



Alternatives to Sustainable Development: What can we Learn from the Pluriverse in Practice?

# The many faces of Post-Development: alternatives to development in Tanzania, Iran and Haiti

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## Abstract

Post-Development, a body of transitional imaginaries, is not homogenous, neither in its critique, nor in the alternatives proposed. Given that the term ‘development’ is already highly contentious, the question of what ‘alternatives to development’ might be, becomes difficult to respond to. In this article, we argue that Post-Development can assume many faces that are highly dependent upon their conceptual and geographical contexts. In analysing practices of resistance, contestation and subversion in Tanzania, Iran and Haiti we investigate in what ways various forms of peasant and community organising can be considered transformative and non-hegemonic. In exploring their common ground, we attempt to examine in what ways strategies of reciprocity, solidarity and commoning in different geographical locations and contexts can be understood as means of survival and/or as efforts to provide alternative pathways for societal and economic transformation.

**Keywords** Post-Development · Alternatives · Solidarity · Commons · Transformation

## Introduction

Despite its core ideas having been formulated already in the last century, the Post-Development (PD) school and its desire to investigate ‘alternatives to development’ continues to inspire debate in development theory, as the recent surge of publications (Singh et al. 2018; Kothari et al. 2019; Klein and Morreo 2019; Ziai 2019) demonstrates. There have been new editions of some of the classical works, including reflections by early PD authors (Sachs 2010, 2019; Shiva 2010; Escobar 2012; Esteva/Prakash 2014; Rist 2014, 2019) that add up to a lively debate which has not lost any of its relevance today. A crucial lesson to be recognized is that, as Sachs highlights, the first wave of PD had not recognized

‘the extent to which the development idea has been charged with hopes for redress and self-affirmation’ and that the ‘desire for recognition and equity is framed in terms of the civilizational model of the powerful nations’ (Sachs 2010: viii). These desires for ‘development’ in a material sense need to be taken seriously. A second lesson is the call to focus on more concrete PD alternatives ideally constituting ‘transformative initiatives’ (Kothari et al. 2019: xxix).

‘Development’ has repeatedly been called an amoeba, a concept which can take many shapes and forms, or an ‘empty signifier’, which can be filled with any kind of meaning (Esteva 1985: 79; Sachs 1992: 4; Ziai 2009: 196). The Post-Development literature has formulated a poignant critique towards ‘development’ as a term, discourse, and practice, and has called for ‘alternatives to development’, as most recently advocated by Kothari et al. (2019). More often than not, the critique does hardly differentiate between alternatives to neoliberalism (which can be found in the model of a capitalist developmental state), alternatives to capitalism (which can be found in modernist regimes striving for socialist development), and alternatives to development (which can be found in social movements going beyond the practices of Western modernity) (see Fig. 4 Layers of (Post-)Development Politics in Schöneberg 2021a, b). The

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neoliberal counter-revolution in development theory and practice since the 1980s has contributed to obscure the differences (see Ziai 2016, chapters 8 and 9 on these processes).

In this paper, we seek to illuminate some of the many faces of Post-Development. By investigating three case studies, we are exploring different imaginable concepts of alternatives *to* ‘development’ that can be discovered in practices in several parts of the world. While the case studies are deeply rooted in their specific geographical and cultural contexts, they share commonalities in the way actors enact forms of contestation and resistance. Assuming that through hybridisation, non-Western cultures can engage in a transformative way with ‘development’ as hegemonic discourse, and practice of modernity (Escobar 1995: 219), we explore in what ways various forms of peasant and community organising in Tanzania, Iran and Haiti can be considered transformative and non-hegemonic. In exploring their commonalities, we attempt to determine in what ways strategies of reciprocity, solidarity, and commoning in different geographical locations and contexts serve as means for survival and/or provide alternative pathways for societal and economic transformation.

## Post-Development as theory and practice

We seek to understand Post-Development as a post-structuralist critique of ‘development’ (Gudynas 2018: 85). PD can be considered as a set of theories and visions imagining and describing possible and practiced alternatives that share a common critique of ‘development’ as imperial and hegemonic construction. Under the label or frame of Post-Development a variety of different concepts are subsumed. On the other hand, also practices that refuse to be labelled might be counted as such. Most recently, the diversity of practices and ideas has been showcased by the ‘Pluriverse: Post-Development Dictionary’ (2019).

The academic debate has pointed out the need for conceptualizing ‘alternatives *to* development’ but it remains ambiguous in answering the question of what ‘development’ really means (Ziai 2015). To avoid the danger of becoming arbitrary, the question of what we can learn from concrete experiences of ‘alternatives *to* development’ begs the question ‘alternatives *to what*’?

Specifically, in our discussion of possible practiced alternatives we draw on five arguments that serve as framing for how theoretical Post-Development critiques relate to the discourse and practice of ‘development’. ‘Development’ has been characterised as (1) an ideology of the West promising prosperity to countries in the process of decolonization (Rahnema 1997: 379), (2) as a failed experiment which tried to universalize Western models (Esteva 1985: 78f), (3) as a discourse constructing non-Western

lifestyles as homogenous and inferior (Escobar 1995: 53), (4) as a process of subjugating social interactions to an economic logic (Esteva 1992: 19f), or (5) as a legitimization of domination and violence to be exerted in the name of progress (Nandy 1992: 139). Having named ‘development’ an amoeba-like concept and practice, one without any real meaning, Gustavo Esteva claims that increasing disillusionment with the promise of ‘development’—predicting an end of poverty as a result of the universalisation of Western models of the economy, politics and culture—would lead marginalised people to build alternatives to this project. According to Esteva, these alternatives, often connected to cultural traditions, could be found in the informal sector, manifest in neighbourhood and community organizations and practices of reciprocity and solidarity, leading to ‘new commons’ after the old ones have been destroyed or lost in the course of colonialism and capitalism (Esteva 1992). They can be imagined as various ‘constellations of heterogenous communitarian weavings that sustain life’ (Gutiérrez Aguilar and Lohman 2015).

