

# Research Paper: Strategies for Empowering the Physical and Social Structures of Informal Settlements in the Koshtargah and Its Surrounding Villages (Case Study: Urmia County)

Sina Sharafati Miandoab<sup>1</sup>, Alireza Estelaji<sup>2\*</sup>, Mohammad Hemmati<sup>3</sup>

1. PhD Student, Department of Geography and Urban Planning, Yadegar-e-Imam Khomeini (RAH) Shahre Rey Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

2. Professor, Department of Geography and Rural Planning, Yadegar-e-Imam Khomeini (RAH) Shahre Rey Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

3. Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Yadegar-e-Imam Khomeini (RAH) Shahre Rey Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.



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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Today, in most metropolises, we are confronted with a phenomenon known as informal settlements in peri-urban areas, which causes various problems in economic, social, physical, and other domains. This study aimed to identify solutions for empowering informal settlements' physical and social structures in the Koshtargah region and villages within its sphere of influence (Case Study: Urmia County).

**Methods:** This is an interpretive study in terms of its objective and a mixed research in terms of methodology. Data were analyzed using background theoretical models and structural equations. The statistical population in qualitative and quantitative phs consisted of professors, graduates, and individuals knowledgeable in the field of study (urban and rural organizations). Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling to the point of theoretical saturation. In total, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted.

**Results:** Based on the background theory, practical strategies for social and physical empowerment of informal settlements and villages within the sphere of influence include social institutionalization, creating economic incentives, increasing social capital and participation, enhancing security through physical development, establishing necessary mechanisms in line with empowerment policies and challenges, upgrading sectoral empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development, stemming from meaningful units. According to the AMOS software, the most essential physical and social empowerment strategies are enhancing the effectiveness of empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development and creating economic incentives with coefficients of 0.93 and 0.88, respectively. Additionally, within these strategies, the highest impact relates to addressing managerial challenges and strengthening the household economy, with coefficients of 0.59 and 0.61, respectively.

**Conclusion:** The results indicated that sustainable empowerment in informal settlements' physical and social domains can be achieved by addressing technical and managerial challenges and utilizing a decentralized development approach through integrated management.

## Keywords:

Physical-Social Empowerment, Informal Settlements, Villages within the Sphere of Influence, Urmia, Koshtargah area

## \* Corresponding Author:

Alireza Estelaji, PhD

Address: Department of Geography and Rural Planning, Yadegar-e-Imam Khomeini (RAH) Shahre Rey Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

Tel: +98 (912) 5130274

E-mail: [al\\_estelaji@yahoo.com](mailto:al_estelaji@yahoo.com)

## 1. Introduction

**D**ue to urban poverty over recent decades, parallel to global industrialization, the issue of unequal service provision and overcrowded housing has emerged as an undesirable aspect of urban life (Zali et al., 2016: 115). This trend has concretely highlighted the physical manifestations of poverty within impoverished neighborhoods and informal settlements, becoming a characteristic of most prominent cities in developing countries. Indeed, informal settlements represent a significant facet of urban poverty, manifesting as self-built, lacking building permits and formal urban planning, where low-income individuals gather, shaping a low standard of living, often termed marginal settlements, informal housing, slums, and precarious living areas (Piran, 2003: 7). Therefore, the living environment in these settlements is susceptible to abnormalities and incites social damages, occasionally blamed in a paradoxical argument as the cause of their emergence.

Since the emergence of informal housing, various approaches to address the issue have been put on the agenda based on the prevailing economic and social conditions and attitudes. After the failure of liberal and practical strategies in the late 1980s, the empowerment approach emerged, reframing individuals residing in such settlements not as a problem but as a social asset. This approach advocated for improving their socio-economic and physical status, placing the responsibility and empowerment in their hands, replacing a culture of entitlement with an empowerment culture, aiming to alleviate poverty. Rapid urbanization without the simultaneous growth and development of necessary economic and social indicators required for sustainable urbanization has posed various challenges and problems for cities. Urban challenges such as energy shortages, environmental pollution, traffic, and land degradation have been accompanying factors. These issues have caused turmoil and barriers for cities, resulting in significant challenges for urban development (Yigitcanlar et al., 2020: 12). These dilemmas lead to a considerable number of urban citizens lacking even the most basic amenities (Safaeipour et al., 2022: 42).

