



The Position of Sustainable Regional Development Policymaking in the Fourth Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract:

In recent decades, the concept of sustainable regional development has become one of the fundamental axes of policymaking at regional levels in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this regard, with the design and implementation of five-year medium-term plans such as the Fourth Development Plan, greater coherence and alignment between policies and executive actions emerged, and the decision-making system became more systematic. This research, using library tools for data collection and descriptive-analytical methods and qualitative content analysis, as well as utilizing the theory of social and spatial justice, sought to answer the question: What position has sustainable regional development policymaking had in the Fourth Economic, Social and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran? The results indicate that although the Fourth Development Plan, in terms of formulating laws and designing policies, has a progressive, comprehensive, and innovative approach and has attempted to integrate various dimensions of regional development indicators into a coherent and justice-oriented framework with a holistic and integrated view, it has encountered a serious gap between goals and field realities in the implementation and practice stage. Weak institutional coordination, lack of executive guarantees, and the dominance of political views over planning logic have led to the achievement of goals being pursued in an unstable and unbalanced manner. Excessive reliance on unstable financial resources and inability to build effective institutions have hindered the operationalization of key concepts such as land planning and spatial justice. As a result, instead of realizing an integrated development model, this plan has become a manifestation of the disconnect between ideal planning and inefficient implementation.

Key words: Islamic Republic of Iran, policymaking, sustainable regional development, Fourth Development Plan, pathology

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Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of sustainable regional development has become one of the main focal points in public policymaking, as the inefficiency of centralized and unequal development models has led to consequences such as intensified spatial inequalities, irregular migration, excessive concentration of capital and services in a few metropolises, and ultimately, the emergence of social and economic tensions. In Iran, too, after several decades of centralized planning experience, the approach of regional development has gradually gained a place in the planning discourse. This approach, which emphasizes the identification of local capabilities, equitable distribution of resources, and the active participation of local communities in the development process, is recognized as one of the key components of achieving sustainable development. The Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2005–2009) holds a special place from this perspective, as it not only had greater conceptual coherence compared to previous plans, but it was also the first plan to be formulated and implemented concurrently with the beginning of the implementation of the Twenty-Year Vision Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Vision Document had outlined a clear horizon for a developed, balanced, and pioneering Iran in the region, and the Fourth Development Plan was supposed to serve as the first step on this path, laying the necessary foundations. Therefore, examining the position of sustainable regional development policymaking within the text of this plan is not merely an assessment of the

performance of a planning period, but also a criterion for evaluating the initial alignment of the plans with the overarching objectives of the national vision. Nonetheless, it seems that the gap between the stated goals and the executive strategies in this field remains considerable, a matter that doubles the necessity of critical analysis and rethinking in regional development policymaking.

The present research, using a descriptive–analytical research method and based on data collected from library sources, has analyzed the qualitative content of the Fourth Development Plan. Within this framework, the conceptual and executive structure of the plan has been examined in relation to the principles of sustainable regional development. The spatial scope of the research encompasses the entire geographical territory of the country, and its temporal focus is the implementation period of the Fourth Plan (2005 to 2009), a period which, due to its simultaneity with the commencement of the Twenty-Year Vision Document, is of increased significance. The main objective of this research is to answer the following question: What is the position of sustainable regional development policymaking in the Fourth Development Plan? In response to this question, the hypothesis posed in this research is that: Although the Fourth Development Plan, at the level of overarching goals, paid special attention to balanced regional development, in practice and implementation, a significant gap has emerged between the defined goals in the plan and the executive and field realities.

1. Research Background

Ghaffari-Fard and colleagues (2023) in an article titled *"Mechanisms for Enhancing Governance and Regional Development Policy in Iran"* point out that examining existing structures and the role of delegating authority to regions can improve the performance of the governance system and create spatial balance in the country. Designing a comprehensive monitoring system in the planning and budgeting process can be considered the most effective strategy for improving regional development policymaking.

