Research Paper: Explaining the Process of Population Changes in Rural Areas to Provide Sustainable Population Strategies (Case Study: Rasht City, Iran)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Migration from the village to the city is considered a common phenomenon. Although many studies have investigated the consequences of migration phenomenon in villages (origin) and cities (destination), there are not many studies about maintaining the population in rural areas. This study aimed to explain the process of population changes in rural areas to provide sustainable population strategies for Rasht County in Iran.

Methods: This research is an applied and descriptive-analytical study in terms of its purpose and method. Document reviews, interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect data. SWOT and AHP models were used to analyze the data.

Results: The most appropriate strategy for maintaining the population in the rural settlements of Rasht County is to provide infrastructure for economic development and job creation in the villages, and designing and implementing projects with these goals can be significant.

Conclusion: Unsustainability of the rural areas in Rasht County have undermined the current capabilities of this region. Therefore, it can be concluded that the decrease in population is consistent with weak infrastructure and lower production potential.

1. Introduction

Today, globalization and modernity challenge all aspects of human life, including the population in rural areas (Guatella & Pareglio, 2016). The population is a prerequisite for economic, social and cultural planning, so understanding and predicting the trends are crucial for planning and decision about spatial extension (Molayi Hashjin, 2007). Up until three decades ago, internal migration, especially from the rural areas to the city, was regarded as a positive activity in economic development literature (Christos Kalantaridis, 2010). Migration is not a new issue, and different countries have

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had various approaches to it. Migration is the result of an area's attractions, or the environmental and individual factors, which has always been the concern of geographers and some sociologists (Akbarpour et al., 2013). In underdeveloped and developing countries such as Iran, modernism and excessive urbanization along with the inefficiency of the environmental, economic and social structures of rural areas and communities, have caused many negative changes. A review of policies and the implementation of many development programs in the last few decades for the rural communities of Iran confirms the deficiency of effectiveness (Zabihi., 2021). Therefore, the population stability of the villages is a rural development objective. The ideal development approach (Connelly, 2007) is contemplated as a controversial (Breau, 2015) and multidimensional concept (Kitchem & Marsden, 2009), which promotes the sustainability of the rural population. Today, this issue is the main topic of decisions for development (Vilshair, 2007).

Due to distinct geographical locations and ecological conditions, Rasht city has attracted many migrants. It is a popular destination for short and medium trips and permanent migrations. During the last 40 years, three demographic movements have been affecting the geographical location of Gilan Province including migration from the western part to Mazandaran, migration from villages and towns to Rasht and other big cities, and finally, migration from other parts of the country to the province, which has become popular in the last ten years. Particularly, migration from villages and towns to the big cities due to the natural attractions of rural areas of Rasht city has been a strong motivation. Nevertheless, in recent years, young rural people have entered Rasht to find jobs and education. However, migration to Rasht has caused many complications, such as creating small and large neighbourhoods, poverty, corruption, and traffic lockdowns. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the appropriate strategies for the permanence of the population in the rural settlements of Rasht. Therefore, the present research seeks to explore the following question:

• What are the appropriate strategies for population sustainability in the rural settlements of Rasht?

2. Literature Review

According to Brown and Skaft's organizational plan, different theories about the village can be such theories can be classified into one of two groups: place-based theories (e.g., demographic, population, spatial, political economic and socio-cultural theories) and social constructivist theories (Koziol et al., 2015). Initially, the definitions of the village were based on sociological theories and focused on the inherent differences between urban and rural communities (Peng et al., 2016). Definitions of the village based on population density and demography are related mainly to the works of Emile Durkheim in 1893 entitled Division of Labor in Society. Durkheim distinguished societies by their unique nature and presented a theory about the direct function of population density. According to Durkheim's theory, societies with low population density (for example, rural societies) devote themselves to a mechanical form of solidarity, which is characterized by collective orientations, homogenous backgrounds, belief systems, practices, and agricultural life (Koziol et al., 2015). The objective criteria about the village that were used in the spatial contexts of England and Wales and previously presented by Many researchers as: Locke (1977) and Clack and Edwards (1986) is another example of the definition of the village based on population density (Harrington & Donoghue, 1998). They presented a fourfold classification of non-urban local government areas from very rural to very non-rural classes. This classification aims to differentiate cities and villages rather than a new explanation of the village (Harrington & Donoghue, 1998). In addition, the OECD definition of a rural area is based on a combination of land size and population density (Johansen & Nielsen, 2012).