Due to the issues concerning informal settlements in primary and even intermediate cities, approaches to address the problem have gained attention in Iran. In some cases, even policies related to evacuation and demolition are noticeable in certain major cities in Iran. However, parallel to developing approaches to solve this issue,

global experiences related to informal settlements in Iran are significantly more suitable for problem resolution. Accordingly, one of these approaches that has remained noteworthy in our country is the empowerment approach (Behzadfar et al., 2018: 97). Experts believe that alongside efforts to provide various urban services to residents of underprivileged areas, planning for the empowerment of marginalized urban areas should also be on the agenda. According to experts, implementing empowerment plans in these areas leads to an increase in the social and economic capital of the inhabitants. It provides them with financial resources for further growth and welfare (Amini et al., 2020: 598).

In this regard, the primary issue in this research revolves around the emergence of numerous problems in the marginalized neighborhoods of the Koshtargah vicinity and its surrounding villages in Urmia County, affecting various dimensions of optimal urban management. These issues have led to the emergence of problems such as the widening social class gap and urban poverty, the formation of informal housing, reduced sustainability, diminished access to services and amenities, lowered public health and well-being, increased environmental problems, expansion of unemployment and everyday occupations, as well as the unregulated construction, resulting in uncontrolled physical growth. Solutions such as demolition or providing services by relevant organizations without recognizing the right to habitation and utilizing the participatory force of these communities have proven ineffective. Hence, seeking fundamental, internal, and root-oriented solutions in dealing with these settlements is essential to harmonize these peri-urban neighborhoods with formal districts.

In recent decades, one of the practical initiatives or perspectives in managing informal settlements is the empowerment approaches and organization of these areas. Most efforts have been directed toward understanding the response of local authorities and the low-income regions in the marginalized neighborhoods and the zones of influence, as well as leaders in resolving housing issues and providing solutions and empowerment strategies for their organization. However, as previously mentioned, these efforts have not been notably successful in improving the problems in these areas. Therefore, it is crucial to implement fundamental strategies in the social and physical empowerment of the informal settlements in the Koshtargah vicinity and the zones of influence. Thus, the primary objective of this research was to empower the informal settlements in the Koshtargah vicinity and its surrounding villages in Urmia County, and the central question is, what are the strategies for

the physical and social empowerment of these informal settlements?

## 2. Literature Review

As one of the sub-systems of rural spaces, the physical-spatial system is transforming due to internal and external factors. Among the external factors, cities and their spatial interactions with rural areas are some of the most influential factors affecting rural development, particularly the physical-spatial system (Darvishi et al., 2023: 1). Villages located within the sphere of cities face various opportunities, limitations, and multiple challenges due to their geographical proximity and spatial-physical dependence on cities, which are not as pronounced in other villages (Khorasani, 2017: 1).

Settling around cities and benefiting from appropriate communication networks allow these types of villages to utilize urban infrastructures and services, particularly in economic, cultural, and social domains (Ryahi et al., 2016: 37). Amidst this, a significant role is observed due to the migration from rural areas to cities, especially in the case of dormitory villages located around metropolises and industrial towns. Migrants often move to large industrial cities hoping to find employment, as they cannot afford land and housing in the city. Consequently, they are compelled to seek affordable land and accommodation away from the legal limitations and regulations of urban construction, thus settling in peripheral villages. These villages represent one of the primary settlement centers for migrating populations from rural areas and even small cities (Pourtaheri et al., 2014: 36).