Approaching the reality of lifeworlds in a pluriversal manner means that alternatives *to* what Escobar (2020) calls the one-world world, are inevitably varied and diverse. They can take on different shapes and be practiced on different layers, dependent on various epistemological and ontological underpinnings (Schöneberg 2021a, b). Thus, we suggest that Post-Development, which we understand as theoretical and practiced basis for alternatives towards the five critical points above, can assume many faces in different conceptual and geographical contexts. What they have in common is a critique of the one-world world, understood as the West’s claim to ‘arrogate itself the right to be “the world” and to relegate all other worlds to its rules, to a state of subordination, or to non-existence’ (Escobar 2020: 14). The rules and categories of this one-world world are centred around ‘development, growth, markets, competitiveness, the individual, and so on’ (ibid.: 27).

Departing from the prevalent ‘development’ discourse as comprised of features, such as a focus on economic growth, productivism, the rhetoric of progress, anthropocentrism, capitalism, and rationalism, in the following, we are seeking to bring to the fore alternatives to this homogenizing model and the dominance of Western framing. In three case studies, we will explore (1) if and how alternatives to Western models exist and (2) if and how these possible alternatives need to differentiate between survival and resistance. We will do so by approaching struggles for food sovereignty by moving beyond techno-managerial Westernized ‘development’ in Tanzania, community groups as resistance towards the logic of economic man in Iran, and solidarity organising in Haitian peasant groupings as alternatives to interventionist ‘development’.

## Food sovereignty and agroecology in Tanzania: strategies for moving beyond techno-managerial and western-hegemonic ‘development’

In the first case study, we explore resistance and non-hegemonic alternatives to ‘development’ by Tanzanian smallholder farmers<sup>1</sup> who practice food sovereignty and agroecology. We illustrate the transformative potential of food sovereignty and agroecology among smallholder farmers in the context of the expanding agroindustry through the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT). The exploratory case study comprises a literature review of food sovereignty and agroecological practice in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania that is supported by research on the SAGCOT corridor, including 31 semi-structured interviews with donors, government officials, and agribusiness corporations, participant observation, and an analysis of project documents. This was carried out over five months between 2017 and 2018. We argue that food sovereignty and agroecology practiced by smallholder farmers along the SAGCOT corridor embody grassroots organizing, commoning, and localized and ancestral knowledges, which entail key aspects of what Escobar (1995: 215f.) defines as Post-Development practices.

The concepts of food sovereignty and agroecology are among the alternatives to ‘development’ that gain increased visibility in the Post-Development debate. For example, Gutiérrez Escobar et al. (2019) argues in *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* that food sovereignty ‘impl[ies] the defence of the knowledge, practices, and territories of food producing peoples’ (187). For smallholder farmers, food sovereignty is about the democratic control of the food system (Patel 2009: 670). At the same time, food sovereignty has a complex and conflicting history with agroecology, but it can be an emancipatory practice (see Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013). The interlinking of food sovereignty and agroecology offers radical alternative practices with transformative potential for moving beyond techno-managerial and Western-hegemonic ‘development’ (Amin 2015; Gutiérrez Escobar et al. 2019). For this potential to unfold, agroecology needs to be an integral part of the food sovereignty movement and resist attempts of co-optation (Gliessman et al. 2019; Holt-Giménez and Altieri 2013). According to Toledo et al. (2019), agroecology is a practice that ‘offers solutions to the serious environmental and food production problems caused by modern or industrialized agriculture and

agribusiness in the entire world’ (85). The agroecological practices revolve around sustainable food systems and cultivation methods to work with nature, which often evolved over multiple generations. From a Post-Development perspective, food sovereignty and agroecological practices can offer simultaneously a way of resistance and transformative alternatives to ‘development’ (Escobar 2015; Toledo et al. 2019: 88).

### Food sovereignty as resistance and solidarity

An example of the food sovereignty movement’s resistance is the struggle against the \$3.4 billion SAGCOT initiative in Tanzania. The SAGCOT corridor promises development, modernizing and commercialization of agriculture while reducing poverty, achieving food security, and mitigating climate change (SAGCOT 2011: ii). The ambitious Private–Public Partnership initiative claims to commercialize over 230,000 smallholder farmers, acquire 350,000 hectares of land for industrial agriculture production, and generate 420,000 new jobs by 2030 (SAGCOT 2011: 7). An alliance between (multi)national agribusiness actors, Western donors, the Tanzanian government, and NGOs implement the corridor vision through a ‘green modernization development discourse’ (Bergius and Buseth 2019). In short, the prestigious SAGCOT project attempts to *bring* ‘development’ to the Southern Highlands by commercializing ‘underproductive’ smallholders and ‘underutilized’ land. From a Post-Development perspective, this illustrates what Esteva (1992) calls ‘violent transformation.’

