



The Shadow of Centralization: Exploring Rural Mismanagement and Governance Challenges in Iran

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Abstract

Purpose- This study elucidates the profound impact of power struggles on rural management and the multifaceted challenges confronting rural municipalities (RMs) in Iran. The concept of rural mismanagement, initially proposed to decentralize power and reduce government control, has been a pivotal theme in Iranian rural development literature. Over the past 23 years, tensions between mismanagement and the government have intensified, culminating in an escalation of power struggles among rural stakeholders. This research enriches the existing literature by offering novel insights into the common obstacles faced by rural mismanagement in developing countries.

Design/methodology/approach- The study employed qualitative thematic analysis to examine the challenges faced by RMs. Snowball sampling was utilized to identify informed respondents. Through qualitative interviews with 60 local administrators, rural management experts, government officials, and residents, we identified that villages with fewer than 20 households are not recognized as villages and lack RMs, resulting in adverse social and economic consequences. For thematic analysis, interview data were analyzed using the immersion technique and the MAXQDA text analysis program to uncover underlying meanings, structures, themes, and patterns.

Findings- This research underscores the challenges facing rural management in Iran and the necessity to expand its functional areas and activities beyond rural boundaries. The findings reveal that RMs are constrained in their responsibilities, limiting their capacity to effectively address organizational concerns. Moreover, distrust in the government undermines the ability of RMs to address community issues, despite their expectations. The research highlights the difficulties RMs encounter in countries with centralized and hierarchical governance structures. The application of the research results underscores the importance of empowering local management, facilitating participation, and institutionalizing processes to address fragmented policymaking and conflicts of interest in rural management. This approach aligns with broader challenges in Iranian rural development, including weak management structures and lack of coordinated programs, which hinder sustainable development.

Keywords: local management, Government, Hierarchical structure, RM, Iran.

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1. Introduction

Urbanization, rural areas in many countries re-main the cornerstone of livelihoods and food security. Nevertheless, the development of these areas is often impeded by persistent governance gaps. Scholars have observed that top-down planning models frequently neglect local circumstances. [Ge and Lu \(2021\)](#), for instance, stress that effective rural spatial governance requires the integration of both top-down and bottom-up approaches and the active involvement of multiple stakeholders. Without such integration, centralized plans risk overlooking the genuine needs of communities. Similarly, [Sakketa \(2023\)](#) finds that successful rural development depends more on robust institutional frameworks and strong political commitment than on the mere availability of resources. His research in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that, in the absence of adequate infrastructure, legal protections, and inclusive participation, rural areas are unable to benefit from broader economic transformations.

Numerous empirical studies have documented the detrimental effects of rural mismanagement. In China, for example, [Ruan and Wang \(2023\)](#) reveal how village-level elites circumvent formal regulations: local officials employ bribery and patronage to control communal land, manipulate village elections, and suppress dissent. Evidence further suggests that even well-intentioned reforms—such as new rural revitalization initiatives—can inadvertently trigger a series of negative outcomes, including the consolidation of power by individual officials, elite capture, and widespread corruption. In Ethiopia, [Bekele et al. \(2022\)](#) demonstrate that state-led land policies have intensified conflict. Their study shows that large-scale agricultural investments have encroached upon communal pastures, resulting in land-use disputes driven by pasture scarcity and insecure land tenure. The centralized allocation of rural resources, without safeguarding customary rights, has led to increased resistance and social friction. These cases, spanning both authoritarian single-party systems and more pluralistic, reveal a common pattern: when local voices and rights are disregarded, centralized planning often leads to corruption, conflict, and a decline in trust in government. Overall, the literature indicates that

weaknesses in local institutions—such as insufficient accountability, limited participation, and inadequate resources—perpetuate mismanagement. These systemic deficiencies are fundamental to many of the failures observed in rural governance under centralized planning systems.

Managing rural areas in Iran has been a significant challenge due to the chronic disintegration of development management ([Badri et al., 2021](#)). In recent decades, various independent organizations with different approaches have taken charge of rural development, resulting in a lack of coordination and a fragmented approach to rural affairs ([Afsharipour et al., 2021](#); [Kosec & Wantchekon, 2020](#)). As a result, weaknesses and gaps in rural management have emerged, and there is an urgent need for a proper structure to advance rural affairs with a multi-dimensional and coordinated approach ([Andrews, 2003](#); [Copus et al., 2017](#)). One of the institutions responsible for rural management in Iran is the RM, which provides rural services and manages at the village level ([Badri et al., 2013](#); [Zohouri et al., 2017](#)). However, more needs to be done to address the shortcomings and weaknesses of rural people in achieving sustainable development in rural areas ([Rezvani, 2011](#)). The literature on RMs stresses the importance of preserving resources, promoting development, and empowering different groups to participate in decision-making processes ([Afsharipour et al., 2021](#)). Effective RMs should encourage thinking about the environment and become a factor in analyzing and solving economic, social, and environmental problems in rural areas ([Badri et al., 2021](#); [Salehi et al., 2014](#)).

Iran's rural management system is deeply embedded in a highly centralized legal and administrative framework, which has resulted in the concentration of power within national-level decision-making bodies. This centralization has significantly undermined local autonomy, transparency, and the accountability of local executive institutions. The legal foundations of rural management in Iran suffer from multiple deficiencies that impede the development of effective and participatory local governance. One prominent issue lies in the structural legal weaknesses that characterize Iran's rural governance. Although the establishment of rural councils is legally mandated under Article 100 of the Constitution, the actual implementation of robust legal mechanisms to support these councils

remains inadequate. Ambiguities and inconsistencies across key legal documents—such as the Law on the Establishment of Islamic Councils (1996) and the Law on the Management of Rural Affairs—have led to overlapping jurisdictions, restricted financial autonomy, and persistent administrative subordination to central ministries (Hashemi & Ghaffary, 2017).

A critical legal deficiency is the absence of a comprehensive legal framework delineating the powers and functions of village councils. While these councils are formally recognized, they often function merely as executors of central government directives rather than as autonomous, sovereign entities. The legislative and financial decision-making powers of these councils remain vague, rendering them subordinate to provincial and county officials appointed by the Ministry of Interior. This structural dependence erodes the foundations of local governance and democratic accountability, which are essential for effective rural administration (Badri et al., 2021). Furthermore, Iran's legal system lacks coherent and context-specific land ownership regulations suitable for rural areas. Land management in rural regions is governed by a disjointed set of outdated laws—including the Land Reform Law (1962), the Public Lands Law (1975), and the Rangeland Management Law—none of which have been sufficiently revised to reflect the contemporary realities of rural life or to recognize customary land rights. This fragmented legal landscape contributes to tenure insecurity, particularly in tribal and semi-nomadic communities where informal land claims frequently conflict with formal state ownership, resulting in land disputes and inefficient land utilization (Hosseini et al., 2015). Another significant shortcoming is the absence of legal mechanisms for accountability and anti-corruption at the rural level. Although national oversight institutions such as the General Inspectorate of the State and the Supreme Court of Accounts are mandated to monitor public sector performance, their oversight is primarily restricted to higher tiers of government. There is a notable lack of statutory provisions for the establishment of regional or local bodies capable of ensuring financial transparency and ethical governance at the village level. This institutional vacuum facilitates lobbying and manipulation during council elections and curtails meaningful public participation (Tajbakhsh, 2022).