Additionally, the lack of necessary expertise and professional skills and the problem of capital deficiency, or more precisely, poverty, leads to the failure of assimilation within the socio-economic structure of the city, compelling migrants towards informal settlements in the peripheries of surrounding villages. The development and expansion of such villages near cities should be regarded as part of the regional/urban imbalance and the economic duality in society, resulting in population relocation from impoverished rural areas. The construction of housing outside official planning in these villages is likely the cause of the spread of informal settlements in rural areas. In general, the consequences brought about by informal settlements in rural environments surrounding metropolises include poverty, income inequality, limited access for the impoverished to infrastructural facilities, deficiencies in healthcare facilities, an increase in social delinquency, land speculation, alterations in consumption patterns, rising land prices, diminished ru-

ral ownership, and their environmental rights concerning resources (Barkpour & Asadi, 2011: 35). It should not be forgotten that poverty is a threat to everyone, anywhere (Sarafi, 2002: 6). The combination of these factors underscores the complexity of the issue and emphasizes the importance of examining this matter distinctly in rural areas (Riyahi et al., 2016: 37). Therefore, empowerment has gained considerable attention as a new approach over the past few decades. This term has been used in a broad spectrum of fields since 1907; however, on an international level, it is employed to combat poverty and underdevelopment. Regardless, various forms of empowerment exist in different areas (Úcar Martínez et al., 2017: 34). Empowerment is a developmental phenomenon and varies over time, concerning individuals and environments, emphasizing the bestowal of power or control to a specific individual or group within a society or nation for influencing, participating, negotiating, evaluating, and controlling (Shaterian & Mirzaei, 2022: 26).

The empowerment approach focuses more on identifying individual or group assets and capabilities (Ile et al., 2018: 4) and is an attractive and powerful concept used internationally as a tool to combat poverty and underdevelopment (Úcar Martínez et al., 2017: 35). Some consider it as the transfer of power from higher levels of society to lower levels and as a way to control individuals over their lives through active participation. This is related to transformation and change in individuals and groups, transitioning from a lack of power to a state where life is controlled; therefore, increasing participation (Kohfeldt et al., 2011: 30) seems necessary in supporting empowerment. This fosters a feeling that individuals have more freedom in decision-making and are accountable for their decisions (Ma et al., 2021: 1). Empowerment of rural populations has emerged in recent decades as a new approach to rural development due to both rural development and the reduction of urban problems resulting from rural migration. To some extent, rural development relies on empowering rural populations because changes and the evolution of knowledge, skills, and attitudes among rural communities lead to rural development (Azizi et al., 2022: 2).

In the past decade, we have witnessed the emergence of an asset-based approach as a distinct alternative to the needs-based process (Porter & Habiby, 1999: 49-50; Kubisch et al., 1995: 213; Grant, 1991: 114-135). The prevalence of this approach is due to a progressive trend in decentralization processes several decades ago, dissatisfaction with direct government intervention, and limited budgets for impoverished communities. Ulti-

mately, it relies increasingly on the self-sufficiency of civil society. Asset-based policies constitute a novel approach to developing local communities instead of need-based local social development. This approach relies on the foundation of assets, focusing on capacity building. The process is pragmatic, holistic, and equipped with this tool (Sen, 1989: 769-780). Anti-poverty asset-based policies rely on mobilizing the collective resources available to a group or what a local community possesses, not necessarily what it needs. This mobilization leads to capacity building. Community capacity encompasses financial, physical, and social assets (Glickman & Serven, 1998: 497-539). Topics related to local social assets include social capital and physical capital. Kretzmann and McKnight consider local social investments to include individuals, associations, and institutions. They believe that in many local communities, there are associations whose members come together with different goals to address problems and shared interests. Alongside these associations, some institutions constitute tangible local social assets and count as assets due to being the groundwork for community involvement and collective activities.

According to Arefi, in the asset-based approach, local social assets essentially include social and physical capital. Bullen also believes that local community development is impossible without social capital. Policymaking and decision-making by managers to achieve regional development based on this model can focus on social, physical, and financial capital.