The SAGCOT initiative demonstrates the uneven impacts of Western-hegemonic ‘development’ that results in land grabbing, adverse inclusion, and exploitation. First, the land acquisitions for commercial monoculture farming under the SAGCOT initiative result in multiple cases of land grabbing (ActionAid 2015; Bergius et al. 2017; Chung 2017) and limit access to land, water, and communal grazing areas for the smallholder farmers (Bergius et al. 2017: 10; Schiavoni et al. 2018: 6; Sulle 2020: 343).<sup>2</sup> Second, the SAGCOT strategy of outgrower schemes to incorporate smallholders in large farm estates as contractors increase inequalities because smallholders with capital and more land access tend to benefit more than those with less (Martiniello 2016; Sulle 2017).

<sup>1</sup> For the case study in Tanzania, we use the terms peasants and smallholder farmers interchangeably, while acknowledging the diversity and heterogeneity of their activities. The primary focus in this case study are smallholder farmers who cultivate crops.

<sup>2</sup> The Tanzanian land governance system is based on the colonial state, and today’s Land Act No. 4 and the Village Land Act No. 5 of 1999 organizes land into three categories: village land, reserve land, and general land (Shivji 1998). Shivji (2002) argues that the “division between ‘private’ and ‘public’ or ‘individual’ and ‘common’ therefore has to be located primarily at the use and management of resources rather than ownership” (50). The village common lands compromise about 70% of all land and is often used for agrarian use and land deals.

Third, the large-scale industrial farm estates in the corridor offer often poor working conditions and exploit farmworkers (Schiavoni et al. 2018; Twomey et al. 2015). At the same time, the investments in industrial farms and outgrower schemes increase the pressure on the commons and smallholders' livelihoods throughout the Southern Highlands of Tanzania (Bluwstein 2018; Massay and Kassile 2019). Therefore, the enclosures turn the commons into resources that are used for creating economic value (see Esteva 1992: 18) and lead to the dispossession of rural communities across Tanzania (Shivji 2002: 55). The SAGCOT initiative might benefit agribusiness actors and a few smallholders, but it is ill-suited for the needs of the majority of smallholder farmers.<sup>3</sup>

Some smallholder farms organized resistance based on principles of food sovereignty against the expanding corridor. A key actor in the struggle against SAGCOT and large-scale land grabbing is the National Network of Small-scale Farmers Groups (*Mtandaowa Vikundivya Wakulima Tanzania*, MVIWATA). MVIWATA is part of La Via Campesina, and advocates for smallholder farmers in the spirit of *Mtetezi wa Mkulima ni Mkulima Mwenyewe*, which translates to *the defender of a farmer is the farmer*.<sup>4</sup> According to Martiniello and Nyamsenda (2018: 7), the NGO boasts 400,000 members who are organized in relatively autonomous grassroots chapters and in a national-level structure. MVIWATA mobilize resistance against large-scale land acquisitions and land grabbing by supporting grassroots movements and commissioning studies on land grabbing throughout Tanzania (Martiniello and Nyamsenda 2018: 19).

In addition, MVIWATA supports solidarity among smallholder farmers through various training and promoting the democratic control of the food production process for transforming the food system. The workshops and training organized by MVIWATA for smallholders include agroecology and climate justice.<sup>5</sup> For example, in the Songea Rural District, MVIWATA has partnered with smallholder farmers to build their own cassava processing plant as an alternative to the dependency on maize cultivation (Schiavoni et al. 2018: 9). Therefore, the activities of MVIWATA are not limited to resistance against SAGCOT and land grabbing, but the organization also supports solidarity, autonomy, and grassroots organizing.

## Practicing agroecology and commons

Along the SAGCOT corridor, smallholder farming communities practice food sovereignty and agroecology to defend their livelihoods from agribusiness expansion and to build sustainable food systems. According to Schiavoni et al. (2018: 10), many rural communities create local food systems with limited external support. An example of self-reliance and autonomy through practiced agroecology can be found among smallholder farmers from the Luguru ethnic group in the Uluguru Mountains. Mdee et al. (2019: 16) argue that over generations, Luguru smallholders have been sharing the stewardship of a freshwater irrigation system, while they resist the purchase of an irrigation permit from the state and thus face the danger of evictions. The resistance against state authorities enables autonomous and communal management of water as a commons in a sustainable way. This place-based dimension of autonomy and challenging state authority can be interpreted as Post-Development alternatives in practice (Escobar 2018: 174).

Agroecological practices can create autonomy and self-sufficiency for many smallholder farmers. For example, smallholder farmers of the villages of Mbinga Mhalule and Ikongosi in the Southern Highlands have adopted agroecological practices to 'work with nature,' and create a certain self-sufficiency in food for more autonomy and improved livelihoods through selling surplus vegetables (Schiavoni et al. 2018: 10). A central aspect of the smallholders practicing agroecology is the low financial cost (Mdee et al. 2019; Schiavoni et al. 2018). This is in contrast to the SAGCOT approach, which relies on a capital-intensive technology package of pesticides, fertilizers, hybrid seeds, and other agricultural inputs supplied by multinational agribusiness corporations. The technology package is ill-suited for the needs of smallholder farmers and for many of them economically not feasible (Schiavoni et al. 2018: 6), and risks creating or deepening dependencies (Mbunda 2016: 276).