Kamali (2023), in an article titled *"Identification and Ranking of Challenges in Evaluating Development Policies in Iran (Five-Year Development Plans)"*, states that the lack of effective mechanisms for evaluation and feedback from the plans is one of the main obstacles to improving developmental policymaking in Iran. This issue has been less emphasized in the Five-Year Development Plans. The results of this study indicate that cultural and institutional challenges, such as weak accountability, lack of willingness to utilize evaluation results, and resistance to evaluation, are more significant than technical challenges.

Mostafavi Thani and Nemati Fard (2019), in an article titled *"A Pathological Analysis of Balanced Regional Development in National Development Plans"*, state that despite the long history of development planning in Iran, the balanced and justice-oriented approach has been neglected in regional policymaking. They emphasize

that the results of these plans are not consistent with the resources spent. Challenges such as the absence of a clear conceptual definition of balanced development, centralization, weakness in the resource allocation system, and ambiguity in the definition of regions are among the main barriers to achieving regional development in the country.

Claire (2023), in a book titled *"Sustainable Regional Development: Reviving Regions through Innovation"*, notes that peripheral and non-urban areas have lagged behind in knowledge-based economic transformations, and innovation should be considered a comprehensive and social process. She emphasizes the role of local communities in creating innovation. Utilizing local creativity, social participation, and support from local institutions can pave the way for the economic and social revival of these areas.

Liu (2022), in an article titled *"Sustainable Regional Development Strategy Based on Coordination Between Ecology and Economy"*, points out that the imbalance between economic and environmental systems—especially in regions with specific natural features—is one of the major challenges of sustainable development. The findings of this study suggest that interdisciplinary and coordinated approaches that simultaneously consider economic and environmental dimensions can lead to balanced and sustainable development and prevent long-term imbalances.

2. Theoretical Framework: Theories of Social and Spatial Justice

In the theory of social justice, justice is considered a multi-layered structure based on concepts such as equality, solidarity, and human dignity (Lotfi et al., 2013, p. 70). Within this framework, two key axes—quality of life and equitable distribution of opportunities and infrastructure—form the basis for analyzing social inequalities and policymaking aimed at reducing them (Martínez, 2009, p. 390). Social justice, in its essence, means providing equal opportunities for the growth of all individuals in society and removing discriminatory obstacles on their path to progress (Motahhari, 1973, p. 29). John Rawls views justice as a structure for the fair distribution of freedom and opportunities, where the state plays a fundamental role in guaranteeing it, while Robert Nozick, rejecting state intervention, emphasizes individual liberty and property rights (Abbasi Tavalali, 2023, p. 2). Brian Barry also considers social justice a criterion for judging the efficiency of institutions (Barry, 1989, p. 148). Despite differences in approach, these perspectives all stress the need for equitable distribution of opportunities and resources as a path toward achieving desirable collective living.

In continuation of social justice theory, the concept of spatial justice is based on the interconnection between social structure and the spatial organization of the environment, and its goal is to reveal and rectify distributive inequalities in urban and regional spaces (Mitchell, 2003, p. 231). Since the 1970s, under the influence of Rawls's theory of justice, spatial justice has been recognized as a criterion for analyzing geographical inequalities—

particularly in racial and urban domains (Laurent, 2011, p. 1853). Spatial justice is not merely a physical concept but a social structure that reflects political, economic, and managerial decisions at various levels of governance (Javan and Abdollahi, 2008, p. 138). This form of justice specifically concerns the equitable distribution of services and resources among marginalized groups and seeks to provide universal, non-discriminatory access to infrastructure such as transportation, health, and education (Heydari and Deyzijani, 2018, p. 192).

Utilizing theories of social and spatial justice in examining the position of sustainable regional development policymaking in the Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran is significant in that these theories fundamentally address the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and services among different regions and social groups. Since sustainable regional development aims at more than mere economic growth and encompasses social, environmental, and institutional dimensions, the use of these theories provides a conceptual basis for justice-oriented evaluation of the policies of the Fourth Development Plan and contributes to a more precise understanding of the distribution of resources and developmental outcomes at spatial and social scales.