A theoretical gap in RMs that needs to be addressed is the lack of a proper structure to advance rural affairs with a multi-dimensional and coordinated approach (Afsharipour et al., 2021; Bagheri et al., 2013; Copus et al., 2017). In developing countries like Iran, the division of power between the local administration and the governing body can hinder the progress of RMs (Crosta et al., 2006; Niedomysl, 2007). Centralized countries may resist power transfer to public institutions, making it difficult to achieve effective RMs (Salehi et al., 2014; Zohouri et al., 2017). Global experiences have shown that good governance, based on democratic and egalitarian development, can influence all interested forces in the administration of rural affairs and respond to the needs of these groups (Reis, 2016). Effective RMs should facilitate participation, institutionalization, and planning in the affairs of villagers (Niedomysl, 2007). RMs should focus on empowering different groups and promoting participation, planning for the future, investing in opportunities, striving for happiness, increasing well-being, and ultimately improving the quality of life in rural areas (Afsharipour et al., 2021; Bagheri et al., 2013).

This study aims to investigate the challenges RMs face in Iran. The establishment of RMs in Iran was intended to decentralize power and reduce government control. Yet, over the past 23 years, tensions between RMs and the government have escalated, leading to power struggles. This Research contributes to the current literature on RMs by offering fresh insights into the common obstacles encountered by RMs in developing nations. Furthermore, it highlights how power dynamics in centralized and hierarchical countries can hinder the efficacy and productivity of RMs.

2. Research Theoretical Literature

As a local institution in Iran, the RM manages and administers villages (Badri & Badri et al., 2013). The RM, managed by the Village head, is recognized as the primary institution for rural management in Iran (Salehi et al., 2014). These municipalities serve as crucial references for providing local community services and executing assigned tasks. In Iran's administrative and management system, the RM is considered a non-governmental public institution that receives financial resources to perform its duties (Afsharipour et al., 2021). Following the Islamic Revolution, Islamic councils were entrusted with managing rural areas. However, in

1996, the law on determining the duties and powers of RMs increased the role and importance of RMs in local administration (Zohouri et al., 2017). In 1998, RMs officially entered Iran's rural management arena with a stronger role after approving the "Law on the Establishment of Self-sufficient RMs in the Country's Villages." According to this law, the Village head, nominated by the council and elected for a four-year term with the District administration's approval, holds executive responsibility for rural management (Afsharipour et al., 2021).

Due to their proximity to the people, understanding of societal problems and needs, and close relationships with relevant departments and organizations, RMs hold a crucial position in Iran's administrative system (Zohouri et al., 2017). They

can serve as an effective intermediary between the people and the government to address local problems and needs (Badri et al., 2021). The Law on Definitions and Rules of Duties of RMs defines the RM as a rural executive unit with the rank of administrative supervisor (Salehi et al., 2014). Today, RMs are responsible for managing financial and tax affairs, implementing local laws and regulations, maintaining security and public order, monitoring and controlling economic activities, managing and providing rural services, meeting the needs of villages, controlling the process of development and migration of villagers to cities, etc. (Afsharipour et al., 2021). Figure 1 shows the position of RMs in the administrative system. (Figure 1).

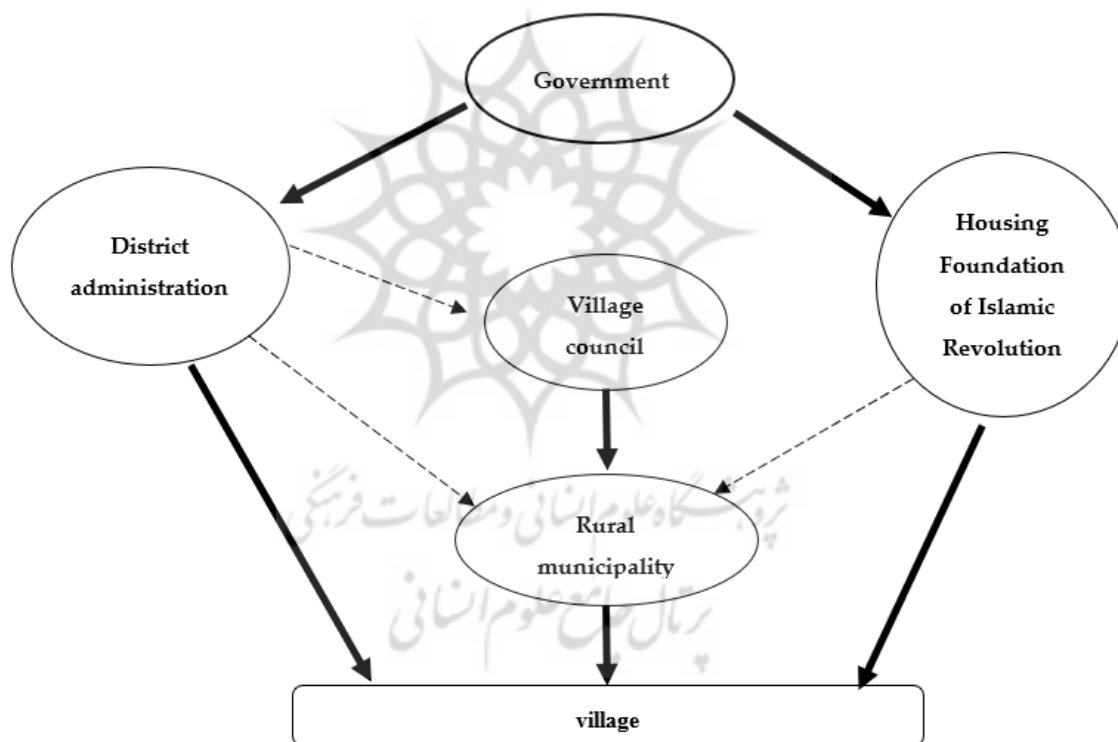


Figure 1. The position of the RM in the rural management system in Iran

2.1. Literature Review

Rural municipalities are local governments responsible for governing and providing services to rural areas. The concept of rural municipalities is grounded in the principle of local governance, which is based on the idea that local authorities are best placed to understand and address their communities' unique needs and challenges (Mokhtari Karchegani, Tavakoli, et al., 2024). This

approach originates from the decentralization theories advanced by Jean-Paul Faguet, Rondinelli et al. (1983). It emphasizes the transfer of authority and resources from central governments to local institutions (Andersson et al., 2009). According to this theory, local governments are more effective and accountable when decision-making powers are devolved, particularly in rural areas where localized knowledge plays a critical role (Karchegani et al.,

2025; Vargas-Hernandez et al., 2025). Successful experiences of Rural municipalities can be found in various countries, including Canada (Douglas, 2023), Australia (Brunet-Jailly & Martin, 2020), and Norway (Šūpule & Søholt, 2019). In Canada, rural municipalities are typically responsible for road maintenance, waste management, and emergency services. In Australia, rural municipalities are responsible for various services, including water supply, waste management, and community development (Brunet-Jailly & Martin, 2020). The specific responsibilities and powers of rural municipalities can vary widely depending on the country and its system of government.