Rural-Urban migration is one of the most apparent examples of population mobility when villagers move to the city. Moreover, this is one of the old and constant phenomena of human history and civilization, which accelerated after the industrial revolution and in the modern era (Akbarpour et al., 2013). Almost throughout human history, in all countries, there has been migration from the village to the city (Goldsmith et al., 2004). Some theorists explain migration in common theoretical views of social sciences. For example, rural-urban migration is considered an integral part of the economic development process, which is accompanied by the transfer of labor from the agricultural sector to the industrial sector (Bosworth, 2006). Therefore, some theories about migration are apt for a process of rural-urban interaction.

Demographic theories can explain the general demographic changes in villages (Firouzniya, 2006) as the migration of young people from the village and the stability. However, the villages experience a transformation process where they lose their young population, and the adults are less likely to move. This lifecycle also illustrates the process of rural transformation (Firouzniya, 2006). Therefore, in their transformation process, some villages have reached the stage of migration

of young people. Then they go through other stages of transformation (Firouzniya, 2006). Another theory for explaining when the population stays in rural areas is Lee's migration model which accounts for push/pull factors (Zanjani, 2001). According to this theory, the most critical factor in maintaining population is how much population the village has attracted for more than 30 years and the existing obstacles in the cities for migration. In addition, since these attractions and repulsions depend on people's conditions and have different roles, the stability of the adult population in rural areas can be well explained by using the theory of migration factors (Firouznia, 2017). It can also be done according to the characteristics of system analysis theory (Rezain, 2000). Villagers often migrate or stay in the village depending on their conditions and requirements. Staying in or migrating from the village can be analyzed as human behaviour, as behaviourists and geography explain people's behaviour (Shekoi, 2003). According to this theory, a human being makes decisions based on the knowledge of the surrounding environment and the perception of the quality and quantity of the issue in the context. Therefore, a person reacts to the surrounding environment and makes decisions. Choosing a place of residence or changing and moving one's place of residence is a decision-making process, which is involved several factors (Taslimi, 2011). Figure 1, illustrating the important factors, is drawn as a conceptual model.

Many researchers have conducted studies about rural migration in different countries, including Iran. However, no study has been conducted to explain the process of population changes in rural areas to provide population sustainability strategies. On the other hand, many studies have related to population sustainability strategies. Here, we compare the studies that overlap and agree with the present research topic. Although some studies discuss the strategies for population sustainability, none is about these strategies in rural areas. We provide an overview of the most related studies on population strategies.

Ahmadi and Tavakoli (2014), in a study entitled "analysis of spatial movements of population in rural settlements", concluded that migration is the main factor of population change and transformation in the area, which is the reduction and depopulation of the region. It resulted in an imbalance in the distribution of rural areas and their population and the dispersion of villagers to other areas. Firouznia (2017), in a study titled "factors affecting the adult population to stay in villages", concluded that a comfortable life in the village, satisfaction with life, and having farms would encourage the adult population to stay in villages.

On the other hand, the ageing of the population in both periods and with much greater intensity in 2015 weakened the population's structure and identity in 2011. Arabi et al. (2018), conducted a study titled "explaining the appropriate strategic model on population sustainability in rural settlements of Mosabi Rural District in Sarayan County using the SWOT model. They concluded that knowing the internal aspects (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats), diversity strategy (WO) is the most effective strategy for the region to sustain the population in rural areas.