3. Definition of Concepts

3-1. Development

Development can be considered a complex and multidimensional process that is not

limited merely to economic growth; rather, its realization requires fundamental transformations in social structures, public attitudes, and the performance of macro-level political and economic institutions. It is a process that must be accompanied by increased economic growth, reduced inequality, and the eradication of extreme poverty (Todaro, 1994, p. 23). In this respect, development is not limited to the enhancement of production and income, but also includes fundamental changes in institutional and organizational structures, as well as in social attitudes and behaviors—a transformation that in many cases leads to a reconsideration of the traditions, customs, and deeply rooted beliefs of society (Momtaz, 2015, p. 5).

On the other hand, development in its scientific and fundamental sense is considered the gradual death of an old order and the birth of a new one—an order that brings new conditions and requirements for society, and within which quantitative and qualitative transformations in production and services, reduction of poverty and unemployment, enhancement of public welfare, and scientific and technological progress become manifest (Azkia, 2005: 42).

3-2. Regional Sustainable Development

Regional sustainable development is a multi-dimensional and integrative concept that seeks to achieve a dynamic balance among economic, social, environmental, and institutional dimensions within a defined spatial scale (region). Unlike traditional regional development, which often followed quantitative approaches focusing on economic growth or increasing investment in specific areas, regional sustainable development emphasizes the

medium- and long-term sustainability of resources, spatial and intergenerational justice, the preservation of cultural identity, and the enhancement of quality of life for local communities.

In this framework, the region is defined not only as a geographical unit but also as a living, dynamic, and active system in which the interconnections between humans, the environment, and socio-economic structures play an essential role. In this approach, the use of local resources—emphasizing the empowerment of local communities, participatory planning, and the understanding of the specific capacities and limitations of each region—holds a special place (Steimetz et al., 2018, pp. 84–85).

From a policy-making perspective, regional sustainable development requires a transformation in decision-making structures and the distribution of power between the center and the periphery. This necessitates effective decentralization, strengthening of mid-level institutions (provincial and regional), and the creation of accountable and participatory mechanisms that allow local communities to actively participate in the decision-making process (Omidali, 2022, p. 122).

3-3. Centralization

Centralization is considered a method of political-administrative organization in which decisions concerning all public affairs (local and national) are made by a central political authority. This organizational method is employed in countries that do not have a large spatial-geographical diversity, aiming to increase efficiency. In a centralized political structure—emphasizing the strengthening and expansion of government institutions at all spatial levels—the central government has the

authority to enact laws, regulations, bylaws, and directives, and its policies are mandatory for local staff and organizations (Ghaderi Hajat & Hafeznia, 2018, p. 40).

3-4. Regional Development Policy-Making

Regional development policies are tools for developing and strengthening peripheral and less developed areas, in such a way that by economically empowering these regions, not only are new opportunities for local growth created, but ultimately the overall national economy is also strengthened.

Thus, regional development policies have been employed both to eliminate spatial inequalities and to enhance the economic cohesion of the country (Stohr, 1975, p. 96). These policies respond to two fundamental questions: first, how can economic growth be stimulated? And second, how can this growth be distributed fairly?

These policies specifically deal with issues such as competitiveness and spatial cohesion in different regions. Their primary goal is to improve the efficiency and productivity of economic activities and public services through optimized location and better organization.

Nevertheless, one of the key goals of these policies is to reduce the gap in the rate of growth or level of development between more advanced regions and more deprived ones, such that the benefits of economic growth are distributed more equitably among various territories, and the consequences of economic stagnation in weaker areas are mitigated (Amirhajloo, 2022, p. 8).

4. History of Regional Development Policy-Making in Iran

4-1. Regional Development Policy-Making before the Islamic Revolution

Development policy-making during the Pahlavi era was mainly carried out within the framework of centralized planning and a top-down approach. From the first seven-year national development plan (1948–1955) to the end of the fifth development plan in 1977, Iran's economic-social planning structure was heavily influenced by modernization theories, technocratic views, and centralist tendencies, where the priority was rapid economic growth, industrialization, and attracting foreign capital into designated centers (especially Tehran and a few major cities) (Gholami & Mehralitabar, 2022, pp. 321–323).