There are some domestic and international research backgrounds in the related subject. Darvishi et al. (2023) investigated the correlation between physical and demographic changes in rural habitats on the outskirts of Kelaleh city. Examining land use changes and the growth patterns of these outskirts indicate a physical expansion of these rural areas, especially around Kelaleh City, to accommodate the growing population's needs. Consequently, the transformation of agricultural and pastoral lands on the city's outskirts has followed an ascending trend. Human and financial resources in this area hold a certain level of influence and superiority over rural regions and those on the city's fringes. In other words, Kelaleh City, by providing welfare and livelihood services to the rural areas within its influence, along with purchasing rustic products, has facilitated the conditions for rural growth and vitality, leading to physical and spatial changes in these regions. Additionally, Najafi Kani and Hamidi (2021) examined the challenges and development strategies of informal settlements in Babol. They found a significant relationship, up to a confidence

level of 99%, between the level of citizen involvement in these informal settlements and the degree of development across various neighborhoods. In essence, increased participation of people in different infrastructural and service aspects results in a proportional reduction in the problems of communities and indicates a more developed area.

Estelaji and Sharafati (2021) conducted a study focusing on empowering informal settlements, emphasizing the socio-physical capacity of the Koshtargah region in Urmia County. The results indicated several influential factors contributing to the formation and expansion of informal settlements in Urmia, particularly in the Koshtargah area. These factors included economic reasons, weak enforcement of urban regulations and standards, social factors, and land legal reasons. Taleshi et al. (2021) explored the role of the government in empowering rural communities in the Koshtargah region. Findings illustrated a strong, positive, and direct relationship between two variables: investment and rural empowerment (0.000). Consequently, sustainable rural development programs should focus on participatory and facilitative planning with a realistic, bottom-up, and decentralized approach. Additionally, regional and local planning studies should be conducted, and individual responsibility should be enhanced at these programs' design and implementation levels.

Shafeisabet and Farhadi (2019) conducted a study to examine the impacts of empowering agricultural operators on rural development in the Semiram region. The findings demonstrated that empowering rural farmers significantly influences the increased agricultural production, higher income among rural residents, and the socioeconomic sustainability and development of rural settlements. On the other hand, Gutierrez (2023) focused on the connection between participation and empowerment, particularly in the context of community-based tourism in empowerment applications. The results revealed that participation in tourism doesn't consistently and naturally lead to empowerment. The model derived from the study suggests that while communities require a level of empowerment for effective participation in community-based tourism initiatives, continuous interaction could increase their level of involvement and empowerment.

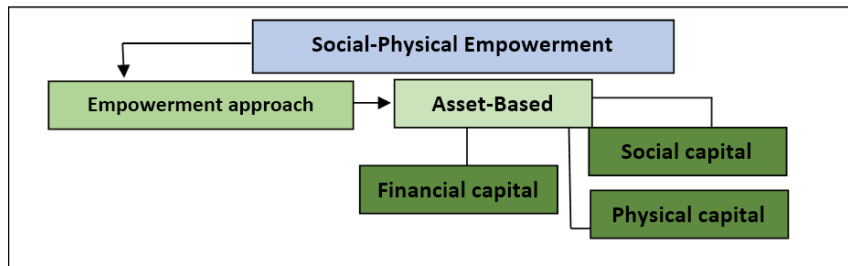


Figure 1. Conceptual Research model. Reference: Research results, 2023



### 3. Methodology

This is an interpretive study in terms of its objective and mixed research in terms of methodology. The data were collected using document-based, library, and field studies (interviews and questionnaires). In this regard, unstructured, exploratory, in-depth interviews were used for the qualitative part of the research. The qualitative section’s data analysis was performed using the Grounded Theory model. Finally, in the quantitative area of the study, the Structural Equation Model was used to rank and determine the importance of each proposed solution (results in the qualitative section). Based on this, each proposed solution was reflected in a questionnaire and distributed among the sample population. In this regard, the AMOS software was utilized.

The research sample population consists of two parts, qualitative and quantitative, which include professors, graduates, and informed individuals in the field of study (urban and rural organizations). The sampling continued until theoretical saturation (sufficiency). The piece was non-probabilistic and purposeful. A total of 25 in-depth interviews were conducted (40 to 50 minutes), recorded, and immediately transcribed and noted.

