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The Geographies of the "Development" Rhetoric: An Ethical Critique of Land Transformation in Transitioning Societies – Lessons from Albania and Kosovo

ABSTRACT

The term "development" is ubiquitously used in urban planning discourse to describe land transformation for new construction, implying progress and modernization. Its uncritical application, often rooted in anthropocentric assumptions that treat non-anthropized areas as "value-less land", frequently conceals environmental degradation, social displacement, and uneven benefit distribution. This paper offers a geographical and environmental-ethical critique of the rhetoric of "development", examining its semantic, legal, and practical implications for land transformation in transitioning societies. Drawing on empirical evidence from Albania and Kosovo and situating the argument within the broader development-critique literature (e.g., Mittelmann, 2018), the study analyzes spatial planning legislation (Albania: Law No. 107/2014; Kosovo: Law No. 2003/14, amended in 2008) to show how legal language and prevailing discourse shape spatial outcomes. The findings reveal a persistent tension between aspirational legal principles (sustainability, social equity, and the protection of natural and cultural heritage) and practical definitions that equate development with construction. The paper argues for more precise, geographically informed terminology and planning practices rooted in environmental ethics—prioritizing brownfield redevelopment, ecosystem-services valuation, participatory governance, and land-value capture mechanisms—to better align spatial practice with intergenerational equity, environmental justice, and sustainable territorial stewardship in post-communist transition contexts.

Keywords: development rhetoric, land transformation, environmental ethics, post-communist transition, spatial planning, environmental justice, Albania, Kosovo

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is characterized by an unprecedented acceleration of urbanization, fundamentally altering Earth's geographies of human settlement (UN-Habitat, 2020). As human populations increasingly concentrate in urban centers, the demand for land, housing, infrastructure, and services intensifies, driving pervasive land transformation globally. In the discourse surrounding these spatial reconfigurations, the term "development" holds a prominent and almost universally accepted position. It evokes notions of progress, economic growth, improved living standards, and modernization. Crucially, the very language we use, for instance, defining the "environment" as "everything that is around us" and "everything that we can or may use to fulfill our needs", often fosters an anthropocentric vision. This human-centered perspective embeds in our collective consciousness the conviction that humans are at the center of all things, possessing an inherent right or power to utilize nature at will. However, this seemingly benign term warrants critical geographical scrutiny, especially when applied to the physical conversion of so-called natural or semi-natural land ("new soil") for construction purposes. Is it accurate, fair, or even ethically sound to invariably label such activities as "development," or does the rhetoric of "development" oversimplify, sanitize, or romanticize processes that often entail significant environmental and social costs?

Any human understanding of its context necessarily emerges from the human condition itself. In this sense, reasoning from the anthropic perception of human needs cannot be avoided. Any attempt to claim a non-human perspective—whether that of other species or wider planetary "understandings"—would amount to another version of anthropocentrism, even if well-intentioned, because it would impose human reasoning upon entities and species possessing fundamentally different frameworks of consciousness. As Birch et al. (2020) explain, "Instead of thinking about variation between species in terms of levels of consciousness, we should think about multidimensional consciousness profiles," since other species do not reason in the same way humans do and display such a wide range of differences that establishing any cognitive hierarchy on human terms becomes impossible (p. 9). Traditional societies often value other living beings, or even inanimate objects, as equals, attributing to them human-like forms of reasoning (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). While this reflects a respectful attitude toward non-human entities and an effective approach that tends to preserve the survival environment of human communities, it nevertheless reduces those entities to human culturally driven values and fundamentally remains an ethnocentric survival strategy.

However, reasoning based on human needs is not necessarily human-centered, as it may evolve precisely in the opposite direction through an awareness of otherness as a condition of existence. Ethics emerges in such a context not merely as an exercise in respect for or protection of "the other." As Jean Piaget demonstrated a century ago in his seminal 1926 work (Piaget, 2002), this process can be observed in individual ontogenesis, which begins in a fully egocentric state and gradually evolves toward a relational model that increasingly recognizes personal flourishing as dependent upon embeddedness within networks of both human and non-human agencies. The self-awareness

of the adult thus converges toward the ethical consideration of alterity, that is, the recognition of the other as a necessary layer structuring the self (Ricouer, 1992).

This paper offers a geographical critique of the rhetoric of "development" by dissecting the conceptual and practical implications of using "development" as a blanket term for urban land transformation. It contends that the semantic weight of "development" frequently obscures the complex and often detrimental realities of land conversion, leading to policies and practices that prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability and social equity (Satterthwaite, 2007). Crucially, this critique foregrounds environmental ethics by examining the moral implications of land transformation for natural systems and human well-being. To substantiate this argument, the paper draws on empirical insights from Albania and Kosovo, two countries that have experienced rapid and often unregulated urban expansion during their post-communist transition since the early 1990s (Doxiadis Associates, 2009; Krasniqi & Aliu, 2018). These contexts provide fertile ground for examining the tension between aspirational planning goals and the realities of land transformation, particularly through the lens of Albania's (Law No. 107/2014) and Kosovo's (Law No. 2003/14, amended in 2008) legal frameworks for spatial planning, and the ways in which the rhetoric of development shapes these distinctive urban geographies in post-communist transition contexts.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and critical research methodology combining conceptual analysis, comparative case-study research, legal-document analysis, and literature review. The paper examines the rhetoric of "development" as it is used in spatial planning and land transformation discourse, with particular attention to its geographical, legal, and environmental-ethical implications. The research is grounded in a critical discourse approach that investigates how the language of "development" shapes perceptions of land value, territorial transformation, and urban policy outcomes.