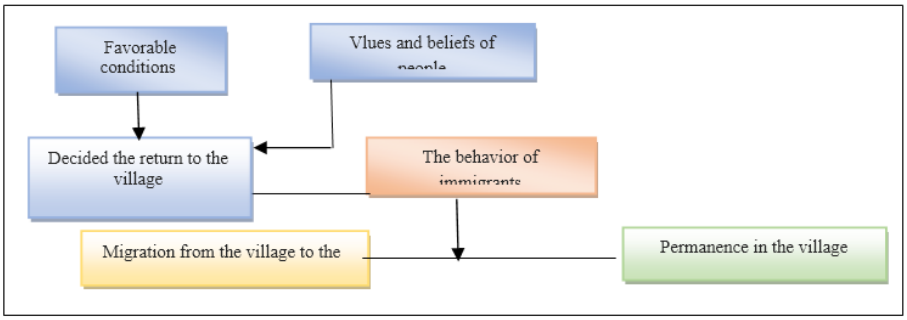

Figure 1. Research conceptual model

Source: Research findings

Zabihi et al. (2020), in a study entitled "structural analysis of demographic and agricultural changes in the rural areas of Markazi Province", concluded that the population and demographic characteristics played a crucial role in giving identity to the villages of the province. In addition, the changes in rural areas of the province have been more affected by demographic changes compared to changes in agricultural indicators. "Management and planning of population sustainability in rural settlements of Garmsar County was a study by Sabouri and Hasan Abadi (2021). They found that the improvement of the rural settlements of Garmsar County in terms of geographic-economic variables helped the population maintain more in the region. Amar (2021), in a study entitled "analysis of migration and spatial mobility to rural areas of Gilan Province concluded that population movement is a function of the modernization process, life disorders in populated cities, climatic conditions, tourism development, spending leisure time, and retirement of people. Joksimovic and Jovanvis (2020), in a study entitled "population revitalization of rural areas of Montenegro through the concept of the smart village", concluded that the concept of the smart village might be vital in the process of population revitalization of rural communities. The application of this concept primarily in Slovenia and Croatia showed that the traditional rural society should be developed with digital technologies and innovation. Hoffman (2021), in a study titled "population changes and land use", concluded that there is a significant and positive relationship between population changes and land use changes.

3. Methodology

This research is an applied and descriptive-analytical study in terms of its purpose and method. Document reviews, interviews, and questionnaires were used to collect data. The statistical population in this research is the residents of the villages of Rasht County, and the sampling method is random. Due to the investigation of population changes to maintain the population, we chose villages with less than 20 households as the statistical population. Therefore, the villages with more than 20 households were divided into three groups: the first group included 20-50 households in 22 villages; the second group, 51-100 households in 34 villages and the third group, more than 101 households in 211 villages. Then, 20 per cent of these villages were selected as samples (based on random sampling), which includes 54 villages and 23204 households. The first group include four villages, the second group 7 villages, and the third group 43 villages. To determine the sample size using Cochran's formula, 378 households were chosen for questionnaires from 23204 rural households. To analyze data and achieve a strategy, the SWOT analytical matrix was used. To this end, a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats was identified and analyzed. Weakness, opportunity and threat were extracted from the questionnaires. At the same time, we interviewed the officials of Gilan Province and Rasht city (governorate, housing foundation, agriculture organization, rural manager and Islamic councils). After that, by adjusting the internal and external strategic factors, the SWOT strategic matrix was extracted. Finally, by summing up different views, each SWOT factor was weighted to combine two AHP-SWOT models through Expert choice software.

Rasht t is one of the metropolises of Iran and the capital of Gilan Province in the north of Iran and the centre of Rasht city. This city is also the largest and most populated city in the north of Iran among the three coastal provinces of the Caspian Sea (Mazandaran, Gilan and Golestan). Rasht includes six districts named Khoshkbijar (Pasikhan, Pirbazar, Homeh, Lakan Rural districts), Khokhbijar District (Haji Bekande, Khokhbijar, Nausher, Khokhbijar Rural Districts), Sangar District (Islamabad, Saravan, Sangar Rural Districts). Kuchsefahan District (Belsbaneh, Kanarsar, Lulman Rural District), Lasht Nesha District (Jirhande Lasht Nesha, Ali Abad Zibakanar, Gafshe Lasht Nesha Rural District), Khammam District (Chukam, Chaparkhane, Kete Sarkhmam Rural District).

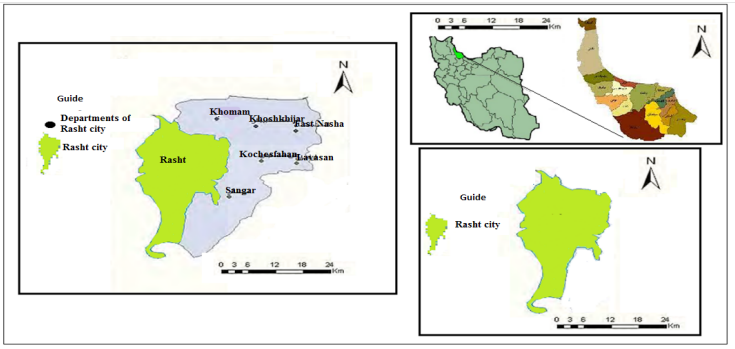

Figure 2. location of Rasht city. Source: Authors (own Illustration)

4. Findings

To identify and determine the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the study area using the SWOT model, the required data was collected from the questionnaire of rural people in the villages of Rasht. A second visit was made to check the correctness and accuracy of the answers, and additional information was obtained through interviews with the residents. Finally, the most important internal and external influencing factors on retaining the population in the villages of Rasht were determined.

