

# Social Sustainability Measures for Rural Areas in Iran

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## Abstract

One of the most important issues which has been of interest for scholars during the past decades is sustainable rural development and its concerning discussions. Social sustainability as the key aspect of sustainable development is of critical importance to sustainable rural development. Bringing social sustainability issues into focus in the present century has made an opportunity for achieving the goals of sustainable development. This aspect of sustainable development can be discussed in detail by introducing social sustainability measures. Hence, a variety of factors affects social sustainability owing to its importance. Given the complexity and diversity of social sustainability measures and their central role in rural areas, special attention needs to be devoted to it. The measures have their own importance in addressing social sustainability issues. They are also referred to as forward-looking strategies as policy-makers and decision-makers identify their strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, they are highly effective in appropriate planning and resource allocation. In the present paper, the criteria affecting social sustainability were collected and categorized by reviewing previous studies and utilizing experts' ideas and with regard to the objectives of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plan of Development. On this basis, the social sustainability criteria in Iranian rural areas included eight criteria: security, population, social collaboration, health, leisure, employment, education, and safety, each of which had some sub-criteria for the assessment of social sustainability and unsustainability.

**Keywords:** Rural Regions, Rural Sustainable Development, Social Sustainability, Measures of Social Sustainability

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## 1. Introduction

In Iran, villages have always been a social and organizational unit in which several groups of people gathered for cooperation in economic, social, cultural, and political fields. Villages are the basis of social life in Iran. Therefore, as an organizational unit in social life, it is especially important and essential in planning for the country. In the law, village has been defined as an independent settlement, such that if its population exceeds a certain level, the government can improve it to a city. Thus, villages are the basis of settlements, and most of the modern cities in the country had previously been villages which were changed to cities by attracting population and altering their spatial structure as a result of regional changes. Investigating the plans and programs as well as the exploratory and applicable objectives of various sciences such as geography, regional programming, architecture, and agriculture can result in distinct definitions of village, all of which can be documented and acceptable.

Based on the country subdivisions of Iran, a village is the smallest residential unit in terms of socio-political situations. It is defined as the origin of country subdivisions with uniform natural, social, cultural, and economic systems and independent civil or registered zones by Iranian Interior Ministry. It has at least 20 households or 100 people with either centralized or

decentralized residence and its native inhabitants, directly or indirectly, engage in activities such as agriculture, farming, horticulture, rural industries, fishing or their combination (Official Website of Islamic Parliament of Iran Research Center).

Today, in many countries, rural planning is of special importance for national, regional, and zonal growth and development. It is very important to exactly recognize and identify village-related problems because, based on the ideas of urban and regional experts, many problems and underdevelopments such as extensive poverty, developmental inequality, rapid population growth, and increasing unemployment are rooted in rural areas.

Numerous problems of Iranian rural areas, which are the outcome of underdevelopment, have directed considerable attention toward rural development and have been prioritized over urban development in many development plans. Another reason for the importance of villages is their significant position and role in development processes in any country. Rural settlements affect economic, social, political, and environmental developments in national, regional, zonal, and local scales. Therefore, it can be said that rural development is a form of sustainable development which has always been one of the influential and important problems in the development and progress of any country. Besides, it is

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considered as an important strategy for meeting the fundamental needs and optimal distribution of resources. If, for any reason, sustainable development plans cannot achieve their goals, the most negative effects will be imposed on rural societies. Rural societies are one of the most vulnerable groups in the country. According to the studies on and evidence from Iranian rural areas, it is clear that sustainable social development plans have not achieved their specified goals, as evident by poverty, inequality, drastic reduction of rural population, high vulnerability against natural events, cultural and educational problems, and various problems such as social and security abnormalities. Consequently, the social problems of villages, as one of the dimensions of sustainable development, are among the most important issues in the country.

## 2. Sustainable Development

Since the mid-1970s, discussions about sustainable development have been gradually included in the literature. Barbara Ward first used the term 'sustainable development'. This general concept was widely introduced with world conservation strategy to manage the protection of the environment and natural resources with the aim of promoting the human welfare. Sustainable development with a more general and comprehensive view to life pursues socio-economic objectives in the relations between humans and the environment (Barrow, 2007).

When a system is able to function properly for a long period, it is considered sustainable. Sustainability refers to a situation in which the existing facilities and utility do not change over time, and resources required to carry out the system tasks do not degrade (Gilman, 1999). As described in Shriberg (2002), sustainable development must meet the present needs with no effect on the ability of next generations to meet their own needs. He has defined three basic pillars for sustainable development, namely environmental (ecological), economic, and social.

With respect to its great and wide scope, social sustainability is a particular aspect affecting environmental and economic sustainability (Pourtaheri et al., 2011). Colantonio (2008) also introduced social sustainability as the relationship among different aspects of sustainable development.