On the other hand, the absence of regional or local institutions in the planning and policy-making process, as well as the extreme dependency of planning institutions on the central government (such as the Plan and Budget Organization), led to the failure to design and implement any comprehensive or sustainable policy for the development of deprived areas. In addition, the land policies and land reforms of the 1960s, despite their declared objectives regarding rural development, in practice led to massive migration to cities and the weakening of the rural and border area economies, in fact intensifying regional inequalities (Gholami & Mehralitabar, 2022, p. 325).

Even though in the fourth (1968–1973) and fifth (1973–1977) development plans, due to

increased oil revenues and higher public investments, opportunities were created for developing infrastructure across various parts of the country, these investments were also mostly viewed through technical and sectoral lenses and lacked a coordinated spatial approach.

Efforts such as establishing special industrial zones, developing ports, or founding universities in non-central areas were largely interpreted as responses to technical or security needs of the state rather than as part of a sustainable regional development vision (Ziari & Mohammadi, 2017, p. 170).

In general, it can be said that the development plans before the revolution failed to create regional balance and led instead to intensified inequalities, spatial polarization, and sectoral imbalance. In practice, there may not have been any real regional planning at all—rather, what existed was regional policy-making or to some extent regionalizing national plans.

4-2. Regional Development Policy-Making after the Islamic Revolution

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, a new discourse emerged in the field of national development, born out of a strong critique of the centralized spatial development model of the former regime—a model that had led to massive rural-to-urban migration, unbalanced population growth, and concentration of resources in Tehran and a few limited metropolises.

In this new context, spatial justice and the balanced distribution of resources across the country were emphasized as fundamental components of social justice. The main goal was to create equity in access to the benefits of development for all regions of the country

and to curb the unrestrained growth of the capital (Mostafavi Thani & Nemati, 2019, pp. 41–42).

From the very beginning of the Islamic Republic, one of the main slogans was achieving social justice and eliminating deprivation, which naturally made regional development one of the central concerns of policy-making (Pouryamahr, 2021, p. 89).

During the years when the country lacked a medium-term development plan, certain clauses of budget laws played a significant role in efforts to reduce regional disparities and paved the way for the creation of institutions such as provincial planning committees with limited authority (Sajoodi et al., 2024, p. 14).

4-2-1. Five-Year Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plans

The five-year development plans are strategic and macro-level documents designed to define the economic, social, and cultural objectives, policies, and priorities of the country within a specified time frame. These plans serve as roadmaps for improving the overall situation of the country and responding to emerging needs and challenges. They are typically based on assessments of the current situation, evaluations of capacities and resources, and lessons learned from past experiences.

Since 1989, coinciding with the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the Islamic Republic of Iran has undertaken the formulation and implementation of five-year development plans in order to organize the process of reconstruction, modernization, and achieving sustainable development.

These plans, starting from the first development plan (1989–1993) and continuing

through to the seventh plan (2024–2028), comprise a total of seven plans. Each has pursued specific goals and approaches based on the circumstances, capacities, and needs of the country at the time.

These strategic documents, while offering general frameworks in economic, social, and cultural dimensions, have aimed to provide a suitable foundation for improving the country's macro-level indicators and addressing developmental challenges, and at the same time, with a forward-looking perspective, to guide the planning and policy-making process in a medium-term, organized, and coherent format.

5. The Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan (Foundations, Goals, and Principles)

The Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2005–2009) held a special position among the other five-year development plans. This plan was considered the country's first experience in the full alignment of macro development policies with the objectives of the Twenty-Year Vision Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The draft of this document was approved by the Cabinet on August 20, 2002, and on August 23, 2003, it was presented by President Khatami to Ayatollah Khamenei, the Leader of the Revolution. After review and revision by the Expediency Council, it was promulgated by the Leader on November 3, 2004. Based on the Vision Document of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the horizon of 2025, Iran is, by that time, a developed country with the

highest rank in economic, scientific, and technological fields in the region, with an Islamic and revolutionary identity, an inspiration in the Islamic world, and constructively and effectively engaged in international relations. At the end of this document, it is stated that from then on, five-year development plans must be formulated with consideration of the objectives of the Vision Document. (Mir et al., 2024, p. 38)

This plan, aiming to achieve sustainable economic development and improve the quality of life of the people, encompassed a series of economic, social, cultural, and managerial reforms (Management and Planning Organization, 2005).

