The foundational level is dedicated to the philosophical foundations that were discussed earlier, which situate AI in relation to social constructivism. In addition, a set of assumptions and principles forms the action-oriented foundations of this approach. The subsequent levels include orientation, approach, type, strategy, objectives, and data collection methods within AI.

Although AI has been independently formulated within the literature of management and organisational development, it has also drawn on a range of interrelated concepts and perspectives in order to more precisely articulate its practice. These include action research, asset-based

development, participatory approaches, and interpretive traditions in the social sciences. Furthermore, the introduced levels are not solely concerned with the internal explication of this approach; rather, they provide a conceptual foundation for subsequently reinterpreting and adapting it to applied domains, including regional planning. As suggested by constructivist premises, these stages and layers are interactive, overlapping, recursive, and socially constructed, and they may be redefined or transformed in accordance with the context, actors, and dynamics of each system. From this perspective, AI is understood less as a step-by-step model and more as a generative and dialogic process. Accordingly, the formulation presented in this section is intended merely to provide a systematic understanding of this approach, rather than a prescriptive model that must necessarily be followed in a linear, stepwise manner.

4.1. Assumptions and Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

In order to understand the practice of AI, it is first necessary—grounded in its philosophical foundations—to examine its assumptions and principles as the initial theoretical lens. This forms the first level of analysis, which then provides the basis for engaging with the subsequent levels, all of which are articulated in relation to this underlying conceptual lens.

The first assumption of AI is that communities are centres of human connections that can enhance the best possibilities of the human condition, which depends on appreciating the present capacities and growth-oriented qualities within communities. Another assumption holds that in every community, something is already working; communities are viewed as a manifestation of life's miracle, full of capacities, energies, and potentials, and human beings live in communities precisely because of their fundamental need for life-giving human connections. Therefore, the appeal of asset-based community development lies in being a foundational assumption embedded within AI. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993: 13) portray communities in a positive light, likening them to a glass that is half full. They stress that all communities inherently possess both shortcomings and strengths. However, they argue that it is these strengths and talents that elevate communities into robust and productive systems. Therefore, they believe that identifying these strengths is crucial for cultivating such communities. Within communities, individuals can organise themselves and propel development processes by recognising and utilising existing, yet often overlooked, strengths and resources. This approach underscores the importance of social assets, encompassing individuals' unique talents and the hidden social capital within relationships that invigorate local groups and informal networks. Moreover, the key to uncovering these hidden assets is through inquiry. In the realm of AI, questioning is not merely a tool, but is viewed as an intervention and a catalyst for change. Consequently, what we choose to focus on and the nature of our questions shape our reality and influence our path. In essence, what we inquire about tends to expand and evolve.

The next assumption views holistic change in a society as contingent upon the near-simultaneous transformation of all its members. For this reason, it is grounded in the belief in the engagement and genuine participation of the entire system. It is also based on the assumption that profound societal change is more likely when members of a community experience a strong sense

of trust, psychological safety, and commitment to the AI process. In such conditions, people are expected to carry into the future selected aspects of their known past—specifically, their best past experiences—so that these can be transformed into the reality of the future. The underlying assumption is that human systems move toward the issues about which the most authentic and generative questions are asked; knowledge and destiny are deeply intertwined. What we know, and how we come to know it, has a direct influence on where we ultimately arrive. In this sense, the term “people” is understood in its fullest and most literal meaning, and differences among them are valued and respected. This interpersonal interaction, grounded in the recognition of differences and aimed at bringing positive moments of the past into the present while shaping a shared, interest-based identity (Ghazaie et al., 2024: 18), which in this context refers to generativity and change, fosters a sense of confidence and calm. This not only prepares individuals for a journey into the unknown future within AI, but also increases the likelihood that stakeholders will feel inspired, think creatively, and experiment with new ideas. As a result, social change can be implemented more easily and may become more sustainable (Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1025–1026; Bushe, 2012: 9–10; Stavros et al., 2016: 96; Verleysen et al., 2015: 13; Mohr & Watkins, 2002: 2; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003: 474).

From these assumptions and the more detailed elaborations of the philosophical foundations of AI, different scholars have collectively proposed five foundational and five emergent principles for this approach. The foundational principles articulate the underlying beliefs that connect AI from theory to practice, while the emergent principles extend and enhance these foundational assumptions by clarifying how an appreciative stance is to be enacted by practitioners in the field. These principles are briefly presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Foundational and emergent principles of Appreciative Inquiry, (Lewis, 2016: 126-127; Mohr & Watkins, 2002: 5; Verleysen et. al., 2015: 13; Stavros et. al., 2016: 103-101, 104; Mehta, 2017: 5; Maier, 2009: 108-107; Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 166-167; Bushe, 2011: 5-15; Danaeifard & Ehsani Moghaddam, 2020: 9; Sandercock, 2003: 36)

Principles		Meaning
Foundational principles	Constructionist	The system of phenomena—comprising the elements of a given phenomenon and the set of relationships, actions, and meaning-making processes among them, which together construct a representation of the phenomenon in the mind of the individual as one of those very elements—evolves toward patterns that are shaped by the questions formulated to understand how these systems operate. Accordingly, words construct the world, and reality is socially constructed through language. Our reality and identity are co-constituted, and we are deeply interconnected with one another. Therefore, the construction of a transformative future depends on the transformation of our identity, which in turn depends on reshaping socially constructed reality and attending to the exceptional.
	Simultaneity	Identity transformation is not treated as a late-stage outcome of a process; rather, it begins simultaneously with the formulation of positive and unconditional questions. In such questions, the very act of inquiry itself functions as a generative force of transformation.
	Anticipatory	Large-scale changes begin with small actions, and these actions that shape our present behaviour are influenced by the future and the transformative vision we

Emergent principles		anticipate. This image of a better tomorrow guides the current behaviour of each stakeholder involved in the phenomenon.
	Poetic	Like poets, who face no inherent limits on what they can write about, we too are not constrained in what we can inquire into and learn from. The past, present, and future of a system of phenomena, much like a good poem that invites multiple interpretations, constitute an endless source of learning, inspiration, and meaning-making. Accordingly, it is necessary to transform our habitual ways of seeing and, drawing on the richness of lived experience, cultivate an appreciative lens while creating space for stories to be heard, in order to explore what we wish to see more of.
	Positive	This underlying principle, which also supports all other principles, regards positive emotions as generative and amplifying forces of thought. The key to strengthening strengths and capacities lies in identifying, affirming, and appreciating them. The heliotropic orientation of AI—its inherent tendency to move toward sources of energy, vitality, and life-giving force—also stems from this principle. Accordingly, within this principle, AI emphasises inquiry into that which “gives life.”
	Wholeness	Beyond job titles, education, and formal qualifications, human beings each carry a complete life story and an infinite set of skills, and each reflects their own socially constructed reality of the system of phenomena. Respecting this diversity of experiences, forms of knowledge, and perspectives—and embracing them in relation to one another—allows us to move beyond the perceived capacities of the phenomenon under study and creates conditions for generativity. Thus, grounded in the belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, the best of a phenomenon and its desired future become visible only when its wholeness is deeply felt and apprehended.
	Enactment	This principle points to the idea that the way we imagine and formulate what we desire plays a decisive role in how it comes into being; in other words, envisioning and constructing a mental image of the future is simultaneously part of the process through which that future is formed. For example, if a generative and sustainable region is desired, its planning process must also be shaped in alignment with this very vision. From this perspective, enactment emerges from the alignment between imagination, action, and practical articulation. Some have also referred to this principle as self-organisation.
	Free Choice	Individuals can freely choose how they participate in and contribute to the change process. In such conditions, they perform better and show a stronger commitment to change. Inner freedom enables the possibility of living freely.
	Awareness	Understanding and integrating the assumptions and principles of AI, as well as how they relate to one another, is essential for practicing it. Reflexive awareness of one’s own thoughts, habits, and actions can enable practice within an appreciative paradigm.
	Narrative	The stories and narratives we construct about a phenomenon have transformative power. Stories must be told and written in ways that reflect the best of reality. They are co-created and co-narrated by stakeholders. AI emphasises all narratives for understanding the “whole phenomenon,” including those that are marginalised and those that are largely innovative in nature.