Fattahi et al. (2013, p. 66) revealed that, in general, achieving social sustainability in rural areas through improving its indices and constituent components as well as its effective factors would promote the social capacities of rural residents and improve the rural society's capability to exploit the economic, social, and natural resources proportionate to the objectives of sustainable development.

As seen in most studies, social sustainability level of rural areas in developing countries is lower than that of urban areas. Thus, it is extremely important to assess social

sustainability indicators in rural areas (Rasti and Jahantigh, 2014).

Social sustainability is a sustainable development-related concept which has been imported into the development plans of different countries since 1960s. However, due to the lack of consensus on the components of this concept as well as its position among other components of sustainable development, it has been dealt with very differently in practice (Vaezzadeh et al., 2015, p. 45).

Social sustainability is a continuous process that increases quality and security, and enables people to participate in all life functions as well as individual and social activities (Kumar, 1993).

Valance et al. (2011) explained social sustainability based on the following aspects: (1) Development and sustainability in which goals such as basic needs, creating and maintaining social capital, justice, and equality are set. (2) Mediation and sustainability in which changes leading to the achievement of physical and environmental objectives in social behaviors are discussed. (3) Conservation and sustainability in which varying cultural and social values are appreciated and standard techniques are learnt to overcome changes.

In addition to the existing contradictions, they have similar characteristics. Countries and communities have shown an interest in three aspects of social sustainability in terms of their development level and socio-economic conditions.

In Moffat et al. (2002), social sustainability in rural areas was regarded as healthy life by serving the basic needs of rural society. Achieving the objectives of sustainable rural development depends on three principles of regional balance, social justice, and political freedom. Bryden (2002, p. 9) believes that the recognition of social sustainability at the level of rural societies is associated with the concept of QoL (quality of life) and social welfare, and is assessed by components such as access to health services, education, housing, security, income, and deprivation level

Scheyvens and Overton (1999) believed that the literature on sustainable development has paid more attention to environmental and economic issues. They considered social approach on the basis of three principles, namely empowerment, social justice, and freedom of choice. Thus, the first priority is to meet peoples' material needs in sustainable development. They argued that, in the societies where there is no justice, there is unsustainability. Therefore, socially sustainable development focuses on eliminating social injustices and imbalances in societies. They defined two concepts for social approach to sustainable development: first, bottom-up development which is based on the principle that priority must be given to poor people as the main groups in development process and, second, empowerment which is to provide tools needed to make changes in poor people's lives.

Moreover, Woodcraft (2012, p. 29) believes that, compared to the economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, the social dimension is the major subject of theoretical discussions and has been less regarded in practical programs and development policy-making. Theoretical viewpoints have been mainly focused on the philosophical and political viewpoints of human rights, welfare, social justice and equality, social capital, and empowerment.

Nevertheless, a concept introduced in recent years in relation with social sustainability and then applied to the new methods of assessing the performance of organizations, e.g. in McElroy et al.'s (2007) social sustainability footprint method, is the concept of triple bottom line that was first introduced by John Elkington in 1997 and then quickly expanded. This term means that it is impossible to separately gain access to a desirable level of economic, social, or environmental sustainability without access to a minimum basic level of all the three forms of sustainability at the same time (Elkington, 1999, p. 75). Although, in this concept, all the three components of sustainable development are of the same value, in practice, the experiences of many countries and organizations have shown that the centrality of the economic area has been maintained and the social components have become marginal, because the supposition that social sciences support environmental and economic sectors is still preserved (McKensy, 2004, p. 7-13). One of the reasons for the shortcomings in this field is the lack of a systematic index-making for social sustainability and the lack of an accurate clarification of the position of this element in relation with other components of sustainable development. In new approaches, it has been attempted to regard social sustainability not as an element besides other elements but as an element involved and engaged in all other elements including economy, culture, environment, and politics. However, these viewpoints are at the starting point of their path and need to be clarified and elaborated.

The position of social sustainability in the development plans of the Iranian government which are compiled and implemented as five-year plans with the aim of realizing disciplined and coordinated economic, social, political, and cultural development can be described and evaluated in two main parts. Before the Islamic Revolution, five development plans were executed in Iran. Except for the first plan, all of them focused on social issues but not as the axis of development, since these plans were concentrated on economic issues. After the Islamic Revolution, five other development plans were executed, in all of which some provisions were allocated to social components. Nevertheless, for the first time in the 4th Plan of Development, a full chapter was allocated to health promotion as well as QoL and environment improvement, indicating the high sensitivity of Iranian