Empirically, the study focuses on the post-communist transition contexts of Albania and Kosovo as comparative case studies. These countries were selected due to their rapid urbanization processes, extensive land-use transformations, and evolving spatial planning systems after the 1990s. The analysis centers on the legal and institutional frameworks regulating territorial planning and construction, particularly Albania's Law No. 107/2014 "On Spatial Planning and Development of the Territory" and Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14 "On Spatial Planning," including its amendments under Law No. 03/L-106 (2008). The study applies qualitative legal and policy analysis to examine how concepts such as "development," "spatial planning," sustainability, and public interest are defined and operationalized within these frameworks.

The research further incorporates a broad interdisciplinary literature review spanning geography, urban studies, environmental ethics, sustainability science, political economy, and development theory. Classical and contemporary theoretical contributions were analyzed to contextualize the historical

evolution of the concept of "development" and to identify tensions between normative sustainability principles and practical land-transformation processes. Secondary empirical sources concerning urban expansion, informal settlements, environmental degradation, and post-conflict reconstruction in Albania and Kosovo were also reviewed to support the interpretation of spatial and socioeconomic dynamics.

The analytical approach is interpretative and normative-critical rather than quantitative. The study does not aim to produce statistical measurements of land transformation; instead, it seeks to critically assess the ethical and geographical implications of the dominant "development" rhetoric and its influence on planning practices, environmental governance, and spatial justice.

RESULTS

Conceptualizing "Development": From Aspiration to Spatial Transformation

The Evolving Meanings of "Development" and Its Geographical Implications

Historically, "development" has been inextricably linked to economic progress, primarily measured through indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, industrialization, and infrastructure expansion (Todaro & Smith, 2015). The underlying idea of "improvement," and the notion that human-induced transformations trigger it, can be traced back to classical texts in many cultural traditions, recalling human adaptive strategies during the Early and Middle Holocene and the transition toward domestication. As Socrates, quoted by Xenophon in the 4th century B.C., is said to have argued, "It was an excellent saying of his who named husbandry the mother and nurse of all the arts, for while agriculture prospers all other arts likewise are vigorous and strong, but where the land is forced to remain desert, the spring that feeds the other arts is dried up; they dwindle, I had almost said, one and all, by land and sea" (Xenophon, 1994). This idea still echoes in many contemporary public policies: first to take care of "economic" resources through land transformation, so that flourishing may become viable.

The notion of "progress" itself has deep roots in classical and Enlightenment philosophy, often tied to "eudaimonia," or human flourishing, following the approach proposed by Aristotle in the 4th century B.C. in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1994), as well as the Western classical dialectics that pushed thesis and antithesis toward a "higher" level of synthesis, tending toward human-induced transformation as a condition for well-being and harmony. This approach would later be resumed by Enlightenment German philosophers, especially Kant in 1784, arguing for the possibility of progress (Kant, 2007), and Hegel in his 19th-century lectures, presenting progress as the driving force of History (Hegel, 2011).

However, a significant shift occurred after World War II, when "development" began to be actively promoted as an automatic consequence of economic growth, propelled by geopolitical changes and economic theories. In the post-war era, the concept became central to international aid

and nation-building efforts, particularly in what came to be known as the ”developing world.” This period witnessed the explicit emergence of ”development” as a global political strategy, profoundly influenced by President Truman's call to assist ”underdeveloped” nations (Truman, 1949). This initial understanding of development, as a pathway for former colonies to engage with the industrial model of the Global North, was framed within a nascent post-colonial global strategy that significantly expanded global markets and served as a crucial instrument within the growing Cold War context of the Iron Curtain, aimed at securing geopolitical influence. Economic theories, such as Walt Rostow's stages of economic growth proposed in 1960, further consolidated this linear understanding of progress (Rostow, 1990). In this context, ”development” was often equated with Westernization and a linear trajectory toward modernization, thereby constructing distinct geographies of progress and backwardness.

This approach was not unique to the global West. Similar development plans focused on economic growth emerged in former socialist states such as Albania and Yugoslavia, reflecting a broader regional trend of rapid urbanization and economic restructuring after World War II. These plans frequently mirrored Western growth-centered development models. Over time, however, the narrow economic definition of development faced increasing criticism for failing to account for social welfare, environmental health, and the equitable distribution of resources (Sen, 1999). Important movements, such as the post-Vatican II calls for social justice (namely Paul VI, 1967), the early development missions in Africa (Singleton, 2010), and later the warnings issued by the Club of Rome regarding the “limits to growth” during the 1970s (Meadows, 1972), fundamentally challenged the purely economic paradigm, advocating instead for a more holistic and sustainable understanding of progress that considered ecological boundaries and societal well-being.

The late 20th century witnessed the emergence of the concept of ”sustainable development,” famously articulated in the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This expanded definition integrated environmental protection and social equity alongside economic growth, aiming for a more holistic understanding of progress, even if it still neglected a crucial dimension: culture. In urban planning, this translated into calls for integrated land-use management, green infrastructure, and community participation. Despite these conceptual advancements, the term ”development” often retains its narrower economic connotation in practical urban-planning discourse, particularly when referring to physical construction, thereby continuing to shape spatial practices in a frequently limited way (Parnell & Oldfield, 2014).