Population sustainability strategies in the villages of Rasht city using the combination of the AHP method and SWOT model.

A pairwise comparison of SWOT factors was carried out in the form of AHP for retaining the population of the villages of Rasht city. Tables 2 to 6 and Figures (3-6) show the weighting and prioritizing process.

Table 1. SWOT Analysis for population changes in the rural areas of Rasht

O1. Having entrepreneurship fields and a variety of job opportunities in the village O2. trend towards rural tourism outside the village O3. The possibility of providing free insurance for villagers O4. Improving the quality of communication services (telephone, internet, post bank, audio and television networks, satellite, etc.) O5. encouraging the necessary infrastructure for the development of tourism and ecotourism O6. Guaranteed purchase of agricultural products O7. Access to financial and credit services outside the village	Opportunities (O)	S1. The village has recreational spaces and tourist attractions S2. Increasing the safety of the village against hazards such as floods and earthquakes S3. Cultural and religious services of the village, such as the mosque and Hosseiniyeh, etc. S4. a system for collecting surface water and sewage in the village S5. employment opportunities in the village S6. Access to public transportation S7. Diversity of agricultural activities S8. Strengthening and sustainable development of the industrial sector	Strengths (S)
T1. Lack or absence of necessary training to promote rural culture, especially in villages that accept immigrants T2. lack of economic development infrastructures such as cold storage, roads between farms, etc., in the village T3. lack of attention and neglect of environmental hazards in the village T4. The lack of formation of rural development cooperatives based on small capitals of villagers T5. the lack of production and value chains in the village T6. lack of investment in the village T7. existence of social disputes with neighboring villages	Threats (T)	W1. lack of diversity of employment in the village W2. lack of recreational, sports and cultural facilities in the village W3. Lack of agricultural water resources for various agricultural activities W4. lack of transportation and communication facilities in the village W5. Insufficient income of villagers W6. Shrinking agricultural land W7. Permanent and seasonal unemployment in the village W8. Heterogeneity in ethnic and cultural structure due to reverse migrations W9. Lack of land for agricultural activities W10 .lack of motivation to participate in village affairs	weak points (W)

external causes — internal factors

JSRD

Table 2. Pairwise comparisons of strengths factors on population retaining in the villages of Rasht City

Relative weight	S8	S7	S6	S5	S4	S3	S2	S1	Symbol	Strengths
0.274	5	5	5	1	5	6	3	1	S1	The village has recreational spaces and tourist attractions.
0.163	5	4	4	0.25	4	5	`	0.33	S2	Increasing the safety of the village against hazards such as floods and earthquakes
0.029	0.5	0.33	0.25	0.2	0.5	1	0.2	0.16	S3	Enjoying the cultural and religious services of the village, such as the mosque and Hosseiniyeh.
0.049	1	1	1	0.16	1	2	0.25	0.2	S4	a system for collecting surface water and sewage in the village
0.315	6	6	6	1	6	5	4	1	S5	There are employment opportunities in the village
0.077	4	2	1	0.16	1	4	0.25	0.2	S6	Access to public transportation
0.048	1	1	0.5	0.16	1	3	0.25	0.2	S7	Diversity of agricultural activities
0.042	1	1	0.25	0.16	1	2	0.2	0.2	S8	Strengthening and sustainable development of the industrial sector

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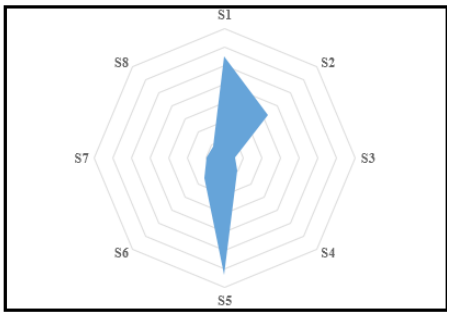

Figure 3. The final weight of each strengths (AHP-SWOT)

According to Table 2 and Figure 3, the existence of employment conditions in the village with a weight of 0.315 has the highest rank. Sstrengthening and sustainable development of the industry sector with a weight of 0.042, has been assigned the lowest rank.

