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Philosophy and Realistic Reflection

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From Saying to Showing: Action, the Economy of Silence, and the Limits of Development Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary discourses on inclusive and just development emphasise ambitions of empowerment and capacity-building without producing genuine socio-economic transformation. This article develops the concept of the Economy of Silence to explain why the smallest and most constrained actors are often those who generate social change most effectively in comparison with institutions that are dominant at the discursive level. Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's distinction between "saying" and "showing" in the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, the article argues that meaningful language must remain anchored in facts. When discourse becomes detached from material transformation, it generates what this article calls discursive inflation: the circulation of language without corresponding changes in reality. In a context of economic scarcity, material and institutional constraints require a certain discipline on the part of the actors who are most exposed to the consequences and do not have discursive power. Exposing their actions to consequences aligns intention, practice, and outcome. Action therefore functions as a materially intelligible form of communication that remains accountable to consequences. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach suggests that development consists of valuing the expansion of freedoms and opportunities available to individuals to achieve functioning using available resources, and not just by making mere declarative commitments. The article concludes that silence, often understood as exclusion, sidelining from institutional discourse or renunciation, emerges rather as the structural condition in which ethical, economic and political

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 14 March 2026 | Revised: 9 June 2026 | Accepted: 16 June 2026 | Published Online: 23 June 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/prr.v3i2.102513

CITATION

Nkurunziza, V., 2026. From Saying to Showing: Action, the Economy of Silence, and the Limits of Development Discourse. Philosophy and Realistic Reflection. 3(2): 62–76. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/prr.v3i2.102513

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meaning converges in facts rather than in discourse.

Keywords: Economy of Silence; Wittgenstein; Capability Approach; Discursive Inflation; Scarcity and Adaptive Rationality; Saying and Showing; Philosophy of Language; Development Discourse

1. Introduction: The Noise of Power and the Silence of Facts

Contemporary societies are characterised less by a lack of discourse than by its proliferation. They are saturated with policy declarations, economic strategies, institutional commitments and ethical manifestos giving the impression of an abundance of meaning. Yet this proliferation of discourse often coincides with limited material transformation. Inequalities persist despite inclusion policies; poverty persists despite development programs[1]; injustice continues despite numerous convictions. This gap between discourse and material transformation raises questions about the capacity of institutional language to produce social change.

This article is based on a different principle. It argues that actors operating closest to material consequences are often structurally compelled to maintain stronger alignment between action and outcome. This claim may appear counterintuitive because transformation is often associated with visibility, scale, and institutional authority. This argument challenges dominant assumptions associating transformation with institutional visibility and discursive influence. Actors operating under material and institutional constraints rarely dominate public discourse or control symbolic capital[2]. Even when they are not reduced to passive listeners, they often remain structurally absent from dominant narratives. Under such conditions, their actions are immediately tested against reality, and their impact is measured not in declarations but in observable outcomes.

To explore this dynamic in depth, the article develops the notion of the Economy of Silence. The concept is used throughout the article as a diagnostic tool to describe situations in which action acquires greater ethical and epistemic reliability than discourse under conditions of constrained accountability. More precisely, the Economy of Silence is not itself a behaviour, a moral virtue, or a political strategy. It is an analytical concept used to identify situations in which disciplined action acquires greater reliability than discourse because actors remain directly exposed to consequences. Throughout this article, silence refers specifically to a condition of disciplined action under constrained accountability, where actors prioritise materially consequential practices over discursive participation that lacks transformative effect. It does not denote passivity, exclusion, resignation, or withdrawal from public life. I propose a framework of meaning in which action replaces discourse when the latter becomes ineffective or detached from the facts. Emerging under conditions of material, temporal, and symbolic scarcity, silence becomes a disciplined restraint on speech that avoids rhetorical excess rather than an absence of words. The concept developed here applies only where silence is accompanied by action and exposed to consequences. It is the condition under which meaning regains density, what Max Picard designates as the foundation from which authentic speech emerges[3]. It is neither imposed nor synonymous with the absence of words and must therefore be distinguished from exclusion.

From an ethical point of view, some may wonder if this posture could not risk signifying a political withdrawal and raise the question of the plausibility of justice if the actors withdraw from speaking in contemporary societies marked by communicative power. The concept of the Economy of Silence requires clarification to avoid collapsing into quietism. This argument is philosophically based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus[4].

Wittgenstein writes that "the world is the totality of facts, not of things" (proposition 1.1 of the Tractatus)[4], that "we make to ourselves pictures of facts" (proposition 2.1)[4], and that "the proposition is a picture of reality" (proposition 4.01)[4]. The meaning of a proposition must be anchored in possible configurations of reality. From an ethical point of view, Wittgenstein thus asserts that what matters most cannot be described by the proposition but rather be shown (propositions 4.1212 and 4.421)[4]. He adds that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (proposition 7)[4]. Through this distinction, Wittgenstein relocates meaning from abstract declaration toward correspondence with

reality. The distinction between 'saying' and 'showing' has important social implications. It helps explain why development discourses frequently fail to translate into material transformation when institutions and policies are unable to convert their commitments into practice. This positioning questions the basis of declarations on social justice, human dignity and development, which can only become real if they are manifested in facts, in institutional behaviour, lived realities and changed living conditions. The present argument does not claim that Wittgenstein developed a social theory of development. Rather, it treats the distinction between saying and showing as an analytical heuristic capable of illuminating situations in which discourse becomes detached from material verification. The move from philosophy of language to development theory is therefore analogical and diagnostic rather than exegetical.