The Fourth Development Plan is considered a turning point in the history of developmental policymaking in the country; because it was the first plan designed in line with the realization of the macro-objectives of the Twenty-Year Vision Document and aligned with the national development roadmap, and formulated within a context of specific domestic and international developments. On one hand, fundamental transformations in the structure of the global economy and the increasing importance of competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable development had influenced the field of policymaking; and on the other hand, Iran sought to use the experience of implementing the previous three development plans to design a more efficient and effective model for achieving balanced, justice-based, and knowledge-oriented development. The approach of the Fourth Development Plan moved beyond the traditional project-based and sectoral decision-making view and moved

toward institution-building, governance process transparency, and enhancement of human capital. (Shojaei Nasab, 2017, pp. 135–136)

The Fourth Development Plan was designed within the framework of four major goals, which were: sustainable economic growth, expansion of social justice, development of human and social capital, and cultural and environmental protection. In line with achieving an 8 percent economic growth rate, the main emphasis was placed on improving productivity through enhancing the role of knowledge, innovation, private sector investment, and improving the performance of the banking system. In the area of social justice, strategies such as reducing regional disparities, combating poverty, extending social insurance, and supporting vulnerable groups were envisioned. In this regard, empowering less-developed areas and optimizing the use of resources through spatial planning was given attention. From the human capital perspective, emphasis was placed on improving the quality of education, research, healthcare, and social capital, and human development was considered the key foundation for economic and social transformation. In addition, considering global trends and environmental threats, macro policies for the protection of natural resources and sustainable development at national, regional, and local levels were included. (Allameh, 2014, pp. 87–88)

“Meritocracy,” “public participation,” “accountability,” “transparency,” and “long-term sustainability” are among the governing principles of the Fourth Development Plan. Among the structural innovations of this plan was the attention to improving the performance evaluation system and budget transparency at various levels of government. Also, for

the first time, the concept of a “developmental state” was to some extent introduced into the executive discourse of the country—a government that is not merely a project implementer but a facilitator of development and a generator of institutional capacities (Zali, 2017, p. 138). The plan’s view on the principle of “decentralization” also differed from previous plans by having a structural rather than merely executive approach, such that the roles of provinces, local councils, and regional institutions in development planning and policymaking were officially recognized. Another important principle is the “competitive economy” and the avoidance of monopolism, which was proposed with the aim of enhancing productivity, reducing rent-seeking, and reforming the business environment. (Rahimpour and Abdollahzadeh, 2020, p. 101)

In this plan, in addition to economic goals, the strengthening of social and cultural infrastructures was also addressed. The development of human resources and social capital was one of the main pillars of this plan. For this reason, improving the level of education, health, and public wellness and creating equal opportunities for all segments of society was considered a priority. In this regard, improving the quality of the educational system, strengthening technical and vocational skills, and paying special attention to higher education, research, and innovation were among the highlights of this plan. The Fourth Development Plan also addressed key issues such as strengthening the administrative system and reducing economic corruption, reforming the tax system, and developing information and communication technology as essential tools for advancing the country’s macro-objectives. Economic and managerial reforms in this phase of the plan were designed in such a way as to enable the

country to, through strengthening competitiveness, attracting domestic and foreign investment, and improving economic infrastructure, lay the groundwork for sustainable growth and the creation of sustainable employment. Ultimately, the law of the Fourth Development Plan was approved with the aim of enhancing the quality of life of the people, strengthening national infrastructure, and achieving balanced economic and social development, and became one of the important pillars of the country's development planning. (Management and Planning Organization, 2005)

6. The Place of Regional Development Policy in the Fourth Development Plan

According to a thorough examination and analysis of the provisions of the Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, out of the 161 legal articles included in this plan, 26 articles are directly or indirectly related to the subject of regional development policymaking. This volume of articles related to regional development indicates that lawmakers and policymakers, in drafting the Fourth Development Plan, paid special attention to the spatial dimensions of development and its requirements. In fact, by reviewing these articles, it can be seen that regional development in this plan was not considered as a secondary issue, but as a part of the macro strategy for achieving sustainable growth, social justice, and economic efficiency.