Table 3. Pairwise comparisons of weak factors on population retaining in the villages of Rasht City

Relative weight	W10	W9	W8	W7	W6	W5	W4	W3	W2	W1	Symbol	Weaknesses
0.075	1	4	1	0.33	0.25	0.33	3	4	3	1	W1	Lack of diversity of employment in the village
0.048	0.33	3	0.33	0.2	0.2	0.2	4	4	1	0.33	W2	Lack of recreational, sports and cultural facilities in the village
0.019	0.25	0.23	0.25	0.16	0.16	0.2	0.25	1	0.25	0.25	W3	Lack of agricultural water resources for various farmer activities
0.036	0.25	4	0.25	0.2	0.16	0.2	1	4	0.25	0.33	W4	Lack of transportation and communication facilities in the village
0.158	4	5	4	0.33	0.25	1	5	5	5	3	W5	Insufficient income of villagers
0.284	4	6	5	3	1	4	6	6	5	4	W6	Shrinking agricultural land
0.195	3	6	4	1	0.33	3	5	6	5	3	W7	Permanent and seasonal unemployment in the village
0.069	0.33	4	1	0.25	0.2	0.25	4	4	3	1	W8	Heterogeneity in ethnic and cultural structure due to reverse migrations
0.025	0.33	1	0.25	0.16	0.16	0.2	0.25	3	0.33	0.25	W9	Lack of land for agricultural activities
0.087	1	3	3	0.33	0.25	0.25	4	4	3	1	W10	Lack of motivation to participate in village affairs

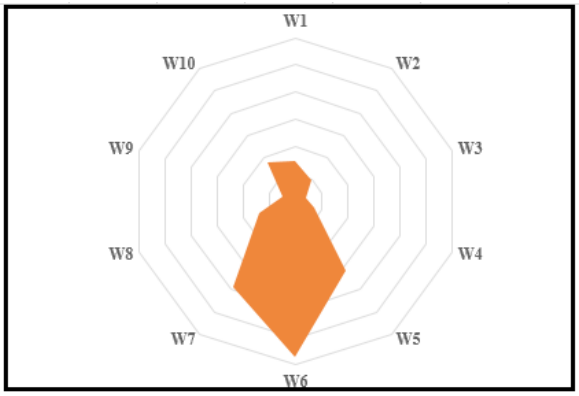

Figure 4. Final weight of each weakness (AHP-SWOT)

According to Table 3 and Figure 4, the shrinking the agricultural land plots, with a weight of 0.284, is the most important weakness in the sustainability of the population and the lack of agricultural water resources, with a weight of 0.019, was the less important weak point in the sustainability of the population of the villages of Rasht County.

According to Table 4 and Figure 5, entrepreneurship and the diversity of job opportunities in the village, with a weight of 0.184 were the most important opportunities for population retaining, and the guaranteed purchase of agricultural products, with a weight of 0.040 was the least opportunity for maintaining the population of the village of Rasht County.

Table 4. Pairwise comparisons of opportunity factors on population retaining in the villages of Rasht city

Relative weight	O7	O6	O5	O4	O3	O2	O1	Symbol	Opportunities
0.184	4	4	4	4	0.2	1	1	O1	Having entrepreneurship fields and a variety of job opportunities in the village
0.155	5	5	5	1	0.25	1	1	O2	Tendency to rural tourism outside the village
0.41	5	5	4	5	1	4	5	O3	The possibility of providing free insurance for villagers
0.123	4	5	4	1	0.2	1	0.25	O4	Improving the quality of communication services (telephone, internet, post bank, radio and television networks, satellite, etc.)
0.043	1	1	1	0.25	0.25	0.2	0.25	O5	encouraging the necessary infrastructure for the development of tourism and ecotourism
0.040	1	1	1	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.25	O6	Guaranteed purchase of agricultural products
0.041	1	1	1	0.25	0.2	0.2	0.25	O7	Access to financial and credit services outside the village

Figure 5. Final weight of each opportunity (AHP-SWOT)

Table 5. Pairwise comparisons of Threat factors on population retaining in the villages of Rasht city

Relative weight	T7	T6	T5	T4	T3	T2	T1	Symbol	Threats
0.068	4	0.2	0.2	0.33	5	0.2	1	T1	The lack or absence of necessary training to promote rural culture, especially in villages that accept immigrants
0.216	6	0.33	1	4	6	1	5	T2	The lack of economic development infrastructure, such as cold storage, roads between farms, etc., in the village
0.031	1	0.2	0.2	0.2	1	0.16	0.2	T3	Lack of attention and neglect of environmental hazards in the village
0.106	5	0.25	0.33	1	5	0.25	3	T4	Lack of formation of rural development cooperatives based on small capitals of villagers
0.198	6	0.33	1	3	5	1	5	T5	Absence or lack of production and value chains in the village
0.349	6	1	3	4	5	3	5	T6	Lack of investment in the village
0.029	1	0.16	0.16	0.2	1	0.16	0.25	T7	Existence of social differences with neighbouring villages

