



The Social Construction of Border-dwelling and Underdevelopment in the Border Regions of Sardasht

Afshar Kabiri¹ | Omid Rahmannedjhad²

1. Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran. Corresponding Author, E-mail: a.kabiri@urmia.ac.ir
2. Master of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Urmia University, Urmia, Iran. E-mail: omidrahman61@gmail.com

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Article type: Research Article Article history: Received: 18 - 02 - 2026 Received in revised form: 25 - 02 - 2026 Accepted: 25 - 02 - 2026 Published online: 18- 03 – 2026 Keywords: <i>Border-dwelling, Lived Experience, Underdevelopment, Sardasht, Social Constructivism.</i>	Objective: Borderland areas, as complex socio-spatial phenomena, have consistently been analyzed in development literature through the dualistic lens of "opportunity vs. threat." Ideally, borders can serve as platforms for economic, cultural, and social interaction, linking peripheral regions to broader development flows. However, the lived experience of many border communities in Iran suggests that the border has not only failed to become a driver of development but has instead become an active mechanism for reproducing poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment. Focusing on the border city of Sardasht, this study seeks to reconstruct and interpret the meaning of "border-dwelling" (<i>marz-neshini</i>) as a context for non-development from the perspective of the residents themselves. It aims to demonstrate how dominant policies, structures, and semantic systems have transformed the border from a latent potential into a structural trap for development. The primary objective is to understand the lived experience of Sardasht's residents and analyze the social construction of border-dwelling in relation to processes of economic, social, and cultural underdevelopment. Specifically, this research addresses how the border location, in interaction with center-oriented policies and a securitized perspective, leads to the degradation of livelihood structures, the erosion of human capital, and the formation of semantic systems based on exclusion, inequality, and an "us vs. them" dichotomy. Consequently, the study moves beyond structural or economic explanations to address the interpretive, identity-related, and cultural layers of border-dwelling, highlighting the role of local actors in meaning-making. Methodology: This study is situated within the interpretive paradigm, relying on a social constructivist approach and employing ethnographic methods. Ethnography was selected for its emphasis on deep understanding of meanings, experiences, and the lifeworld of social actors, allowing access to the hidden and context-dependent layers of the border-dwelling phenomenon. The field of study encompasses the border regions of Sardasht. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and field notes. The participants include 18 local informants (including village leaders, teachers, traders, council members, border activists, and those involved in cross-border livelihood activities), selected via purposive and snowball sampling. Interviews continued until



theoretical saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using ethnographic analysis in four stages: organizing, initial coding, category development, and the extraction of core themes. To enhance research credibility, strategies such as prolonged engagement, data triangulation, member checking, and rigorous documentation of the analytical path were employed.

Findings: The findings indicate that the residents of Sardasht interpret their economic, social, and cultural situation—in comparison to the country's central regions—as one of inequality, deprivation, and a product of structural discrimination and center-oriented policies. At the livelihood level, the border has led to the expansion of an "instant economy" and unsustainable, high-risk activities like kulbari (border portage) instead of creating stable employment. This type of livelihood not only fails to provide economic security but also degrades human dignity, increases physical and mental trauma, and creates permanent dependency on volatile border conditions. Simultaneously, local capacities in agriculture, horticulture, and tourism have remained weakened or underutilized due to a lack of infrastructure, investment, and institutional support. At the social level, the results indicate severe erosion of human and social capital. Widespread migration of the workforce and elites, reduced motivation for education, the weakening of social solidarity, and the spread of individualism are direct consequences of the blockage of sustainable opportunities. The replacement of traditional elders and local authorities with nouveau-riche and rent-seeking actors has fueled a crisis of legitimacy and social distrust, undermining the community's capacity for collective action and advocacy. Furthermore, the historical experience of war, insecurity, and livelihood pressures has led to psychological exhaustion, aggression, and tension in social and familial relations. In the cognitive and cultural dimension, residents speak of cognitive poverty, a weak educational system, and the dominance of a securitized perspective in policymaking. This situation has led to a sense of powerlessness, apathy, and distrust toward governmental institutions. Simultaneously, by re-interpreting their experiences of deprivation and marginalization, the residents create a symbolic distinction between the "us" (border-dwellers) and "them" (the center-dwellers). In this process, the border transcends a mere geographical line and becomes an identity-based, cultural, and political symbol that reinforces representations of "otherness" and exclusion.

Conclusion: Overall, the results show that in the absence of indigenous policymaking, spatial justice, and a development-oriented approach, border-dwelling in Sardasht has become a sustainable mechanism for reproducing underdevelopment. The border is not merely a consequence of underdevelopment but a partial cause; in interaction with center-oriented structures, unproductive economics, the erosion of human capital, and exclusionary semantic systems, it reproduces a vicious cycle of poverty, inequality, and social passivity. The study concludes by emphasizing the necessity of a paradigm shift



in governance for border regions. This shift should move beyond a purely security-based gaze toward empowering local communities, involving residents in decision-making, strengthening sustainable livelihood infrastructure, and leveraging indigenous cultural and economic capacities. Only within such a framework can the border be transformed from a context of non-development into a realm for sustainable and inclusive development.

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