4.2. Orientation and Approach of Appreciative Inquiry

Research orientation can generally be classified into basic and applied research. Basic research is concerned with the production of knowledge for deeper understanding, while applied research focuses on producing knowledge for action. Basic research seeks to advance fundamental understanding of the social world and, in particular, to test theories. In contrast, applied research

is oriented toward practical outcomes and is used to improve task performance, inform policy development, and enhance efficiency. In basic research, researchers tend to be more detached and academically oriented, whereas applied researchers are more action-oriented and engaged in processes of change (Blaikie, 2016: 73–74). With this conceptual grounding in basic and applied research, and through a review of AI literature—particularly the work of Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987: 150)—it becomes evident that AI is situated within action research, yet emerges as a critique of its conventional forms. They argue that the problem-solving orientation in action research directly reduces the likelihood of generativity and transformative ideas. In response, they introduce AI as a form of action research and as a change and development approach aimed at creating novel ideas, enabling action, and envisioning a better future (Cooperrider & Avital, 2015: xvi–xxi; Bushe, 2000: 5; Lewin, 1946: 36). The outcomes of an AI process must be practically useful for the system in which the inquiry takes place and must be validated in practice (Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 165). According to the principle of simultaneity, inquiry is not merely about asking questions; rather, it is understood as an initiating act of change.

Facing the responses to these questions in order to generate new knowledge—which we previously referred to as a transformative, creative, generative, and change-oriented conception or imagination—requires an appropriate research logic or approach. Blaikie (2015: 83) identifies four logics for knowledge development: deduction, induction, retroduction, and abduction. Given what was previously discussed regarding the idealist ontology and constructivist epistemology of AI, Blaikie argues that approaches grounded in such theoretical perspectives tend to adopt an abductive approach to inquiry. This approach involves the formulation of theories that emerge from the language of people and stakeholders, and from the meanings and constructions through which they interpret reality and the phenomenon under study (Dadashpoor & Ghazaie, 2019: 9–10). A key point in the abductive approach within AI—and a distinction from other related perspectives—is that the discovery and articulation of these internal viewpoints is not necessarily the task of an external researcher or outsider. Rather, stakeholders and participants in AI are expected to actively engage in the process of inquiry itself. For this reason, questioners are typically drawn from the same community as respondents, and as a result, the dichotomy of “we and they” or “we and you” is diminished and gradually dissolves. It is also through this process that identity transformation is initiated (Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 165). Here, stakeholders are engaged in questioning one another, thereby exposing themselves to their shared socially constructed reality of the phenomenon at its moments of best performance. Through understanding one another’s meaning systems and interpreting their constructions of the phenomenon, they collectively envision their desired future and trajectory. In this context, the researcher or facilitator of the inquiry merely records and organises these imaginaries. In the following section, an integrated discussion of the type, strategy, objectives, and data collection methods of AI is provided to further elaborate how the process is implemented.

4.3. *The Practice of Appreciative Inquiry*

AI deliberately links the tools and purposes of inquiry at the point where methodology and phenomenon become increasingly aligned and mutually constitutive (Cooperrider & Avital, 2015: xiv–xvi). In other words, AI and the phenomenon are not separate from one another; rather, as its name suggests, this approach initiates inquiry from within the phenomenon itself and as part of it. In this process, stakeholders—through their interactions with one another—enter a sequence of events and engagements in search of something valuable, and in doing so, they often discover something of genuine worth. On this basis, AI can be specifically classified—as previously noted—as a form of field study. However, library-based and laboratory studies may also play a complementary role, supporting the process of bringing to the surface latent life-giving elements that remain unknown and that may require historical analysis, experimentation, or calculation. Similarly, although the dominant orientation of AI is generally qualitative in nature, quantitative studies can also contribute in a complementary and mixed-method capacity. This methodological flexibility, particularly in dealing with complex and multi-stakeholder phenomena, provides a basis for reflecting on its applicability in regional planning. However, as Bhatt and Singh (2025: 678) demonstrate, some core principles of quantitative research are in tension with the constructivist assumptions of AI. Therefore, such methods should be considered at the margins of the inquiry process, and their findings should be discussed and interpreted within interpersonal and dialogical sessions among participants.

Multiple strategies, including case study and action research, can be considered for the implementation of AI. However, since AI itself is also regarded as a strategy, this section focuses solely on its description. It should be noted that David Cooperrider placed greater emphasis on the underlying philosophy of this inquiry than on treating it merely as a technique (Bushe, 2011: 2). In 1997, the four-stage model (4-D) was first introduced and was later expanded into the five-stage model (5-D). Given that AI is fundamentally a change process based on inquiry (Grieten et al., 2017: 8), the cornerstone of each of these stages is questioning and the interviews conducted among individuals or stakeholders. Therefore, the data collection method in this inquiry is primarily based on interviews. Such an emphasis on dialogue and engagement makes it particularly significant in contexts where stakeholder diversity, collective sense-making, and the surfacing of latent or less visible issues are crucial. This mode of implementing AI rests on the assumption that through genuine participation and deep engagement of stakeholders, members' commitment to the system of the phenomenon is strengthened, and they become more invested in creating change for its future (Maier, 2009: 108).

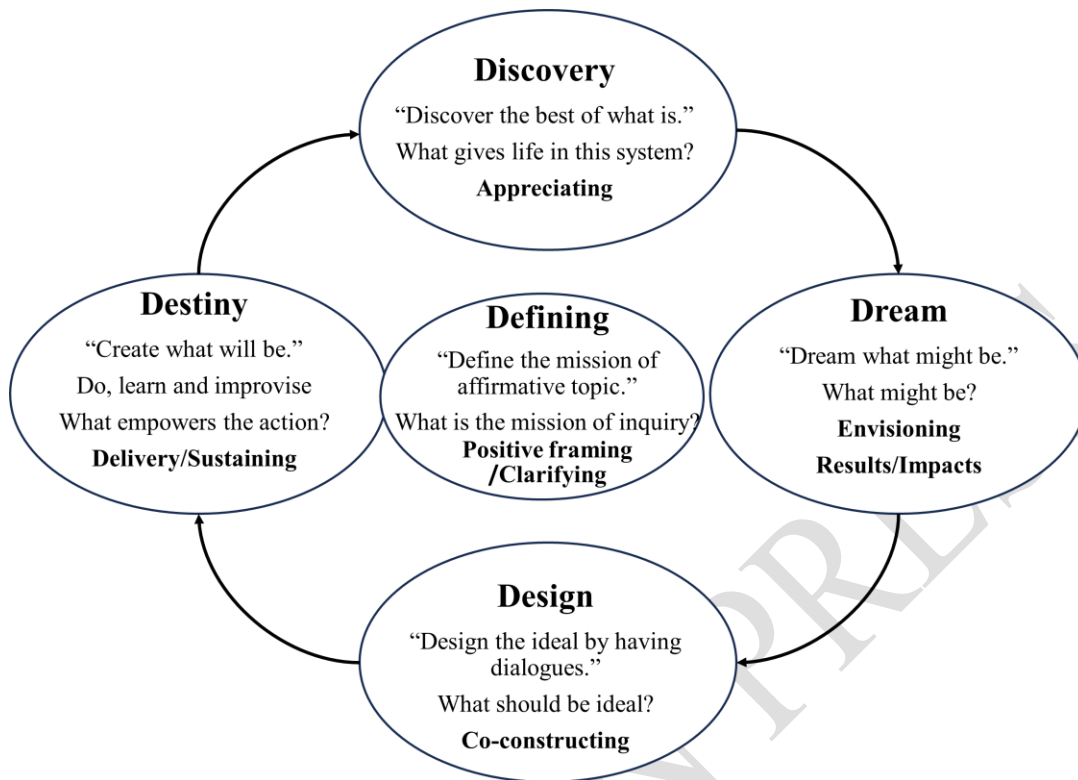


Figure 1. Five-stage model of implementing Appreciative Inquiry (Bushe, 2011: 2-4; Danaeifard & Ehsani Moghaddam, 2020: 12; Stavros et. al., 2016: 104; Stavros et. al., 2018: 74)