These 26 articles encompass a diverse set of policies and actions covering various dimensions of regional development. Among the most prominent themes in these articles is decentralization and the transfer of part of the decision-making and executive powers from the national level to the provincial and local levels; a process aimed at increasing agility, accountability, and productivity in regional development management. Also, enhancing the role of provinces and regions in the development planning process, emphasizing the strengthening of local and regional institutions, and involving local actors in decision-making are other key components emphasized in these articles.

In addition, this set of articles emphasizes the use of the capacities and relative advantages of each region, especially in economic, natural, and human domains, in such a way that regional development is pursued not merely from a geographical perspective, but based on a precise understanding of each region's indigenous and specialized features. Moreover, issues such as equity in resource distribution, prioritizing less-developed regions, balancing infrastructure, and reforming the credit allocation system are other important themes reflected in these articles.

Table 1: Themes and indicators related to regional development in the Fourth Development Plan

Articles	Themes and indicators related to regional development in the Fourth Development Plan
Article 15	Linking capital market policies with regional development policies
Article 19	Strengthening infrastructure and indicators of rural and nomadic areas (sustainable empowerment of indigenous communities while preserving their lifestyle and cultural and economic capacities)
Article 23	Linking natural resources with regional development policymaking based on land planning (allocating part of the income from gas resources to realize infrastructure projects on the Iranian coasts and islands of the Persian Gulf and their direct sphere of influence)
Article 27	Strengthening investment and employment in deprived areas (providing the basis for granting facilities and paying part of its profits and fees to investors in less-privileged areas)
Articles 28 and 34	Developing transportation, trade and tourism by understanding the country's strategic capacities in connecting the northern and southern territories as well as the eastern and western ones

Article 30	Improving urban and rural infrastructure, increasing the safety of structures and improving the quality of the living environment (more balanced distribution of facilities, reducing regional inequalities and promoting spatial justice)
Article 52	Educational justice and improving the quality of the education system with an emphasis on providing equal access to educational facilities in the regions less advantaged and creating support mechanisms to attract human resources in deprived areas and the participation of the non-governmental sector and school-building donors
Article 65	Developing principles of sustainable ecological development and paying attention to the environmental, climatic, natural resources and ecological capacities of each region in the planning process
Articles 72-73-74	Requirement of the government to implement the National Land Planning Document at three levels: macro, sectoral and provincial (identifying the advantages, limitations and capabilities of different regions, providing a platform for targeted decision-making for allocating resources and investments in order to improve productivity, spatial justice and reduce regional inequalities)
Article 75	Paying attention to the specific geographical, economic and social characteristics of each region in order to

	strengthen their links with the national and supranational economy
Article 77	Establishing coordinating institutions at the supra-provincial level in order to promote regional development and regionalize the country based on land planning
Articles 78-82	Allocation of a portion of provincial revenues to regional development of the same province (such as various taxes, service, property and criminal revenues and allocating it to a specific treasury of each Province)
Articles 84 to 94	Achieving spatial justice in the health system and improving the quality of life of the people, especially reducing health costs for low-income and vulnerable households
Article 95	Social justice, poverty alleviation and empowerment of low-income groups by developing the social security system, targeted support for the low-income deciles, promoting the participation of non-governmental organizations in different regions, local employment generation programs, and providing health, education and housing infrastructure for deprived areas
Article 137	Decentralization and devolution of authority to local and regional levels (modernization and restructuring of the macro-organizations of executive agencies and moving towards designing an efficient, effective, decentralized

	administrative system that is appropriate to new technologies)
Articles 138-139	The role of provincial planning and development councils in decision-making, as well as the allocation of financial resources based on performance, activity results and the cost price of services in different geographical contexts
Article 155	Place-based policymaking through strategic development documents (emphasis on the design and implementation of three types of strategic documents, including the National Sectoral Development Document, the Provincial Development Document and the Development Document Special (Meta-sectoral) to systematize differentiation, localization, and adaptation of macro-development policies to the characteristics and needs of different regions of the country)