In the literature on decentralized governance, institutional perspectives—particularly in Faguet (2014) studies—highlight a strong correlation between the level of development and the institutional policies of decentralization. These perspectives assert that when local governments possess sufficient capacity and autonomy, governance outcomes are significantly improved. Allowing local authorities to make decisions in rural areas can result in more effective and responsive service delivery (Popoola et al., 2022). This is because they are better equipped to understand their community's unique needs and challenges, which leads to tailor-made policies and services (Islam, 2025). As a result, resources can be used efficiently and residents can experience better outcomes. However, rural municipalities can face challenges due to a lack of financial and human resources. The smaller populations and limited tax bases in rural areas make it difficult to provide high-quality services (Biljohn & Lues, 2020). Additionally, a shortage of skilled professionals, such as engineers and planners, can limit the ability of rural areas to implement complex policies and projects (Lessing, 2021).

Despite these challenges, evidence suggests that rural municipalities can effectively address the needs of rural communities. For example, a study conducted in Norway found that rural municipalities could provide high-quality services despite facing significant resource constraints (Gjerstad et al., 2015). The study also found that rural municipalities could collaborate effectively with other local authorities and community organizations, which helped enhance service delivery and promote economic development. Rural municipalities are an essential form of local

governance that can provide responsive and effective services to rural communities (Mokhtari Karchegani, Tavakoli, & Portahari, 2024). While they face challenges such as a lack of resources and skilled professionals, evidence suggests that they can effectively address rural areas' needs (Saputra & Havlíček, 2024). As such, there is a need for further Research and policy development in this area to support the development and Sustainability of rural municipalities.

3. Methodology

This study utilized qualitative thematic analysis to explore the challenges facing RMs. To identify knowledgeable respondents, we employed snowball sampling, a widely used qualitative research method that involves selecting future sample members through previous sample members, resulting in the sample size growing like a snowball (Torabi et al., 2021). This method is particularly useful when access to the study population is complex, often due to small numbers and subject sensitivity. Given the sensitivity of our research topic, we anticipated that potential respondents, especially government experts, might be reluctant to participate unless they trusted the researchers. Our assumption proved to be correct, resulting in a six-month interview period. Despite conflicts with some individuals and government managers, we gained many stakeholders' trusts and encouraged some to cooperate.

Before conducting the interviews, we established cordial relationships with the stakeholders during the winter of 2022. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, while local authorities were contacted to facilitate referral chains. After approaching 67 potential participants, we ultimately secured interviews with 60 respondents (Table 1). To ensure robust results and avoid potential bias, respondents were selected from all categories of stakeholders who impact or are impacted by RMs. Interviews were conducted at participants' homes, workplaces, or by phone, using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of three general questions focused on the challenges facing the RMs under study. As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents were affiliated with local managers (30%) and in terms of gender, 56.4% were male and 43.6% were female. Held at least a master's degree (45%). Over half had more than 10 years of executive experience in rural governance.

Table 1. Respondents' profile

Variable	Sector	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Institutional Affiliation	local managers	18	30%
	rural management experts	17	28.3%
	government officials	12	20%
	Residents	13	21.7%
Gender	Male	34	56.40%
	Female	26	43.60%
Education Level	Bachelor's degree	22	36.7%
	Master's degree	27	45.0%
	PhD	11	18.3%
Years of Executive Experience	Less than 5 years	8	13.3%
	5–10 years	21	35.0%
	11–20 years	19	31.7%
	More than 20 years	12	20.0%

3.1. Data collection

The study employed pre-arranged appointments, conducting semi-structured interviews either in person or by phone based on participants' preferences. Prospective respondents were invited to participate via telephone. Our interview questions were selected after conducting a comprehensive literature review and consulting experts in the field, focusing on eliciting detailed and comprehensive responses that would allow us to explore a range of related topics and issues. Our interview guide consisted of three primary questions:

What are the primary challenges facing RMs?

What are the expectations of local communities about RMs?

How would you assess the relationship between RMs and the Government?

The researchers asked additional questions as needed to account for the various factors affecting the challenges faced by RMs, such as political, cultural, social, and economic factors. While all interviews were recorded, seven participants chose not to be recorded and instead, notes were taken. The interviews were translated from Farsi to English, and confidentiality was assured to the participants prior to the interview. Data collection continued until the point of theoretical saturation, with a total of 60 inter-views conducted. The length and number of questions varied based on the topic and the participant's response, with the average inter-view lasting 45-60 minutes and consisting of 10-15 questions.

3.2. Data analysis

Using thematic analysis, we examined interview data by reviewing transcriptions and notes mul-tiple

times to ensure transcription reliability. We utilized the immersion technique and MAXQDA textual analysis program to uncover the data's underlying meanings, constructs, themes, and patterns. Our approach involved both logical and intuitive thinking, utilizing open coding and charting to visualize data and group codes based on semantic and conceptual relationships. We selected central themes for each code network and linked sub-codes/sub-themes to understand the relationships between concepts. We returned transcribed interviews to respondents for review to ensure research validity, but only one-third provided additional feedback. We analyzed keywords and categories developed from the research question and emerged themes. Our findings were presented clearly, organizing interview texts according to themes and categories and using quotes and examples to illustrate results. Our emergent thematic structure and codes reflected the subjectivities of respondents' experiences and captured the social distribution of issues raised.

4. Research Findings

4.1. The position of RMs in Iran's administrative system

The present Research sheds light on the challenges that RM in Iran faces, primarily related to their focus on physical issues. This narrow scope has left them ill-equipped to address rural residents' social and economic challenges, especially given the absence of government institutions in rural areas.

RMs, the executive organization of rural management, and municipality managers must possess the legal and customary authority to carry out their duties effectively. Currently, the law

defines 48 duties for village officials, of which 35%, 17%, 10%, and 37% are executive, supervisory, information, and communication tasks with government organizations, respectively. However, these tasks are often unclear and general, leaving no instructions for how the villagers' activities are carried out. Although the law requires RMs to cooperate with government organizations, there is

no written law mandating cooperation with RMs, despite its crucial role in mediating between people and government organizations. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize RMs' role in these organizations' laws to improve their efficiency. The executive body can coordinate or cooperate with the RMs to perform their activities.