The purpose of AI is to enable stakeholders within a system of phenomena to co-create, in a collaborative and generative manner, context-specific visions and pathways toward future success, grounded in a deep understanding of their own core strengths, successes, and internal resources. Achieving this goal requires taking into account both constraining and enabling contextual conditions, which must be considered from the outset. The inquiry is recommended when there is a perceived need to introduce a degree of positivity and hope into a situation. It is also particularly useful when the challenge or opportunity concerns the entire system and when collective intelligence is required to address it. Accordingly, this approach is more effective in collectivist societies, where individuals perceive themselves as sharing in the lives of other members of their group. Moreover, AI can be particularly helpful in situations where multiple pathways have already been attempted without achieving the desired success, or where the way forward remains uncertain and there is a need for creativity and generative thinking. Bushe (2010: 236) argues that AI has its strongest emotional impact when a system is experiencing a negative deviation from its normal state. Finally, this approach can be applied in situations where there is a need to enhance confidence among members or where there is no explicit pressure to change the existing conditions (Lewis, 2016: 123; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011: 1352).

Alongside articulating the capacities of AI, it is essential to attend to its limits of applicability and the contexts in which this approach may be less effective, in order to avoid its inappropriate or oversimplified use. Such sensitivity to context and conditions becomes even more critical in applications characterised by institutional complexity and a diversity of stakeholders. AI requires

leaders who are prepared to effectively mobilise the group's skills, strengths, and energy in order to activate and work with them. Otherwise, if leaders are committed to control and command and believe it is their role to provide all the answers, the event will merely become a waste of participants' time. Moreover, there is a risk that this may create unfavourable conditions for others who may wish to adopt this approach in the future. Another key point is that achieving the best outcomes from an AI process requires investment of time and energy, even after the event itself. Therefore, if the timing is not appropriate, AI is not recommended. Furthermore, it is essential to view change as a process rather than a single event. The inquiry is most effective when understood as an iterative process and as a cultural way of being. A summit or group event does not constitute the entirety of AI; rather, it is only the visible part of it. What occurs before and after the event is equally important components of the change process. The final limitation concerns the importance of selecting an appropriate topic or focus for the inquiry. In fact, the topic of AI—defined and refined in the first phase of the process—must be chosen with great care. Initiating an inquiry around superficial or peripheral issues, while a sleeping giant exists at the core of the system, can intensify latent tensions and bring them to the surface in ways that may damage both the process and participants' trust (Lewis, 2016: 136–139). As Flyvbjerg and Gardner (2025: 251) argue, in preparatory and planning sessions prior to the initiation of the inquiry, it is essential to deepen understanding of the system's mindset and underlying context by repeatedly asking “why” in order to clarify the rationale for conducting the inquiry. Overall, raising these considerations serves to provide a realistic delineation of the boundaries of AI's applicability. Such a perspective enables more informed and deliberate use of the approach and helps prevent its reduction into a universal, prescriptive model—both philosophically and methodologically—for all contexts.

In combination with the preceding discussion, “defining” can be regarded as the core of the AI implementation practice. In early accounts of AI, this stage was not explicitly labelled as such and was more commonly referred to under the concept of the “affirmative topic.” At this stage, while the affirmative topic—serving as the focal point of inquiry—is introduced and refined, the purpose, method, and rationale for using AI, as well as the preliminary arrangements for its implementation, are also addressed. In some cases, the affirmative topic may already have been defined and clarified in advance by the audience and stakeholders themselves. In such situations, it is possible to proceed directly to exploring the positive core by building on that shared understanding. However, in defining this affirmative topic, involving appropriate participants—particularly supporters who have the greatest interest in and power to influence the system—is crucial in identifying a focus that is both compelling and persuasive for both leaders and stakeholders (Bushe, 2011: 4). Here, the guiding question is: “On which generative topic do we want to focus together?” The purpose of this question is to reach a shared understanding of an aspect of the phenomenon that deserves collective attention (Bhatt & Singh, 2025: 675). From this perspective, the affirmative topic is not a pre-existing given, but rather a gradually constructed outcome within a dialogical context, which may itself be subject to redefinition throughout the process.

As expected, the initial formulation of the affirmative topic often begins with participants' articulation of problems and challenges. In such situations, it is important to avoid dismissing these expressions and instead to listen to them actively. Rather than discarding the problem, efforts are made to reframe it into a positive affirmative topic by asking guiding questions such as "What do they want more of?" The affirmative topic is crucial to the inquiry process, as it shapes the tone of the questioning and provides the foundation for progressing through the subsequent stages of AI. Regardless of their specific focus, affirmative topics should generally exhibit these main characteristics: they should be positive, desirable and appealing to members, and capable of stimulating a desire for learning and dialogue around desired futures (Maier, 2009: 108–109; Stavros et al., 2016: 105; Boyd & Bright, 2006: 1026; Bushe, 2007: 5; Lewis, 2016: 134–135; Whitney et al., 2010: 132).

To facilitate the articulation of the affirmative topic, a planning group is typically formed, acting as a representative body of the system under study. This group, in interaction with the AI facilitator, not only becomes familiar with the philosophy of the inquiry but also participates in shaping how it is carried out. Orientation sessions for the planning group may vary in length depending on contextual conditions, but they generally pursue two main objectives: first, to develop an understanding of the philosophy and practice of AI; and second, to create a space for collective exploration of how the inquiry can be implemented in alignment with the specific context. At this stage, members of the planning group, together with the facilitator(s) of the inquiry, draw on their contextual understanding and, while taking into account the constraints previously identified for the process, reinterpret and localise the implementation of AI. In doing so, these members also evolve into "ambassadors" of the inquiry, which can be particularly valuable in cases where the system—such as a region—is highly extensive and geographically dispersed. Working with the planning group, the affirmative topic is further refined by identifying what stakeholders wish to have more of within the system. In addition, distinguishing between pre-identity and post-identity¹ states of the system, as well as assessing whether the current state of the system lies along a spectrum of negative or positive deviation², should also be undertaken at this stage (Bushe, 2011: 15–17).

Decisions regarding who should participate in the inquiry are also made in interaction with the same planning group. Criteria such as level of influence, access to resources, relevant knowledge, and willingness to engage and engaging in dialogue may all play a role in this selection. However, these criteria are not fixed and may remain flexible depending on the context and objectives. Inclusive participation of all relevant stakeholders is crucial for generating practical insights;

¹ In pre-identity systems, members have relatively little concern for the needs of the system and tend to view it primarily as a means for fulfilling their own personal needs. In contrast, in post-identity systems, members take the needs of the system into account and may even be willing, at times, to sacrifice their own interests in order to improve the system's condition. The latter group is likely to show impatience toward inquiry into ideal states and may even experience it as a form of narcissism. Instead, they tend to focus on improving the effectiveness and capacity of the group or organisation and are more engaged with inquiries aimed at enhancing the system's competencies and capabilities. The former group, on the other hand, may benefit most from inquiry into ideal states, and if successful, such inquiry can help them move toward a post-identity condition (Bushe, 2011: 15–16).

