



# The Interrelation Between Culturally Learned Helplessness and Economic Underdevelopment

Ferhat Öztutuş<sup>1</sup>, Yunus Eroğlu\*<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This article offers insights into the interrelationship between culturally learned helplessness and economic underdevelopment. It is argued that the concept of learned helplessness offers noteworthy insights into the nature of economic underdevelopment, particularly in less developed countries where or if it has become a cultural phenomenon. This reasoning is based on a rationality that is spatially bounded and intrinsically connected to the nature, source and evolution of social and cultural norms. It is concluded that the integration of learned helplessness (or a behavioural theory in general) into the field of economic development offers significant potential for exploring and explaining long-term evolutionary patterns of development.

**Keywords:** Economic development, Learned helplessness, Underdevelopment, Culture, Poverty

## 1. Introduction

Before proceeding to explain the inter-relationship between learned helplessness and economic development, a few points should be emphasized here. First, this paper is less concerned with the theoretical status of the concept of “learned helplessness” than with the possible linkages between social and economic conditions caused by learned helplessness. Second, until empirical materials are developed, the validity of the scope of the hypothesis discussing the relationship between two concepts in this paper can be questioned. However, the views expressed do not exclude the possibility that they include the effects of a culture of learned helplessness. The third and final point is that no claims are made about the scope or prevalence of the perspective here. Indeed, the historical events and countries cited as examples in the article are used merely as illustrations, without any implication either that they are the result of learned helplessness or that they suffer from learned helplessness.

<sup>1</sup>Hakkari University, Department of Economics, Hakkari, Türkiye, ferhatoztutus@hakkari.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6146-144X

<sup>2</sup>Hakkari University, Yuksekova Vocational School, Department of Administration and Organization, Hakkari, Türkiye, yunuseroglu@hakkari.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6076-4868 \*Corresponding Author

**Received:** 05 June 2024, **Accepted:** 01 September 2024, **Online:** 22 September 2024

**Cite as:** Öztutuş, F., & Eroğlu, Y. (2024). The interrelation between culturally learned helplessness and economic underdevelopment. *Universal Journal of History and Culture*, 6(2), 120-140. <https://doi.org/10.52613/ujhc.1496419>

Although there are many studies on the theory of learned helplessness, no research has been conducted on the relationship between learned helplessness and economic development. Therefore, we try to fill this gap and explain the socio-economic framework of learned helplessness from different perspectives for a specific group of countries (e.g. less developed countries). In this context, the purpose of this article is threefold. The first is to explain the meaning of the culture of learned helplessness and to evaluate the cognitive tendencies that lead to it from a sociological perspective. The second is to address learned helplessness from an economic development perspective, using concrete examples from around the world. Third, to identify public policy challenges that need to be addressed in order to reduce learned helplessness fostered by culture (e.g. welfare dependency) and/or economic conditions (e.g. crises). The ultimate aim is to make suggestions for overcoming the culture of helplessness created by culture and economic conditions.

## 2. Culturally Encoded Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness acquires a collective characteristic by being transferred to culture and the sphere of spiritual existence through individuals. If individuals' learning of helplessness is carried to a social field, helplessness in this field gains a cultural and therefore a sociological dimension. Thus, although it is a concept commonly used in the field of psychology, it has also entered the domain of sociology by being dealt with in different sociological dimensions (attitude, mentality, collective behaviour). To analyse whether learned helplessness is of psychological or sociological origin, the following reasoning is appropriate to make: if a society, organization, nation, or group believes that it does not possess the ability, faith, and potential to address an economic, political, or natural issue, and if it distorts its perception through self-judgment of "worthlessness or incompetence," this condition is sociological in nature (Ayan, 1996).

Therefore, it can be said that learned helplessness reflects a social as well as an individual state of mind or behaviour. However, the concept of learned helplessness, which initially manifests in individuals, is then reinforced and propagated within society's cultural construction process. In this context, Ayan (1996) argues that the obligatory transition of the concept of learned helplessness from psychology to sociology is completed in culture. In accordance with Ayan's analysis, learned helplessness, which results from individual psychological processes, has evolved into a collective mindset and now possesses a cultural dimension. In other words, the socio-ontology of learned helplessness is fundamentally embedded in the cultural environment, making it a social and historical phenomenon. Similarly, Aktan (2016) posits that

learned helplessness occurs as a learned behaviour within social culture. He evaluates learned behaviour within the definition of social culture, which comprises learned behaviours that have been accepted for many years. Thus, learned helplessness is accordingly considered a part of these behaviours.

The most remarkable functions that play an active role in the cultural characterisation of learned helplessness in society are language, tradition, identity and consciousness. Language is a resource that enables people to connect with the past and to make designs for the future. Undoubtedly, language has a cultural character and does not only give us a copy of external reality, but, in some cases, it actually constructs reality itself. In this context, the transmission of learned helplessness across generations is realised through language's dominance. Tradition is a social phenomenon and refers to cultural continuity. It delineates the cultural moulds with hard and soft sanctions passed down by people within society from generation to generation. The concept of identity characterises who individuals, groups, and organisations are and is a socio-political process of labelling attached to them. Identity, which is formed through the influence of different constructs such as ideology, religion, occupation and ethnicity, shows an existence based on appeals and comparisons, but with an emphasis on similarities and dissimilarities. However, in the construction of identity, similarities tend to be more prominent (Greenacre, 1957, as cited in Akhtar, 2018). In this regard, Bauman (2001) argues that identity serves as a means of escaping uncertainty and indicates where a person stands among existing behaviour patterns. Social identities correspond to distinguishing characteristics and can thus include the cultural formation of learned helplessness as part of identity.