As Sen argues in the capability approach[5, 6], the idea of development is not to create a rhetoric of growth but to activate an expansion of substantive freedoms—what individuals are actually capable of doing and being. Development does not consist in multiplying slogans but in expanding real freedoms through which individuals are able to use available resources to confront the constraints of everyday life. The connection proposed here is not that Wittgenstein developed a theory of development, but that his distinction between saying and showing provides a useful criterion for evaluating whether developmental claims correspond to lived realities. In this sense, Sen's emphasis on realised capabilities offers a practical counterpart to Wittgenstein's concern with meaningful verification. The continuing relevance of the capability approach within contemporary development research is reflected in recent systematic reviews highlighting its growing use in the assessment of well-being, agency, and development interventions[7]. The convergence of these two perspectives suggests a common proposition: ethically, socially, and practically, what matters most in development must be realised in facts rather than remain declarative. Seen from this perspective, rhetorical ineffectiveness becomes costly under conditions of scarcity. Actors without discursive power, most often directly exposed to the consequences, see their actions immediately put to the test of verification. In this sense, they know that every action must count. The central claim of this article is that "smaller actors, under conditions of constraints, are capable of generating more effective change in society because they are structurally constrained to operate at and near the level of facts rather than at the level of discourse."

The contribution of this article to contemporary social and political theory lies in the proposal of a conceptual framework linking the philosophy of language proposed by Wittgenstein to the analysis of discursive power and material transformation to help elucidate the absence of real development in contexts of material and institutional constraint. The argument is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. Put forward, it does not propose silence as a political ideal nor small-scale actors as a universal substitute for institutions; rather, it helps to identify a structural dynamic: when discourse ceases to be confronted with material realities, action finds its basis as the main locus of truth and ethical responsibility. The Economy of Silence therefore describes a condition in which proximity to consequences disciplines action more effectively than discursive amplification.

Wittgenstein and Sen provide the article's primary theoretical foundations, while the remaining authors are mobilised selectively to clarify mechanisms of symbolic power, recognition, institutional mediation, and adaptive action.

Methodological Orientation

This article adopts a philosophical and conceptual methodology. It combines conceptual reconstruction of Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing with normative and diagnostic analysis drawn from development theory, particularly Sen's capability approach. The objective is not empirical verification but theoretical clarification of the relationship between discourse, action, and material transformation under conditions of constraint. The article therefore proceeds through philosophical analysis and interdisciplinary conceptual synthesis.

2. What Cannot Be Said Must Be Done: A Tractatus Framework

To help understand the concept of the Economy of Silence, it is necessary to clarify the logical architecture that underlies it. Although presented as a work of logical analysis, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus[4] also contains an important ethical orientation, particularly in its way of distinguishing between "saying" and "showing," thereby estab-

lishing the limits of language and opening a space in which action acquires ethical significance beyond discourse. This interpretation is also defended by Diamond and Conant[8, 9]. For these scholars, the Tractatus is not merely a work on logical form but also advances a therapeutic and ethical dimension. Ray Monk speaks of the "ethical seriousness" of Wittgenstein's work[10].

This article follows this interpretive framework by treating the Tractatus not merely as an analysis of language but as a clarification of the limits within which meaning and value emerge. Recent scholarship further emphasises that the work aims to dissolve philosophical confusion by clarifying the limits of sense rather than advancing theses[11].

2.1. The World as the Totality of Facts

Wittgenstein opens the Tractatus with a decisive claim: 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things' (proposition 1.1)[4]. Facts are not objects but states of affairs—configurations of reality that determine what is the case. Meaningful propositions picture these states of affairs (proposition 2.1)[4]. A thought is a logical picture of facts (proposition 3)[4], and a proposition shows its sense by representing a possible configuration of reality (proposition 4.022)[4].

Language, properly used, mirrors the logical structure of the world. It does not create reality; it describes it. For Wittgenstein, language remains meaningful only insofar as propositions correspond to possible states of affairs. Logical form is therefore the condition of representation rather than an additional layer of reality. Statements represent the world only if they share its logical structure (proposition 2.18)[4]. This cannot be described as an additional fact; rather, it is manifested through the functioning of meaningful propositions. "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (proposition 5.6)[4]. What cannot be represented in the logical structure of facts cannot be said meaningfully.

As Kuusela notes, logical form in the Tractatus is not a hidden metaphysical structure but the condition that makes representation possible[12]. This means that to represent facts and produce meaning, language needs to be logical. Logic, therefore, does not constitute a reality or an ontological layer behind the world, but rather the condition that makes the representation of facts possible.

More than a grammatical distinction, the transposition of "say/show" reveals an internal limit to the meaningful representation. The world is made up of a set of facts and language can only have meaning if it remains in correspondence with reality. It is precisely at this border that the Economy of Silence takes shape. Once discourse becomes detached from facts, it gradually ceases to produce meaning. Language no longer ensures its function of representing concrete situations and then tends to become a discursive accumulation without real significance.

2.2. Ethics, Silence, and Action

At the border of language appears ethics. Wittgenstein argues that "ethics cannot be put into words" (proposition 6.421)[4]. The ethical dimension of the Tractatus redirects attention toward lived experience and practice.

The distinction between "saying" and "showing" suggests that the logical form cannot be stated (proposition 4.1212)[4]; it manifests itself in propositions. In the same way, ethics cannot be described: it is shown in reality. "The world of the happy is different from that of the unhappy" (proposition 6.43)[4], by its orientation to the world.