² Whether the system of the phenomenon deviates positively or negatively from the normal situation.

therefore, the planning group should also determine an appropriate timing for conducting the inquiry (Lewis, 2016: 128–129). Unlike some research approaches, here the number of participants is not determined based on theoretical saturation, but rather in relation to the potential for stimulating collective imagination and expanding dialogue (Mohr & Watkins, 2002: 6). Accordingly, the broader the scope of participation, the greater the possibility of generating new horizons. In addition, attention to participants' readiness and providing sufficient opportunities for them to become familiar with the logic of the inquiry can significantly improve its quality. Some studies have shown that superficial and short-term training does not lead to meaningful outcomes (Bhatt & Singh, 2025: 678). Decisions regarding the mode of implementation and the appropriate method, tailored to the context, are among the other choices that the planning group must make. Overall, the AI planning group should select one or more approaches for conducting the AI event—aligned with the context and setting—in order to implement the stages of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

Table 2. Approaches to organising Appreciative Inquiry events, (Skinner & Kelley, 2006: 85-87)

Approach	Description
Whole-system 4D Dialogue	All members and stakeholders are engaged across the stages of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny over an extended period ranging from several months to a year. They participate in selecting the affirmative topic, designing interview guides, conducting interviews, interpreting findings, and disseminating results. Whole-system dialogue spans all levels and units of the system. This approach is particularly useful when the aim is to foster a learning culture and enhance the capacity for change.
Appreciative Inquiry Summit	This is an approach for accelerating change that engages a large group of people (30 to 1000 or more) in the change process. It is typically organised as a single event held over a period of two to four days. The process is focused on a specific topic and involves all those connected to that issue. Participants are drawn into the strategic core of the system and develop a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcomes. It is used to discover opportunities for change, design desired futures, bring people together, strengthen alliances and partnerships, and generate momentum for new initiatives.
Mass-mobilised Inquiry	This is a method for engaging large numbers of people in face-to-face dialogue through a cascading (or pyramid) process. A group of interviewers conducts an initial set of interviews; after completing them, interviewees are invited to become interviewers themselves. Those who choose to participate are trained via telephone and provided with an interview guide package. Within a relatively short period, a small number of individuals—each conducting around ten interviews—can generate hundreds or even thousands of interviews. This approach is particularly useful when the goal is to involve large numbers of people in building relationships across different and potentially conflicting groups. This approach is particularly useful when the goal is to involve large numbers of people in building relationships across different and potentially conflicting groups.
Core Group Inquiry	A core group of individuals (generally 50 people or fewer) representing the entire system identifies topics, formulates questions, conducts interviews, and produces a synthesis of interview themes. This form of inquiry can be used to empower a small group to rapidly initiate a transformation or change effort, to prepare for an AI summit, and to establish a strong foundation of engagement and enthusiasm.
Positive Change Network	This is a bottom-up approach. After a few days of training in AI methods, participants develop their own initiatives within their specific areas of expertise. A critical feature of the Positive Change Network is that participants select their own topics, develop their own questions, conduct interviews, and interpret the data. They may work individually or with others within their respective fields. Once completed, participants share the ideas and initiatives that emerge from the inquiry.

Positive Change Consortium	A Positive Change Consortium brings together teams of individuals from different organisations within the system to participate in the Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny phases. The aim is to pursue a shared strategic interest. Various teams work together as a large inquiry team over a period of six to nine months, selecting affirmative topics and developing interview guides. AI interviews are then conducted. After completing the interviews, team members participate in an AI summit to interpret their findings, develop design statements, and reorganise into teams to implement what they have learned. This approach is useful for aligning a value chain.
AI Learning Team	This is one of the simplest forms of AI. The team consists of a small group of individuals who use the inquiry process to achieve a specific goal. AI learning teams are most often used in the Destiny phase to stimulate innovations that are aligned with the outcomes of the Discovery, Dream, and Design stages.
Progressive AI Meetings	Another small-scale approach to AI involves a group or team working through a series of 10 to 12 short sessions (2 to 4 hours each), following the four-phase cycle. Each session is assigned a specific agenda—such as selecting topics, developing questions, conducting interviews, and so on—and the meetings are completed over a period of several months. This process offers the advantage of continuity. Progressive AI Meetings can be used for a wide range of purposes.

As can be inferred from these approaches, AI, as a context-sensitive framework, can adopt different strategies in accordance with institutional and cultural settings, social structures and hierarchies, and considerations of power, trust, and prior planning experience. Accordingly, in planning group sessions, decisions can be made regarding how the inquiry should be implemented, and even how its stages may be redefined or adapted to better fit the context. Overall, what can be understood from the “Defining” phase in AI is that it is less a discrete, preliminary stage and more an ongoing process of preparation, shared understanding, and orientation that can continue throughout the inquiry. It can therefore be seen as a space for collective reflection on how to advance the inquiry, plan its implementation, and uncover positive core elements within the system.

“Discovery” is another phase that follows appreciative reflection and focuses on those qualities that make the vitality and dynamism of the system possible. At this stage, participants, in an interactive connection with other dimensions of the inquiry, engage in a collective dialogue around “the best of what is.” This dialogue is sometimes also referred to as the search for “life-giving forces” and the “positive core.” The key point here, in addition to listing strengths, capabilities, and unique opportunities facing the system of the phenomenon, is the gradual construction of a shared understanding of what is perceived by actors as meaningful, valuable, and generative—what has been, is being, or can be experienced as such. Participants’ narratives and stories about their best conditions and experiences related to the system’s affirmative topic play a central role in this process. Sandercock (2003: 26) views these narratives as central to planning practice and defines planning as “performed story.” She argues that narratives operate both as part of planning processes and within them, where the capacities for storytelling, listening, and story-making are cultivated, alongside the equally important capacity to create spaces in which these narratives can be heard. The role of narratives as catalysts of change is realised, on the one hand, through their capacity to inspire, and on the other hand, through their ability to shape a new imagination of alternatives. These stories and narratives hold together cultures, communities, and organisations, while also revealing deeply embedded values. Inquiry into the surfacing of the positive core can also lead to the emergence of a new culture among members, fostering a sense

of competence and self-efficacy. Core questions such as “What has been life-giving in this system?” or “What has been our best experience of it?” help open new interpretive horizons in this context (Bushe, 2011: 3 & 13; Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 167; Mehta, 2017: 5). The underlying assumption here is that the reality of social life, as mediated through language, narratives, and mental images, tends to give rise to events and actions that reinforce the ways members speak about and think about the phenomenon (Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1029). The search for and discovery of the positive core holds the greatest potential for opening a generative mind, thereby supporting the generativity of the inquiry process (Grieten et al., 2017: 7). Based on research on the human brain, stories have the capacity to connect the left hemisphere—associated with logic and language—with the right hemisphere, associated with artistic sensibility, innovation, and creativity. By engaging the whole brain, we gain access to the full range of our ideas and emotions, creating a strong foundation for our images of an ideal future state (Stavros et al., 2016: 105–106).

At the operational level, this step is typically advanced through a set of AI questions focused on the affirmative topic. These questions may be pursued through individual interviews or group interactions, but they are not limited to these formats and, depending on the context, may also be complemented by methods such as observation, trend analysis, or even quantitative data. In this sense, there is no single, fixed methodology for carrying out this step; rather, its realisation is shaped in relation to contextual conditions, actors, and available resources. However, AI is at its best when appreciative interviews are given priority and involve all stakeholders. When the interviews are completed, the resulting stories and narratives are shared with all members to identify their common themes (Skinner & Kelley, 2006: 83). The collected stories are written down, and small groups are formed in which all members read a single shared story together. They then discuss the images and ideas that the story evokes in relation to the inquiry’s purpose. This constitutes a form of stimulated brainstorming. When the discussion loses momentum, the group moves on to reading another story. The group continues until reading additional stories no longer generates new ideas. This process is referred to as “synergenesis.” It not only helps produce new ideas but can also transform the ongoing narrative (Bushe, 2007: 5). In this context, movement between narratives, pauses, returns, and reinterpretations are considered a natural part of the process.