The cultivation of localized knowledges is another critical aspect of a transformative Post-Development alternative, which is reflected in the horizontal sharing of agroecological practices. For example, smallholder farmers from the Luguru ethnic group share knowledge on agroecological practices mostly via demonstration plots, and its low financial cost enables a weaving together of existing local knowledges and agroecological practices (Mdee et al. 2019). Furthermore, Schiavoni et al. (2018) identify 'horizontal learning exchanges' as an essential characteristic of smallholder farmers across generations, for example, building up the soil to move away from fertilizer dependency, which often takes place on collectively managed demonstration plots (11). These localized, grassroots, and intergenerational practices are central for semi-autonomy from the state and

<sup>3</sup> Mbunda (2016) argues that the SAGCOT initiative marks the state's alliance with international investors for large-scale farming while lacking support and losing trust in the peasantry (288).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mviwata.or.tz/about-us-2/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mviwata.or.tz/mviwata-na-la-via-campesina-lvc-seaf-waendesha-mafunzo-ya-kilimo-cha-kiikolojia-na-haki-ya-mazingira-kwa-wazalishaji-wadogo/>

multinational agribusiness corporations, and thus can be seen as a Post-Development alternative (see Escobar 1995).

However, smallholder farmers are diverse in their political (re)actions to land-based investments, and their transformative practices can be at times more survival-oriented. The (re)actions to land deals from smallholders cover a spectrum that ranges from struggles of resistance to demanding inclusion as contract farmers (Borras and Franco 2013). This relates to the tension of agrarian class differentiation (Bernstein 2014), which is observed among smallholder farmers in SAGCOT outgrower schemes (Sulle 2017). Similarly, the internal tension within MVIWATA can be differentiated between a ‘political’ and ‘project’ orientation approach, while the former advocates for food sovereignty and the latter carry out donor-funded projects (Martiniello and Nyamsenda 2018). The internal contradictions of organizations such as MVIWATA and the spectrum of responses by smallholders to SAGCOT investments illustrate a central challenge of the food sovereignty movement in Tanzania.

In this section, we have shown various examples of Tanzanian smallholder farmers advancing food sovereignty and practicing agroecology to resist ‘development’ through struggles for autonomy, grassroots organizing, and cultivating localized and ancestral knowledges. The agroecological practices and food sovereignty along the SAGCOT corridor can improve smallholder farmers’ livelihoods and sustainably work with nature (Mdee et al. 2019; Schiavoni et al. 2018). We argue that despite contradictions and the absence of direct references to Post-Development, these practices transform socioecological relationships in the spirit of the pluriverse.

### **Marginalised communities in Tehran: Post-Development as resistance against the logic of economic man**

The second case study investigates several informal settlements in Tehran, focusing on the economic realm. The theoretical grounding is provided by Esteva (1985), who points out that the post-war project of ‘development’ continued the ‘violent transformation’ of societies (first performed in and then exported from Europe), in which ‘the economic sphere’ is excised from society and culture as an autonomous sphere and installed ‘at the centre of politics and ethics’ (14), subjecting them to the imperative of maximizing production and productivity and disvaluing allegedly unproductive activities (15). This new project no longer relied on domination by Europeans and was compatible with anti-colonialism. On the individual level, it implied the transformation of humans into economic beings as a ‘precondition for the emergence of economic society’ predicated on the assumption of chronic scarcity (15). A new society geared to endless accumulation

was based on the idea of human beings possessing infinite needs for material goods, acting as rational maximisers of utility pursuing this goal. However, this assumption of *homo oeconomicus* acting according to this logic is ‘untenable when confronted with what we know about ancient societies and cultures and even with what we can still see in some parts of the world’, says Esteva (1985: 17). After realizing that the project of ‘development’ failed to deliver the good life that was promised, people on the margins resisted the ‘economic invasion of their lives’ by ‘disengaging from the economic logic’ and creating ‘new commons’ through ‘strengthening forms of interaction embedded in social fabric and by breaking the economic principle of the exchange of equivalents’ (19). Esteva (1985) asserts that in these alternatives to ‘development’ ‘common men’ (20) and women would manage to re-embed the economic sphere within social relations (14), engaging in practices of reciprocity and solidarity. Esteva’s claims have been disputed by critics, accusing Post-Development of romanticizing poverty (Corbridge 1998) and mistakenly identifying practices arising out of practical necessity as resistance to Western models. ‘When those excluded unite in groups and forge ties of solidarity’, Schuurman argues, ‘this must be seen not as an embryonic form of a new society, but rather as a survival strategy’ (Schuurman 1993: 28).

Against the backdrop of this debate on whether or not practices arising out of practical necessity or survival needs can be considered as resistance to Western models (Schuurman 1993), we are investigating practices in three different marginalised communities. We are asking: Can we find alternative economic practices of reciprocity and solidarity here or do people on the margins conform to the model of ‘economic man’, the utility-maximizing individual? We will further explore what these practices (if they exist) look like, to what extent they are limited to a specific social group, and whether they should be interpreted as survival strategies or forms of a new society, how we can differentiate between the two and to what extent they are related to cultural traditions.

The study is based on data collected during field research from January to May 2020 in Tehran. The research methods included participant observation and interviews that are backed up by a literature review. We gained access to the communities through family ties (one of the authors originally comes from the Azeri community in Nasimshahr) and intermediaries who have worked with the Afghan and the drug addict community in district 19 for several years, building up relations of trust. Data was also provided by community members themselves on the basis of (oral) informed

consent. Translators were not necessary. The interviewees were not taking part in the research design. There were no conflicts or challenges during the research process, apart from one intermediary being called upon to ‘first take care of his own people’ (Iranians) before worrying about Afghan immigrants. Research results will be presented informally and orally to community members.