In his final proposition—"What one cannot speak about, one must be silent about" (proposition 7)[4]. Wittgenstein emphasises that silence is not a withdrawal but a recognition of the limits of discourse, beyond which responsibility must be expressed through action. Silence, therefore, does not mean emptiness, but the refusal to substitute words for what can only be experienced. This argument suggests that action can convey value where words fail to capture it. Applied to social theory, this idea suggests that proclamations do not necessarily generate ethical quality. Charters, policies, and declarations are only linguistic artifacts. Expressing the intention alone does not produce ethical value; this appears in the facts, in the way of behaving and managing the vulnerability of institutions and in the way of exercising power.

2.3. Showing vs. Saying in Social Life

Beyond the philosophy of language, the transposition of the saying/showing distinction has implications in social life. Modern societies frequently attempt to 'say' what can only be 'shown': to declare justice, proclaim inclusion, and announce development. These statements can often fail to transform the situation. This shows how discourse often generates confusion when values are treated as propositions

rather than practices, inflating language beyond its meaningful limits. When language exceeds its logical function, it attempts to say what can only be shown.

An institution demonstrates justice only through its conduct, by changing the facts. A free society shows freedom in real capacities. The ethical significance is visible in the result. Furthermore, according to Wittgenstein, in order to generate forms of life, meaning must be anchored in a shared practice rather than in an abstract articulation. As Moyal-Sharrock[13] argues, forms of life constitute the practical background within which meaningful discourse becomes possible. Like contemporary scholarship that views Wittgenstein's work as ethically charged and not merely analytical[8, 9], this article's reading of the Tractatus believes that the limit of language is not an epistemic embarrassment but rather an ethical boundary.

The smallest actors often operate closest to this boundary. Lacking access to influential platforms and symbolic resources, they cannot rely on declarative authority. Their legitimacy depends on observable transformation rather than declarative authority. This corresponds to the Wittgensteinian framework in which meaning must manifest itself through facts rather than declarative authority; action remains accountable to reality. Here, we see the emergence of a distinctive rationality generated through the alignment of resources with consequences. Silence becomes a form of concentration rather than absence, "prioritising action over unnecessary speech" for this purpose. Many commentators have interpreted the saying/showing distinction as an ethical restraint in representation rather than a mystical withdrawal.

Recent interpretations emphasise that the distinction between saying and showing serves to clarify the limits of meaningful discourse rather than to disclose an ineffable metaphysical domain[11].

In this sense, silence does not signal an inability to express oneself through speech in the romantic sense, but marks the condition by which responsibility passes from speech to action.

3. When Speech Becomes Waste: The Inflation of Discourse

Having established the limits of language in Section 2, we will examine in Section 3 what happens if societies do not take these limits into account. The Economy of Silence becomes intelligible precisely when discourse loses its connection to material consequences. In modern societies, language is used not as representational but as performative[14]. A declaration is supposed to produce realities and dominion is supposed to confer existence. Political announcements often operate as though declaration itself constituted implementation, and as though the publication of ethical commitments guaranteed their realisation.

When we look closely at narratives of progress[15], we see that narratives invoking rhetorics of progress often mask structural stagnation and reproduce normative complacency[16]. The language of progress can "hide relations of domination under the guise of normative progress"[16]. Descriptions increasingly substitute for the realities they claim to represent.

3.1. The Overproduction of Words

In the Tractatus, language remains meaningful only insofar as it clarifies and represents reality (propositions 4.01 and 4.112)[4]. However, many contemporary institutions operate in the opposite direction, multiplying declarations in response to problems. Institutional discourse often proceeds as though declarations themselves could resolve injustice and communication strategies could substitute for transformation.

This argument does not deny the emancipatory potential of discourse. This position is also defended by Jürgen Habermas, who affirms that communicative rationality can be founded on mutual understanding between actors[17]. For Habermas, communication under appropriate conditions remains capable of coordinating social action. However, when discourse ceases to correspond to observable consequences, when it is no longer referred to verifiable consequences, the problem arises: it generates discursive inflation because it circulates without corrective feedback from the facts, calling into question the completeness of its communicative rationality. In critical theory, to maintain its emancipatory force, criticism needs to remain "anchored in concrete forms of life and responsible for them"[18], otherwise the idea of transformation becomes illusory.

Institutional language can become increasingly self-referential when statements, reports, commitments, and declarations circulate independently of observable conse-

quences[19]. Under such conditions, discourse may continue to expand while its connection to lived realities weakens, creating the appearance of meaning without a corresponding increase in practical transformation. Discursive inflation operates analogously to monetary inflation: as excessive currency reduces purchasing power, excessive discourse can reduce the informational and ethical value of speech. This produces the illusion of transformation without corresponding material change.

Contemporary forms of data-driven governance often intensify this tendency by simulating responsiveness without guaranteeing transformation. In the economic and political domains, discourse consumes attention, trust and institutional credibility and the production of discourse often substitutes for the time required for action. The Economy of Silence suggests replacing the time invested in performative discourse with the time required for transformative action.

Discursive inflation operates analogously to monetary inflation: an overproduction of language detached from corresponding value in reality.