Furthermore, consciousness is a fundamental aspect of the 'culturalisation' of learned helplessness, encompassing perception, recollection, thinking, evaluation, and decision-making processes. It is integral to evaluating sensations, reflections, memory, reasoning styles, and preferences (Aydın, 2020). Durkheim's concept of "collective consciousness" holds great importance as it relates to the intellectual output of societies (Durkheim, 2018). He defines collective consciousness as a set of emotions and thoughts shared by individuals within a community, which possess qualities akin to a living entity (Tuncer, 2017). Collective behaviour and thinking patterns are intrinsic aspects of society's actions, consistently manifesting and expressing themselves through oral communication, education, and literature (Durkheim, 2018). When considered in this context, learned helplessness occurs in social memory and is passed down to new generations through the aforementioned factors of language, consciousness, identity, and tradition. This indicates that learned helplessness can manifest as social personality traits through cultural inheritance and the establishment of societal norms.

The process of “enculturation” results in the transfer of learned helplessness from an individual’s psychological world to the wider culture of society, where it becomes a heritage passed down to future generations. Herkowitz, who coined the term, defined it in the context of “unconscious adaptation to social life” and “automatic adaptation to cultural patterns” (Herkowitz, 1968, as cited in Shimahara, 1970). Although acculturation is defined in various manners, it primarily refers to the process in which individuals acquire knowledge about and relate to their ethnic culture. This includes the development of cultural awareness and understanding throughout one’s life, as well as the degree to which individuals identify with and experience their ethnic culture (Soldier, 1985 & Wilbert, 1976, as cited in Zimmerman et al., 1996). At this juncture, it is important to note that the concept of “acculturation” encompasses safeguarding the values present in society in response to its needs and instructing all generations on how to culturally respond to meet these requirements (Uygunkan, 2005). The emergence of a culture of learned helplessness appears to result from a particular acculturation process. This process is defined, in this context, as the conscious or unconscious acquisition of intellectual products, understanding, and cultural awareness over time. Therefore, just as the process of addressing a social issue can develop into a societal norm over time, the notion that the measures taken to resolve a social issue hold no influence over the outcome and the decision to not take action can also develop into a societal norm over time, transmitted through the process of acculturation to successive generations.

The situation described above can be explained in the following way: When individuals confront a social issue, they endeavour to address it by considering the advantages to society and humanity. Learned helplessness, a facet of acculturation, can be attributed to the belief that society is incapable of solving the issue as a result of prior lived experiences. It is important to note that learned helplessness, which has become a societal norm, does not arise spontaneously or abruptly. Over a period, an individual or society may develop a psychological state of learned helplessness, which takes on a sociological identity through other social institutions. Through subsequent acculturation, the perception process becomes automatic, and then leading to the transmission of learned helplessness to new generations. Later, the emergence of a culture of learned helplessness over time within society creates obstacles to social change and development, ultimately impeding progress.

The notion of “habitus” constitutes a crucial element of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology, as it highlights the impact of the group or environment to which an individual belongs on their behaviour. This is conveyed through the notion of “tendencies” that exist within the mind. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus pertains to the reservoirs of knowledge that individuals possess as a result of their association with particular cultures or subcultures (Bourdieu, 2017). By virtue of this definition, it serves as a cognitive and motivational

mechanism that structures, for example, the class group to which an individual belongs, his or her attitudes towards events (including phenomena, objects, situations), and his or her tendencies to think and act. Besides, habitus generates a cultural orientation among group members. This mechanism can also establish a sense of learned helplessness in the group due to a certain cognitive and intellectual disposition. The individual may develop a tendency to act or refrain from action, remain indifferent towards events or situations specific to their social group or class, or gain intellectual awareness that they are powerless to influence outcomes.

In cultures where learned helplessness has become ingrained, possibly due to a passive social structure, there may be a sense of indifference towards countrywide progress or, even worse, a fatalistic acceptance. According to Maier and Seligman (1976), this refers to motivational, emotional, and cognitive shortcomings, such as perceived lack of control over event outcomes, helplessness, determining if perception of lack of control is accurate, apathy, passivity, anxiety, depression and the inability to learn that events are controllable (Gordon, 1985). Consequently, societies with a culture of learned helplessness exhibit passive resistance, believing that their actions will not affect the outcome.

Research into the connection between economic development and behavioural constructs such as culture has revealed the difficulty of elucidating causal relationships between human behaviour and economic activity at the group level (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015). For this reason, in recent years, a number of debates have focused on the impact of cultural factors on the development of cities and regions, both in the political and economic spheres.

### 3. Economic Underdevelopment

The issue of economic “underdevelopment” in relation to economic development was once addressed primarily by economists. However, over time, this issue has extended to other social sciences, leading to an interdisciplinary identity for the question of underdevelopment. This shift recognizes that underdevelopment cannot be resolved solely through economic policies (Berber, 2015). Consequently, existing literature<sup>1</sup> presents various approaches to addressing the problem of underdevelopment based on different parameters such as capital, technology, production, consumption, labour, political stability, geography, and religion. Despite these diverse approaches, there is a noticeable lack of attention to the causal relationship between the psychological perception of society and the level of economic development of a country. This aspect will be discussed in detail in this section.

---

<sup>1</sup>See the next subheading for more details.

Most nations strive to achieve contemporary developmental levels and align their economic policies accordingly. Typically, countries establish their policies by considering various macroeconomic indicators such as balance of payments, growth rate, employment rate, inflation rate, and income distribution. Any potential uncertainty or instability in these variables can result in an economic crisis, impacting both social psychology and social welfare.