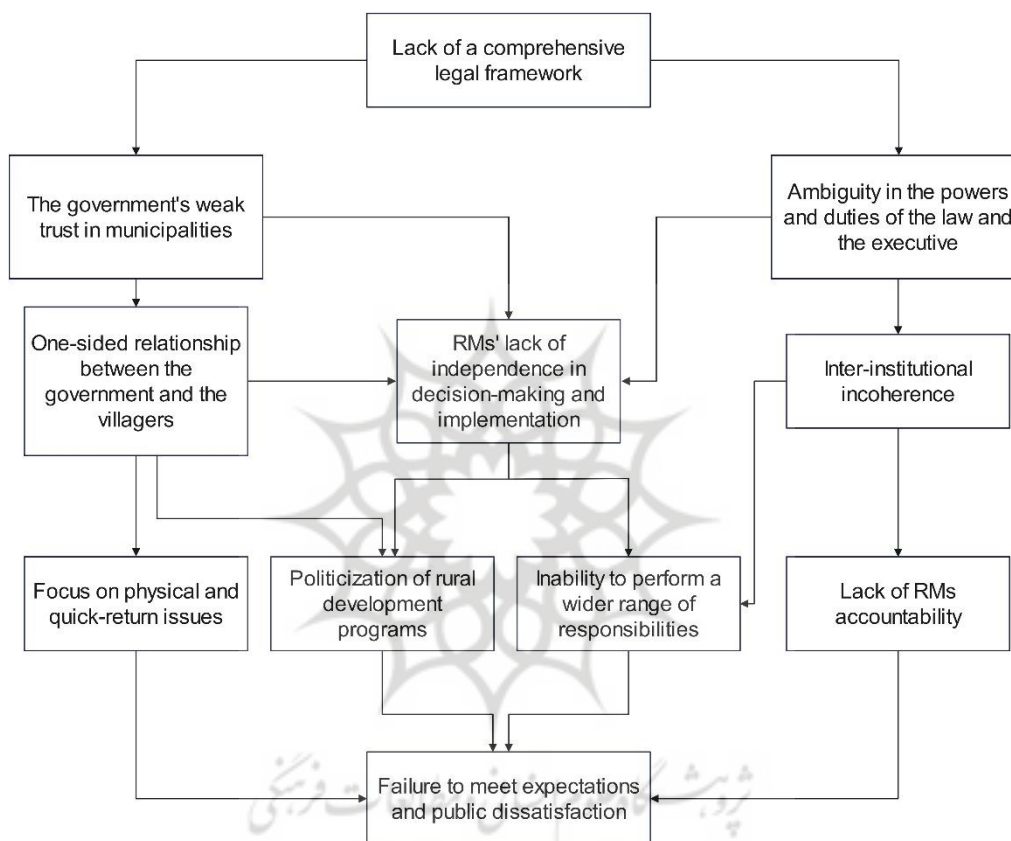


Figure 2. Low government trust and insufficient powers of RMs

The challenges RMs face in Iran are not unique, as developing countries worldwide face similar issues. RMs are often expected to carry out various tasks beyond their capabilities, such as managing infrastructure, providing basic services, and promoting economic development (Czudec & Zajac, 2021; Mashau et al., 2022; Miceikienė et al., 2021). This situation results in RMs being unable to adequately address the needs of rural residents, leading to social, economic, and environmental problems. To address this issue, the literature suggests that RMs should adopt a wider scope of responsibilities similar to that of local government in urban areas. This would require a decentralization of power, with local institutions assuming greater

responsibility for managing their affairs. However, decentralization alone is insufficient to address the challenges RMs face. The research findings highlight that the lack of trust in local administration by the governing body is a significant obstacle to carrying out activities outside the physical structure of the village. A broader cultural shift is necessary, in which government officials view RMs as a partner rather than a rival. Such a shift would require a fundamental change in how government officials view rural areas and their residents, and would necessitate a concerted effort to promote greater understanding and collaboration between rural and urban areas. The present Research highlights the challenges RMs face in Iran regarding

their focus on physical issues. To address these challenges, RMs should adopt a broader scope of responsibilities, akin to that of local government in urban areas. However, this will re-quire a broader cultural shift in which government officials view RMs as a partner rather than a rival (Niedomysl, 2007). This shift will facilitate greater collaboration and understanding between rural and urban areas, leading to greater social, economic, and environmental Sustainability in rural areas. Figure 2 shows the insufficiency of RMs' powers due to the government's low trust.

Also, the findings of this Research highlight the need for multi-level and joint governance in rural areas, which can be operationalized through a more efficient coordination mechanism among different stakeholders. Iran's current administrative

hierarchy structure is considered inappropriate for implementing such policies, and experiences from other countries have shown that inter-sectoral coordination is crucial for sustainable rural development. The literature on rural governance also emphasizes the importance of coordination mechanisms among different stakeholders, both horizontally and vertically. Studies have shown that horizontal coordination among local stakeholders is essential for successful rural development, and it depends on various factors such as democratic processes, social, human, institutional, and symbolic capital, and the legal and regulatory structure. On the other hand, vertical coordination among local institutions and higher political hierarchies is crucial for effectively implementing rural policies and programs.

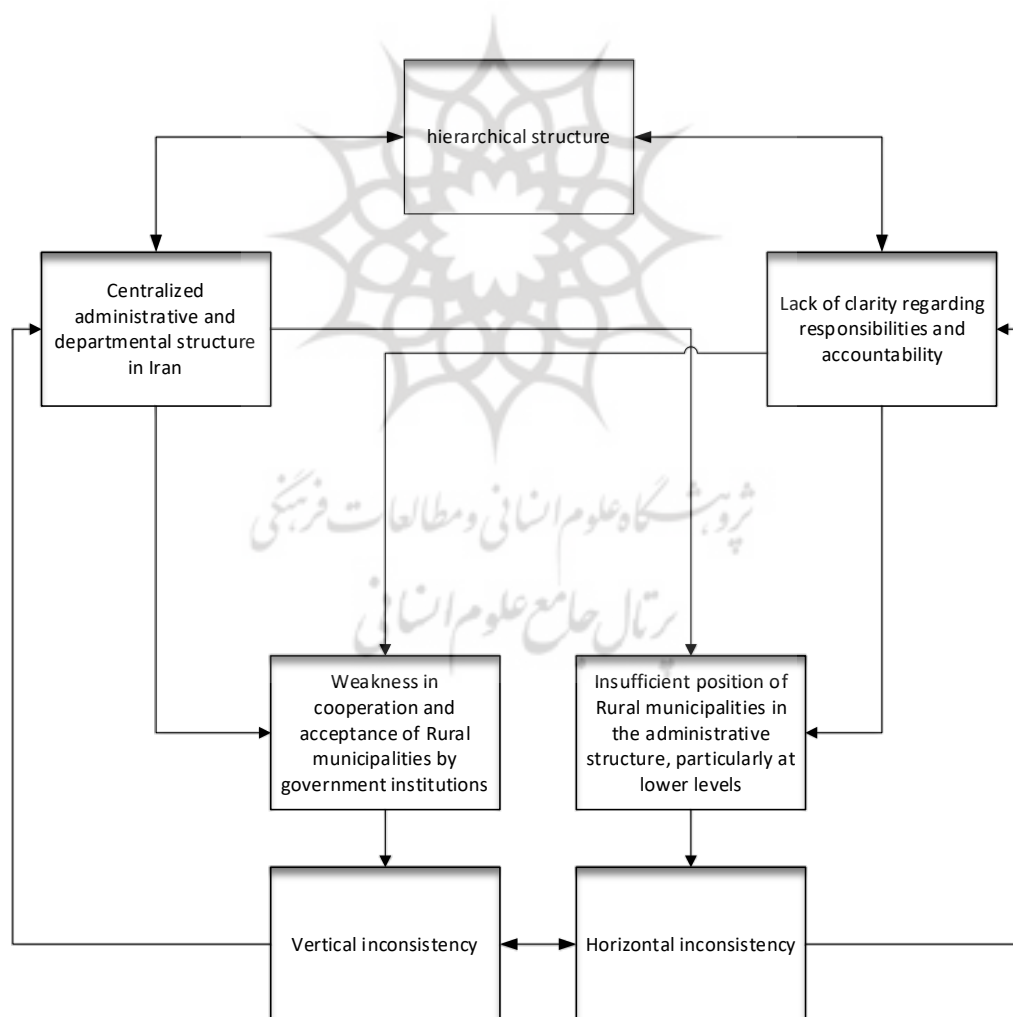


Figure 3: Hierarchical structure and horizontal and vertical inconsistencies

Moreover, the literature suggests that the success of rural governance depends on the type and level of