Part of the reason lies in the sustainable-development model itself, which maintained the industrial separation of the economy from society and the environment, thereby allowing for the technical autonomy of a sphere that should necessarily depend upon—and serve—society (following the classical concept of economy) in harmony with the environment. This original concept of economy, understood as governance anchored in leadership and social improvement rather than in tangible assets (Xenophon, 1994), began to be questioned during the Enlightenment. Criticism emerged as early as the mid-19th century, for example from Stuart Mill in 1848, who argued that progress should

be assessed through mental and social variables and suggested that human improvement did not necessarily imply capital accumulation or population growth: “It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on” (Mill, 1891, p. 498). In a sense, contemporary critiques of the prevalence of GDP and other econometric indicators revive Mill’s foresight.

The Normative vs. Descriptive Divide in Urban Land Transformation: A Geographical Rhetoric

The inherent ambiguity of ”development” lies in its dual nature: it can function both as a descriptive term and as a deeply normative one. Descriptively, it refers to a process of change, alteration, or growth. Normatively, it implies improvement, progress, and a positive trajectory. When a new plot of land is cleared, graded, and built upon, the physical process is undeniably a “change” or “transformation.” However, labeling this process as ”development” immediately imbues it with a positive and often unquestioned value judgment. This semantic bias forms a key component of development rhetoric, subtly guiding perceptions and justifying particular spatial interventions (Bridge, 2000).

Within the context of urban planning and land transformation, ”development” almost instinctively implies improvement. This frequently leads to the uncritical acceptance of projects framed as “developmental,” even when they result in environmental degradation, social displacement, or increased vulnerability for particular populations. Furthermore, the application of the term ”development” to describe planning for new construction on natural or semi-natural land is not merely a verbal issue; it shapes both collective consciousness and subconscious perceptions. It subtly reinforces the idea that the value of land is measured primarily through economic utility rather than ecological integrity. This may lead to the perception of undeveloped natural areas as “no-value land” or “value-less land.” When spatial planning designates natural land as “land for development,” it implies that land lacking buildings is of lower quality, even if it possesses fertile soil or hosts significant biodiversity.

Such an approach follows early attempts to anthropize territories, in a movement that one of us has described as the construction of the category of “landscape” as a bridge between the “safe” sphere of culture and the “dangerous wilderness” of nature (Oosterbeek, 2025). This prevailing conviction drives the *modus operandi* of transforming natural land into built-up land, while the reverse process—converting built land back into natural environments—is often perceived as meaningless or regressive.

The rhetoric of “development” can therefore become a powerful instrument, legitimizing land transformations that might otherwise encounter strong opposition if described in more neutral or critical terms, such as “land conversion,” “urban expansion,” or “territorial reshaping” (Harvey, 1989). From a geographical perspective, this rhetoric actively constructs and legitimizes specific forms of spatial production, frequently privileging capital accumulation over environmental integrity and social well-being.

Legal Frameworks in Albania and Kosovo: Defining "Development" and Its Spatial Manifestations

To understand how "development" is conceptualized and regulated in practice, it is useful to examine specific legal frameworks. Albania's Law No. 107/2014 "On Spatial Planning and Development of the Territory" (Republic of Albania, 2014) and Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14 "On Spatial Planning" (Republic of Kosovo, 2003), later amended by Law No. 03/L-106 in 2008 (Republic of Kosovo, 2008), offer pertinent case studies of spatial governance during the post-communist transition. Both laws are foundational for regulating land use and construction activities in their respective countries, which have undergone significant urban and economic restructuring (Baxhaku & Bushati, 2016; Krasniqi & Aliu, 2018).

Defining "Development" and "Spatial Planning": Shared Physical Geographies of Development

The legal frameworks in both Albania and Kosovo, despite differences in specific phrasing, reveal a similar underlying understanding of "development" as fundamentally tied to the physical transformation of space.

In Albania, Law No. 107/2014 explicitly defines "Zhvillim" (Development) in Article 3, Point 45, as "the process of changing the territory through new constructions or changes to existing constructions" (Republic of Albania, 2014, Article 3, Point 45). This definition is remarkably direct and physical, equating "development" with acts of construction and alteration of the built environment.

In Kosovo, although Law No. 2003/14 is titled "On Spatial Planning," it frequently uses the term "zhvillim" (development), or its derivatives, to describe physical alterations of territory. The initial purpose of the law is "to promote rational spatial development and planning" ("zhvillimit dhe planifikimit racioanl hapesinor") (Republic of Kosovo, 2003, Preamble). Crucially, Article 2, defining "Plani hapësinor" (Spatial Plan), states its purpose as "regulating, utilizing, and developing (zhvillimin) the space" (Republic of Kosovo, 2003, Article 2). The 2008 amendments further reinforced this approach by explicitly stating their goal as regulating the "conditions and methods of planning, regulating, and developing (zhvillimit) space" (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 1). Key terms such as "Plani Zhvillimor Urbanistik" (Urban Development Plan) and "Kushtet e ndërtimit" (Construction Conditions) directly connect planning to the physical realization of structures (Republic of Kosovo, 2003, Article 2; Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 2 amendment). The 2008 amendments also introduced the definition of "Vendbanimet joformale" (informal settlements) and the intention to "treat" or "regulate" them (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 2 amendment), thereby implicitly defining a form of interventionist "development."

Thus, in both legal contexts, "development" is deeply embedded within the language of spatial planning and is fundamentally understood as the physical alteration and construction of land. This approach defines the legal geographies of land use, dictating how new spaces are produced and transformed. Hence, the use of the term "zhvillim" focuses on an intended goal (to develop) rather

than on an evolutionary process, making it conceptually closer to the notion of progress ("përparim" in Albanian) than to the original sense of "zhvillim" as a process of evolutionary maturation and increasing complexity. In this regard, the latter interpretation appears more compatible with UNESCO's current understanding of sustainability as a "wicked" challenge (UNESCO, 2017).