Source: (Fourth Development Plan, 2004)

7. Pathology of Implementing Sustainable Regional Development Policies in the Fourth Development Plan

7-1. Failure to Practically Achieve Regional Justice Objectives

One of the key goals of the Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran was to reduce regional disparities and achieve a balanced distribution of facilities, resources, and opportunities across the geographical expanse of the

country. However, an examination of the implementation performance of this plan shows that achieving this goal faced serious challenges. The most significant obstacle in this path was the continuation of centralized structures in the decision-making and implementation system at the national level. Despite slogans emphasizing attention to local capacities and decentralization, the structure governing resource allocation and policy formulation

remained centralized and non-local. (Karachi, 2024, p. 139).

In the process of allocating development funds, political relations, the influence of central elites, and the political weight of provinces often played a more decisive role in the decision-making considerations than objective, needs-based and justice-oriented indicators (Mahmoudian, 2019, p. 66). At the institutional level, one of the fundamental gaps was the lack of formation of effective intermediary institutions between the central government and local levels. Regional institution-building is a prerequisite for achieving justice in development policy-making, since only through indigenous institutions can the real voice of local communities be reflected in national decision-making processes. However, “during the Fourth Plan period, not only did local participatory institutions such as regional planning councils lack the necessary authority, but local capacities — including academic elites, local entrepreneurs, and civil society groups — were also neglected in the policy-making process” (Mosalla nejad, 2021, p. 150).

In the economic arena, the dominant model in the Fourth Development Plan was based on large-scale and mostly state-led investments, which often benefited more advantaged regions. In this approach, not only were the requirements of balanced development ignored, but also regions with pre-existing infrastructure and greater influence received a larger share of investment resources (Yasouri and Sojoudi, 2021, p. 89).

Overall, it can be said that the failure of the Fourth Development Plan to achieve regional justice was due to a set of complex and

intertwined structural, managerial, and cultural factors. As a result, not only did development gaps between provinces not diminish, but public dissatisfaction in less privileged regions increased. Therefore, the inability to achieve regional justice was not merely a programmatic failure, but a warning sign regarding the overall effectiveness of the country’s development-oriented system.

7-2. Weakness of Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

One of the fundamental challenges that hindered the implementation process of the Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran was the absence of an efficient, cohesive, and accountable system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of executive agencies at various levels of governance (Allameh, 2014, p. 111). This structural deficiency, evident both at the national and regional levels, caused the implementation of policies aimed at achieving sustainable regional development to lack the necessary efficiency. The absence of necessary legal and institutional requirements for carrying out regular and precise evaluations led to deviations from the set goals not being identified in time and necessary policy reforms being delayed — or in many cases, not being carried out at all (Goharkhah and Yadegar, 2020, p. 35).

In most cases, the indicators used to measure the performance of different regions lacked the necessary features for comparative and functional analyses. In addition, the information infrastructure required for systematically collecting, processing, and utilizing data either did not exist or lacked sufficient coherence, coverage, and currency (Shojaei Nasab,

2017, p. 134). Even in cases where evaluations were conducted on a limited or case-by-case basis, the resulting findings either were not communicated to decision-making levels or, if communicated, were ignored in the process of policy redesign and program modification (Mirzaei et al., 2023, p. 39).

7-3. Gap Between Program Formulation and Implementation at Local Levels

One of the most fundamental challenges facing the process of sustainable regional development policy-making within the framework of the Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran was the deep and structural gap between the stage of program formulation and the stage of its implementation at local levels. This gap not only hindered the realization of the announced goals in the macro development documents but also questioned the efficiency and effectiveness of the entire planning system (Mansour, 2009, p. 251).