The city of Urmia, with a population of over 1,040,565 people, is in the West Azerbaijan province of northwestern Iran. Historically known as Chichast, Urmia is considered one of the most populous and simultaneously one of the most eventful cities in Iran. According to the 1395 census, the population of this city exceeded 1,040,000, including 527,278 males and 513,287 females. Urmia County consists of 5 sections and 20 districts. The outlying areas of Urmia include four regions named Tarzilu, Vakilabad, and two Islamabad areas (Islamabad 1 and Islamabad 2 or Keshavarz). Three hundred thousand people in Urmia reside in informal settlements, constituting 31% of the city’s population, facing many challenges related to living on the margins. Over the past two decades, many of the villages on the outskirts of Urmia have transformed into urban peripheries due to economic (urban rent) and social reasons. These rundown periphery areas are scattered throughout various regions of Urmia, including the north, east, west, and southwest. The total area of these dilapidated peripheral areas is 356 hectares. The Koshtargah neighborhood in Urmia, as the case study of this research, is located in the northwestern part of the city and the southern and southwestern foothills of a hill known as Javadan Dagi (Jewish Mountain).

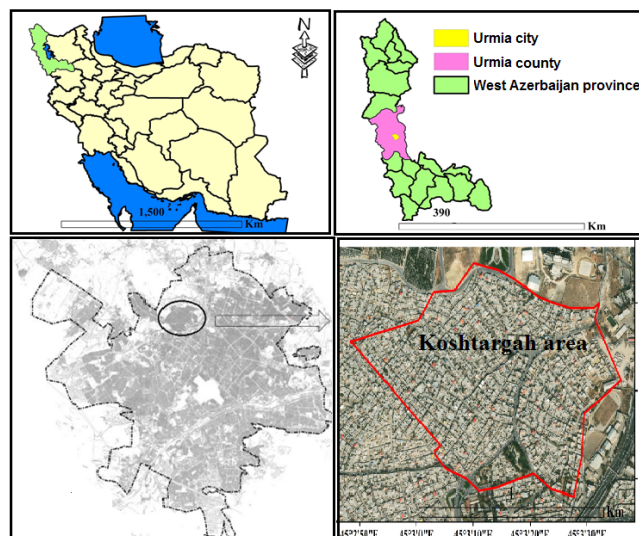


Figure 2. Study area. Reference: Authors, 2023



#### 4. Findings

##### Investigation of a set of strategies for the physical and social empowerment of informal settlement areas in the Koshtargah neighborhood and villages within the influence zone of Urmia County

Initially, in the stage of review and revision, to prevent personal bias when arranging the data (recorded interviews, personal notes), the information was collected, reviewed, and corrected. Subsequently, each concept was organized into meaningful units in the coding process. Consequently, based on Table 1, 44 concepts and 12 units of meaning were extracted from the interview.

**Table 1.** Results of example evidence and the units of meaning extracted from the interview

Unit of Meaning	Example evidence	Unit of Meaning	Example evidence
Building social capital	Fostering Trust in Governmental and Official Institutions	Building physical capital	Improvement in the quality of rural housing and informal settlements
	Fostering Trust in Neighbors and Strangers		Desired access of these settlements to streets and the town center
	Fostering Trust in Relatives and Close Friends (Informal Trust)		Enhancement of the quality of pathways
	Creating a sense of confidence between people and urban/rural organizations through their involvement in neighborhood-related decision-making		Improvement in the quality of construction materials
	Presenting executed plans of organizations to the public for transparency and trust-building		
	Establishing formal jobs by the government		
Financial Capital Formation	Increase income security among residents	Development of participation	Creating comprehensive participation at the local level
	Increase employment security among residents.		Establishing public participation among residents to facilitate and develop programs
	Increase employment security among residents.		Fostering social equality among local inhabitants
	Household banking savings volume		Developing and supporting governmental groups
	Developing physical facilities by establishing businesses and their support from the government.		Engaging educated youth in participation
	Ensuring the safety and security of residents, especially women, children, and the elderly		Emphasizing the facilitating role of the government through facilitating procedures and widespread participation
Maintaining security in the region	Removing crime and criminality from informal settlements and the studied villages	Increasing awareness and knowledge in the field of empowerment	Enhancing awareness and information dissemination among people towards the empowerment of rural and informal settlements
	Utilizing ominous and crime-prone areas with lighting systems to maintain financial and personal security		Providing necessary training to residents through workshops
	Assistance to improve the economic status of households by establishing technical and vocational training classes to enhance the skills of individuals		Developing awareness among residents regarding the physical and social empowerment of habitats
Strengthening household economy	Providing financial aid to promote employment among residents.		Increasing awareness among residents about their environment
	Guiding existing micro-loan funds towards employment generation and improving household economies	Review of policies in line with empowerment	Review of current policies and provision of planned space for low-income groups. Review of the standard approach in the public and government sectors