### Marginalisation and exclusion in Tehran

In the past decades, Tehran, the capital and largest city of Iran, has seen a massive influx of rural migrants. This can be understood as a result of social transformation processes as described by Esteva (1985), which we discussed in the theory section above: the advent, spread and intensification of capitalist practices and the imperative of competition and ever increasing productivity have led to a destruction of traditional rural livelihoods and the attempt to find new ones in the modern, urban sectors of the economy. However, the promises of ‘development’ did not materialize for the majority of migrants. In Tehran, marginalised communities are characterised by insecure employment or unemployment; lack of access (or extremely difficult access) to social security, public facilities, hospitals, and universities; low literacy, or few years of schooling; and insufficient transport infrastructure. Our geographical focus was Tehran and its suburbs and we chose three different marginalised communities with different and increasing degrees of marginalisation:

- (1) an Azeri community in Nasimshahr, Hassan Kandy Rood.
- (2) an Afghan community in district 19, Kooreh Pas Khune.
- (3) a drug addict community in district 19, Seyyed Shapour (behind the stadium of Shahid Kazemi).

We found a number of economic practices which deviated from the model of the utility maximizing individual (‘economic human being’/ *homo oeconomicus*) and may constitute elements of an economy of solidarity.

### Solidarity networks in the Azeri community of Nasimshahr

The residents of Nasimshahr usually work in Tehran and under the conditions of deficient public transport. They were among those hit hardest by the price hike of petrol in November 2019, which led to massive riots. The Azeri or Azerbaijani, mostly Shia Muslims, are the second largest ethnic group in Iran (between 10 and 15 million people) and their language is closely related to Turkish. The Azeri living in Nasimshahr have migrated from villages in the Northwest of Iran and their social structure still mirrors this migration

history: social relations and marriages take place usually within those originating in a particular village. We interviewed members of the Azeri community who have their roots in the village of Hassan Kandy Rood. Their social web is extremely dense, so that one community member could outline the precise family structure and situation of all 136 households. In this community, most earn a living as construction workers or shop keepers. Voluntary work at construction sites of relatives is frequent. On a larger scale, communal voluntary work has also been used for the construction of a mosque for the community. The subsequent enlargement of the mosque has been financed by donations of the community. The women regularly provide cleaning, and the men provide cooking services and take care of maintenance and repairs. Religious sites are seen as commons to which everyone contributes and which everyone benefits from. In the case of serious illnesses whose costs cannot be covered by the families themselves, the community collects donations in support. In case of economic hardship or need, interest-free loans are available from other members of the community. However, all solidarity practices take place within the limits not only of the Azeri community but even more specifically between those with roots in the village of Hassan Kandy Rood in the Northwest of Iran. Practices of solidarity towards non-members of this community usually do not take place, the primary focus of moral obligations seems to be one’s own village (even if they do not live there anymore). The one exception is the Islamic Ashurah mourning ceremony, where food is provided for everyone regardless of origin or religion.

### Solidarity practices within the Afghan community of district 19

The Afghans from the Hazara community originally come from central Afghanistan and speak a Persian dialect (Hazaragi). Those we interviewed were mostly born in Iran since their families have migrated 60 or 70 years ago from the Afghan provinces of Daykundi and Bamyan. Discriminated against or even persecuted as Shi‘ites, they migrated to Iran but continue to be confronted with discrimination. Only since 2017, their children are allowed to attend public schools and as non-citizens, they face numerous obstacles. In particular they are not allowed to buy property. In contrast, the majority of the Azeri community from Nasimshahr introduced above, own their houses, however small and remote from job opportunities it may be. Members of the Hazara community, on the other hand, are living in houses belonging to a semi-active brick kiln, where most of the men are partially employed. Their right to housing is linked to their precarious employment and thus endangered by the imminent shutdown of the kiln in the near future for

ecological reasons. Many also work as traders in the bazaar of Kholazeer.

We find similar practices of reciprocity and solidarity in this community as in the Azeri community, for example in cases of illness, voluntary work to repair houses of relatives or in the construction of a *Husseinye* (a room for prayer which is considered less sacred than a mosque). After two community members contracted tuberculosis, an impressive amount of 30 million Toman (approx. \$1700) had been collected for their treatment (while 1.5 million Toman or \$84 is considered a good salary). Child care is periodically (usually in the summer when women work as agricultural labourers in other areas of Tehran) provided by neighbouring families, and so is help for illiterates by more educated community members, also concerning practical matters like finding the way or talking to a doctor. Again, the religious site serves as commons of the community. Here, too, we can find a closely knit social web among the people, containing many practices not compatible with the idea of *homo oeconomicus*. However, again, practices of solidarity are usually confined to one's own local community. This may also be the result of the discrimination they face as Afghans in Iran. One informant from a different community explicitly criticised our intermediary for also supporting a school for Afghan children, reminding him that he should first help 'his own people'.