Contradictory Geographies: Aspirational Principles vs. Practical Definitions

While the legal definitions of physical change underpin both frameworks, their overarching purposes and guiding principles aspire to broader normative objectives, thereby creating tensions within post-communist urbanization processes. Albania's Law No. 107/2014 (Article 1) aims "to ensure sustainable development of the territory," promoting the protection of natural and cultural heritage, biodiversity, and the creation of fair conditions and equal opportunities. Article 4 emphasizes that "development must be sustainable and guarantee the needs of generations for social equality, economic development, and environmental protection" (Republic of Albania, 2014).

Similarly, Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14 states in Article 1.2 that its objective is "to ensure planned, balanced, sustainable spatial development, good governance, and protection of space, as a general national value" (Republic of Kosovo, 2003, Article 1.2). Its principles (Article 3) include promoting the common interests of Kosovo through the protection of natural resources and support for sustainable development, as well as promoting the protection of the environment and natural and cultural heritage (Republic of Kosovo, 2003, Article 3). The 2008 amendments explicitly added cultural heritage to the list of protected areas, further strengthening this commitment (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 3).

This juxtaposition reveals a critical tension within post-communist urbanization: the legal definitions foreground "development" as a pragmatic, physical act of construction and territorial alteration, whereas the stated goals and principles are aspirational, normative, and rooted in sustainability, equity, and environmental ethics. The challenge lies in the possibility that the practical act of physical transformation—whether framed as "development" or as "spatial planning" leading to development—may proceed without genuinely embodying these higher principles. This disparity between literal enactment and intended outcomes, often reinforced by the rhetoric of "development," forms the core of this geographical critique.

Similar tensions can also be observed in other countries, particularly those that transitioned later to democratic governance frameworks. For instance, in Portugal, which remained under dictatorship until 1974, the current constitutional law (Constituição da República Portuguesa, 2005) associates "development" with well-being (Article 9), human personal rights (Article 26), and socioeconomic and environmental processes (Article 66), while distinguishing it from "progress," which is presented as a societal objective (Preamble) for humankind as a whole (Article 7). Despite this conceptually rigorous constitutional framework, subsequent legislation has adopted a different emphasis, associating "development" primarily with economic competitiveness (Article 2 of Law 31/2014 on land use), thereby opening the way for policies facilitating new construction on arable land, particularly under housing market pressures (Decree-Law 117/2024).

Environmental Ethics and Environmental Consequences of Land Transformation

The physical land transformation inherent in converting new soil for construction, while legally defined or implicitly understood as "development," carries profound and often irreversible environmental consequences that stand in stark contrast to the aspirational goals of sustainable development and pose significant challenges to environmental ethics (Grimm et al., 2008).

Habitat Loss, Biodiversity Decline, and the Ethical Imperative

The most immediate impact of converting undeveloped land (forests, wetlands, agricultural fields, and grasslands) to urban uses is the destruction of natural habitats. This leads directly to a decline in biodiversity, as species lose their homes, food sources, and migratory routes (McDonald et al., 2008). The fragmentation of remaining natural areas further exacerbates these effects by isolating populations and reducing their long-term viability. From an environmental ethics perspective, this constitutes a profound moral problem, as it represents an irreversible diminishment of inherent environmental value and an erosion of the right of other species to exist and thrive. The rhetoric of "development" often downplays this ethical imperative by framing such losses as mere "trade-offs" for human progress.

Soil Degradation, Erosion, and the Ethics of Land Stewardship

"New soil," in the context of construction, often implies excavation, grading, and the importation of fill material. This process can severely degrade existing soil systems. Topsoil, rich in organic matter and crucial for fertility, is frequently removed or buried. Compaction caused by heavy machinery reduces soil porosity, impairing water infiltration and aeration. When protective vegetation is removed, exposed soil becomes highly vulnerable to erosion by wind and water, leading to sedimentation in waterways and the loss of agricultural productivity (Ellis, 2011). The replacement of native soil with foreign material can also alter local soil chemistry and microbiology, thereby affecting the potential for future environmental restoration.

Environmental ethics calls for responsible land stewardship by recognizing soil as a living system and a vital, non-renewable resource. The extensive physical land transformation driven by construction often violates this ethical principle.

The legal frameworks examined in this study acknowledge these concerns. While Albania's Law 107/2014 aims to ensure the "protection of natural resources, such as land, especially agricultural land" (Article 1), Kosovo's Law 2003/14, through its 2008 amendment (Article 22.3), goes further by explicitly stating that: "Until the approval of the Municipal Development Plan, no object may be built that is contrary to the destination of fertile agricultural land" (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 22.3). This direct legal prohibition highlights an awareness of the ethical imperative to protect fertile land, although the reality of rapid land conversion in both countries often contravenes this principle.

Water Cycle Disruption, Pollution, and the Ethics of Hydrological Systems

Urban transformation fundamentally alters the natural water cycle. Impermeable surfaces such as concrete and asphalt prevent rainwater from infiltrating the ground, leading to increased surface runoff. This rapid runoff contributes to flash floods, particularly in downstream areas, and reduces groundwater recharge, potentially depleting aquifers (Fletcher et al., 2013). Furthermore, urban runoff frequently carries pollutants—including oil, chemicals, heavy metals, and litter—directly into rivers, lakes, and coastal waters, thereby contaminating aquatic ecosystems and affecting human health (Walsh et al., 2005). Construction activities themselves may also release sediment and chemical pollutants into nearby water bodies, further degrading water quality.