3.2. Political and Economic Noise

Discursive inflation is structured by power rather than occurring accidentally[20], and is displayed through a growing dissociation between institutional language and lived realities where power acts by producing abstractions capable of detaching themselves from material consequences[21]. Karl Polanyi argues that markets have gradually become "disembedded" from concrete social relations (pp. 57–76)[22]. Discourse can therefore detach itself from material consequences and circulate autonomously, while the consequences of its failure are borne elsewhere.

Polanyi's analysis of fictitious commodities—land, labor, and money treated as detachable "things"—illuminates this dynamic. In the sense of discursive inflation, legitimacy and value are detachable from practice and recognition becomes performative, while redistribution remains structurally limited. This divergence persists, as Nancy Fraser demonstrates: recognition operates according to a discursive model, while redistribution operates materially[23]. This reveals a persistent gap between the two.

In her most recent work, Nancy Fraser continues to show how discourses presented as progressive can continue to exist alongside the worsening of deep social inequalities. According to Fraser, recognition policies can work "without disrupting the underlying structures of accumulation"[24, 25]. This means that a society can multiply narratives of recognition—inclusion, empowerment, diversity—without disrupting the structures of redistribution, thereby allowing discursive abundance to coexist with material stagnation.

The analysis of Michel Foucault[26] provides further depth by showing how, by operating only through coercion, but also through regimes of truth, power succeeds in having its discourse validated. Institutions certify statements, amplify narratives and define categories. Discourse does not simply describe reality; it also shapes the conditions under which particular realities are recognised, ignored, or even simulated. This does not mean that the facts disappear. Access to recognition becomes mediated through institutional processes that determine which claims remain visible and which remain peripheral. Institutional structures can therefore insulate discourse from material verification.

3.3. Symbolic Power vs. Practical Power

Discursive inflation is closely linked to symbolic power. Pierre Bourdieu shows how symbolic power allows certain actors to define categories, impose classifications and have their words treated as consequences independent of the result[2]. Symbolic capital allows discourse to retain authority even when practice fails. This raises important questions about the protective discursive buffers available to institutions: policies can fail without dissolving the institution that produced them. Promises can remain unfulfilled without silencing the speaker and Bourdieu's analysis demonstrates that language circulates autonomously. Smaller players do not have such buffers. Their words do not benefit from institutional credit. If nothing changes, nothing is said. Their speech is immediately exposed to verification.

This distinction reveals divergent rationalities shaped by unequal exposure to consequences. When discourse can be insulated from consequences, abstraction proliferates because institutional actors retain the capacity to reinterpret failure narratively. By contrast, actors operating close to material consequences remain continuously exposed to verification. As established in Section 2, meaning retains coherence only when discourse remains anchored in observable states of affairs. Where such anchoring disappears, silence functions as a protection against the dilution of meaning.

This section made it possible to affirm that excess of speech is not without consequences. Discursive excess is therefore not neutral. Its production and protection are structurally uneven, and its proliferation can weaken the representational function of language itself. It is this erosion of meaning that justifies the Economy of Silence.

4. Facts as a Universal Language

When language loses its logical anchoring in reality, discursive inflation obscures factual meaning. Meaning can only be restored through renewed correspondence with facts without having to abandon communication, but rather by recognising that action constitutes a more fundamental form of communication than speech. In this sense, facts or actions are considered a universal language.

4.1. Action as Non-Linguistic Communication

In the Tractatus, language remains meaningful only insofar as it corresponds to states of affairs. Meaning depends on structural correspondence between discourse and reality [4].

The question now arises relating to the direct relationship between facts and language. Action, however, can communicate independently of explicit linguistic mediation. This claim does not presuppose a theory of unmediated access to fact. Rather, it asserts that altered states of affairs constrain interpretation by producing material consequences. The proper functioning of an institution, the emergence of an effective solution to a problem, and the restoration of the means of subsistence of a community—all of these actions transform the situation, without merely describing change but by materially enacting it. The distinction between "saying" and "showing" (proposition 4.1212) [4] indicates that the logical form cannot be said but rather manifests itself in the functioning of discourse. Likewise, ethical and social meaning manifest themselves primarily through practice.

When social life becomes saturated with discourse, embodied practice often remains the most reliable site of intelligibility. Action is publicly visible, materially consequential, and accountable to feedback. It communicates because it alters reality. Action becomes a form of non-linguistic communication—a language whose grammar is shaped by consequences. This insight finds a practical parallel in Donald Schön's notion of reflective practice [27], according to which understanding frequently emerges through engagement with concrete situations rather than through prior theoretical articulation. In such cases, meaning is disclosed through action and adjustment rather than through abstract description.

4.2. Why Facts Travel Better Than Ideologies

Discursive authority is unevenly distributed through education, institutional recognition, and symbolic capital. According to Bourdieu, symbolic capital is unequally distributed [2]. Facts, however, differ from ideologies because they constrain interpretation through material consequences rather than rhetorical adherence. An effective solution does not require prior familiarity with a particular author or theoretical framework to be understood. One may accept or reject its implications, but its consequences remain difficult to ignore. In this sense, facts often circulate more effectively than ideologies.

One may object that facts are themselves politically mediated, casting doubt on the universal character of action as language. Yet an effective practice in one context can often be observed, reproduced, or adapted elsewhere because its intelligibility lies primarily in its practical effects rather than its rhetorical framing. In Wittgenstein, propositions share logical form with the reality they describe (proposition 2.18) [4]. Meaning therefore emerges through structural correspondence rather than persuasion. This gives action a communicative reach that largely escapes ideological controversy, since its effects can be observed independently of prior agreement.