### Practices of reciprocity and solidarity among drug addicts of Seyyed Shapour

The third community is not based on ethnic origin, but on the common habit of drug addiction and partly also on the common activity of drug dealing. The drug addicts of Seyyed Shapour live in sheds ('Alonak') which they have built themselves. These are located behind the stadium of Shahid Kazemi, in the vicinity of a garbage dump. The existence of the individuals in this group is strongly characterised by social exclusion from their families (see also Tohidi et al. 2018). While the houses in Nasimshar are formalized today and those of the Afghan community are semi-informal (brick houses with electricity and gas but not running water), the settlements of Seyyed Shapour are entirely informal. The hangout at the back of the stadium has no electricity, and people use candles and fire to illuminate it. Shelters have no gas or water, and there is only one water pipe about 150 m away. People living here have usually been cast out from their communities due to drug addiction (mostly 'Shishe': crystal meth). On some days, food is provided through charities. Almost no one possesses an identity card. The rate of literacy and the occurrence of high school degrees is higher than in the other two communities. People earn money by selling drugs, collecting and selling waste, and stealing. Practices of reciprocity and solidarity are common: food,

money and drugs are shared if they are available, and mutual help and compassion are mentioned as characteristic for the social relations in the community. However, this changes in circumstances where drugs are not available. Then people resort to less benign practices, such as stealing or robbery, to get access to drugs.

### Can we find alternative economic practices of reciprocity and solidarity among people on the margins in Tehran?

Just as proponents of Post-Development such as Esteva (1985) claim, we do find economic practices of reciprocity and solidarity among the marginalised communities in Tehran, constituting what he has described as 'new commons', a sense of community, cooperation and collective ownership and responsibility (mostly related to religious sites). However, this finding has to be qualified in several respects. First, the economic practices of reciprocity and solidarity (e.g., non-market finance, such as interest-free loans or donations) aim at limited redistribution of material goods but not at equality; sometimes they are part of patron–client relationships and reproduce hierarchies in status regarding material affluence or education. Second, the practices of reciprocity and solidarity are usually limited to one's own village, ethnic and/or religious group and are compatible with a lack of solidarity towards members of other groups. Among the first two groups, these practices are seen as in line with cultural traditions. Third, among the drug-users, who are outcasts from their own families and ethnic and religious groups, practices of reciprocity and solidarity extend to all members of the social group beyond ethnic and religious borders. Fourth, in this social group, which is the most marginalised one, the practices of reciprocity and solidarity go deeper than in other groups, amounting at times to a joint/common economy (e.g., non-market transactions such as sharing or alternative property such as common funds). However, it must be said, that this is highly conditional on access to drugs for the respective community members and their solidarity is, therefore, much more fragile than in the other cases.

As for the concept of 'development' prevalent among the community members, there is often a low level of literacy and education and no conscious or explicit concept to be found. However, there were certainly ideas of what 'improvement' or a 'good life' could look like. As a rule, the marginalised we spoke to were seeking to find suitable employment and income, to provide education for their children, and to be able to afford insurance and retirement. Therefore, their desires did not seem to diverge significantly from a mainstream model of 'development'.

## (Un-)tying the knot of colonialism in Haiti: solidarity as strategy for survival and alternatives to interventionist and modernist models of ‘development’ as progress and growth

In the third case study, we look at two forms of Haitian peasant<sup>6</sup> organisations as possible living ‘alternatives’ and forms of resistance to the interventions of ‘development’: First, rural community groups, *gwoupman peyizan*, and second, national peasant networks. Following Escobar’s call to look for ‘alternative practices in the resistance [of] grassroots groups,’ (Escobar 1995: 222) the organising of marginalised peasant communities, their resistance to capitalist ‘development’ logics and their alternative conceptions of the ‘economy (solidarity and reciprocity instead of homo oeconomicus and the world market), of politics (direct democracy instead of centralized authorities) and of knowledge (traditional knowledge systems instead of modern science)’ (Ziai 2007: 5) seem an especially apt entry point for exploration.

Haitian history boasts one of the, if not the, most groundbreaking revolutions in global history: Haitians succeeded in overthrowing slavery, making Haiti the world’s first independent Black republic. The slave uprising of 1791 resulted in the Haitian Revolution and finally the declaration of the Repiblik Ayiti in 1804. In the years preceding the revolt, groups of slaves, *maroons*, had repeatedly fled plantations to found autonomous settlements and social communities in the mountains to evade exploitation, organise resistance and claim liberty. This practice of *mawonaj* (marronage) is seen as having laid the ‘groundwork for an uprising that united slaves across plantations and in doing so enabled them to smash the system from within’ (Dubois 2005: 55). Despite the Haitian Revolution remaining conspicuously absent from European history books, it is, in the words of Aimé Césaire, a symbol for ‘where the knot of colonialism was first tied, and where it was first untied’ (Césaire 1981: 24). Since then, Haiti has experienced long periods of occupation, (US tolerated) dictatorship and prolonged intervention by a wide array of ‘development’ actors, international organisations and international NGOs. The country’s economy was crippled by the imposition of French reparation claims for the loss of its most prosperous colony right after independence, but also by agricultural policies imposed by the US in the

1970s forcing Haiti to reduce tariffs on American imports, in particular highly subsidized US rice, and not least, tied aid programmes and neoliberal foreign investment projects, such as the Caracol industrial park. Haitian voices in the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission (IHRC) tasked with coordinating reconstruction efforts after the 2010 earthquake were systematically side-lined. The narrative that has been constructed around Haiti is that of a helpless disaster-stricken country in utter need of external intervention to be ‘lifted’ out of poverty and misery and achieve progress and modernization (Maurer and Pollmeier 2020).