**Table 1.** Results of example evidence and the units of meaning extracted from the interview

Unit of Meaning	Example evidence	Unit of Meaning	Example evidence
Strengthening household economy	Providing financial aid to promote employment among residents.	Review of policies in line with empowerment	Review of current policies and provision of planned space for low-income groups.
	Guiding existing micro-loan funds towards employment generation and improving household economies		Review of the standard approach in the public and government sectors
Addressing financial and economic challenges	Defining income groups and separating them by the government.	Addressing technical challenges	Standardizing construction regulations and procedures and adopting a common approach in official and unofficial areas.
	A transparent financial and credit system to address the situation in these settlements.		Resolving inappropriate standards and parameters
Utilization of a decentralized approach to development	Unified empowerment through the elimination of sectional approaches to development funds.	Addressing managerial challenges	Coherence among relevant organizations.
	Employment of urban design principles towards widespread involvement and alignment with local community preferences.		Transparency in presenting empowerment programs.
	Adoption of reformist thinking.		Overcoming sectorial governance.
	Utilization of a bottom-up development approach in management for the improvement and renovation of residences		Overcoming multiple management in executing empowerment plans.

Reference: Research results, 2023



Based on [Table 1](#), units of meaning were extracted: Financial Capitalization, Strengthening Household Economy, Solving Financial and Economic Challenges of Residents, Participation Development, Social Capitalization, Increasing Awareness and Knowledge in Empowerment, Physical Capitalization, Regional Security Preservation,

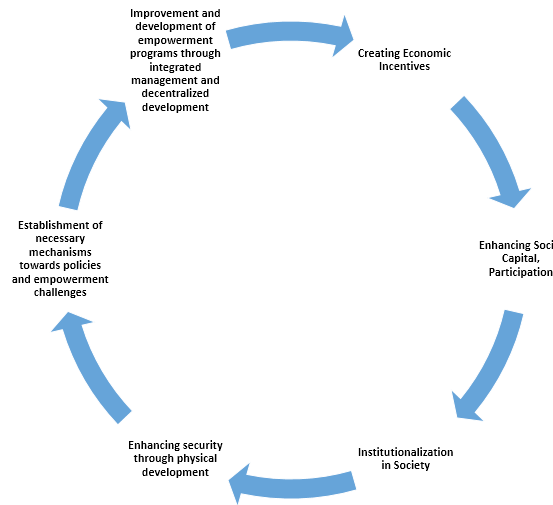
Policy Review for Empowerment, Resolution of Technical and Managerial Challenges, and finally the use of a Decentralized Development Approach. Then, key concepts and main themes were extracted using perspectives or main statements ([Table 2](#)).

**Table 2.** Issues addressed in the empowerment of physical and social aspects of informal settlements and villages in the sphere of influence

Row	Category	Unit of meaning
1	Creating Economic Incentives	Financial capital formation
		Strengthening household economy
		Addressing the financial and economic challenges of residents
2	Enhancing Social Capital, Participation	Developing participation
		Social capital foundation
3	Institutionalization in Society	Increasing awareness and knowledge in the field of empowerment
4	Enhancing security through physical development	Physical capital formation
		Maintaining security in the region
5	Establishment of necessary mechanisms toward policies and empowerment challenges Top of Form	Reviewing policies toward empowerment
		Solving technical challenges
6	Improvement and development of empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development	Addressing managerial challenges
		Utilizing a decentralized approach to development