Interpretation ultimately depends upon material states of affairs. Without them, interpretation becomes speculation; their presence reveals the secondary character of discourse.

4.3. The Egalitarian Structure of Action

Discursive hierarchy is structured through unequal access to symbolic authority. Symbolic capital determines whose voice is amplified [2]. This dynamic is shaped by narratives of epistemic injustice, in which a "systematic credibility deficit" is attributed to certain speakers [28]. Regimes of truth structure the statements that are validated [26].

Action, by contrast, possesses a comparatively egalitarian structure. Its meaning depends primarily on what it materially accomplishes. This does not eliminate inequali-

ties, but nevertheless creates a domain where the emergence of meaning is not based on any discursive privilege. Epistemologies of resistance highlight the "epistemic frictions" generated by marginalised points of view[29]. Actors excluded from dominant discursive structures frequently rely on the communicative force of observable results. Their actions require immediate intelligibility because they cannot rely on interpretive mediation. It is this requirement that gives action the character of a universal language. Although practices may remain locally specific, the logic is transferable because the meaning resides in the functioning. It should be noted that, according to Wittgenstein, the role of philosophy is not to advance theses but to clarify what has already been demonstrated (proposition 4.112)[4]. Theoretical reflection must not replace practice but recognise its meaning. This position clearly defines the mission of theory here, that of describing and not prescribing. The assumption that visibility determines impact is therefore destabilised.

5. The Poor as Logical and Economic Actors

Action provides a grammar through which reality becomes intelligible in practice. This has an important implication: action emerges under materially constraining conditions. In this section, this article makes a counterintuitive claim: constraint does not necessarily diminish rationality; under certain structural conditions, it can intensify adaptive forms of rational coordination. This argument nevertheless risks being misread as a moralisation of constraint, which requires great caution in argumentation.

The argument advanced here is that actors operating under high material constraints often develop forms of adaptive efficiency that remain less visible in environments protected from immediate consequences[30].

5.1. Constraint as a Source of Rationality

This section examines how sustained exposure to material consequences can influence practical judgment and decision-making, fostering adaptive forms of coordination grounded in direct engagement with outcomes. This is a structural observation, not a moral judgment. Scarcity does not confer moral superiority and poverty is not a virtue. This argument is supported by Sen[5], who considers deprivation as a restriction of capacities and a condition of injustice. We therefore do not intend here to idealise marginality.

Scarcity disciplines behaviour by forcing actors to pay attention to immediate constraints and consequences[31]. The scarcity of resources reduces the margin for error, making it impossible to postpone decisions or absorb consequences using institutional buffers because they are not available. Nancy Fraser makes a clear distinction between recognition and redistribution to explain this asymmetry[23]. For Fraser, while recognition may expand through discourse, redistribution remains stagnant, emphasising that while discourse concerning poverty expands, their structural position remains unchanged, with only the proximity of consequences constituting a constraining factor for alignment. Their rationality becomes increasingly constrained by material verification.

Wittgenstein's claim that "the world is the totality of facts" (proposition 1.1)[4] can be read here from a social perspective. Logic here becomes more than abstract coherence and becomes practical navigation through states of affairs. When the consequences are immediate, the logic of action becomes inevitable.

5.2. Efficiency Born from Necessity

This subsection argues that efficiency arises from necessity. When large institutions, operating at a distance from consequences, fail, their failures can often be absorbed through institutional scale and symbolic insulation[2]. Institutional inefficiency can be narratively reframed rather than materially corrected. On the other hand, small-scale actors who do not have such insulation see their actions immediately tested. Banerjee and Duflo emphasise that development analysis must remain attentive to lived decision-making under constraint[32]. Policies need to focus on "how people actually live and decide under constraint." For small-scale actors, a failed decision may threaten their livelihood, and the resulting dysfunction cannot be offset through rhetoric. Proximity to consequences therefore generates a distinctive form of practical efficiency. It is not an optimisation in the economic sense, but the search for coherence between intention and consequence.

Albert Hirschman's work on exit, voice, and loyalty shows how silence can function strategically (pp.15–43)[33]. It states that, when voice becomes costly or structurally ineffective, actors eventually turn toward exit, reallocating

efforts from discursive participation to practical adaptation. In this sense, within the Economy of Silence, silence should not be understood as withdrawal from public life but as the reallocation of effort from low-yield discourse toward consequential action.

This argument is also supported by James C. Scott[34], who argues that subordinate groups often mount discrete and dispersed forms of resistance constructed through everyday practices aimed at changing their conditions without requiring public proclamation. These adaptive responses to asymmetrical power, not necessarily judged heroic, allow them to replace speech where they know it to be ineffective. This dynamic corresponds to the Economy of Silence, and the silence here is not an imposed silence but a rational prioritisation of action instead of investing in low-yield discursive participation.

Institutional abundance can conceal inefficiency behind layers of organisational complexity. On the other hand, the scarcity of resources makes it obligatory to operationalise the justification of each action. The argument therefore suggests that meaning must remain functional rather than merely symbolic. Under such conditions, action becomes less a preference than a necessity.

5.3. Small Actors and Systemic Adaptation

Rationality under constraint tends to become adaptive rather than predictive. This does not aim to control the future of facts through abstraction but continually adapts through an often informal or improvised reactivity from the point of view of formal economic theory. It is precisely this embeddedness in an adaptive process that is the basis of resilience. Rather than relying on rigid planning, actors continuously adjust through feedback. Ostrom argues, similar to research on polycentric governance, that local actors often preserve the commons more effectively than centralised authorities[35].