coordination at different levels. For instance, in Finland, the government formed a large

interdepartmental committee of different ministries to remove obstacles to rural development. In Canada, the federal government created a rural secretariat in the Ministry of Agriculture and Food to manage rural development policies in a coordinated way. Similarly, in Mexico, the inter-administrative coordination plan for rural development is an organizational agreement to resolve inter-departmental conflicts and ensure the effective implementation of rural policies and programs.

In Iran, the centralized administrative and departmental structure has hindered the efficient coordination of activities related to rural development among executive bodies. The lack of clarity regarding responsibilities and accountability has also been identified as a significant challenge. To address these issues, the Research suggests that expert work should be carried out to determine the method of coordination, everyone should follow the same policy, and the division of duties should be done naturally. The study also highlights the weakness in cooperation and acceptance of RMs by government institutions, both horizontally and vertically. This can be attributed to the insufficient position of the RMs in the administrative structure, particularly at the lower levels. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the position of the RMs and increase their power and influence in the administrative structure to ensure the effective implementation of rural policies and programs. This Research contributes to the existing literature on rural governance by highlighting the importance of multi-level and joint governance and the need for efficient coordination mechanisms among different stakeholders. The findings suggest that Iran's current administrative hierarchy structure is inappropriate for implementing such policies, and experiences from other countries provide valuable insights into effective coordination mechanisms (Badri et al., 2021). Finally, the study underscores the need to strengthen the position of RMs in the administrative structure to ensure the successful implementation of rural policies and programs. Figure 3 shows the hierarchical structure and horizontal and vertical inconsistencies.

4.2. RMs incomes

The findings of this study shed light on the challenges rural communities face in terms of income generation and the limitations of the current institutional framework in addressing these

challenges. The Financial Regulations of RMs provide seven sources of income for the institution. However, the low incomes in rural areas, particularly in villages with low and marginal populations, mean that village assistants receive minimal income, and rural farmers' income is primarily dependent on the construction sector, which is an unstable source of income due to its high fluctuations. While criticizing the low income of RMs in sparsely populated villages, one of the Village heads stated that *"it is stipulated by law that RMs should be self-sufficient in income."* Also, in this regard, another participant said that *"despite the formal transfer of administrative responsibilities to the dehyars since the early 2000s, their financial autonomy has remained severely limited."* It is further noted that *"However, these approaches are either poorly implemented or inherently unsustainable, which requires in-depth academic study. In Iran, most of the income of RMs also comes from construction taxes. However, small villages with very little building construction cannot generate sufficient income to cover the infrastructure cost, despite the provision of equipment"*.

The findings indicate that legal regulations constitute another exacerbating factor in the financial challenges faced by rural areas, rooted in broader institutional frameworks. Specifically, revenue generation by rural management institutions in Iran is deeply entangled in legal obstacles, bureaucratic red tape, and macro-level economic fluctuations. At the micro level, these issues are further compounded by the absence of formal oversight mechanisms, speculative behaviors of key actors, and weak community participation. According to Article 5 of the relevant law, village administrators (dehyars) are required to achieve financial self-sufficiency. However, they lack access to key fiscal instruments such as progressive taxation, land value registration, or local commercial levies-tools commonly available in de-centralized systems worldwide (Shucksmith, 2018). As one participant noted, *"The minis-tries-especially the Ministry of Interior and the Planning and Budget Organization-keep a tight grip on financial transfers. They don't give us much room to adjust budgets to fit local needs, and village administrations are basically left on their own."*

Moreover, the findings suggest that the inability to attract investors and build partnerships with other

development stakeholders constitutes another major financial barrier for rural areas. Legal deficiencies and the centralized political-economic structure have hindered rural councils from formalizing relationships with external actors. In contrast, urban municipalities in Iran often succeed in negotiating financial arrangements through strategic alliances with higher authorities or private sector entities. As another participant put it,

"There's no law that officially recognizes village councils and dehyars as financially competent agents. That's what keeps them from taking part in public-private partnerships or joint regional development investments." As a result, rather than positioning rural economies along broader development trajectories, this institutional and legal isolation has effectively pushed them further to the margins.