From the perspective of environmental ethics, such disruptions undermine the integrity of natural hydrological systems and unjustly transfer environmental burdens to downstream ecosystems and communities.

Urban Heat Island Effect, Air Quality Deterioration, and Environmental Health Ethics

Construction materials such as concrete, asphalt, and dark roofing surfaces absorb and retain more solar radiation than natural landscapes. This contributes to the "urban heat island" (UHI) effect, whereby urban areas experience significantly higher temperatures than surrounding rural environments (Oke, 1982). Elevated temperatures increase energy consumption for cooling, intensify heat-related health problems, and worsen air quality by promoting the formation of ground-level ozone.

Construction activities also contribute directly to air pollution through dust emissions, vehicle exhaust, and the release of volatile organic compounds from building materials. These impacts raise important concerns regarding environmental health ethics, particularly because vulnerable urban populations often bear a disproportionate share of the resulting environmental and health burdens.

Loss of Local Adaptive Cultural Knowledge and Traditional Practices

The rapid and often uncritical pursuit of "development" frequently overlooks—and may actively erode—valuable local adaptive cultural knowledge and traditional practices that have evolved over centuries in close interaction with specific environments. These practices, ranging from vernacular building techniques adapted to local climates and materials to traditional land management and flood-avoidance strategies, embody a profound understanding of environmental systems and resilience (Livadie & Ortolani, 1998).

As "development" homogenizes construction techniques and spatial planning approaches, often prioritizing standardized "modern" solutions, these indigenous knowledge systems are marginalized or lost. Traditional building methods that naturally mitigate heat, manage water runoff, or resist seismic activity are frequently replaced by conventional and often less context-appropriate designs. This loss is not merely aesthetic; it represents a significant reduction in a community's capacity to adapt to environmental conditions and manage resources sustainably.

Such dynamics are evident in many regions, including the Balkans, where traditional rural economies and knowledge systems are increasingly undermined by rural exodus and peri-urban expansion, rendering these regions progressively dependent on standardized urban resources and planning models. A stark reminder of these risks can be observed in recent events in Portugal, where infrastructure failures revealed the consequences of planning systems that neglected historical flood patterns and hydrological knowledge (Coelho, 2026), knowledge that traditional practices would likely have incorporated and mitigated.

The disregard for long-standing adaptive practices, often dismissed as "backward" within the pursuit of "development," can therefore increase vulnerability to environmental hazards and contribute to the irreversible loss of cultural heritage intertwined with ecological wisdom.

Case Study: Albania's and Kosovo's Coastal and Agricultural Land — Physical Degradation and the Erosion of Environmental Ethics

Urbanization during the post-communist transition in Albania has been characterized by a strong emphasis on economic growth, particularly through tourism and real estate development. The country's Adriatic and Ionian coasts became prime targets for "development," often at the expense of highly fertile agricultural land, pristine wetlands, and natural dune systems (Kuçi et al., 2018). In areas such as Durrës, Vlorë, and parts of the Albanian Riviera, extensive tracts of agricultural land were converted into hotels, residential complexes, and supporting infrastructure.

Similarly, in Kosovo, despite legal provisions such as the amended Article 22.3 explicitly protecting fertile agricultural land, significant unplanned expansion has occurred in peri-urban areas surrounding cities such as Pristina (Hyseni et al., 2017). This illustrates a broader tension in which legal aspirations for the sustainable use of land (Law No. 107/2014, Article 1; Law No. 2003/14, Article 1.2) are challenged by rapid land transformation processes.

For example, the "development" of new resorts along the Albanian coast involved the clearing of olive groves and natural vegetation, the alteration of coastal geomorphology, and, in some cases, encroachment upon protected areas (Vlora et al., 2019). Although these projects generated economic investment and employment opportunities, they also resulted in the irreversible loss of productive agricultural land, increased coastal erosion, reduced biodiversity, and mounting pressure on local water supply and waste management systems.

In these cases, the rhetoric of "development" frequently prioritized economic indicators—such as tourist arrivals and investment value—over environmental ethics, long-term food security, and the intrinsic value of natural ecosystems, thereby undermining the legal principles aimed at protecting natural resources. Ironically, the very environmental qualities that attract tourism are often degraded or destroyed by the methods of "development" employed, creating a profound ethical dilemma regarding the sustainability of such spatial strategies in both countries during their post-communist transition.

Socioeconomic Disparities, Displacement, and Environmental Justice in Urban Transformation

Beyond direct environmental impacts, the transformation of "new soil" into constructed urban areas frequently generates significant socioeconomic disparities and may lead to the displacement of vulnerable populations, even when framed within the rhetoric of "development." These outcomes raise crucial questions of environmental justice within the context of urbanization in post-communist transition contexts.

Exclusion, Gentrification, and the Uneven Geographies of Progress

"Development" projects, particularly those driven by private capital seeking high returns, often target areas considered ripe for valorization. This can lead to processes of gentrification, whereby existing low-income residents or communities are displaced as property values and living costs increase (Lees et al., 2008). New construction, while ostensibly expanding the housing stock, may cater exclusively to wealthier populations, thereby exacerbating social segregation and excluding those who historically inhabited the area. In this context, the rhetoric of "development" tends to obscure the fact that benefits are frequently distributed unevenly, serving specific economic interests rather than broader societal well-being. From an environmental justice perspective, this unequal distribution often means that the burdens of urban transformation (e.g., pollution, loss of green space, and increased living costs) disproportionately affect marginalized groups, while the benefits remain largely privatized.