To illustrate, the political structure represents a substantial influence on the process of development. Issues such as inadequate governance, inefficiencies within the bureaucratic apparatus, an excess of red tape, a lack of effective communication channels, military and political interventions, corruption, inflexible regulations, the absence of a viable democratic culture, and legal difficulties indirectly impact development. Furthermore, international factors, including data published by other countries and the expectations of foreign analysts regarding a country's economy and politics (including the role of domestic institutions), can indirectly influence economic development (Shah, 2023).

Consequently, it is difficult to engage in discourse concerning economic progress and its beneficial outcomes in an environment that is characterised by a paucity of economic, sociological and political stability. It is typically the case that socio-economic-political challenges are accompanied by problems of economic development. The presence of certain indicators, such as poverty, corruption, high inflation, low income, low levels of education, income inequality, and social exclusion, can result in individuals experiencing or being at risk of experiencing permanent material deprivation. It is challenging to overcome this situation, particularly for those who are members of the affected society.

Over time, societies that perceive themselves to be lacking the capacity to achieve their desired economic objectives may become less inclined to pursue those objectives. This outlook can be attributed to their extensive experience, accumulated perceptions of past events, and a lack of capacity to regulate the future, which results in a lack of motivation and confidence in change. Consequently, entities within such a society may be reluctant to engage in economic, political, and social activities that demand structural alterations in the economy due to a perception of ineffectiveness and futility, particularly when fatalism is prevalent (Dixon & Frolova, 2011).

Therefore, the long-standing challenge of promoting economic development persists.

Historically, it is evident that when the citizens of a country inherit socio-economic underdevelopment over generations, it reflects in every sphere of life (Dale-Harris, 2013). The negative repercussions of a country's level of development bolster a culture of learned helplessness within society. A prevalent

sense of powerlessness, passivity, and uselessness hampers development, reinforcing a culture of “learned helplessness.” This analysis can be elucidated as follows: The prevalence of learned helplessness in society leads to a lack of motivation, passivity, and fatalism. This hinders the ability to overcome negative economic situations and prolongs the implementation of solutions. Moreover, negative practices such as the long-term continuation of socio-economic problems, the extended process of resolving these problems, disagreements between interest groups on policy solutions, policies failing to reach their expected goals, and the allocation of existing resources exclusively to certain groups cause discontent and disappointment, strengthening the psychology of learned helplessness. Societies enduring adverse conditions may strive to persevere or mitigate the impact of such circumstances but gradually lose their motivation and hope as they come to terms with their lack of control.

As the research suggests, the interplay between social psychology and economic development is increasingly recognised as a critical factor in the field of research. The extant literature demonstrates that social trust and cooperative behaviour exert a significant influence on economic performance, thereby underscoring the imperative for the implementation of policies that foster social cohesion and trust (Fukuyama, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Furthermore, the part played by cultural values and social norms in influencing economic outcomes emphasises the importance of taking psychological factors into account in development strategies (Hofstede, 2001). In light of these observations, the concept of learned helplessness is considered in the context of economic underdevelopment in the following section.

#### **4. The Theories on Economic Development**

The scholarly investigation of economic development spans nearly two centuries, during which various theories have been proposed to address the challenges faced by both developed and underdeveloped nations. Nevertheless, theoretical frameworks rooted solely in the socio-economic structures of developed countries have proven inadequate in addressing all the problems of less developed nations (Berber, 2015).

The literature on economic development reveals multiple theories aimed at explaining and resolving the economic development issues of less developed countries. These include Modernization Theory, Marx’s Historical Materialism, Vicious Cycle Theory, Structuralist Approach, Dependency Theory, Dualism Theory, Structural Change Theory, World-Systems Theory, Economic Development with Unlimited Supply of Labour, and the New Classical Counter-Revolution (Berber, 2015). These theories generally evaluate development within the context of economic relationships, structures, and sociological or cultural differences.

Furthermore, behavioural economics has gained prominence for integrating psychological insights into economic models to understand decision-making processes, challenging the traditional notion of rational behaviour. For example, Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) "prospect theory" highlight how individuals make satisficing rather than optimizing decisions and asymmetrically value gains and losses. Simon's (1990) concept of "bounded rationality" argues that the minds of individuals must be viewed in terms of the environmental context in which they have developed, leading to limitations in human information processing due to limitations in knowledge and computational capacity (Kahneman, 2003). Therefore, despite its insights, behavioural economics mainly focuses on individual cognitive biases rather than collective resignation (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Camerer & Loewenstein, 2004). The Human Development and Capabilities Approach (Sen, 1989, 2000) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) focus on empowerment of individuals and intrinsic motivation, respectively, yet fail to consider the entrenched societal inertia seen in learned helplessness. Cultural economics examines the influence of cultural values and norms on economic behaviour (Throsby, 2000) but does not specifically address the negative impact of a pervasive defeatist mindset on economic development. Social capital theory discusses the role of individualism, social networks and socio-economic behaviours (Putnam, 2000) but do not fully capture the deep-seated psychological barriers to economic phenomenon that learned helplessness emphasizes. These theoretical approaches demonstrate that rational choice theory is insufficient to explain economic and social behaviour and the decision-making processes that individuals employ to determine such behaviours (Hodgson, 2012).

Nevertheless, current economic and sociological approaches almost never emphasise the pre-existing social structure necessary to realise the ideal of a prosperous and functioning society. Neoliberal theory, for example, theorises a universal fiction that sets out the conditions necessary for social welfare. However, there is no mention of the social structure that needs to be in place for neoliberal values to function. As a result, this and many other economic theories leave unanswered the question of whether an autonomous society with a low level of culture and thought can support these values.