At the same time, the long tradition of collective organisation, social action, solidarity and resistance that appears in a variety of forms both in the countryside (Bell 2013; Smith 2001) as well as in urban areas such as the capital Port-au-Prince (Schuller 2012) continues to exist. The spirit of *mawonaj*, as important emancipatory force of the Haitian Revolution, and seen as the historical root of Haitian communal action, continues to provide the basis for collective organisation. While local peasant groups do not refer explicitly to a theory of Post-Development, it is striking that they also do not use the term ‘development’ other than to refer to the work of foreign INGOs and their project-led interventions. We, therefore, argue that a practice of Post-Development in Haiti, even if it may not be named as such, can be understood as resistance towards domination and violence exerted in the name of progress (Nandy 1992). The following observations were made on several visits to Haiti between 2012 and 2017. One of the authors was able to spend time living in one of the communities and participating in various forms of gathering and community organising. In an effort to give back, she engaged in prolonged consultational exchanges with an INGO actor, which, as a result, adapted their mode of intervening in the community from a project-based to a solidarity-led engagement (Schöneberg 2021b). In the following, we outline peasant organizing as possible forms of prefigurative politics in a Post-Developmental sense that practice alternatives to interventionist and modernist models of ‘development’ as progress and growth.

### Peasant solidarity as strategy for survival

Haitian *gwoupman peyizan*, literally translated as small peasant groups, are rooted in a long tradition of solidarity and social organising and are plentiful across the country. Groups range from small collectives in remote rural villages, to highly structured organisations covering whole communities, some of which uphold close relations to international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) (Schöneberg 2016). Some Haitian peasant organisations practice alternatives that are considered non-hegemonic. These appear in the spheres of (1) the economy, through credit and seed bank systems independent from the state, (2) the social, through

<sup>6</sup> ‘Peasant’ is mostly considered a derogatory term. According to Bryceson the term ‘peasant’ has been ‘largely associated with a way of life and frame of mind counter to ‘modernization’ (Bryceson 2000: 1). Nevertheless, Haitian small farmers, *tipeyizan*, consciously and politically self-identify as such. As Bell points out, it ‘accurately describes a socioeconomic position in an intact feudal society in a way that the descriptor ‘farmer’, which names only a profession, does not’. (Bell 2013: 11).



an understanding of society and community shaped by reciprocity, interrelatedness and mutual interdependence, (3) politics, through networks and committees based on radical democratic decision-making, and (4) knowledge, through story-telling, song and the practice of traditional medicinal knowledges. While these practices of solidarity and commoning are survival strategies, in a Post-Developmental sense they are also acts of political resistance, grounded in a strong understanding of community and solidarity that is in opposition to the individualistic and self-centred doctrine of modernist progress.

At the same time, national movements, such as the *Mouvman Peyizan Papaye* (MPP), one of the largest associations with its network spanning nationally and internationally, seek to build national and transnational alliances. In their own words, MPP seeks to ‘gather all the poor peasants [...] in all corners of Haiti in a major national movement to build a good life for all [...] and for everyone to be free to think, act and speak.’<sup>7</sup> According to MPP founder Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, MPP activities include reforestation, disseminating practices of sustainable agriculture, connecting and networking with peasants around the country on soil conservation, food sovereignty and the fight for land rights, while simultaneously organising marches and participating in protests globally, joining with other peasant organizations inside the country and internationally defending the poor all over the world.

However, while it is easy to romanticize the functioning of these structures that are to some extent self-reliant on the very local level, it also needs to be acknowledged that struggles oftentimes only serve to secure a, rather precarious, status quo and often fail at prompting profound processes of transformative change (Schöneberg 2016). In this sense, the critique of ‘development’ defined as an ideology of the West promising prosperity, as proposed by Rahnama (1997) and others, is ambiguous. While peasant groupings certainly contest structures of global capitalism that exclude them from participating successfully in global markets, their main, and in fact very justified concern, is to make ends meet—something that collective organising on the local level just about serves to achieve, but nothing more.

Thinking of Post-Development as a pluriverse with many faces, Haitian peasant organisations contribute to the multitude of resistance struggles in the realm of food and food production. *Gwoupman peyizan* radically contest the state through setting up semi-autonomous communities that are practicing alternatives. In their struggles for food sovereignty they enact resistance to a global, exploitative system that extracts labour and resources. To a certain extent this is transformative and non-hegemonic as structures seem to

be reaching beyond assumptions made by global capitalism. However, in practice, it has become clear that while the enacted solidarities are strong on the local level, they are too weak to prompt transformative change on a larger scale.

## Discussion: alternatives to ‘development’ in practice?

We have claimed above that ‘alternatives to development’ inevitably have many faces, just like the term ‘development’ is always ambiguous and more than once has been identified as a container term, an empty signifier devoid of any meaning and vulnerable to becoming co-opted for and filled with dominant, euro-hegemonic political discourses and agendas.

The discussion concerned with food sovereignty and practiced agroecology in the Southern Highlands illustrates a concrete Post-Development alternative in Tanzania, which challenges the hegemonic ‘development’ paradigm. As a development project, the SAGCOT corridor demonstrates the expansion of corporate agriculture in its neo-liberal variant that deepens capitalism and coloniality. In contrast, the food sovereignty movement and practiced agroecology by Tanzanian smallholders offer an alternative and non-hegemonic transformation of socioecological relationships, while at times also catering for survival-oriented strategies. The transformative practices are characterized by grassroots organizing and hybridization of localized and ancestral knowledges with agroecological practices that embody some key aspects of what Escobar (1995: 215f) defines as Post-Development practices.