Loss of Livelihoods, Traditional Economies, and Social Injustice

The conversion of agricultural or peri-urban land for construction directly affects the livelihoods of those dependent on traditional economies. Farmers lose productive land, often receiving inadequate compensation that fails to reflect the true value of generational assets or the costs associated with relocation and re-establishment (Narain et al., 2013). Small businesses, informal traders, and artisans operating in areas designated for "development" may likewise be displaced without viable alternatives, resulting in unemployment and economic marginalization. Thus, transformations framed as progress within development rhetoric may dismantle established community structures and economic networks, perpetuating cycles of social injustice.

Informal Settlements, Formalization Challenges, and Contested Geographies

In many rapidly urbanizing contexts, including the Balkans, informal settlements emerge as spontaneous responses to housing shortages and economic opportunities, creating complex urban geographies outside formal planning systems. These settlements, often established on marginal or unauthorized land, represent a substantial share of urban growth (Berisha et al., 2015). Both Albania and Kosovo continue to grapple with the legacies of informal development. Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14, through its 2008 amendments, explicitly recognized "Vendbanimet joformale" (informal settlements)

as "human settlements which do not enable residents to enjoy their rights to a suitable standard of living, in particular adequate housing" (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 2 amendment). The law further mandates that such settlements be incorporated into planning processes and addressed with the aim of their regulation (Republic of Kosovo, 2008, Article 14 amendment on the Urban Development Plan for communities). This legal recognition acknowledges a significant socioeconomic challenge. Subsequent attempts to "develop" or formalize these areas present complex challenges. Although formalization can provide infrastructure and tenure security, it may also lead to:

- demolition and displacement, particularly when formalization plans involve the clearance of parts of settlements without adequate rehousing or compensation;
- increased costs through the introduction of property taxes, utility fees, and building standards that informal residents cannot afford, thereby forcing them to relocate; and
- the erosion of community networks and social capital built over many years within the informal setting.

Unplanned Urbanization and Post-Conflict "Development" in Pristina, Kosovo

Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, experienced rapid population growth and extensive unplanned urbanization following the 1999 conflict. The return of refugees and internally displaced persons, combined with a weak regulatory environment, led to the rapid expansion of informal settlements on peri-urban agricultural land and public property (Hyseni et al., 2017). These areas, such as "Lagjja e Re" ("New Neighborhood"), frequently lacked basic infrastructure, coherent planning, and secure legal tenure, reflecting the chaotic spatial dynamics of post-conflict reconstruction.

During the post-conflict reconstruction period, "development" initiatives in Pristina sought both to formalize these settlements and to accommodate further urban expansion. However, these processes often conflicted with the principles of environmental justice and social equity. While Albania's Law No. 107/2014—and comparable Kosovar legislation, including the amended Law No. 2003/14, Article 3(d), which promotes "equal economic and social rights for all Kosovars"—emphasizes the provision of "suitable and fair conditions and equal opportunities for housing," the implementation of "development" policies frequently failed to achieve these objectives.

- *Property rights challenges:* The complex and often contested property rights situation in post-conflict Kosovo made land acquisition and regularization highly problematic. New "development" projects were frequently implemented on land with unresolved ownership claims, thereby intensifying conflicts and marginalizing original inhabitants. In such contested contexts, the legal concept of "e drejta për zhvillim" ("right to develop") could become an instrument privileging powerful actors over vulnerable communities, thus producing uneven geographies of property rights (Smith, 2005).
- *Selective formalization and displacement:* Efforts to formalize informal settlements sometimes involved selective demolition without adequate rehousing provisions, especially in areas considered attractive for "higher-value development." Residents who had invested limited

personal resources into constructing homes were consequently displaced to peripheral areas with even fewer services. The rhetoric of "urban regeneration" or "modernization" frequently obscured the social costs associated with these displacements.

- *Uneven distribution of benefits:* New commercial and residential "developments" often attracted foreign investment and catered to a growing middle class, while the original inhabitants of informally developed areas continued to face poverty, limited access to services, and social exclusion. The "value created" by such development, despite Law No. 107/2014's principle that it should "be derived and appropriated by the society that creates it" (Article 4), was frequently captured by developers and politically connected elites rather than distributed equitably, thereby reinforcing socio-spatial inequalities (Berisha et al., 2015).

In essence, the rhetoric of "development" in these contexts frequently masked processes of urban restructuring that, while generating economic growth for some groups, simultaneously deepened social inequalities and undermined the well-being of marginalized populations, raising fundamental questions of environmental justice.

Ethical Implications and the Question of "Fairness" in Land Transformation

The core of the argument against the uncritical use of the term "development" for land transformation lies in profound ethical considerations, particularly those concerning fairness, justice, and the broader framework of environmental ethics (Fainstein, 2010).

Whose "Development" Is It? A Geographical Ethical Query

The inherent unfairness of many "development" processes stems from the question of whose interests they ultimately serve. Although the term suggests universal progress, the reality is that urban land transformation is often driven by specific economic and political interests, producing uneven geographies of benefits and burdens. Large-scale construction projects generate profits for developers, investors, and landowners, while also potentially stimulating local economies through job creation—often temporary—and increased tax revenues. However, these benefits are rarely distributed equitably across society (Logan & Molotch, 2012).

As illustrated in the cases of Albania and Kosovo, "development" may disproportionately benefit politically or economically connected elites while imposing significant costs—environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods, and displacement—on less powerful social groups. In this context, the rhetoric of "development" subtly legitimizes processes that may be exploitative and inequitable, transforming land for the benefit of a limited number of actors under the guise of collective progress. This raises a fundamental ethical question regarding the moral legitimacy of spatially concentrated benefits achieved at the expense of diffuse social and environmental harm.