The theoretical examinations of poverty generally focus on its sociological and economic aspects. Classical Marxism attributes contemporary poverty to the capitalist economy's operations, while critical Marxism links poverty to both capitalist functions and cultural factors (Çoban, 2019). The neoclassical approach highlights individual efficiency and skill deficiencies as causes of poverty, while the social Darwinist perspective views poverty as an evolutionary outcome of social breakdown and differentiation, portraying it as a purifying process that eliminates societal misfits (Harvey & Reed, 1992). Ritzer's sociological analysis considers poverty an inherent feature of capitalism's basic structure (Ritzer, 1986).



The Malthusian approach attributes poverty to uncontrolled population growth amidst scarce resources, whereas Lewis's (1966) "culture of poverty" theory suggests that poverty stems from a cultural context that promotes contentment with less (Giddens, 2005).

Examining the theories discussed so far reveals a general neglect of the socio-psychological aspects of economic development problems, such as cultural poverty and cultural unemployment. There are three main reasons why economists often overlook these aspects in their analyses. First, establishing causality between psychological factors and social and economic phenomena presents methodological challenges. Second, it is difficult to quantify the social and economic costs associated with psychological factors. Third, social psychology is susceptible to sudden changes due to external factors, and the impact of these changes on social and economic phenomena takes time to become apparent.

Given that society is fundamentally central to economic development, an important question arises: does inherited culture, such as learned helplessness, impact the economic development process of a country? Ruby Payne (2005) was the first to ask this question in her book "A Framework for Understanding Poverty". In her examination of the urban American class system, Payne argues that a form of learned helplessness, passed from parents to children, is a core element of poverty. She suggests that poverty engenders a mindset of learned helplessness, which stifles forward-thinking motivation among those who are impoverished. Moreover, Payne asserts that this learned helplessness leads individuals in poverty to spend their income in seemingly irresponsible ways, rather than saving for future investments or actively responding to social incentives. However, it is crucial to critically examine these claims, considering that cultural and structural factors are deeply intertwined, and attributing poverty solely to individual mindset risks oversimplifying the complex dynamics at play.

However, the concept of learned helplessness in the context of economic underdevelopment we discuss in this paper differs from that proposed by Ruby Payne (2005) in terms of scope, focus and implications. Payne's analysis focuses on the "culture of poverty" within particular urban American communities, emphasizing how generational poverty cultivates a mindset of helplessness that influences both individual and communal behaviours. However, the notion of learned helplessness fundamentally extends beyond this approach, carrying broader implications for societal and institutional dynamics, particularly concerning economic underdevelopment. That is to say, this paper intends to assess the ways in which collective powerlessness can impede national economic progress and impede structural socio-economic reforms.

Furthermore, Payne's work provides educators and policymakers with practical strategies for addressing these behaviours at the local level. In contrast, it is our contention that the phenomenon of learned

helplessness causing economic underdevelopment necessitates the implementation of comprehensive, multi-faceted strategies that encompass institutional reforms, empowerment programmes and broad economic policies. What is more, the former employs a socio-cultural framework to address poverty at the community level, while the latter integrates a socio-cultural framework to examine the interplay between psychological barriers and economic structures at a national scale.

Despite the multitude of approaches that have been taken to address economic underdevelopment from a variety of perspectives, the causal relationship between societal psychological perception, namely culturally learned helplessness, and economic development remains underexplored. This represents a significant gap in the existing literature, as a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and cultural dimensions of economic underdevelopment is essential for the development of effective strategies to promote economic progress. In order to overcome the limitations imposed by learned helplessness, it is imperative to incorporate these factors into development strategies.

As such, inherited cultural traits such as learned helplessness determine human potential and social choices, which in turn influence economic development. Similarly, economic conditions in society can reinforce cultural attitudes, and thereby creating a cyclical relationship. It is important to emphasise that our argument particularly pertinent to less developed countries, where learned helplessness often becomes deeply entrenched within the culture.

No doubt about that there is evidence in the literature, suggesting that psychological and sociological factors have a more significant impact on economic development. It is argued that in countries where learned helplessness is prevalent, there is a marked inability to perceive or respond to opportunities and challenges posed by economic system. This phenomenon perpetuates a cycle of underdevelopment, as these countries struggle to break free from the constraints of their psychological and cultural mindset (Dweck, 2006; Seligman, 1972). Moreover, societies experiencing economic difficulties frequently demonstrate a lack of activity despite being aware of the challenges. This reality is rooted in both learned and culturally ingrained unresponsiveness. A sense of hopelessness, as a result, exacerbates living conditions, resulting in either temporary poverty or prolonged underdevelopment. According to Ayan (1996), these conditions can create fictional doctrines within the collective mindset, further impeding development. The issue evolves when these conditions instil a belief that development is unattainable, leading to widespread inaction.

To combat economic underdevelopment effectively, it is necessary to integrate psychological and cultural dimensions into development strategies and policies. That is, a new way of thinking that takes

into account the negative influence of culturally learned helplessness should be cultivated in order to fully unleash the potential of the human spirit and drive economic progress. By gaining insight into and addressing this underlying psychological and cultural factor, policymakers can develop more comprehensive and effective strategies to promote economic development, particularly in less developed countries.