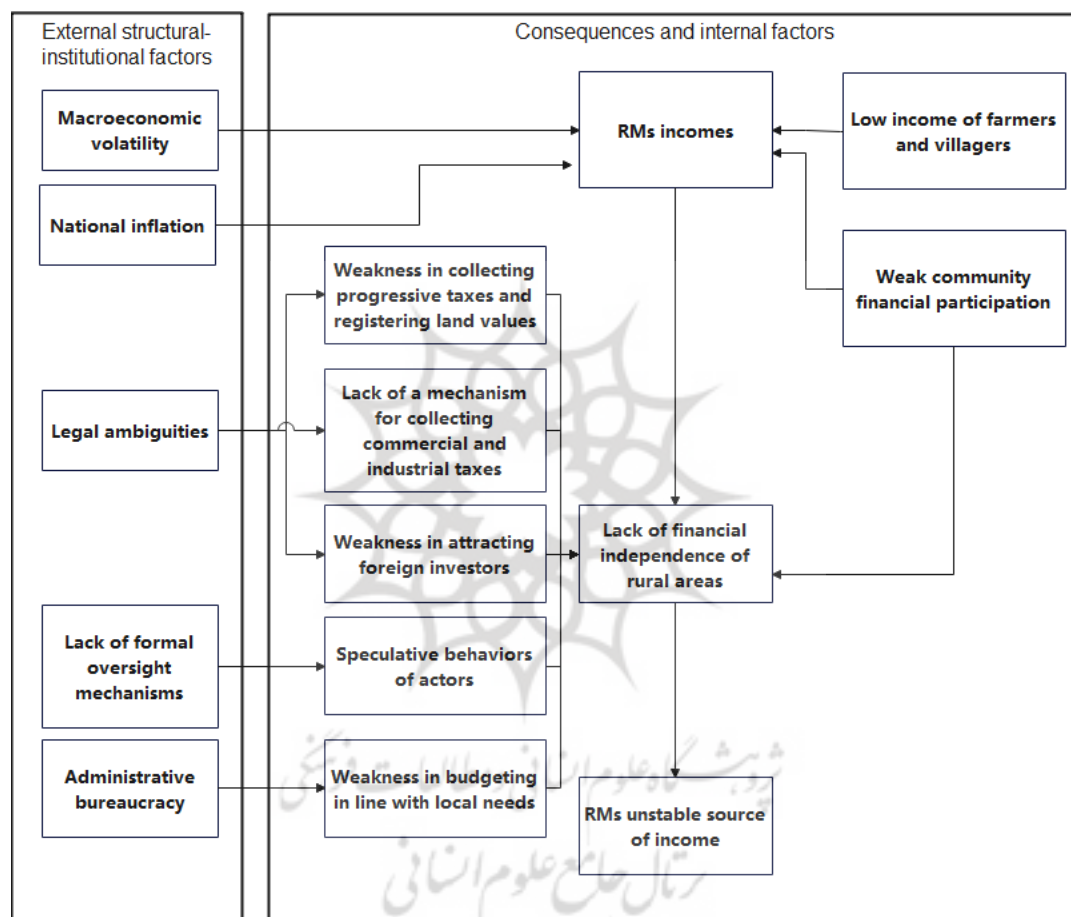


Figure 3: Factors that make RMs' income sources unstable

The study suggests that empowering village assistants and supervisory bodies and delegating authority to them can help overcome these challenges. This aligns with the global trend of local governments worldwide aiming to solve rural problems and reduce communication with higher centres by creating mechanisms within villages. Decentralization of power and resources can lead to better management and diversification of income based on an all-around plan in the village. Incentives for economic activities should be allocated to those who participate, increasing creativity in the RMs and encouraging them to

participate more in the local community. Regarding the use of village heads' creativity to generate income for the village, an expert in RMs stated that "the main activity of villagers in Iran is agriculture, but they cannot benefit from this job as agriculture is exempt from taxes." Furthermore, the law presents a significant obstacle to creating new ways to increase the income of rural farmers. Therefore, if the law and regulations permit rural farmers to generate income according to their rural talents, their financial problems can be reduced to some extent".

The literature supports the idea that decentralization can improve rural communities' outcomes. For example, scholars have argued that decentralization can lead to better service delivery, more effective governance, and greater community participation in decision-making processes (Salehi et al., 2014; Singh & Shishodia, 2016; Zohouri et al., 2017). Similarly, researchers have highlighted the importance of empowering local institutions and communities to address rural communities' challenges (Humlerová, 2017; Torabi et al., 2025; Torabi et al., 2021). The study also suggests that communication with entrepreneurs and sharing successful experiences can motivate villagers, and custodian institutions should facilitate communication. This is consistent with the literature, which suggests that networking and collaboration among stakeholders can lead to better outcomes for rural communities (Afsharipour et al., 2021; Villanueva, 2021).

4.3. Management of villages under 20 households

According to the definition of a village in Iran, a village is a homogeneous settlement in terms of its environment (natural, social, cultural, and economic conditions) and has a specific independent registered or customary domain and territory. At least 20 households or one hundred people live there, whether concentrated or scattered. According to this law, places and farms with fewer than 20 households and fewer than 100 people are deprived of the blessing of having a rural management institution due to not meeting the conditions for establishing RMs. Therefore, these places and farms lack coherent and systematic management, like villages with over twenty households. For example, one of the beneficiaries criticized the current approach and claimed, "Unfortunately, we do not have a management structure for the villages below the population's household level. Although these settlements are not included in the definition of a village in this country... but if it were not a city place! Alternatively, it was not a village! Shouldn't they be served? Does that mean they should be forgotten? Is this justice?"

The lack of management structures for villages with less than 20 households in Iran highlights a gap in the governance system, policy-making, and community development. Good governance, effective policy-making, and community development are essential for rural development. In the case of Iran, the applicability of the definition of

a village and the lack of attention to the management issue in micro and middle-level plans suggests a need for policy reforms. Community-based approaches to RMs could be a potential solution to address the needs of local communities and ensure effective and sustainable management structures (López-Penabad et al., 2022; Nunes et al., 2022). Further Research is needed to explore the potential of community-based approaches to RMs and their implications for rural development in Iran. In the Population and housing census 2014, there were 22,819 villages with less than 20 households. According to the information of the Iranian Statistics Center, villages with less than 20 households suffer from high migration of young people, low literacy levels, low employment, and severe poverty compared to other rural areas of the country due to a lack of services. On the other hand, due to social-geographical isolation and a lack of guardians in these places, access to services for this type of citizen is low. Therefore, considering the population and the relatively high number of places and farms, a new structure for management at these levels seems necessary. To solve this problem, governments sometimes start the policy of consolidating small and scattered settlements. However, it should be noted that applying this policy sometimes leads to the loss of resources and weakness in the country's humanitarian and defence capabilities. One of the beneficiaries from the group of academics claimed: "Some of these places and fields have a suitable location; we should not allow these places to wither and disappear little by little. Because many of these places and farms have significant production, some of them used to be villages that lost their population over time and now face this RM vacuum... instead of solving the problem, we should solve the problem by destroying these places and erasing their identity. However, we must design a mechanism that allows easy access to services for this type of citizen, not uneconomically."

Good governance is essential for effective rural development. According to Agrawal and Tripathy et al. (2021), good governance is a set of processes that promote accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. In rural areas, effective governance can help ensure equitable resource distribution, sustainable development, and increased access to services (Addink, 2019). Rural governance structures can be complex and include local,

regional, and national levels of government. In the case of Iran, the lack of management structures for villages with less than 20 households highlights a gap in the governance system, which could be addressed through policy-making. Another beneficiary, criticizing the non-implementation of some legal provisions of the Fifth Development Plan in Iran, stated, "In the fifth development plan, the concern of these points was taken into consideration, but in the micro and middle-level plans, practically no attention was paid to it... as if the program has assigned that these points should be organized in some way..." in fact, Policy-making is an essential tool for rural development. Policies can

help address rural areas' challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and limited access to services. In the case of Iran, the non-implementation of some legal provisions of the Fifth Development Plan highlights a challenge in policy-making. The Fifth Development Plan aims to promote rural development, providing services and infrastructure in rural areas. However, the lack of attention to the management issue in villages with less than 20 households in micro and middle-level plans suggests a policy gap. Figure 4 shows the challenges of villages with less than 20 households that do not have a village municipality.