The "Natural" versus "Developed" Binary: A Challenge to Environmental Ethics

The framing of "new soil" as land available for "development" frequently relies on a simplistic binary in which natural land is considered "undeveloped" or "empty," thereby implying a lack of value or utility until transformed through human intervention. Such a perspective directly challenges environmental ethics, which recognizes the intrinsic value of ecosystems, biodiversity, and the essential ecosystem services they provide, including clean air and water, flood regulation, and climate mitigation (Costanza et al., 1997).

Agricultural land, wetlands, and forests are not "undeveloped"; rather, they are productive and living systems with considerable environmental and socioeconomic value. Labeling their conversion as "development" risks reducing them to raw materials or vacant spaces awaiting improvement, instead of recognizing them as integral components of ecological systems and human well-being. In this sense, the rhetoric of "development" devalues complex natural geographies and undermines the ethical recognition of nature's intrinsic worth and its fundamental role in sustaining life.

This ethical dilemma is further reflected in legal provisions. While Albania's Law No. 107/2014 establishes objectives for the protection of agricultural land, Kosovo's amended Law No. 2003/14 (Article 22.3) introduces a direct, albeit temporary, prohibition on construction on fertile agricultural land until proper planning mechanisms are in place. The existence of such legal safeguards indicates a broader societal recognition of the value of natural land. However, when these provisions are circumvented or weakly enforced under the pressure of "development," this constitutes a failure to uphold environmental ethics in practice.

The use of the concept of "landscape" as an intermediate category—referring neither to wholly "natural" nor entirely "developed" entities, but rather to dynamic spaces encompassing different cultural perceptions and interests—could contribute to overcoming this dilemma in a more ethically grounded manner. Such an approach would shift the focus from predefined developmental goals toward relational and process-oriented understandings of territory.

Intergenerational Equity and Irreversible Spatial Losses: An Environmental Ethical Dilemma

A further ethical concern relates to intergenerational equity. The conversion of natural land for construction purposes is frequently irreversible. Once paved over or built upon, ecosystems are rarely restored to their original state. Consequently, current "development" decisions may permanently deplete natural capital, reducing the environmental inheritance available to future generations (Norton, 2005).

Future populations may therefore inherit urban environments that are increasingly vulnerable to climate change, deficient in green spaces, affected by resource scarcity, and deprived of cultural and environmental heritage. The pursuit of immediate developmental gains may thus impose long-term and largely unquantified costs on individuals who have no voice in present-day planning decisions.

Albania's Law No. 107/2014, Article 4, emphasizes that "development must be sustainable and guarantee the needs of generations," while Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14 (Article 1.2) similarly aims

to ensure "sustainable spatial development." Nevertheless, the irreversible character of many land transformations frequently contradicts these principles in practice, representing a profound ethical failure in environmental stewardship.

The Role of Governance, Enforcement, and Ethical Spatial Practice

The ethical implications of land transformation are further compounded by governance-related challenges. In post-communist transition economies such as Albania and Kosovo, weak regulatory enforcement, corruption, and limited transparency in land transactions may intensify the negative consequences of "development" (Stanilov, 2007). Although legal frameworks such as Albania's Law No. 107/2014 (Articles 50, 51, and 52) and Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14 (Articles 29 and 30) establish ambitious objectives concerning sustainable and equitable planning, their effective implementation often remains insufficient.

- *Regulatory loopholes and discretionary interpretation:* Despite their normative intentions, planning laws may contain ambiguities or allow discretionary interpretations that can be exploited for private interests, thereby producing geographies of impunity.
- *Corruption:* Illicit payments and undue political influence may circumvent environmental assessments, zoning regulations, and public consultation procedures, facilitating forms of "development" that serve narrow interests.
- *Lack of public participation:* Genuine public participation, which is essential for equitable outcomes and the incorporation of local knowledge, is frequently superficial or neglected, marginalizing community concerns. Both Albanian (Law No. 107/2014, Article 24) and Kosovar (Law No. 2003/14, Article 19) legislation mandate public consultation, yet the quality and practical influence of such consultation vary considerably, thereby undermining the ethical foundations of participatory spatial planning.
- *Weak enforcement:* Even where regulations are clearly defined, inadequate institutional capacity, lack of political will, or corrupt practices may undermine enforcement mechanisms, allowing illegal construction and non-compliance with environmental standards to proliferate. The numerous amendments to Law No. 107/2014, alongside the provisions concerning administrative violations (Article 52) in Albania and the supervisory roles established under Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14 (Articles 29 and 30), reflect ongoing struggles to achieve effective governance and ethically grounded land transformation.

In such contexts, the rhetoric of "development" not only frames potentially harmful activities in a positive light but also becomes complicit in obscuring the systemic governance failures that enable these harms to occur. Consequently, the "fairness" of the term itself becomes deeply questionable when the underlying processes are opaque, inequitable, and disproportionately beneficial to specific actors, producing ethically problematic spatial outcomes.

Towards Alternative Geographies: Reframing Language and Practice

To foster more responsible and equitable spatial transformations, a critical shift in terminology and approach is imperative. This requires moving beyond the potentially misleading rhetoric of "development" and embracing practices rooted in robust environmental ethics.