Building on this premise, it would be prudent to explore the interrelationship between economic development and the culture of learned helplessness here. Indeed, the interrelationship between economic development and the culture of learned helplessness is shaped by the structural interconnections between these two phenomena. An economy, much like a society, reflects psychological traits through the collective actions of its members. Consequently, it is in accordance with social norms and behaves in accordance with the prevailing social logic. When economies, akin to societies, face structural challenges and sudden shifts, they exhibit instability and struggle to maintain equilibrium. In essence, national and global economies demonstrate behavioural patterns similar to those of societies that are entrenched in learned helplessness (Shah, 2023). This theoretical framework, originally designed to diagnose individual and social issues, can thus be applied to analyse economic phenomena.

It is imperative to view the economy as a living entity with distinct behavioural patterns and emotions. In other words, an economy can be conceptualised as a social network of individuals, encompassing factory workers and central bankers alike, who engage in market activities and are subject to emotional influences. The terms “economic confidence,” “business confidence,” and “confidence in global markets” are indicative of the prevailing sentiments among the majority of market participants. To illustrate, in rapidly developing markets, the actions of participants, such as new investments, job creation, and property purchases, contribute to macroeconomic improvement with minimal perceived risk in a positive economic atmosphere. Conversely, in economies that frequently experience recessions, participants tend to adopt a defensive strategy, investing in safe assets, accumulating capital, reducing investment, and halting job creation, in order to mitigate the impact of deteriorating macroeconomic indicators (Shah, 2023). Such behaviours also exert an influence on the indicators used to measure levels of economic development.

A combination of adverse social experiences and a culture of learned helplessness makes it challenging to anticipate positive behaviours from market participants. Learned helplessness fosters a mindset of ‘impossibility of change’ or ‘this is the way it is’, which hinders individuals from adopting a different outlook. This scenario is analogous to the fear of recessions, as measured by indices such as the ‘VIX Fear Index’, within an economic context. Consequently, the economy is a reflection of both the optimistic

and pessimistic perspectives that are prevalent in society.

Another factor impacting development and indirectly leading to learned helplessness is unstable political institutions. These institutions inevitably manifest significant effects on both the society that constitutes them and those that facilitate and maintain them. The deliberate or inadvertent mistakes made by a political institute, such as failure to implement policies, failure to manage crises, or disconnection from the public, can lead to the emergence or perpetuation of a culture of learned helplessness. In simpler terms, the political institute in certain societies can play the role of the actor who confines dogs to a box, akin to the Seligman experiment, or traps fleas in a jar, as in the flea experiment. The average political institution, from time to time, may influence society to acquire learned helplessness, or it may reinforce society's existing learned helplessness for its own benefit.

Hence, in countries - including developed ones - where unstable and ineffective political establishments wield significant influence, the majority of the populace could be disengaged from their political and economic surroundings. Although they comprehend that they possess a conceptual say in governance through means such as voting and electoral participation, a gulf remains between them and their environment (Shah, 2023). Societies governed by incompetent political institutions may feel that their struggles are futile, and that mobilising for change will prove challenging due to their lack of agency in determining their future. Consequently, these societies are taught to believe that their efforts against such indirect actors as political institutions will yield no meaningful change. Thus, even when conditions change in favour of these societies, it is either difficult or takes time for them to become aware of it. As stated by Seligman, "A fundamental sense of well-being relies significantly on our capacity to control our surroundings and acknowledging that we have such capacity" (Shah, 2023).

There is substantial evidence indicating that politics significantly shapes social behaviour and welfare. Governments with autocratic tendencies, such as Nazi Germany in the past and contemporary North Korea, exemplify societies exhibiting learned helplessness. In these regimes, citizens often become passive, believing they have no control over their environment or future. This passivity leaves them susceptible to manipulation and control. For instance, it would not have been possible in a rational society for Hitler to enact legislation that resulted in the inhumane extermination of the Jewish people (Shah, 2023). Numerous similar examples can be found throughout the history of international political economy.

When all these factors are taken into account, it becomes evident that a culture of learned helplessness can manifest in a variety of economic developmental challenges. These include pervasive pessimism, the inefficient utilisation of constrained resources, diminished rates of entrepreneurship, reduced labour

force participation, minimal engagement in education and skills training, and the emigration of skilled individuals. Consequently, the presence of learned helplessness within a society is thought to impede the capacity of policymakers to enact effective structural adjustments or reforms, both in the short and long term. To illustrate this problem, a number of concrete examples can be provided.

Bolivia, for instance, is among several countries grappling with multigenerational poverty. Historical events of the country could clarify why Bolivia has been sometimes unresponsive to aid and incentives, and reluctant to take advantage of the potential rent. As part of an initiative to enhance the current education system, the Bolivian government provided teachers with a financial reward if they could help their pupils attain a specific standard. Nevertheless, many teachers held the view that the effort was futile since they'd be unable to achieve the required score for incentives. Consequently, teachers believed that they lacked the capacity to determine their fate or that of their students (Dale-Harris, 2013). The prevalent stance held by Bolivian teachers, and the main intellectual determinant of inaction, is undoubtedly the most obvious example of the transformation of learned helplessness into sociological reality. Based on this example, it is possible to argue that society's all-encompassing culture of learned helplessness generates economic and institutional ineptitude, hindering progress.

Ethiopia is another example among several countries in Africa region afflicted by multigenerational poverty. Historical factors may offer some explanation as to why the country has not always been responsive to aid and incentives or sought to exploit the potential rental income. Within Ethiopia, the majority of households are grappling to fulfil basic human requirements. Children who grow up in such households are firsthand witnesses to their parents' battles for survival. The bleak prospect of inheriting poverty and a future devoid of improvement is readily apparent to them as they base their evaluation of the future on personal experiences from the past and present. It is a reflection of the fact that a section of society suffers from "learned helplessness", i.e. an absolute sense of powerlessness and uselessness. If this culture, which tends to be passed down from one generation to the next, is not broken, it will be difficult to expect positive results from structural reforms and foreign aids. Hence, this presents an urgent and significant challenge in Ethiopia.