Sen affirms that rationality is not defined by a formal law but by real functioning[5, 6], that is to say, what individuals are really capable of doing. According to Sen, capability is realised through practice rather than declaration. Nussbaum similarly emphasises the embodied and socially supported nature of capacities; the capacity of actors is inscribed, not in a form of legal abstraction, but in their lived capacity supported by material and institutional conditions[36]. By combining economic necessity with social cohesion, small-scale actors manage to face severe limitations and achieve a high level of efficiency. We are witnessing the integration of ethical and material concerns to counter the risk of failure, which carries an immediate material cost. Their actions are directed toward preserving the structures on which their survival depends because the potential existence of destructive forces is an ongoing threat that could harm future possibilities. Their innovations may be modest in scale, but they are often highly refined through continuous exposure to consequences.

By overturning the conventional hypothesis, Section 5 argues that constraint functions not only as a limitation but also as a source of clarification. Under conditions of scarcity, the proximity of consequences can strengthen adaptive forms of rational coordination among actors directly exposed to material outcomes, encouraging the prioritisation of action where ineffective discourse carries little practical value.

6. Measured Blows and Sustainable Melodies

This section uses the metaphor of drumming to suggest that sustainable transformation depends less on force than on measured and sustained intervention. If constraint can intensify adaptive rationality, it also disciplines force. Social systems are not inert objects but living structures shaped by trust, norms, expectations, and interdependencies. Intervening within such systems requires attentiveness to structural limits and temporal rhythms. As the metaphor suggests, "a blow too hard breaks the drum; well-measured drumbeats produce music."

There are thresholds beyond which intervention stops transforming and begins to destroy. Systems accumulate memory, trust, expectations, and stable relations over time[37]. From a Latour's[37] perspective, social order is not a fixed object but an achievement continuously maintained through interconnected actors and practices. Excessively forceful intervention can destabilise the very structures upon which sustainable transformation depends.

6.1. Violence, Speed, and Structural Damage

Large institutions often equate scale, speed, and force with effectiveness. For them, speed, scale and visibility are indicators of impact. Rosa argues that acceleration erodes "relations of resonance with the world"[38], thereby inten-

sifying systemic instability. Actors seeking rapid results frequently externalise long-term costs. Certainly, systems have absorption capacities but beyond certain thresholds, accelerated intervention often weakens corrective feedback mechanisms.

From a Wittgensteinian perspective, this reflects a conceptual confusion. The logical form is not one object among others, but the condition of intelligibility (proposition 2.18)[4]. Once structural limits are ignored, intelligibility itself begins to erode. In this sense, social forms become unstable when their structural limits are exceeded. Interventions detached from structural limits generate instability rather than transformation. The system does not respond with transformation but with fragmentation. Large institutions, protected by symbolic capital and institutional insulation[2], can temporarily absorb the consequences of such fragmentation but small actors cannot. Rapid interventions often generate visible short-term effects followed by gradual structural erosion.

6.2. Precision, Rhythm, and Social Continuity

Sustainable action operates through rhythm, adjustment, and feedback. As Sennett[39] argues, durable social forms require iterative and open-ended construction rather than imposed design. This construction allows feedback, correction and learning while respecting thresholds.

To preserve the systems within which they operate, small actors generally seek to avoid disruption. Abrupt destabilisation of the surrounding environment also destabilises them. They must therefore engage in interventions that allow continuity to be preserved, which produces an iterative rationality. Because their own survival depends upon systemic continuity, constrained actors tend to avoid forms of intervention that destabilise their environment too abruptly. Each intervention is continuously adjusted through feedback. A similar logic appears in Schön's notion of reflective practice, where solutions are progressively refined through interaction with concrete situations rather than imposed in a fully articulated form from the outset[27]. Ethics and economics converge here. Sustainability here refers not only to ecological prudence but also to structural coherence. It is therefore irrational to initiate an intervention which destroys the conditions of possibility of this same intervention. We find a social echo in the idea of Wittgenstein. This recalls Wittgenstein's claim that "the solution to the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem" (proposition 6.521)[4].

Measured intervention preserves the structural conditions that sustain meaningful transformation. Achieving sustainable transformation does not require overwhelming resistance but a dissolution of the imbalance between practice and structure.

6.3. Against the Myth of Scale

Modern developmental imaginaries frequently equate scale with effectiveness. Yet we also see that scale often increases the distance from consequences. Distance from consequences encourages abstraction. Delayed feedback weakens corrective adaptation. Smaller actors, on the other hand, operate at a minimal distance from consequences and their feedback loops are tight, making their mistakes immediately visible. This proximity encourages refinement rather than performative visibility. Efficiency here refers less to maximisation than to the minimisation of systemic breakdown. Its central objective is the preservation of future possibilities.

This argument challenges dominant economic imaginaries that equate efficiency with expansion. Efficiency may also consist in maintaining structural coherence over time. Actors operating under constraints often sustain continuity because their actions remain closely exposed to consequences. This is not a romanticisation of scarcity but a structural observation: change is integrated through proportionate interventions that preserve the conditions of future action. Excessive force tends to destabilise systems, whereas measured action promotes their maintenance and coherence.

The arguments developed across the previous sections converge toward a common conclusion: meaningful transformation depends less on discursive scale or institutional force than on sustained exposure to material consequences.