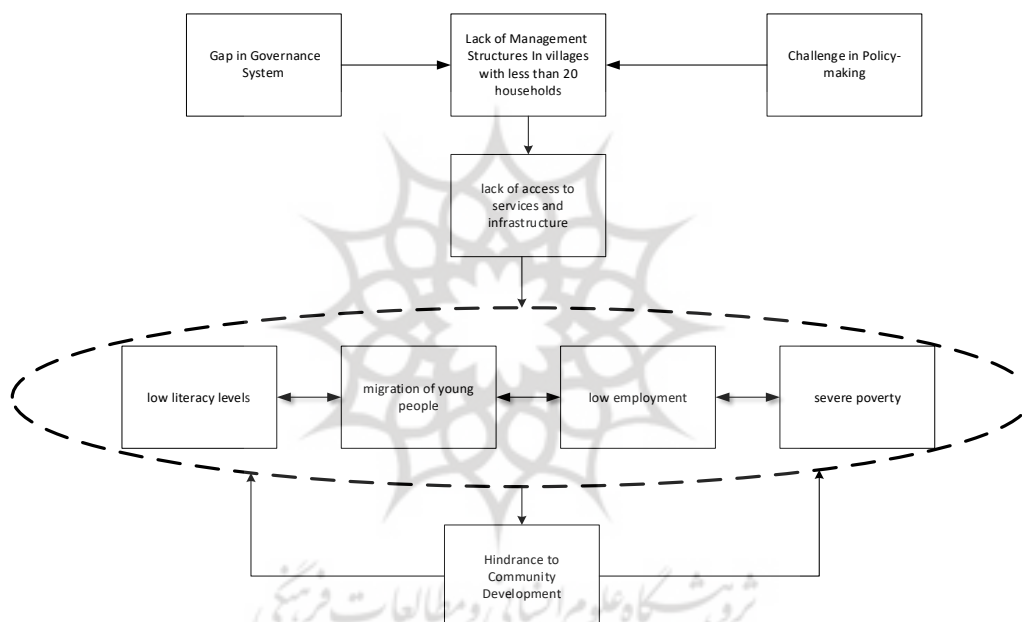


Figure 4: the challenges of villages with less than 20 households that do not have a village municipality

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the challenges encountered by RMs in Iran and provides insights into the need to expand their functional area and duties beyond village boundaries. It highlights the significance of a new management structure for small communities, which can inform further studies on RMs in Iran and other countries facing similar challenges. While previous Re-search has focused on community-oriented capacities in RMs in developed countries (Badri et al., 2013; Copus et al., 2017; Douglas, 2005), this study provides a new perspective on the specific challenges faced by countries with centralized institutional structures. The weak institutionalization of local management in developing countries impedes sustainable rural

development (Kato et al., 2022), and this study critically examines prevailing approaches to local management, emphasizing the role of villagers in the local development process (Zohouri et al., 2017).

This Research contributes to rural management literature by providing unique insights into RMs' general challenges in developing countries. It highlights how power relations in centralized and hierarchical countries can reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of RMs, leading to struggles for power between RMs and the Government and hindering effective rural management (Castro-Arce & Vancly, 2020). The centralization of power in Iran has led to a hierarchical structure resistant to the

transfer of power to public institutions, making it difficult to achieve effective rural management. Additionally, this study highlights how power struggles have led to a fragmented approach to rural management, resulting in weaknesses and gaps (Clark et al., 2007). A lack of coordination and a fragmented approach to rural affairs have emerged due to various independent organizations with different approaches taking charge of rural development (Badri et al., 2021). The Research emphasizes the need for a coordinated and multi-dimensional approach to advance rural affairs. To improve rural management, the study recommends empowering RMs (Torre & Traversac, 2011), facilitating participation (Müller et al., 2020), institutionalizing planning (Kato et al., 2022; Kim & Lim, 2016), and focusing on promoting development and pre-serving resources (Shortall, 2008). It also recommends distinguishing between city and village administrative mechanisms in planning and management systems, delegating a wide range of duties and functions to local administration, and expanding the area of influence of RMs from point management to territorial management. The study highlights the negative consequences of neglecting the holistic approach in local management (Mokhtari karchegani et al., 2020) and recommends moving from governance to good governance to lead to multi-level and collaborative action (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). Institutionalizing the rural management system is crucial to address challenges in the diverse nature of villages in countries such as Iran. The National Rural Area Management Organization could assist in integrating RMs, while horizontal and vertical coordination could strengthen the effectiveness of the planning and rural management system.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The study recommends granting extensive powers to the local government to diversify the local government's income (Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022), managing lands within the legal boundaries of villages, and consolidating service delivery and allocation of financial credits by the Central Government (McAreavey, 2009). Regional management could facilitate service delivery to small places while considering local capacities. Precise and efficient laws could prevent arbitrary behaviour of local and extra-local managers (Van Assche, 2015), and incentives for social innovation could encourage the active involvement of local

communities and private investors to increase the efficiency and competitiveness of local management (Satola et al., 2019). The central governments should allocate special credit to marginal and less fortunate villages based on their territorial duty (Miceikienė et al., 2021).

5.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study is not without limitations, which should be acknowledged. First, some potential participants refused to be interviewed due to the focus of the study on the challenges of public administration in rural areas. This limitation may affect the generalizability of the results, and thus, caution should be exercised when interpreting them. Second, since this Research was conducted in a centralized political structure with an oil economy, the findings may not be generalizable to other government structures, such as welfare and socialist governments. Therefore, further Research is necessary to determine whether these results hold in different political and economic contexts. Additionally, future studies should explore the relationship between the structure of the planning and management system and the effectiveness of RMs.

Despite its limitations, this research lays a valuable foundation for future investigations. In the political sphere, subsequent studies could explore how varying planning systems and the institutionalization of local governments influence rural governance. To address fiscal mismanagement rooted in institutional shortcomings, future research should explore the potential of participatory governance and decentralization to local governments. Engaging rural stakeholders in planning processes—through inclusive communication, capacity-building initiatives, and shared decision-making frameworks—can foster more coherent and equitable governance structures. For instance, reinforcing local and regional institutions by promoting accountability, empowering local actors, and encouraging effective participation is vital to overcoming rural mismanagement. In the social dimension, future studies could investigate the contributions of social capital, grassroots innovation, and community-driven initiatives to sustainable rural management. Economically, the impact of small village consolidation on rural income diversification and improved market connectivity warrants further

examination. Mapping the networks of local and trans-local stakeholders and investors can help develop context-sensitive strategies that address inefficiencies and align with local priorities. Additionally, measures such as securing land tenure rights -including the formal recognition of customary claims- and ensuring transparency in implementation are widely recognized as effective practices for enhancing the financial management of rural municipalities. Finally, future research should assess how local management practices affect environmental sustainability and the conservation of natural and human resources. These

research directions are essential for advancing knowledge and formulating effective rural resource management strategies.

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Authors contributions

The authors equally contributed to the preparation of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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سایه تمرکزگرایی: بررسی چالش‌های سوءمدیریت و حکمرانی روستایی در ایران

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چکیده مبسوط

۱. مقدمه

حکمرانی روستایی در کشورهای در حال توسعه، و به‌ویژه در ایران، با مجموعه‌ای پیچیده از چالش‌ها و شکاف‌های نهادی مواجه است. اگرچه روستاها همواره یکی از پایه‌های اصلی امنیت غذایی، پایداری اجتماعی و توسعه سرزمینی بوده‌اند، اما ضعف در ساختارهای مدیریتی، تمرکز قدرت در سطوح ملی و ناهماهنگی نهادی میان دستگاه‌ها باعث شده است که بسیاری از برنامه‌های توسعه‌ای به نتایج مطلوب نرسند. ادبیات پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که مدل‌های برنامه‌ریزی بالاب‌پایین، بدون شناخت دقیق زمینه‌های محلی، قادر به تأمین نیازهای واقعی جوامع روستایی نیستند و حتی در برخی موارد پیامدهای منفی همچون کاهش اعتماد عمومی، فساد، انحصار قدرت و نابرابری فضایی به همراه داشته‌اند. با وجود اهمیت تدوین سازوکارهای حکمرانی چندسطحی، ساختار مدیریتی ایران همچنان در چارچوبی سلسله‌مراتبی عمل می‌کند که در آن اختیارات تصمیم‌گیری و منابع عمدتاً در سطح ملی متمرکز است.