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has encountered a range of hurdles, including political instability, civil conflict and economic downturns. Although Nigeria is one of Africa's largest economies and boasts abundant natural resources (such as oil, natural gas, tin, iron ore, etc.), it is plagued by extensive poverty, unemployment, and socioeconomic inequality. In addition to these, factors that are thought to contribute to learned helplessness in Nigeria are persistent failures of governance, lack of basic

infrastructure, corruption and social divisions. The result would be learned helplessness stemming from powerlessness to make significant changes in Nigerian society.

From the 1980s onwards, Turkey has implemented extensive and varied reforms in the areas of economy, politics, and public administration. These measures have been the primary focus of public administration reforms in the country. The country has witnessed the implementation of measures such as performance and strategic management, organisational restructuring, privatisation, outsourcing, regulatory reforms, as well as private sector management arrangements and techniques. However, the country's periodic economic and political upheavals every decade, except for the security services, erode trust in the political framework. Given the onerous weight of negative issues including soaring household debt, commodity costs, inflation rates, steep taxes, budget cuts, and anaemic economic growth on society in the aftermath of each substantial economic crisis, it may not be incorrect to posit that a "culture of learned helplessness" prevails in Turkish society. The mindset engendered by the persistent societal issues is mainly linked to the belief that the country's prospects for change are bleak. Conversely, as the economy's recovery period extends beyond each crisis, political institutions and society become aware that achieving positive outcomes will take an extended period. This, each time, inadvertently reinforces a culturally ingrained sense of learned helplessness in society.

Similar instances can be observed even in developed economies. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of learned helplessness in developed countries is not social but institutional. As the socio-cultural, socio-psychological and socio-economic elements in these countries consist of social realities formed by the welfare society, rules, regulations and norms, any economic and political change threatening these elements may lead to social reaction. This conditioning arises due to the tendency of generations inheriting a stable and predictable structure. That is to say, as most of the societies in developed countries have inherited almost a stable prosperity for a long time, they are not accustomed to living in impoverished conditions. They would react harshly to sudden changes or initiatives that shake the foundations of society, resulting in frequent changes of government, a high probability of early elections or government crises. This has often been the case in developed countries during periods of economic crisis, where political instability is linked not solely to multiple cabinet changes or government crises, but also to economic policy variability (Aisen & Veiga, 2006). Poland, being a European Union (EU) member country (Ekiert & Kubik, 2001), and Italy and Germany (Funke et al., 2016) are examples of such cases. More examples include protests such as the 'war on poverty' demonstrations that took place in the USA between 1964 and 1968, the 'Occupy Wall Street' protests that occurred in the USA and Canada in 2011 and afterwards, and the 'new pension reform' protests that has taken place in France in 2023, as well as the 'public order law' protests that has

occurred in the UK in the same year, serve as other examples. In developed nations, such protests increase the possibility of governmental change and the chances of early elections in the short, medium, and long terms. Recognising this reality, policymakers tend to approach structural reforms with greater caution, particularly when there is concern about re-election. These concerns reflect different aspects of learned helplessness within stable societies. As Paul Krugman puts it, the more the political establishment “fails to do anything about economic problems under difficult economic conditions, or convinces itself that there is nothing it can do, the more it can itself fall into a state of learned helplessness” (Krugman, 2011). As a result, when despair pervades the entire society and its institutions, it assimilates into a culture.

In an economy that has long grappled with developmental issues, the psychology of society is likely to be negatively impacted. Specifically, the persistent burden of low welfare levels on the economy coupled with policy inaction or delays in implementing stabilisation and structural adjustment policies and institutional arrangements could lead to demotivation and passivity among the populace. As such, a chronic or permanent “deprivation” created internally and/or externally, from an economic point of view, may further reinforce the already existing culture of learned helplessness in the society or lead to the formation of a culture of learned helplessness in the society.

A model summarising some of the ideas or deductions presented in this study is presented below.

The preceding table largely summarises this study. It displays the existence of a vicious circle between the elements reflecting culturally learned helplessness and the components of economic development.