policy-makers to the international discourse of development. Furthermore, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Plan of Development in Iran, one of the seven compiled chapters focuses on social issues. In the 5<sup>th</sup> plan, 48% of all the articles is allocated to economy, and only 9% is related to social issues. In this plan, with regard to the rural population, the following issues have been highlighted: priority in access to comprehensive and public health services (Article 12), creating centers for the maintenance of rural and nomadic heritage and traditional culture (Article 11), insurance right (Article 18), cooperative facilities (Article 124), roadway charge exemption (Article 101), improving buildings and spaces (Article 103), rural development and keeping the gardens and agricultural lands (Article 110), urban worn-out textures (Article 111), guidance plan (Article 112), improving the income level and QoL, supporting the expansion of industrial agriculture and rural industries, reverse migration, continuous technical and professional education, improvement, renovation (modernization), reconstruction, and securing the anatomical structure of the environment, houses, and sports locations (Article 134), and roads' network (Article 212) (Management and Planning Organization, the Law of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plan of Development, 2010-2015). Based on the studies on and comparisons between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Plans of Development, it is clear that, in the 4<sup>th</sup> plan, social sustainability components utilized an international perspective. However, in the 5<sup>th</sup> plan, this issue has been regarded from the presidents' viewpoints at the time of compiling the plans (Vaezzadeh et al., 2015, p. 53).

### 3. Methodology

Iranian rich sources were systematically searched based on the fields of this study. Major researches on social sustainability in Iranian villages were collected. Several other papers on the known databases including Web of Science, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, Sage Publication, and Elsevier were used in this study. Finally, the collected data were given to rural planners as experts to reassess and improve the accuracy. Their comments were addressed.

### 4. Social Sustainability Measures In Rural Regions

Index-making in the field of social sustainability is faced with various problems, including the lack of conceptual clarity, management of concept complexity, and suspicion of Occidentalism. Regarding the presented theoretical viewpoints, social sustainability has been defined and characterized with various features. In some sources and references, social sustainability indices include the personal selection of lifestyle, satisfaction of primary needs, efficient and reliable social security system, equal opportunities for democratic cooperation, capability of social innovations, and job selection.

In the present paper, investigating various studies revealed that the complex problems of sustainable

development require integrated sets of criteria or a combination of them. Sustainability criteria are indeed the tools or instruments that help individuals, institutions, communities, and societies to achieve alternative and better choices and options for their future. Finally, with regard to the presented points, based on the

review of numerous foreign and domestic papers and regarding the objectives of the Iranian 5<sup>th</sup> Plan of Development, social sustainability assessment criteria are presented in the following table, aiming at the sustainability of Iranian rural settlements.