Reference: Research results, 2023





**Figure 3.** Issues addressed in the empowerment of physical and social aspects of informal settlements and villages in the sphere of influence. Reference: Research results, 2023



The practical solutions for the empowerment of social and structural aspects in informal settlements and villages within the sphere of influence, according to Table 2 and Figure 3, encompass societal institutionalization, economic stimulus creation, social capital augmentation, participation, security enhancement through structural development, the establishment of necessary mechanisms aligned with the policies and challenges of empowerment, and the improvement of empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development. These have been identified as the core units in this context.

Following this, a questionnaire was administered to urban officials and managers to identify the most essential strategies to achieve the socio-structural empowerment of informal settlements and villages under study. The collected data were then analyzed using structural equation modeling. All the strategy needed to be individu-

ally tested to determine the acceptability of the identified methods in measuring hidden variables. For this purpose, the software AMOS was employed. Table 3 was utilized for this analytical process.

Based on the results obtained in Table 3, the fit indices for the measurement model of the proposed strategies are less than 0.80, indicating a good fit of the models by the data. Ultimately, it can be concluded that these strategies have a good fit, meaning that explicit strategies can effectively measure latent processes.

Moreover, convergent validity and discriminant validity were examined. The results showed that the factor loadings for all the proposed strategies are higher than 0.50, indicating their suitability. Table 4 illustrates these findings.

**Table 3.** General fitting solutions for measurement patterns

Category	Symbol	GFI	IFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Creating Economic Incentives	S1	0.955	0.933	0.955	0.920	0.01
Enhancing Social Capital, Participation	S2	0.960	0.951	0.961	0.944	0.02
Institutionalization in Society	S3	0.951	0.939	0.955	0.950	0.03
Enhancing security through physical development	S4	0.933	0.944	0.931	0.945	0.02
Establishment of necessary mechanisms toward policies and empowerment challenges	S5	0.951	0.948	0.941	0.937	0.01
Improvement and development of empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development	S6	0.961	0.955	0.961	0.955	0.03

Reference: Research results, 2023





Table 4. Measurement of Unit of Meaning

Category	Unit of meaning	Symbol	factor load	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE
Creating Economic Incentives	Financial capital formation	S11	0.647	0.701	0.811	0.750
	Strengthening household economy	S12	0.556			
	Addressing the financial and economic challenges of residents	S13	0.657			
Enhancing Social Capital, Participation	Developing participation	S2	0.876	0.776	0.877	0.678
	Social capital foundation	S22	0.765	0.766	0.855	0.655
Institutionalization in Society	Increasing awareness and knowledge in the field of empowerment	S31	0.755	0.744	0.855	0.678
Enhancing security through physical development	Physical capital formation	S41	0.665	0.754	0.769	0.789
	Maintaining security in the region	S42	0.683	0.779	0.786	0.547
Establishment of necessary mechanisms toward policies and empowerment challenges Top of Form	Reviewing policies toward empowerment	S51	0.512	0.815	0.763	0.653
	Solving technical challenges	S52	0.549	0.883	0.891	0.653
Improvement and development of empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development	Addressing managerial challenges	S61	0.882	0.739	0.826	0.593
	Utilizing a decentralized approach to development	S62	0.756	0.921	0.847	0.588

Reference: Research results, 2023



Furthermore, based on the statistical results and the path analysis model in the AMOS software, the structural model of the research is illustrated in Figure 4.

According to the results obtained from the statistical sample, the most influential strategies in enhancing physical and social empowerment include improving empowerment programs through integrated manage-

ment and decentralized development and creating economic incentives, with coefficients of 0.93 and 0.88, respectively. Within these strategies, the most significant impact was solving management challenges and strengthening household economies, with coefficients of 0.59 and 0.61.