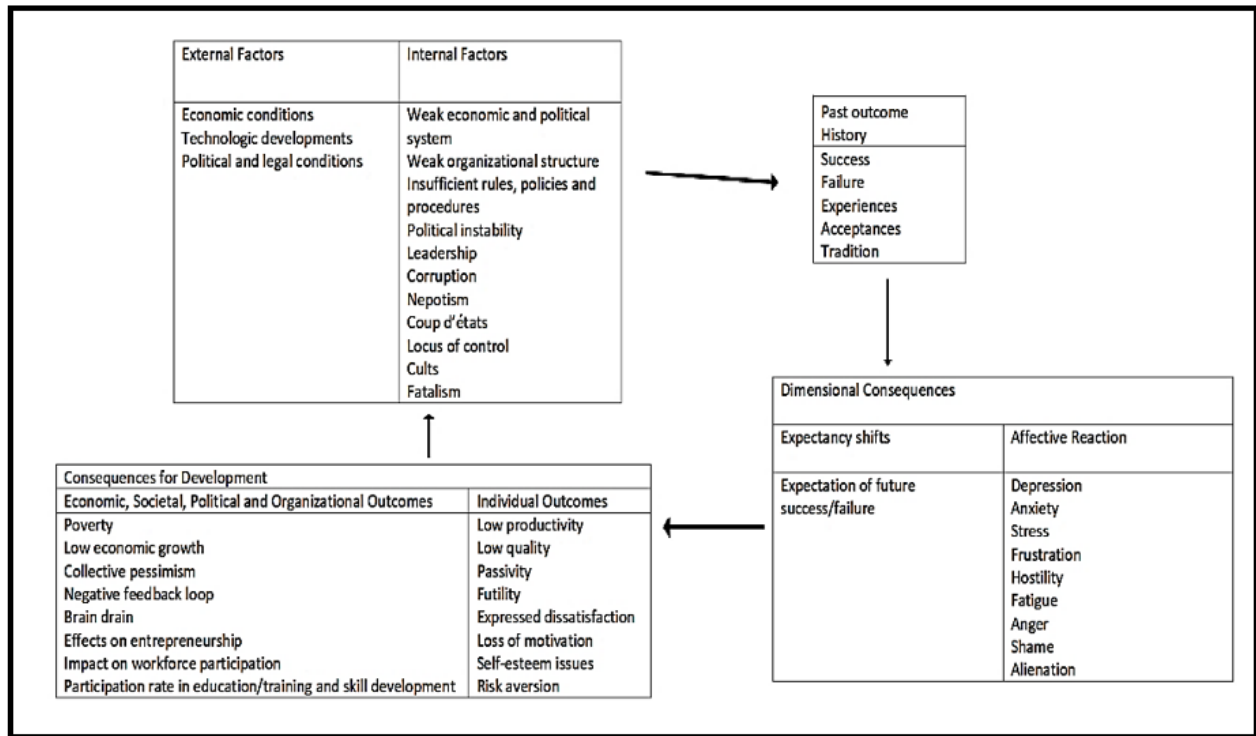
## 5. Discussion

The prevalence of a culture of learned helplessness within a society can give rise to social conflicts, particularly in instances where the state fails to implement radical solutions that prioritise social benefit over political interest. The divergence in discourse and policy proposals among interest groups serves to further complicate the situation. Some groups may view economic liberalisation without addressing structural issues as risky, while others may argue against self-sufficiency in a closed economy or advocate for a strategic shift in focus from the West to the East.

Once more, the phenomenon of culturally learned helplessness impedes social and human actions. However, it is possible for societies to counteract this pacification by adopting a proactive role in solving problems. Transformations or tipping points depend on the interplay of internal and external dynamics, as well as the mobilisation of social motivations.

**Figure 1**

*A Learned Helplessness Model from Economic Development Perspective*



Source: It is reconstructed following Martinko & Gardner (1982).

## 6. Conclusion and Suggestions

Learned helplessness, a psychological theory, has considerable societal implications due to its influence on human behaviour, with sociological consequences that are pervasive in societal culture and exert an impact on all social institutions. This learned trait is acquired through the process of acculturation and transmitted across generations, thereby pacifying individuals and communities by establishing presuppositions on specific issues. In societies where learned helplessness becomes a cultural phenomenon, challenges are perceived as insurmountable, leading to inaction and the acceptance of these challenges as inevitable.

To eliminate the culture of learned helplessness and its developmental consequences in underdeveloped countries, several structural policies or reforms we suggest are:

- i. *Factors:* Determining the factors that increase the perception of learned helplessness culture.
- ii. *Policy Decisions:* Policy decisions that serve the public interest.



- iii. *Idealistic Segments*: Including artists, engineers, sociologists, anthropologists, economists and other relevant professionals in the implementation of public policies to eliminate learned helplessness culture.
- iv. *Effective Governance*: Implementing an effective, transparent, accountable leadership and governance system.
- v. *Cultural Institutions*: Encouraging cultural institutions (schools, cinemas, theatres, media outlets, etc.) to play an active role in disseminating socio-economic development policies that are formed for combating learned helplessness culture.
- vi. *Regulatory Mechanisms*: Ensuring that judiciary, regulatory and supervisory mechanisms are independent, and work effectively.

It is anticipated that the implementation of these measures will serve to reduce social confusion and promote the establishment of a unified yet inclusive social system. Consequently, it is reasonable to say that reliance on statistical indices such as the Human Development Index (HDI) or the World Happiness Index (WHI) is insufficient to reflect the level of welfare of societies affected by learned helplessness. Thus, those in a policy-making role who fail to acknowledge this reality run the risk of repeating the mistakes of the past.

Our study is limited by its lack of empirical analysis, which precludes the drawing of conclusive, evidence-based inferences. Although the hypotheses proposed in this study, which are based on theoretical frameworks and conceptual discussions, provide a robust foundation for understanding the issue, they are insufficient to fully elucidate the reciprocal dynamics between learned helplessness and economic development, or to prove that such a reality exists. In short, our inferences are based on the logical reasonings rather than on empirical evidence. To address this limitation, we aim to collect and analyse primary or secondary data to investigate the research question and hypothesis proposed in this study. Last but not the least, by incorporating empirical analysis, we believe that our future empirical study or future empirical studies can provide more robust and generalisable conclusions that can inform policy, practice and future research in the field of economic development.