Overall, what is referred to as “Discovery” in AI is a continuous process of collective sense-making that provides the raw material for dreaming. However, it can also persist simultaneously across other stages of the inquiry, thereby enriching the process as a whole.

In continuity and interaction with the outcomes of Discovery, a unique space for collective Dreaming becomes possible—a moment in which, as Bushe (2000: 3) suggests, the constraining forces of generativity, namely ridicule and suppression, are temporarily suspended through listening to one another’s stories and to moments in which the best within us has been touched. He (2012: 16) shows that positive conversations create the necessary sense of emotional safety that enables individuals to speak, on that basis, about the dreams they truly hold within. The necessity of dreaming and the suspension of ridicule and suppression can also be captured in Einstein’s assertion that “you cannot solve a problem at the same level of thinking that created it.”

Accordingly, expanding this level and moving into layers of dream and imagination becomes essential.

Through reflection and dialogue on what has been discovered as positive cores, participants gradually enter conversations in which diverse horizons of possible futures for the system are constructed, grounded in these positive foundations. These futures are not elite-driven or imposed on participants; rather, they emerge as an outcome of interaction, imagination, and collective meaning-making. At this point, the focus shifts from merely identifying existing strengths and capacities to their expanded possibilities in the form of alternative narratives of the future. Dreaming enables participants—who are in fact the actors within the system of the phenomenon—to see themselves and their efforts in relation to the future they are collectively constructing for the system, and to envision their own contributions and roles in realising that future. Accordingly, guiding questions such as “What might be possible in relation to the affirmative topic?” or “If we were at our very best possible state, what kinds of futures could we envision?” serve as catalysts for dialogue (Mehta, 2017: 5–6).

At this point, participants—supported by the lifting of generativity constraints—share their rich personal dreams and, through interaction with one another, reinterpret, combine, and expand them into collective horizons. What emerges, therefore, is not a single fixed or stabilised vision, but a set of meaningful images and narratives of the future that remain open to further redefinition along the way. These dialogues, while rooted in the history and experiences of the phenomenon system, enable an expansion of thinking about its capacities and potential futures. The participation of a diverse range of stakeholders, including leaders and other actors, is important in this process, as the diversity of perspectives contributes to the richness of the constructed horizons. In this context, the role of the AI facilitator is not to direct the content of the dreams, but rather to create and sustain a safe and generative dialogical space in which narratives can emerge, interact freely, and be heard. Accordingly, the articulation of dreams may take multiple forms, including storytelling, visualisation, or other creative expressions, which are then explored and reflected upon in collective dialogue. What is expected as the outcome of these creative dialogues is the emergence of inspiring and socially constructed horizons that, as a strategic vision grounded in the assumption of heliotropic orientation, guide individual efforts toward the greatest potential of the system (Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1022 & 1029; Messerschmidt, 2008: 456; Lee et al., 2022: 5).

Overall, based on what Whitney et al. (2010: 186) demonstrate, the combination of deep and careful reflection on the focal question, participation in dream-oriented discourse, articulation of collective dreams, imaginative visualisation and creative construction of dreams, identification of shared themes and opportunities, development of opportunity maps, and documentation of dreams in interaction with one another collectively produces the constructed dream. Subsequently, through a degree of convergence that emerges in the formation of a shared collective dream, it becomes possible to design more objective formulations aimed at realising that shared vision.

In the midst of conversations that shape collective dreams, the need to Design pathways for realising those dreams gradually emerges, potentially initiating a shift from reflection to action. At this stage, the main task of participants is to identify and distinguish objective,

actionable ideas or qualities that bring the phenomenon closer to its envisioned new potential (Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1031; Skinner & Kelley, 2006: 83). Participants, in fact, through the social architecture of the ideal system's characteristics—those that can realise the constructed shared vision—design generative propositions through inquiry and dialogue. In this regard, questions such as “What should the ideal be?”, “Which of the most attractive actionable ideas can we implement and how?”, and “What should our ideal system that realises our dream look like and how should it function?” (Bushe & Kassam, 2005: 167; Bushe, 2012: 11) serve as catalysts for dialogue. In this way, the transition from “What might be?” to “What should be?” leads to a re-examination of imagined possibilities and the formation of triggers for collective action (Mehta, 2017: 6).

Continuing the process, determining what is to be designed and who participates in these conversations is itself regarded as part of an interactive process and, at times, a negotiation among actors. Accordingly, although formats such as summits or representative groups have been proposed in the AI literature, their actual realisation may vary and shift depending on context, institutional structures, power relations, and the level of trust among participants. In this context, attention to the diversity of perspectives and the inclusion of different groups can enhance the richness of the resulting formulations. The number of participants may range from a minimum of around 20 individuals to larger groups of 100 to 300 participants. Notably, the larger the group, the more quickly and easily new designs can be translated into reality through action. Designs emerge from the stories and narratives that people share about how the system under consideration functions at its best, as well as from their descriptions of the ideal. These are then expressed in the form of generative, narrative statements. Rather than serving as prescriptive instructions, these statements aim to open up alternative possibilities for actors, inspire engagement, move beyond established norms, and outline new forms of interaction in the process of realising collective dreams (Whitney et al., 2010: 197–216).

Ultimately, the evocative statements produced in the design phase, which emerge through a degree of convergence among actors as characteristics of the ideal phenomenon system, can serve as a foundation for sustaining the inquiry toward the Destiny stage.

Destiny is the stage in which participants each identify actions relevant to themselves, aligned with the designed plan for realising the shared dream. In this ongoing process of finding their own contribution, generative ideas emerge that, in turn, guide them back toward strengths, positive cores, and appreciation. This is where action plans for change emerge. What takes place here is a transition from planning to implementation, supported by the expansion of actions that, through continuous interaction with contextual conditions, actors, and ongoing feedback, gradually shape and redefine pathways of action, ultimately determining how the future of the system of the phenomenon will unfold. Questions such as “In practice, what will we do to realise what should be?” or “How do we continue using our strengths and capabilities to fulfil the promise of our dreams and ensure that our system flourishes in the future?” are recognised as catalysts for action and dialogue (Boyd & Bright, 2007: 1022 & 1032; Skinner & Kelley, 2006: 8; Mills et al., 2013: 155). On this basis, participants identify areas in which they are willing or

able to act and then engage in action individually or collectively. These actions are not necessarily aligned in a uniform direction and may be diverse depending on the themes, contextual conditions, and contingencies of the system. In this regard, what has been referred to as the formation of “breakthrough teams” is considered one possible way of pursuing these actions (Messerschmidt, 2008: 456).

In this sense, Bushe (2007: 6) explains destiny as being linked to the emergence of a form of convergence among participants around what can be realised in the ongoing process—an alignment primarily concerned with shared understandings and orientations within the context of interaction. He also emphasises the importance of reinforcing the belief among participants that they are able and permitted, within the boundaries of existing capacities and conditions, to undertake actions that move the system forward and bring it closer to the design statements. In addition, all members or participating teams become voluntarily engaged in these actions, which requires an intrinsic motivation that is cultivated throughout the process. In this context, leadership is understood not through control-oriented models, but rather in terms of supporting, connecting, and strengthening actions that are emerging within the field of practice and that can move the system toward desired pathways of development. Bushe describes this leadership style in AI through metaphors such as “tracking” (searching for situations in which signs of the desired future already exist) and “fanning” (strengthening and expanding existing capacities by adding energy to them). In addition, Whitney et al. (2010: 221) view the destiny stage not only as a space for action, but also as a context for recognising and even celebrating the energy, the emergent space, and the learnings generated through earlier stages—an aspect that can itself contribute to the continuity and regeneration of the inquiry in subsequent cycles.