7. Development beyond Speech: Sen and Wittgenstein Together

Without engagement with development theory, the concept of the Economy of Silence would remain philosophically suggestive but theoretically incomplete. This section therefore extends the Wittgensteinian framework into development theory through engagement with the capability approach. The objective is not doctrinal synthesis but struc-

tural comparison: Wittgenstein specifies the limits of language and the primacy of "showing" over "saying"; Sen suggests that development be evaluated in terms of real freedoms, not declarative commitments but real functioning [6, 40]. Both reject the substitution of discourse for lived transformation. The comparison does not imply theoretical equivalence. Rather, Wittgenstein clarifies the conditions under which claims acquire meaning, while Sen specifies how development can be evaluated through actual freedoms and achieved functionings.

7.1. Capability as Realised Functioning

Sen's contribution becomes central at this stage. Contemporary research defines capabilities as "real opportunities to achieve valued functioning" [41]. Sen defines development through the expansion of substantive freedoms and real opportunities for action [5, 6]. For Sen, poverty cannot be equated solely with low income but also with deprivation of capabilities. Development, therefore, cannot be inferred from institutional declarations alone; it requires attention to the actual opportunities available to individuals and to the functions they are able to achieve [41, 42].

Alkire's work reinforces this perspective by highlighting the importance of multidimensional poverty research that assesses deprivation through "observable impairments in functioning" [42]. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum argues that capabilities are not abstract possibilities but real operating powers sustained by material and institutional conditions [36]. Freedom, in this sense, is lived rather than merely proclaimed.

At this point, Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing becomes particularly illuminating. If meaning emerges through use [4], then capabilities acquire significance not as declarations of possibility but through their manifestation in practice. This convergence becomes especially visible when read through the Tractatus. Wittgenstein states that "it is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics are transcendental" (proposition 6.421) [4]. Ethical value is not established through assertion but revealed through forms of life and conduct. In a similar way, development cannot simply be declared to exist; it becomes visible where capabilities are effectively exercised and expanded.

From this perspective, capability acquires meaning not through its declaration but through its realisation in functioning, bringing Sen's conception of development into close dialogue with Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing.

7.2. Freedom as Practiced, Not Declared

Ethical value cannot be secured propositionally. Likewise, freedom cannot be guaranteed discursively. Certain rights only exist in policies, which, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, risk becoming propositionally empty because they only occupy semantic spaces without corresponding to experienced possibilities [43]. On the other hand, freedom becomes real where it is exercised.

One possible objection is that this argument risks romanticising poverty by emphasising the rationality of constrained actors. I would respond by drawing on Sen's argument that poverty remains an injustice because it restricts capabilities and constraint is not a virtue [5]. Our argument is that the proximity of consequences disciplines action. This argument is structural, not normative. We agree with Bourdieu, who warns against the transformation of necessity into virtue [2]. Scarcity does not create virtue, but it often reduces insulation from consequences. Another objection might be that the Economy of Silence possesses an anti-political character. The Economy of Silence should therefore not be interpreted as a rejection of public speech. Hannah Arendt argues that political life requires public articulation to allow the appearance of action (pp.175–247) [44]. The problem arises when discourse becomes autonomous from practice. If speech remains essential for coordination and legitimation, its validity depends on its anchoring in facts.

Austin's theory of performative utterances helps clarify this point (pp.94–108) [45]. It emphasises that speech acts succeed only under conditions of felicity, showing that statements only produce reality when they are anchored in functional forms of life. Austin's theory of performative utterances reinforces this point: speech acts without practice fail. Silence is not anti-political but anti-inflationary.

7.3. Economic Value as Shown Meaning

A central paradox now emerges: the further an actor is from the consequences of his actions, the more he relies on discourse. The closer actors are to the consequences of their actions, the more disciplined their conduct tends to become. This reflection pushes us to reaffirm that distance enables

abstraction, whereas proximity intensifies accountability.

Polanyi's analysis further deepens this economic dimension[22]. It reminds us that markets never function autonomously; they are anchored in the social arrangements of social, institutional and human structures that make exchanges possible. Economic activity depends upon concrete social and institutional relations. So, when economic valuation becomes detached from lived consequences, the markets' functioning becomes a self-referential abstraction. In this sense, we see prices, performance indicators or promises continuing to circulate in the field without leading to the material conditions that they are supposed to represent. This is because Polanyi designates "fictitious commodities": elements like work, land, currency, etc. treated as simple market objects when in reality they constitute fundamental dimensions of social life. Likewise, as far as discursive inflation is concerned, commitments, stories or promises of social transformation can continue to circulate but without producing effective transformative effects. Symbolic value can therefore circulate independently of material transformation.

This is what Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital clarifies by explaining how reputation value can accumulate independently of productive alignment[2]. For constrained actors, by contrast, economic meaning remains tied to practical consequences. But how can silent adaptation generate systemic correction? Hirschman and Scott help us understand this process. They show that when discourse becomes ineffective, actors increasingly redirect effort toward practical adaptation[33, 34]. This highlights that development cannot remain a narrative; it must be realised through practice.

As demonstrated in Section 5, Wittgenstein specifies that meaning must show itself in fact, while Sen specifies that development must show itself in capability. From there, it has been shown that structural constraints predispose the smallest actors to economise on speech and devote their efforts to action. The Economy of Silence designates conditions under which discourse recedes and practice assumes ethical and developmental weight.