## References

- Aisen, A., & Veiga, F. J. (2006). Does political instability lead to higher inflation? A panel data analysis. *Journal of Money, Credit and Banking*, 38(5), 1379–1389.
- Akhtar, S. (2018). *Göç ve kimlik: Kargaşa, sağaltım ve dönüşüm*. S. Ayhan (Çev.). İstanbul: Sfenks Kitap.
- Aktan, C., & Yay, S. (2016). Öğrenilmiş çaresizlik ve değişime karşı pasif direnç. *Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi*, 8(2), 58-71.
- Alesina, A., & Giuliano, P. (2015). Culture and Institutions. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 53(4), 898–944.
- Ayan, D. (1996). *Öğrenilmiş çaresizlik modeli üzerine sosyolojik bir çalışma* [Yayımlanmamış doktora tezi, Hacettepe Üniversitesi].
- Bauman, Z. (2001). *Parçalanmış hayat*. İ. Türkmen (Çev.). İstanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınları.
- Berber, M. (2015). *İktisadi büyüme ve kalkınma*. Derya Kitabevi.
- Bourdieu, P. (2017). *Ayırım: Beğeni Yargısının Toplumsal Eleştirisi*. D. Fırat, F. Şannan & A. G., Berkkurt (Çev.). Ankara: Heretik Yayınları.
- Camerer, C. F., & Loewenstein, G. (2004). Behavioral economics: Past, present, future. In C. F. Camerer, G. Loewenstein, & M. Rabin (Eds.), *Advances in behavioral economics* (pp. 3–52). Princeton University Press.
- Çoban, S. (2019). Yoksulluğa teorik yaklaşım. F. Yıldırım (Ed.), *Yoksulluk ve sosyal hizmet: Yoksulluğa teorik yaklaşım* (ss. 41–60). Atatürk Üniversitesi Açıköğretim Fakültesi Yayını.
- Dale-Harris, M. (2013). Graphics: Inheriting poverty – Learned helplessness and empowerment in development. *Development Roast*. Retrieved May 02, 2023, from <https://inesad.edu.bo/developmentroast/2013/01/graphics-inheriting-poverty-learned-helplessness-and-empowerment-in-development/>.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Self-determination theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology*. (Vol. 1, pp. 416-436). SAGE Publications.
- Dixon, J., & Frolova, Y. (2011). Existential poverty: Welfare dependency, learned helplessness and psychological capital. *Poverty & Public Policy*, 3(2), 1–20.

- Durkheim, E. (2018). *Sosyolojik yöntemin kuralları*. C. Cenk (Çev.). İstanbul: Bordo Siyah Yayın.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House.
- Ekiert, G., & Kubik, J. (2001). *Rebellious civil society: Popular protest and democratic consolidation in Poland, 1989–1993*. University of Michigan Press.
- Fukuyama, F. (1996). *Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Funke, M., Schularick, M., & Trebesch, C. (2016). Going to extremes: Politics after financial crises, 1870–2014. *European Economic Review*, 88, 227-260.
- Giddens, A. (2005). *Sosyoloji*. C. Güzel, (Çev.). Ankara: Ayraç Yayınevi.
- Gordon, A. (1985). Learned helplessness and community development: A case study, *Journal of Community Psychology*, 13, 327-337.
- Harvey, D. L., & Reed, M. (1992). *Theories of poverty and underemployment: Orthodox, radical, and dual market perspectives*. Washington: Health and Company.
- Hodgson, G. M. (2012). *From pleasure machines to moral communities: An evolutionary economics without homo economicus*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Sage Publications.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263-291.
- Kahneman, D. (2003). Maps of bounded rationality: psychology for behavioral economics. *American Economic Review*, 93(5), 1449–1475.
- Krugman, P. (2011, May 5). *Against learned helplessness*. Economist's View. <https://economistsview.typepad.com/economistsview/2011/05/paul-krugman-against-learned-helplessness.html>
- Maier, S. F., & Seligman, M. E. P. (1976). Learned helplessness: Theory and evidence. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 105 (1), 3-46.

- Martinko, M. J., & Gardner, W. L. (1982). Learned helplessness: An alternative explanation for performance deficits. *The Academy of Management Review*, 7(2), 195.
- Payne, R. K. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Aha! Process, Inc.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ritzer, G. (1986). *Social problems*. New York: Rondon House.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1972). Learned helplessness. *Annual Review of Medicine*, 23(1), 407–412.
- Sen, A. (1989). Development as capability expansion. *Journal of Development Planning*, 19, 41-58.
- Sen, A. (2000). A decade of human development. *Journal of Human Development*, 1(1), 17–23.
- Shah, V. (2023, April 17). *Learned helplessness in democracies and economies*. Thought Economics. <https://thoughteconomics.com/learned-helplessness-in-democracies-and-economies/>
- Shimahara, N. (1970). Enculturation-A reconsideration. *Current Anthropology*, 11(2), 143–154.
- Simon, H. A. (1990). Bounded rationality. *Utility and probability*, pp. 15-18.
- Throsby, D. (2000). *Economics and Culture*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tuncer, E. (2017). *Bilgi sosyolojisi ve Durkheim* [Master Thesis, Uludağ Üniversitesi]. <http://acikerisim.uludag.edu.tr/jspui/handle/11452/2024>
- Uygunkan, S. B. (2005). Kültürleme kavramı ve televizyon, *Kurgu Dergisi*, 21, 205- 213.
- Zimmerman, M. A., Ramirez-Valles, J., Washienko, K. M., Walter, B., & Dyer, S. (1996). The development of a measure of enculturation for Native American youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 24(2), 295–310.

### Article Information Form

**Author(s) Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to the writing of this paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Conflict of Interest Disclosure:** No potential conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

**Copyright Statement:** Authors own the copyright of their work published in the journal and their work is published under the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.

**Supporting/Supporting Organizations:** No grants were received from any public, private or non-profit organizations for this research.

**Ethical Approval and Participant Consent:** It is declared that during the preparation process of this study, scientific and ethical principles were followed and all the studies benefited from are stated in the bibliography.

**Plagiarism Statement:** This article has been scanned by iThenticate.