In conclusion of this section, it is necessary to note that although what has been described as Defining, Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny may at first appear relatively objective and clearly delineated, in practice these formulations are flexible and operate in relation to context. Accordingly, the ways in which these layers are understood, interpreted, and enacted across different settings—and, more importantly, the extent to which they remain faithful to the philosophical foundations and core principles of AI—constitute a determining factor in shaping the differences among various applications of this approach. In this regard, researchers in the field caution against applying the label of AI to any approach that merely emphasises positive aspects, and instead stress the importance of remaining faithful to its underlying principles and internal logic. Furthermore, as a final note, it is worth mentioning that for analysing interview data generated through AI, methods such as thematic analysis and grounded theory can be employed. Building on this conceptual framing of the AI practice, the following section will briefly examine the application of this approach in regional planning.

5. The extension of Appreciative Inquiry practice to regional planning: toward co-engagement with the region

An ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspective on AI suggests that change in regional planning—shaped by how the region is conceived and transformed—should be understood not as a sudden intervention, but as a gradual process of reconfiguring meanings, relationships, and collective actions. Within this framework, the region is understood not as a fixed and pre-given unit, but as a socio-relational construct that is formed and reproduced through ongoing interactions among actors, institutions, and multi-scalar structures, in a continuous interplay between people, work, and place. From this perspective, the focus shifts from planning for the region to co-engaging with the region and understanding how it is constructed through real-time practices and actions.

In engaging with this understanding, two analytical conditions can be identified among regional actors: in one, consciousness of the “region” and the role of individual and collective actions in shaping it is weak or fragmented; in the other, such consciousness exists, but is largely framed through problem-oriented narratives focused on deficiencies and constraints. AI, by emphasising peer-level interpersonal and intergroup dialogues grounded in appreciation, seeks to shift these perceptual horizons. In this process, changes in the narratives and meanings that actors attribute to their lived experience of the region can lead to a reconfiguration of how they co-engage with the region. However, this shift is by no means linear or guaranteed; rather, it unfolds as part of a gradual, multi-layered process of reconfiguring networks of relationships, perceptions, and actions. In this regard, the emphasis on “we” in AI also requires careful conceptual attention. This “we” does not imply the erasure of differences or conflicts; instead, it reflects an effort to create a dialogic space in which actors with diverse interests, positions, and levels of power can be present. From this perspective, the formation of such a space necessitates the deliberate design of processes that both enable the expression of multiple voices and prevent the dominance of hegemonic narratives. In this vein, the articulation of interest-based identities around the region, as a shared arena of action, can contribute to strengthening co-engagement among groups and reducing perceptual distances (Mady & Chettiparamb, 2016: 8–9; Ghazaie et al., 2024: 4–7).

As noted earlier, the second prerequisite is a commitment to the foundational philosophy of AI—namely, inquiry, the positive core, and appreciation—and to the energy that emerges from the interplay of this triad, which can foster generativity and change. The third prerequisite is an understanding of planning as a discursive process, in which the boundary between planner and the client of planning is blurred, and both engage, through interaction, in the social construction of knowledge and its linkage to action. Within such an understanding, what emerges is not a plan as a final product or a purely expert-driven intervention, but rather an evolving pattern of co-engagement with the region.

At the same time, it should be recognised that AI cannot be meaningfully realised in every context. A lack of belief in the positive core, the dominance of strictly top-down approaches, or the absence of even minimal capacity for change can pose significant challenges to this process. Moreover, labelling any ostensibly positive approach as AI—without adherence to its underlying

principles—can ultimately contribute to scepticism and erode trust in the approach. Accordingly, when those responsible for regional planning initiatives remain bound to predefined frameworks (such as standard terms of reference), strict time and financial constraints, or directive, top-down approaches, the full application of AI is likely to face significant challenges. Nevertheless, even within such contexts, it is still possible to introduce some of its underlying logics and sensitivities—albeit in a limited manner—into existing processes; though in doing so, one would no longer be engaging with AI in its pure form. From this perspective, AI itself can also serve as a means for rethinking formal regional planning frameworks, including standardised terms of reference.

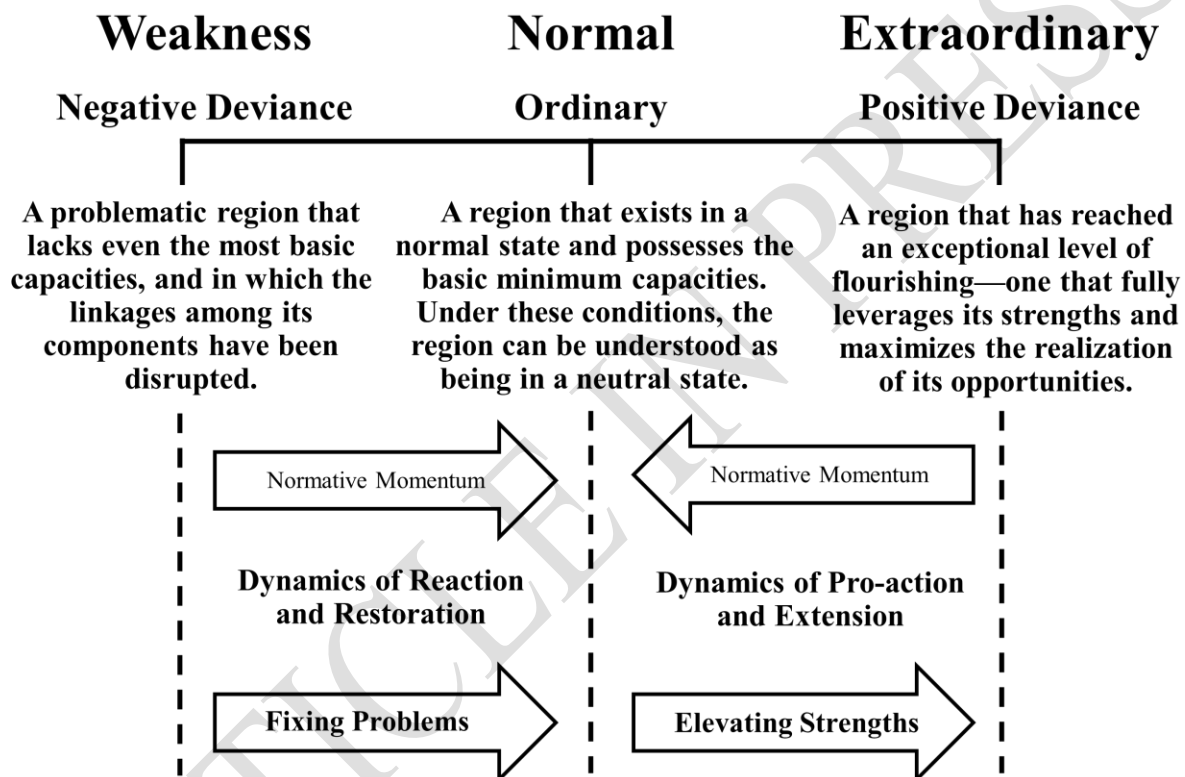


Figure 2. The field of action in regional planning, (Source: Author, adapted from Boyd & Bright, 2007)

As illustrated in Figure 2, the dominant problem-solving approach in regional planning derives its energy primarily from the problem itself, with the aim of returning the region to a normal and minimally tolerable state. For example, consider a region that, in recent years, has experienced significant industrial growth and has consequently received large numbers of migrants with diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. Today, this region faces social instability and related consequences, including social harm and various forms of conflict. In such a case, the objective becomes achieving a regional social fabric in which people can at least tolerate one another and where overt conflict is minimised. The actions taken to achieve this goal are mainly centred on treatment, compensation, and restoration, rather than on generating advancement or development.