Table 1  
Social Sustainability Measures

Measure	Sub-Measures	References
Education	Literacy rate of population, Literacy rate by gender change, diversity of educational levels, Per capita educational area, Net enrolment rate in primary education, Rate of children reaching the fifth grade, Internet penetration rate, Level of literacy in council members, Training periods, Satisfaction with educational facilities, Number of public libraries, Percentage of population with higher education's and Number of books available in libraries	Tavakoli (2014), Karim & Hashemi (2009), Javdan & Eftekhari (2010), Yarihesar et al (2011), Pourtaheri et al (2011), Fatahi et al (2013), Rasti & Jahaan tig (2014), Tavakili et al (2014), Habibzadeh et al (2013), Karimi & Ahmadvand (2014), Bayat (2009), Kalantari et al (2009), Karim & Hashemi (2009), Berimani & Balouchi (2013), Ahmadi & Mahdavi (2014), Barani pesyan et al (2014), Dinpanah (2014), and Heydari saraban (2014).
Employment	Employment rate, Pilgrimage and pleasure trip funding, Rate of job satisfaction, Ability to pay tuition and fees for private universities, Job security, Tendency to continue job in children, Unemployment rate, Income gap ratio, Dependency ratio, Workers in workshops and Workers outside the village to total workers inside the village.	Rasti & Jahaan tig (2014), Yarihesar et al (2011), Fatahi et al (2013), Pourtaheri et al (2011), Karim & Hashemi (2009), Tavakoli (2014), Habibzadeh et al (2013), Nooripour & Shahvali (2010), Kalantari et al (2009), Alizadeh et al (2013), Barani pesyan et al (2014), Alavi et al (2015), Dinpanah (2014), and Shahrokhi sardo & Nooripour (2014).
Health	Employment rate of women per 100 men, Rate of population having sewage collection network, Clean water availability, Mortality rates of under-5 children and mothers, Rate of proportion having healthcare facilities, Reverse time for the accessibility of health services, Satisfaction with educational and health services, Rate of villagers having social health insurance, Number of doctors per 1000 people, Villages with health center and Per capita pharmacies per 1000 people.	Nooripour & Shahvali (2010), Kalantari et al (2009), Berimani & Balouchi (2013), Alizadeh et al (2013), Ahmadi & Mahdavi (2014), Barani pesyan et al (2014), Dinpanah (2014), Shahrokhi sardo & Nooripour (2014), and Heydarisaraban (2014).
Leisure	Satisfaction with recreation and entertainment available in village, Participation in religious ceremonies and Priority for collective trips.	Pourtaheri et al (2010), (Fatahi et al, (2013), Rasti & Jahaan tig (2014), Habibzadeh et al (2013), Nooripour & Shahvali (2010), Kalantari et al (2009), Berimani & Balouchi (2013), Alizadeh et al (2013), Ahmadi & Mahdavi (2014), Rad and Ngah (2014), Barani pesyan et al (2014), Alavi et al, (2015), and Heydarisaraban (2014).
Population	Population size by age and sex changes, Population growth rate, Household size, Local attachment, Rate of permanent residents, Permanent migration, seasonal migration, Fertility rate and mortality rate.	Javdan & Eftekhari (2010), Tavakoli (2014), Fatahi et al (2013), Tavakili et al (2014), Karim & Hashemi (2009), Karimi & Ahmadvand (2014), Nooripour & Shahvali (2010), Kalantari et al (2009), Berimani & Balouchi (2013), and Dinpanah (2014).
Safety	Housing equipment, Strength and durability of housing, Rate of satisfaction with housing, Sense of security against natural disasters and Housing in village.	Rasti & Jahaan tig (2014), Yarihesar et al (2011), Pourtaheri et al (2011), Fatahi et al (2013), Rad et al (2015), Nooripour & Shahvali (2010), Karim & Hashemi (2009), Berimani & Balouchi (2013), Barani pesyan et al (2014), Shahrokhi sardo & Nooripour (2014) and Heydarisaraban (2014).
Security	Reverse rate of tension and conflict in village, Social solidarity, Satisfaction with the availability of police services, Decline of religious beliefs, Drug abuse, Stealing the property and livestock and Increased divorce rate and concerns about social abnormalities.	Tavakili et al (2014), Tavakoli (2014), Karim & Hashemi (2009), Javdan & Eftekhari (2010), Rasti & Jahaan tig (2014), Pourtaheri et al (2011), Fatahi et al (2013), Yarihesar et al (2011), Habibzadeh et al (2013), Karimi & Ahmadvand (2014), Bayat (2009), Nooripour & Shahvali (2010), Alizadeh et al (2013), Ahmadi & Mahdavi (2014), Barani pesyan et al (2014), Alavi et al (2015), Shahrokhi sardo & Nooripour (2014), and Heydari saraban (2014).
Social Participation	Rate of participation in villages' Public meetings, Consulting with women in village-related affairs, Impact of villagers on activities issued by organizations, Participators in elections of Islamic rural councils, Members of cooperatives and associations, Rate of cooperation in agricultural services, Rate of satisfaction with councils, Rate of satisfaction with the county.	Pourtaheri et al (2011), Fatahi et al (2013), Javdan & Eftekhari (2010), Tavakoli (2014), Yarihesar et al (2011), Tavakili et al (2014), Rasti & Jahaan tig (2014), Habibzadeh et al (2013), Karimi & Ahmadvand (2014), Bayat (2009), Ahmadi & Mahdavi (2014), and Heydari saraban (2014).

## 5. Conclusion

As stated in previous sections, sustainable development has three dimensions, including social sustainability, economic sustainability, and environmental sustainability. The social dimension is of special importance since it is the main pillar and affects other dimensions of sustainable development. In recent years, social sustainability has increasingly been recognized as one of the main components of sustainable development. In terms of policy and structure, social sustainability has gradually been accepted and inserted in the agenda of sustainable societies. Nevertheless, in social terms, a development can be sustainable when it provides high-quality and satisfying living conditions for all the people in a society. Since rural areas are of great and special importance due to their effectiveness on economic, social, and political development at national, regional, zonal, and local scales, rural development can be considered as one of the inseparable objectives of sustainable development in any country. On this basis, with an overview of the conditions of rural settlements in Iran, various problems such as poverty, unemployment, and migration are clearly visible. One of the major causes of such problems is the lack of perfect and proper implementation of sustainable development plans, since there is no index or criterion for ranking the level of developedness and providing services in these settlements. Therefore, in order to achieve these objectives, it is necessary to identify and evaluate some criteria for assessing the level of developedness of rural areas because it would be possible to achieve these objectives after identifying such criteria.

The present study was aimed to identify and evaluate social sustainability criteria in rural areas. To this end, by reviewing various papers and investigating experts' ideas and opinions, and with regard to the objectives of Iran's 5<sup>th</sup> Plan of Development, the following eight criteria were extracted and categorized: security, population, social collaboration, health, leisure, education, employment, and safety. Furthermore, each of these criteria has some sub-criteria for the assessment of social sustainability and unsustainability in these areas. The security, population, social collaboration, health, leisure, education, employment, and safety criteria had eight, nine, eight, eleven, three, thirteen, eleven, and five sub-criteria, respectively.

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