8. Discussion and Limitations

8.1. Diagnostic, Not Programmatic

This article develops the Economy of Silence from a diagnostic rather than prescriptive perspective. The objective is not to propose a political program or institutional blueprint, but rather to identify a structural dynamic: that of the shift in the meaning of discourse towards action in conditions of material and institutional constraint.

The Economy of Silence is not advocated here as a social norm, nor with the intention of proposing a universal substitution of small-scale actors for institutions. Its argument is structural: when speech becomes detached from facts, action regains primacy. Silence is treated not as an ideal but as a corrective condition emerging when discourse loses correspondence with practice, which corresponds to Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy as clarification rather than doctrine (proposition 4.112)[4].

The Economy of Silence defines a condition that emerges within the framework of specific structural arrangements. It should therefore not be interpreted as a universally applicable model.

8.2. The Risk of Romanticisation

A central concern throughout this article has been the risk of romanticising poverty. The argument explicitly rejects such an interpretation and takes as support the criticism of Sen, who affirms that poverty is a deprivation of capacities and therefore an injustice[5]. Scarcity is not treated as desirable; rather, the analysis focuses on how structural constraints can discipline action through proximity to consequences.

Following Bourdieu's warning, the article does not present constrained actors as morally superior, but that the isolation of consequences alters rationality. Discursive insulation can weaken accountability for consequences. The effectiveness discussed here is structural rather than moral.

8.3. Efficiency and the Ethical Frame

The article's use of the term 'efficiency' may raise concerns about instrumental reductionism. We deliberately define effectiveness as the coherence between intention, action and constrained consequences. It is this process of reflection that has led to the development of this article. Efficiency here is not equated with maximisation or utilitarian optimisation; instead, we emphasise sustainability, proportionality and attention to consequences as factors of effectiveness. This is a conception closer to practical wisdom than to utilitarian

calculation, which converges with Sen's rejection of a purely results-based assessment of well-being. However, a deeper dialogue with virtue ethics or care ethics could strengthen this dimension.

8.4. Silence, Agency, and Domination

The concept of silence carries a long history of political ambiguity. Feminist, postcolonial and critical studies often evoke silence as a condition of imposed domination. However, Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power[2] shows that symbolic power can normalise exclusion. To understand the argument of this article, it is therefore necessary to distinguish between imposed silence and the Economy of Silence[46]. While the former removes agency, the latter concentrates it[47]. Without capacity, silence turns into oppression. The Economy of Silence exists only where silence remains coupled with agency and action.

8.5. The Limits of a Wittgensteinian Framework

Wittgenstein's early philosophy was not intended as a social or economic theory. We do not claim to derive this article from the sociological conclusions of the Tractatus but the article instead mobilises the distinction between "saying" and "showing" as a diagnostic resource to identify the conditions for surpassing discourse by its real capacity for representation. Through this use, we illuminate the gaps in language, facts and practices in contemporary institutional and economic contexts.

The article does not attempt empirical modelling and this may seem insufficiently operationalised for some of our readers. This is a deliberate choice intended to privilege conceptual clarity and analytical coherence. The article treats Wittgenstein's framework as a diagnostic resource rather than a direct sociological theory.

8.6. Structural Scarcity and Political Economy

A final limitation concerns the political production of scarcity. According to Karl Polanyi's critique, markets remain embedded in institutional and social arrangements[22], while Nancy Fraser emphasises that symbolic recognition can progress without real material redistribution[23]. We recognise here that scarcity is often politically produced but the article does not fully theorise the mechanisms by which certain discursive regimes contribute to the maintenance of inequalities. These mechanisms require further theoretical and empirical investigation.

9. Conclusions

This article develops the concept of the Economy of Silence to explain how conditions of constraint can structurally align action with consequences. Drawing on Wittgenstein's distinction between "saying" and "showing," the article argues that ethical, political and economic meaning cannot be ensured by declaration alone but must be put into practice in fact. When discourse becomes detached from material consequences, it risks becoming inflationary: a circulation of propositions insufficiently accountable to reality.

The article further argues that scarcity, although often produced through unjust structures, disciplines action by reducing insulation from consequences. When actors remain closely exposed to consequences, practical adjustment takes precedence over rhetorical substitution, which is more readily available to institutions protected by discursive buffers and distant from those consequences. Under such conditions, rationality becomes increasingly adaptive and feedback-sensitive. This argument does not romanticise constraint; rather, it identifies a structural dynamic that suggests that the insulation often available to large institutions allows abstraction, while the exposure of the smallest and most constrained imposes alignment on them.

Both Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and Sen's capability approach interpret development not as the proliferation of commitments but as the expansion of real and functional freedoms. Within the Tractatus framework, ethical meaning is not a secured proposition but is demonstrated through lived practice. Institutions remain meaningful only insofar as they preserve accountability to consequences.

The article contributes to contemporary debates in philosophy of language and development theory by introducing the Economy of Silence as a diagnostic concept for analysing situations in which transformative action retains greater epistemic and ethical reliability than discourse detached from material consequences. By bringing Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing into dialogue with Sen's capability approach, it offers a framework for evaluating development through enacted realities rather than declarative

commitments.

Under conditions of proximity to consequences, transformation depends less on rhetorical commitment than on the capacity to sustain practical coherence between institutions, action, and lived realities. Real transformation therefore depends less on discursive affirmation than on the sustained capacity of institutions and actors to remain accountable to lived realities.

The Economy of Silence therefore describes conditions under which action becomes more reliable than discourse as a carrier of ethical and developmental meaning.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No data available.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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