This is why key terms such as restoring balance, resource redistribution, poverty alleviation, and similar concepts are frequently observed in regional planning programs. One of the consequences of this type of approach is the cultivation of leadership that devalues or humiliates the community. In other words, in order to attract resources—and under the assumption that the larger the problem is portrayed, the greater the likelihood of resource acquisition, and that leaders are evaluated based on the resources they secure rather than on community self-reliance—the problem tends to be exaggerated. In this situation, people begin to believe what their leaders say. They start to see themselves as a society incapable of forming meaningful connections with one another, and consequently, instead of seeking to acknowledge and work through differences, they intensify conflicts and continually frame problem-solving as dependent on external intervention.

In contrast, AI provides the conditions for a conceptual transition by focusing on “what works” rather than “what is not”, shifting the focal point from problems or possibilities, and emphasising collective action and co-construction of a shared future. In this framework, the region is no longer viewed as an object of intervention, but as a living, continuously constructed phenomenon grounded in a network of meanings, relationships, and actions that can only be understood and transformed through engagement with it. From this perspective, what enables the process is a shift from planning for the region to co-engaging with the region—an engagement in which knowledge, meaning-making, and action are produced simultaneously through interaction between actors and the regional context. In the example above, instead of focusing solely on conflicts, historical experiences of cooperation—such as the formation of social or infrastructural networks—can be re-identified as part of the region’s positive core, and on that basis, future possibilities can be collectively articulated. The movement from recognising these positive experiences toward the articulation of a shared vision signifies a shift in the source of energy for action from problems to possibilities. Accordingly, by concentrating on the best possible states, the energy of action is drawn from the strategic vision (shared dream), and actors, through imagining how the region’s social fabric would function in its most desirable form, gradually reconfigure their perceptual and practical patterns in relation to the region. This reconfiguration does not occur solely at the mental or programmatic level, but at the level of dialogue-based modes of intervention within the regional context itself—where understanding and action are co-produced, and the boundary between observer and observed field becomes increasingly blurred. In such a situation, co-engagement with the region emerges as a living and continuous process in which actors and the region itself, in a mutually constructive relationship, continuously redefine one another.

However, such a process does not unfold in a vacuum. This means that power asymmetries and conflicts among different groups can shape participation patterns, the framing of appreciative topics, and the articulation of positive core elements. In this context, it is the facilitator who, through the deliberate design of participatory processes and the cultivation of legitimacy among actors, seeks to establish balance. Hence, the role of AI’s facilitators is not merely to organise sessions, but to design processes that prevent the dominance of more powerful voices and enable meaningful participation from less vocal groups. It is also important to note that AI does not, in itself, guarantee equitable engagement. If institutional contexts and power relations are not taken into account, it may end up reproducing dominant patterns; therefore, its application requires a critical sensitivity to the context of implementation.

To initiate the practice of AI, the formation of a planning group becomes essential; a group that, depending on the scale of the study, may include key actors at different levels. These individuals, in addition to their institutional roles, can act as ambassadors of the process, helping to strengthen and disseminate emerging patterns and ideas of co-engagement with the region. The composition

of this group can be shaped in accordance with the context and existing power relations, in such a way that it includes a combination of influential actors, key stakeholders, and representatives of less-heard groups within the planning group. For example, when co-engagement is being undertaken at the scale of a county (shahrestān), actors such as representatives from the provincial governor's office, the governor (farmandār), district administrators (bakhshdārs), representatives of city and district councils, as well as other relevant agencies, can be invited to participate. Each of these individuals—and particularly council representatives—serve as ambassadors of AI, capable of supporting its implementation from the lowest administrative unit (which may be a rural district or a cluster of villages) up to the highest level in this example, the county. When AI planning group has developed an adequate understanding of the AI, it should proceed to defining the affirmative topic.

Depending on the diversity of issues raised, which may refer to specific aspects of the region or to the system as a whole, the affirmative topic gradually takes shape through cycles of inquiry and asking questions such as: “What affirmative and generative theme do we want to work on together in this region?” Accordingly, after each session it is essential to categorise the interview data using methods such as thematic analysis or grounded theory, so as to guide the facilitator toward an emerging affirmative topic that will ultimately need to be endorsed by the core group. For example, “We are a cohesive and pioneering county: strong based on internal capabilities and social solidarity, intelligent in leveraging differences as bridging assets, and agile in creating strategic linkages toward a self-reliant and flourishing future” can serve as an affirmative topic. In the process of inquiry aimed at defining the affirmative topic, there is a possibility that some members may enter the discussion through a dominant problem-oriented framing. As noted earlier, in such cases these concerns should not be excluded; rather, participants should be invited—together with the facilitator—to reframe the problem in AI language. Unlike conventional regional planning approaches, including strategic planning, which in their diagnostic phase emphasise data collection without a clearly value-laden orientation, the affirmative topic, in co-engagement with the region, can function as a compass for guiding questions and conversations.

After reaching an initial consensus on the affirmative topic, and in collaboration with the planning group, each component of the topic is translated into a set of AI questions, and an appropriate inquiry guide is developed accordingly. At this stage, the selection of approach is also reconsidered in relation to the spatial scale of the region and the diversity of stakeholders. Given that AI emphasises broad participation and the strengthening of collective action, a mass mobilisation AI approach is first proposed, followed by an AI summit. In line with the composition of the AI planning group described earlier, each of these members, together with facilitators, initiates the process in a pyramidal manner from rural districts (dehestāns) and even lower levels, progressively moving through districts (bakhshs) and ultimately reaching the county (shahrestān) level; where county-level sessions can be organised in the form of an AI summit. Mass mobilisation from the lowest administrative unit to the highest level, through inquiry-based action, as the core of AI, can introduce a profound transformation in conventional regional planning approaches, which are predominantly expert-driven and technocratic. For example, in conventional foresight and strategic planning models, data analysis, the identification of influencing factors, and the handling of uncertainties are predominantly expert-driven processes, in which regional stakeholders—especially those with higher levels of interest but lower levels of power—have limited engagement. However, co-engagement with the region, made possible through AI, elevates the actor from a mere recipient of knowledge to an active participant in its construction and reconstruction. This encounter can generate the regional consciousness and an

aware individual who belongs to the region, which together seem to be missing a link in regional studies and have critical role in reconfiguring regional relationships, meanings and actions. We name this informed individual who belongs to a region as “region-aware actor”, and conceptualise it not as a merely spatial identity, but as an agent embedded in a multi-scalar network of social, economic, and institutional relations, actively involved in shaping the region, reconfiguring and co-constructing its meanings and concepts, and contributing to its generativity.

With the emergence of the initial groundwork and the partial framing of the affirmative topic, it becomes possible to enter the discovery phase; however, in practice this phase does not unfold in a discrete manner, but rather emerges through overlap, iteration, and back-and-forth movement with other moments of the AI process. In this context, events held at different levels—from rural districts and even smaller scales—constitute the primary setting for the formation of dialogues and the co-construction of shared meanings. Within these events, through questions such as “When have your villages been at their best?”, “What characterised this period of prosperity and flourishing?”, and/or “What features define your villages in their best state?”, narratives emerge that make actors’ lived experiences visible. What is important here is not the mere extraction of facts, but rather the process of narrating, listening, and reinterpreting these stories, which gradually leads to the emergence of what is referred to as the positive core. These positive cores can also be understood in terms of strengths, opportunities, capabilities, and latent potentials. In this process, learning does not arise through the mere analysis of external data, nor primarily among planners and consultants, but rather through individuals’ encounters with one another’s narratives and their reflective rethinking of their own experiences of co-engagement with the region. In this sense, regional consciousness is gradually co-constructed through an interactive, endogenous process. At the same time, conventional approaches to knowledge production in regional planning—despite their epistemological differences—can be used as complementary resources, provided that they are subjected to dialogue and reinterpretation within these spaces. Importantly, the positive cores emerging from these events are continuously redefined and enriched through iterative movement across different levels, until they can be articulated in a more shared and consolidated form at higher scales, including the summit level.