The root causes of this mismatch can be found in the chronic centralization of the country's decision-making system and the weakness of local institution-building, to the extent that the process of drafting programs is mostly carried out at high levels by central institutions and experts based in the capital, while the needs, capacities, and unique characteristics of each region are not properly considered in this process (Gholami and Mehrali Tabar, 2022, p. 255).

At the implementation stage, the challenges became even more apparent. Many provinces and local regions suffered from clear weaknesses in institutional and executive infrastructures. In such a way that governorships,

district offices, and other local institutions — especially in deprived areas — not only lacked sufficient authority for independent decision-making and implementation of programs, but also faced shortages in essential areas such as financial resources, specialized human capital, and managerial capacities (Alipouri and Ashofteh, 2021, p. 117).

On the other hand, the absence of coherent mechanisms for aligning sectoral policies resulted in various executive agencies frequently acting in isolation and without coordination with one another (Ziyari and Mohammadi, 2017, p. 146). Another key reason for the ineffective implementation of the Fourth Development Plan was the lack of genuine participation by local actors such as local communities, civil institutions, and the private sector in the design and implementation process of development policies (Allameh, 2014, p. 126). The top-down approach of the government to development and its reliance solely on standardized models without considering the ecological, social, and economic complexities of different regions led to many projects lacking social legitimacy and public support.

Conclusion

In Iran, regional development policy-making has long been influenced by the centralized structure of the country's decision-making and executive institutions, such that even before the Islamic Revolution, development planning was largely centralized and sectoral. After the Islamic Revolution, with the expansion of the discourse on spatial justice and the elimination of deprivation, regional development policy-making gained attention as one of

the foundations of social justice and balanced development, and especially from the Fourth Development Plan onward, acquired a special position within the framework of five-year economic, social, and cultural development programs.

The Fourth Development Plan (2005–2009), as the first plan aligned with the 20-Year Vision Document, sought to align the country's development approach with global changes, the requirements of sustainable development, and regional justice. This plan emerged during an important transitional period in the country's development policy-making, in which it attempted, on the one hand, to move beyond a centralized and sectoral approach and, on the other, to realize the overarching goals of sustainable development and spatial justice at both national and regional levels.

In this research, which has been conducted using a descriptive-analytical method and based on library data collection and qualitative content analysis, an attempt has been made — by examining legal documents and the content of the Fourth Development Plan — to answer this key question: What position did sustainable regional development policy-making hold within the executive structure and goals of the Fourth Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran? The findings of the study indicate that regional development policy-making in the Fourth Plan witnessed significant advancement and transformation compared to previous plans. Unlike the pre-revolution construction plans, which primarily viewed development from a technical, sectoral, and centralized perspective and gave little room for the participation of local and regional institutions, the Fourth Plan sought to present an integrated and comprehensive concept of regional development. Of

the 161 legal articles in this plan, 26 directly or indirectly addressed various dimensions of regional policy-making. These articles, in addition to focusing on decentralization and delegation of certain decision-making powers to provinces and regions, emphasized strengthening the role of local institutions, utilizing indigenous capacities, empowering deprived regions, and promoting spatial justice. Thus, the Fourth Development Plan not only placed regional policy-making on the agenda as part of the broader strategy of sustainable development but also turned it into one of the key pillars of achieving social justice, balanced economic growth, and increasing the efficiency of the governance system. Despite the efforts made in designing this plan and including diverse legal provisions related to regional policy-making, qualitative assessments show that in practice, challenges such as lack of coordination among executive bodies, remaining centralization in the administrative structure, and institutional capacity shortages at the local level prevented full realization of regional development goals. Although the Fourth Plan, in theory and content, represented an important step toward strengthening sustainable regional policy-making and structurally attempted to bridge the national and regional levels, in practice, due to obstacles such as weaknesses in the governance system and the lack of a cohesive performance evaluation system, the comprehensive achievement of the outlined objectives proved difficult.

In sum, it can be said that regional development policy-making in the Fourth Development Plan — despite valuable efforts and structural innovations — still requires revision, strengthening of institutional capacities, and a more serious commitment toward the

practical realization of spatial justice and sustainable development in the country.

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