The cases of marginalized communities in Tehran point out how, even in the absence of social movements, alternatives to the standard economic practices of capitalism can be found, practices based on reciprocity and solidarity which do not correspond to the *homo oeconomicus*. Just like Esteva (1992) claims, we find ‘new commons’ at the margins that transcend the Western model and the attempts to replicate it. However, the ‘alternatives to development’ are usually confined to one’s community, which is defined by origin, religion or drug use. This begs the question, whether these alternatives merely constitute survival strategies or sow the seeds for transforming societal relations.

The story from Haiti highlights peasant organising as a means for survival and the practice of alternatives in the spheres of the economy, politics and community. This form of organising is traditionally rooted in resistance struggles to colonialism and coloniality, and repeatedly referenced through oral traditions, such as song and proverbs. Similarly to the examples from Tanzania, Haitian peasant struggles highlight the alternatives practiced on a grassroots level, but also show their demands for participation in ‘development’ and transformative, hybrid engagements between tradition

<sup>7</sup> Own translation: <https://www.mpphaiti.org/Objektif-nou-yo.html>

and ‘development’ as a discourse of modernity (Escobar 1995: 219).

The Iranian case differs from the Tanzanian and Haitian case, because there is no organised civil society resistance and/or NGO action. The commonality across the three examples is that the communities exist beyond the realms and institutions of the state. The practices of reciprocity and solidarity in all three Teheran communities can be interpreted as survival strategies insofar as mutual help is much more necessary to ensure reproduction for the marginalised communities. However, in contrast to what Schuurman (1993) and Corbridge (1998) seem to imply, this finding does not contradict the arguments from a Post-Development perspective. Economic practices may be motivated by more than a single purpose. Strategies which effectively promote collective survival can simultaneously be motivated by solidarity with members of one’s own ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1987)—no matter whether this community is based on shared nationality, religion, addiction or humanity. Esteva argued that practices beyond a narrow self-interest of ‘economic man’ or person had become ‘the very condition for survival’ for people on the margins (1992: 17). Yet the ‘new commons’ and ‘alternatives to development’ can also arise from necessity—why should a survival strategy not be the embryonic form of a new society?

About 25 years ago, Escobar (1995) proclaimed that truly just alternatives can only come from the grassroots, or the local, the communities. This may be right to some extent,<sup>8</sup> yet realising that grassroots alternatives do not exist in a vacuum, but in a system of globalised, neoliberal capitalism makes it hard to imagine how these alternatives can claim their just and legitimate spaces. Matthews (2018) reminds us that there are no spaces where no power exists. Any kind of imagination of alternatives *to* development must resist framing these possible alternatives as a pure and untainted way of life. In this context, it has to be acknowledged that some of the alternative actors such as MVIWATA are in fact funded by progressive parts of the development apparatus and the opposition between ‘alternative development’ and ‘alternatives *to* development’ is not as clear-cut as some make it out to be—so maybe progressive politics could bridge the divide (Ziai 2015). It seems that truly transformative alternatives to the many faces of ‘development’ need to be thought and practiced both on the levels of local and transnational solidarity networks at the same time.

The three case studies from Tanzania, Iran, and Haiti converge on the Post-Development theme of localized and

grassroots alternatives that are interwoven by a solidarity for survival needs and a political solidarity towards alternatives, both in societal as well as economic spheres. Across all three alternatives, the shared stewardship of the commons and communal relations play a significant role. These alternative embodied social relations are rooted in all three examples in the rejection of an economic logic perpetuating capitalism through ‘development’ and, to varying degrees, in more-than-capitalist spaces, ‘operating within, outside and alongside capitalism in a more nuanced view’ (Naylor 2022).

As the cases from Tanzania and Haiti outline in particular, the production of food, access to seeds and marketization of produce is ultimately political. For that reason, peasant struggles seem an especially apt entry point for the wider discussion on non-hegemonic alternatives. As Lang asserts, ‘food is both a symptom and a symbol of how we organize ourselves and our societies. It is both a vignette and a microcosm of wider social realities’ (1999: 218). In the struggle for food sovereignty and food democracy the most fundamental questions as to how societies are structured seem to culminate. Food is ‘at the centre of all societies and its dynamics reflect pressures by different actors (producers, consumers, politicians, investors, traders, and others)’ (Wald 2015: 109).

The alternatives sketched in the cases above and many other Post-Development writings are by no means comprehensive, nor unambiguous. In fact, these, among many other examples of alternatives ‘hardly denote a monolithic, homogenous group of subjects empty of friction’ (Akbulut et al. 2022, this Special Feature). Nevertheless, they illustrate the need and the options for alternatives to destabilize the hegemonic model, that is to say in opposition to ‘currently dominant processes of development, including its structural roots in modernity, capitalism, state domination, patriarchy’ (Demaria and Kothari 2022: 140). What they have in common is that their practicing of solidarity for survival and working for alternatives is not an either/or question. What they underline is the need for a movement of (intellectual) work and practice combining post- and decolonial critiques of a neocolonial capitalist world system, and its asymmetric power divides, similarly and simultaneously on local, regional, national and global levels. This transformative practice must take place in the global North and South likewise. As Gustavo Esteva has poignantly formulated: ‘There is no *one* alternative to one bad system. Therefore, we ally to fight this system and at the same time create our own, different worlds in opposition to it. In addition, these worlds—they are different but connected, united but distinct. [...]. One no, and many yeses’ (emphasis added, as quoted in Kingsnorth 2004: 44).

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the debate initiated by the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative on rural authoritarian populism demonstrates the highly problematic aspects of authoritarian local and grassroots movement (see Scoones et al. 2017).

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