More Precise and Geographically Informed Language

Instead of the loaded term "development," especially for land conversion, more neutral and descriptive alternatives should be adopted, reflecting a more nuanced geographical understanding (McHarg, 1969):

- Land Transformation or Land Conversion: These terms accurately describe the physical alteration of land without implying inherent positive value. They invite a more objective assessment of the changes occurring.
- Urban Expansion: This specifically refers to the outward growth of urban areas, highlighting the spatial dimension without making a value judgment on its quality.
- Territorial Change or Land Use Change: These are broad, descriptive terms that encompass any alteration in how land is utilized, prompting analysis of the nature and impacts of such changes.

For projects within existing urban areas, terms like "urban intensification," "urban regeneration," "infill development," or "urban renewal" are more appropriate, as they focus on optimizing existing infrastructure and revitalizing declining areas rather than expanding onto new soil. These terms implicitly carry a commitment to making better use of already urbanized land, reducing pressure on natural environments and aligning with principles of environmental ethics by minimizing new impacts.

Prioritizing Sustainable and Inclusive Spatial Planning: An Environmental Ethical Imperative

Beyond language, a fundamental reorientation of urban planning practices is essential to achieve genuinely sustainable and equitable outcomes, aligning with the aspirational principles of laws like Albania's Law No. 107/2014 and Kosovo's Law No. 2003/14, and rooted in environmental ethics.

- Environmental Restoration and Green Infrastructure: Planning should prioritize the protection and restoration of natural ecosystems within and around urban areas. Investing in green infrastructure (e.g., parks, urban forests, green roofs, permeable surfaces) can mitigate the urban heat island effect, manage stormwater, enhance biodiversity, and improve public health (Benedict & McMahon, 2006). This moves beyond simply "minimizing harm" to actively "enhancing environmental value," reflecting a proactive environmental ethical stance.
- Participatory Planning and Environmental Justice: Genuine public participation is crucial. This involves not just informing communities about plans (as stipulated in Albania's Law 107/2014, Article 24, and Kosovo's Law 2003/14, Article 19) but actively involving them in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard, and their needs are met (Healey, 1997). This

can help to prevent displacement, ensure equitable distribution of benefits, and integrate local knowledge into planning. Such approaches are vital for achieving environmental justice and fostering inclusive urban geographies.

- Ecosystem Services Valuation: Integrating the economic value of ecosystem services (e.g., pollination, water purification, climate regulation) into planning decisions can provide a more comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of land transformation projects (Gómez-Baggethun & Barton, 2013). This makes the hidden costs of environmental degradation more visible and argues for the preservation of natural assets, aligning economic decisions with environmental ethics.
- Brownfield Redevelopment: Prioritizing the redevelopment of brownfield sites (abandoned or underutilized industrial and commercial properties) over greenfield sites (undeveloped natural land) is a key strategy for sustainable urban growth. This reduces pressure on new soil, leverages existing infrastructure, and revitalizes contaminated or derelict areas (De Sousa, 2003), embodying responsible spatial stewardship.
- Robust Governance and Ethical Enforcement: Strengthening legal frameworks, ensuring transparent land administration, combating corruption, and adequately resourcing planning and inspection bodies are critical. The explicit provisions for monitoring and administrative violations in both Albanian and Kosovar laws underscore the ongoing struggle to achieve robust governance. Effective implementation requires political will, institutional capacity, and active civic oversight to ensure ethical spatial practice.
- Land Value Capture: Mechanisms that capture the increase in land value resulting from public investment or zoning changes (as implied by Article 4 of Albania's Law 107/2014 and Article 3 of Kosovo's Law 2003/14 regarding value appropriation by society) can be reinvested into public infrastructure, affordable housing, or environmental protection, ensuring that the benefits of land transformation are more broadly shared (Smarzhevsky, 2017), contributing to environmental justice.

CONCLUSIONS

The term "development," while seemingly innocuous, carries significant semantic baggage that often obscures the profound and complex impacts of urban land transformation. When applied to the conversion of "new soil" for construction, the rhetoric of "development" tends to romanticize a process that can lead to irreversible environmental damage, exacerbate socioeconomic disparities, and raise fundamental questions about fairness, justice, and environmental ethics. The legal frameworks in Albania (Law No. 107/2014) and Kosovo (Law No. 2003/14, amended 2008), while defining spatial interventions primarily as physical construction and planning, simultaneously articulate ambitious principles of sustainability and social justice, highlighting the inherent tension between the practical act and the aspirational goals.

The experiences of Albania and Kosovo illustrate that rapid urbanization during their post-communist transition, often driven by opportunistic "development," can undermine environmental integrity, displace vulnerable communities, and deepen inequalities, despite statutory commitments to sustainable and equitable planning. Explicit legal provisions, such as Kosovo's temporary prohibition on building on fertile agricultural land, demonstrate an awareness of environmental values, yet their effective implementation remains a challenge. To move beyond this problematic paradigm, a deliberate shift towards more precise and neutral terminology, such as "land transformation" or "urban expansion," is necessary. More importantly, urban planning must fundamentally reorient itself towards truly sustainable and inclusive approaches. This entails prioritizing environmental restoration, embracing genuine participatory processes, valuing ecosystem services, and fostering robust governance that ensures equitable benefits and minimizes adverse impacts, all underpinned by a strong commitment to environmental ethics.

Ultimately, achieving urban futures that are genuinely sustainable, equitable and resilient requires moving beyond a simplistic understanding of "development" as mere physical growth and to frame it within a global ethical approach (Capua & Oosterbeek, 2023). It demands a critical geographical engagement with the language we use, and a profound commitment to planning practices that respect both natural capital and social well-being, translating aspirational legal principles into tangible, just, and lasting improvements for all, thereby re-imagining the urban geographies of post-communist transition spaces.

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