In the continuation of this process, participants—who at this stage of AI can be referred to as region-aware actors—engage in dyadic and group interactions, responding to questions of collective future-making, such as: “What might the ideal state of your rural district or villages look like in ten years?” In this context, dreaming is not an individual or purely cognitive activity, but rather part of a dialogue, a process of meaning negotiation, and a co-creation of collective imagination, in which lived experiences, narratives, and expectations are brought together, and from which future possibilities emerge. The difference between this type of visioning and that found in conventional strategic planning approaches lies in both its mode of production and its position within the process. In traditional approaches, the vision is typically formulated as a relatively fixed image of a desirable future by a limited group and then used as a guiding framework for subsequent actions. In AI, by contrast, the vision is co-constructed through ongoing dialogue and retains the capacity to be continuously revisited and reconfigured as the process unfolds; in other words, the vision is not a final endpoint, but an integral part of the ongoing movement and practice of change. For example, if the positive core emerging from the discovery phase, in relation to the affirmative topic, is identified as “a dense and self-sustaining network of socio-economic interactions among several villages,” then their shared vision—after categorising and coding the conversations and narratives—may be articulated as follows: “We are a set of interconnected villages that, over the next decade, have become a self-sustaining hub of the county

in smart agriculture and a regional centre of authentic ecotourism. Each village has specialised based on its intrinsic comparative advantages and, through an integrated and cooperative value chain, has strengthened its economic and social cohesion. This living network, by generating new forms of welfare and opportunity, has become a driver of generational return and settlement, and has evolved into the beating heart of sustainable development in the county.”

This shared vision is subsequently subjected to questions such as: “What should your collective look like in order to realise this vision in the best possible way?” Such questions, through interaction among region-aware actors, gradually lead to the production of propositions that are referred to in AI literature as generative statements. In this example, a proposition such as: “The collective understands return and revitalisation as a shared pathway for the reproduction of regional life, and in interaction with each returning household, establishes trust-based mechanisms for land restoration and settlement stabilisation” can be considered one of these co-constructed formulations emerging through the conversations. Similarly, ideas such as “the establishment of voluntary local mutual-aid mechanisms” or “the foundation of non-monetary community funds to support settlement and land restoration” gradually evolve, through the course of dialogue in the destiny phase, into co-engaged regional horizons; horizons that actors themselves experience as commitments and become actively involved in realising.

Overall, what distinguishes this process from conventional approaches is a shift in the logic of how change comes into being. Change is understood not as a terminal point, but as an open, becoming process that unfolds simultaneously with the formation of dialogues and the circulation of narratives. Within this framework, co-engagement with the region begins from the very first questions, where actors, in encountering their lived capacities, gradually move from the level of description toward the creation of meaning and possibilities for action. In this situation, social and institutional ties are not treated as external instruments of intervention, but rather as living contexts of action, enabling the emergence of initial actions. From this perspective, AI does not aim at controlling or directly engineering the region, but rather focuses on transforming meaning, narratives, and patterns of relationships—levels that, within co-engagement with the region, simultaneously give rise to both behavioural and spatial transformations.

6. Conclusion

In this study, an attempt was made to examine the capacities of AI for rethinking regional planning through the introduction of AI and its linkage with the concept of the region. Grounded in social constructivist assumptions, AI conceptualises the region not as an objective, pre-given entity, but as a socially constructed reality emerging within the context of actors’ interactions, narratives, and meaning-making processes. From this perspective, regional planning is also redefined from a purely technical and external activity into an interpretive, interactive process grounded in the actions of subjects; a transformation that can also be understood in continuity with existing critiques of dominant regional planning approaches in Iran. The outcome of this shift can be described as co-engagement with the region, where understanding of the region is transformed or constructed through practice, and the boundary between it and action gradually becomes blurred.

In this framework, AI offers multiple capacities for rethinking regional planning. First, by highlighting the role of actors, individuals are transformed from passive positions into subjects who actively participate in the co-construction of regional meaning and futures. In this sense, change is understood not merely as an intervention upon an external object, but as a transformation occurring at the level of perceptions, relationships, and social practices. Second, this approach—by focusing on lived experiences and positive cores—provides the required conditions for the

emergence of a form of regional consciousness among actors. This consciousness arises through the reinterpretation of successful experiences, the redefinition of existing assets, and a renewed understanding of one's relationship with the region, and it can serve as the basis for more conscious action in the future. Third, the participatory nature of the process and the blurring of distinctions between planners and participants enhance the possibility of collective action as well as a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility. Fourth, by focusing on what lies within the influence and control of actors, the approach shifts attention from constraints to capacities, thereby enabling the actualisation of the region's internal potentials. Ultimately, this approach seeks to reduce the gap between planning and action by linking vision, strategy, and implementation within an interactive process, and to redefine this relationship within the framework of co-engagement with the region.

However, the key point in engaging with this approach lies in how it is interpreted and applied. Part of the criticism directed at AI itself stems from a problem-focused mode of engagement, which tends to emphasise potential shortcomings rather than attending to its underlying capacities. This is despite the fact that AI is fundamentally grounded in a shift away from this mode of focus. Nevertheless, an exclusive emphasis on positive narratives, in the absence of a deliberate and context-sensitive process design, may lead to the amplification of dominant voices and the reproduction of existing inequalities. For this reason, AI cannot be regarded as a neutral or inherently emancipatory approach, and the way in which power is conceptualised and engaged with can be decisive. While in some interpretations power is primarily understood as a mechanism of control, domination, and the covert shaping of subjectivities, AI seeks to redefine power in terms of collective action, interaction, and the possibility of mutual influence among actors. This redefinition does not aim to deny power asymmetries; rather, it emphasises the need to design processes that can enhance the possibility of diverse voices being expressed and heard, while preventing the consolidation of a single hegemonic narrative. In addition, institutional barriers play a decisive role in the feasibility of this approach and in the configuration of power relations. One of these barriers—and perhaps the most significant—is the set of established and predefined procedures embedded in the standard Terms of Reference of regional planning, which, by their very design, tend to privilege certain voices and perspectives while limiting the space available for interactive, emergent, and constructivist processes.

Finally, it should be noted that the present study is conceptual and theoretical in nature, and the claims advanced pertain to the theoretical capacities of AI rather than to an empirical validation of its outcomes. Accordingly, many of the propositions presented can be understood as opening up avenues and possibilities that require further contextual studies and empirical investigations in real-world settings in order to be refined and assessed for their feasibility. Based on this, several directions for future research can be proposed. These include empirical studies on the application of AI in regional planning in Iran, with a focus on power relations, conflict of interests, and the role of institutions; examination of the link between changes in perception and spatial-institutional transformations; further conceptual clarification and refinement of the notion of regional consciousness; investigation of the potential risks of dominance by certain narratives in inquiry processes and ways to mitigate them; and comparative studies of this approach with other prevalent models in regional planning, such as strategic planning. Moreover, the practical application of this approach in the process of preparing regional plans can provide a basis for its more precise evaluation and even for a reconsideration of formal frameworks, including the revision of standard Terms of Reference.

Overall, AI, by virtue of its characteristics, can be understood as a framework for rethinking both the nature of regional planning and the ways in which it is conducted; a framework that, by

shifting the focus from spatial intervention to intervention in meaning, narratives, and relationships, opens up new horizons for understanding and practice in this field.

Authors' Contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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