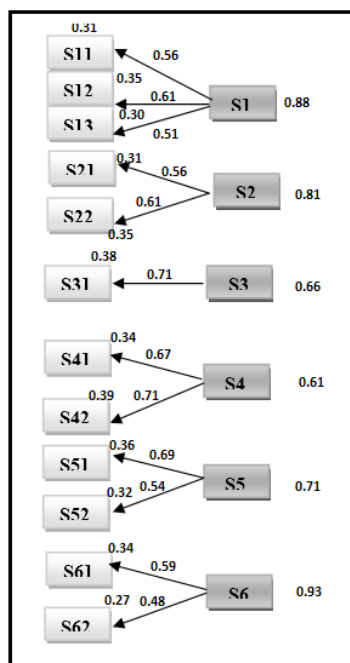


Figure 4. Structural model of research. Reference: Research results, 2023



## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to identify strategies for enhancing informal settlements and villages' physical and social aspects in the Koshtargah region and its sphere of influence in Urmia County. According to theoretical foundational results, practical strategies for empowering the social and physical dimensions of informal settlements and villages include community institutionalization, creating economic incentives, increasing social capital and participation, enhancing security through physical development, establishing mechanisms aligned with empowerment policies and challenges, and improving the effectiveness of empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development. These strategies were identified as core meaningful units. According to the AMOS software, the most crucial empowerment strategies for physical and social enhancement are improving empowerment programs through integrated management and decentralized development and creating economic incentives.

According to the research findings and the structural model, urban integrated management is one of the practical areas in empowering and addressing the challenges of informal settlements. Some experts suggested that entities involved in urban management processes could yield positive results in managing these types of settlements. Establishing an integrated urban management system is a severe strategy in this regard. Consequently, institutions, executive bodies, and urban and rural organizations are expected to take more responsibility and action in connection with this issue.

Furthermore, organizational coherence among these entities is crucial. Many executed projects fail to achieve their expected performance due to a lack of organizational coherence. Each organization implements empowerment plans according to its objectives without connecting with other organizations. On the other hand, a decentralized approach to development projects can lead to better outcomes for the social and physical empowerment of these settlements in Urmia's sphere of influence. The top-down approach has been adopted in many urban and rural projects, but transitioning to a bottom-up approach can significantly improve the efficacy of empowerment schemes.

The second effective solution is to create economic incentives. The emergence of informal settlements near the Koshtargah in Urmia stems from neglecting the poorest segments of society in macroeconomic and social planning. The origin of these settlements in Urmia is a result

of rural-urban migration. Residents from rural areas migrate to the city due to a lack of economic and social facilities and job opportunities. Due to inadequate expertise and lower education, some resort to informal occupations. Therefore, it is necessary to provide economic incentives in this region, including addressing households' financial and economic challenges and facilitating financial capital to strengthen household economies.

The third effective solution for empowerment is to increase social capital and participation. It has always been a fact that development plans for locals can only be achieved through local engagement and an emphasis on government facilitation. This involves enhancing the role of the government in facilitating the flow of activities and fostering widespread participation. Furthermore, building trust in governmental and formal institutions, neighbors, strangers, and establishing a sense of confidence between people and organizations through their involvement in regional decision-making, disclosing and sharing the executed and upcoming plans with the public to promote transparency, are among other effective strategies for social and structural empowerment in informal settlements and rural areas in the Urmia district.

The fourth effective solution is to create necessary mechanisms in line with policies and empowerment challenges. This includes:

- Reviewing existing policies and providing planned space for low-income groups.
- Reconsidering the traditional approach of the government and public sector.
- Changing uniform construction regulations and guidelines and adopting a standard procedure in formal and informal areas.
- Identifying and solving stringent standards and parameters.

The fifth strategy, social institution-building, is dedicated to empowering these settlements and villages in the Urmia district. It is suggested to increase public awareness and dissemination by providing necessary training to residents via educational workshops. Lastly, the sixth influential solution is to enhance security through urban development. This involves ensuring personal safety for women, children, and the elderly by establishing adequate lighting systems in vulnerable and potentially criminal areas. Also, it consists of improving the quality of rural housing, providing reasonable access to these

settlements from streets or Urmia's central district, and enhancing the quality of roads and construction materials.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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