در چنین ساختاری، دهیاری‌ها (RMs) که قرار بود ابزارهای اصلی مردمی‌سازی مدیریت محلی باشند، با محدودیت‌های گوناگون مواجه شده‌اند. از زمان تأسیس این نهادها در سال ۱۹۹۸، هدف اصلی کاهش مداخله دولت و انتقال بخشی از مدیریت روستاها به بدنه محلی بوده است. با این حال، طی ۲۳ سال اخیر تنش میان دولت و RMs افزایش یافته و تضادهای قدرت باعث کاهش کارآمدی این نهادها شده است. این مطالعه با هدف تحلیل عمیق این چالش‌ها از طریق روش تحلیل

تماتیک و انجام ۶۰ مصاحبه کیفی با مدیران محلی، کارشناسان، مسئولان دولتی و روستاییان انجام شده است.

۲. مبانی نظری تحقیق

نظام مدیریت روستایی در ایران مبتنی بر مجموعه‌ای از قوانین و مقررات است که اگرچه به ظاهر بر تفویض اختیار تأکید دارند، اما در عمل با ابهام‌های قانونی و محدودیت‌های مالی و اداری مواجه‌اند. ضعف در تعیین حدود وظایف شوراها، نبود سازوکارهای نظارتی محلی، نداشتن استقلال مالی و عدم شفافیت در نحوه تخصیص منابع، موجب شده است که دهیاری‌ها نتوانند نقش واقعی خود را ایفا کنند. در نتیجه، مدیریت روستایی بیشتر به انجام کارهای اجرایی محدود شده و ظرفیت این نهادها برای ایفای نقش راهبردی در توسعه محلی کاهش یافته است. در ادبیات جهانی، تقویت حکمرانی محلی و تمرکززدایی، شرط اساسی برای دستیابی به توسعه پایدار شناخته می‌شود. کشورهای مانند کانادا و نروژ نشان داده‌اند که با ایجاد نهادهای محلی مستقل و برخورداری از منابع و اختیارات کافی، امکان برنامه‌ریزی مشارکتی و ارائه خدمات مطلوب در روستاها فراهم می‌شود. در مقابل، در کشورهایی با ساختارهای متمرکز، چالش‌هایی چون شکاف میان جامعه و دولت، مقاومت در برابر انتقال قدرت و ضعف سازوکارهای مشارکتی مشاهده می‌شود؛ وضعیتی که مشابه ایران است.

۳. روش تحقیق

پژوهش حاضر به روش کیفی و تحلیل تماتیک انجام شده است. با استفاده از نمونه‌گیری گلوله‌برفی، ۶۰ نفر از مدیران محلی، کارشناسان مدیریت روستایی، مسئولان دولتی و ساکنان

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ه/ پیامدهای اجتماعی و اقتصادی- ضعف ساختار مدیریت محلی موجب نارضایتی، کاهش اعتماد به نهادهای دولتی، عدم تحقق مشارکت اجتماعی، تضعیف توسعه اقتصادی و کاهش بهره‌وری در سکونتگاه‌های روستایی شده است.

۵. بحث و نتیجه‌گیری

پژوهش حاضر نشان می‌دهد که ساختار متمرکز حکمرانی در ایران، اصلی‌ترین مانع توسعه روستایی و کارآمدی دهیاری‌هاست. ضعف قوانین، وابستگی مالی، محدودیت اختیارات، نبود سازوکارهای مشارکت‌محور، کمبود هماهنگی نهادی و نادیده گرفتن روستاهای کوچک، موجب شده است که نهادهای محلی نتوانند نقش خود را در توسعه پایدار ایفا کنند. بر این اساس، راهکارهایی همچون توانمندسازی نهادی دهیاری‌ها، تفویض اختیار واقعی، بازنگری در قوانین، تقویت نظارت محلی، تنوع‌بخشی به منابع درآمدی، ایجاد ساختار مدیریت برای روستاهای کوچک، و توسعه حکمرانی چندسطحی ضروری است. تحقق این اصلاحات می‌تواند ضمن افزایش اعتماد عمومی، زمینه بهبود کیفیت زندگی، پایداری اقتصادی و تقویت انسجام اجتماعی در روستاهای ایران را فراهم کند.

کلیدواژه‌ها: مدیریت محلی، حکمرانی روستایی، ساختار سلسله‌مراتبی، دهیاری، توسعه روستایی، تمرکزگرایی.

تشکر و قدرانی

پژوهش حاضر حامی مالی نداشته و حاصل فعالیت علمی نویسندگان است. بنابراین، از اساتید و کارشناسان ارجمند که با حمایت و همکاری خود در به سرانجام رساندن این پژوهش نقش بسزایی داشتند، صمیمانه تشکر و قدرانی می‌کنیم.

روستایی انتخاب و طی مصاحبه‌های نیمه‌ساختاریافته مورد پرسش قرار گرفتند. تحلیل داده‌ها با روش غوطه‌وری، کدگذاری باز، ترسیم شبکه مفهومی و تحلیل محتوای عمیق (MAXQDA) انجام شد. برای افزایش روایی، متن مصاحبه‌ها برای تأیید به مشارکت‌کنندگان بازگردانده شد.

۴. یافته‌های تحقیق

الف/ جایگاه نهادی و ضعف اختیارات دهیاری‌ها- دهیاری‌ها با وجود آنکه ۴۸ وظیفه قانونی بر عهده دارند، به دلیل ابهام در قوانین، عدم هماهنگی با دستگاه‌های اجرایی و نبود ضمانت‌های قانونی در همکاری بین‌بخشی، از ایفای نقش مؤثر بازمی‌مانند. تمرکز قدرت در سطوح ملی و عدم اعتماد نهادهای دولتی به مدیریت محلی، دامنه عملکرد دهیاری‌ها را محدود کرده است. ب/ چالش‌های درآمدی و ناپایداری منابع مالی- منابع درآمدی دهیاری‌ها بسیار محدود بوده و عمدتاً بر عوارض ساخت‌وساز تکیه دارند. در روستاهای کم‌جمعیت این منبع عملاً ناکارآمد است. نبود اختیارات مالی، موانع قانونی در جذب سرمایه‌گذار، و وابستگی شدید به دولت، پایداری مالی را تهدید می‌کند.

ج/ نبود نظام مدیریت برای روستاهای کمتر از ۲۰ خانوار- بیش از ۲۲ هزار نقطه روستایی در ایران فاقد شرایط قانونی تشکیل دهیاری هستند. این امر موجب محرومیت خدماتی، ضعف برنامه‌ریزی، افزایش مهاجرت، فقر و کاهش کیفیت زندگی در این نقاط شده است. سیاست‌های ادغام روستاهای کوچک نیز در مواردی سبب حذف هویت مکانی و تضعیف ظرفیت‌های بومی شده است.

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