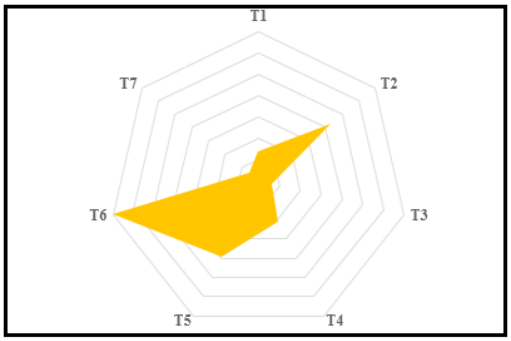

Figure 6. Final weight of each threat (AHP-SWOT)

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Finally, according to Table 5 and Figure 6 (the lack of investment in the village with a weight of 0.349 was the highest and the existence of social differences with neighboring villages with a weight of 0.029 was the least important threat.

Therefore, the integration of SWOT factors and the AHP model has concluded in 32 SWOT priorities. The top 10 priorities include two weaknesses, two opportunities, three strengths, and three threats to maintain the population in the villages of Rasht city as follows:

1- Providing free insurance for villagers (final weight, 0.41) strength (O3).

2- Lack of investment in the village (final weight, 0.349) threat (T6).

3- Existence of employment opportunities inside the village (final weight, 0.315) strength (S5).

4- The shrinking agricultural land plots (final weight, 0.284) weakness (W6).

5- The existence of recreational spaces and tourist attractions in the village (final weight, 0.274) strength (S1).

6- The lack or absence of economic development infrastructures such as cold storage, roads between farms, etc., in the village (final weight, 0.216) threat (T2).

7- Absence or lack of production and value chains in the village (final weight, 0.198) threat (T5).

8- Permanent and seasonal unemployment in the village (final weight, 0.195) weakness (W7).

9- Entrepreneurship opportunity and variety of job opportunities in the village (final weight, 0.184) opportunity (O1).

10- Increasing the safety of the village against risks such as floods and earthquakes (final weight, 0.163) strength (S2).

Finally, after mutual analysis of the strengths/weaknesses and the opportunities/threats, we can select the intervention strategies in the form of the SWOT model, which can be implemented as described below:

Offensive strategy (SO)

• Creating employment and job opportunities in the village

• Strengthening and creating entrepreneurship in the village;

• Diversifying business in rural areas;

• Providing infrastructure for economic development and job creation in villages;

• Determining and approving the implementation of economic development and rural job creation programs;

• Entrepreneurship for young people and rural women, development of small employment centers and creation of numerous jobs and prevention of migration;

• Investment in the villages of Rasht and reducing poverty by creating a communication channel for the added value of local products, the growth and preservation of handicrafts, diversifying the economy of the village, and increasing and changing the strategic resources at risk for productive and compatible resources, which increases income distribution;

• Preparing people to establish and manage small rural industries;

Table 6. The final intergroup priority matrix of SWOT factors on population retaining in the villages of Rasht city

SWOT intergroup factors	The final priority	order of priority	Cumulative priority
S5. employment opportunities in the village	0.315	1	1
S1. The village has recreational spaces and tourist attractions	0.274	2	2
S2. Increasing the safety of the village against hazards such as floods and earthquakes	0.163	3	3
S6. Access to public transportation	0.077	4	4
S4. a system for collecting surface water and sewage in the village	0.049	5	5
S7. Diversity of agricultural activities	0.048	6	6
S8. Strengthening and sustainable development of the industrial sector	0.042	7	7
S3. Enjoying the cultural and religious services of the village, such as the mosque and Hosseiniyeh, etc.	0.029	8	8
W6. Shrinking agricultural land	0.284	1	9
W7. Permanent and seasonal unemployment in the village	0.195	2	10
W5. Insufficient income of villagers	0.158	3	11
W10 .lack of motivation to participate in village affairs	0.087	4	12
W1.lack of diversity of employment in the village	0.075	5	13
W8. Heterogeneity in ethnic and cultural structure due to reverse migrations	0.069	6	14
W2.lack of recreational, sports and cultural facilities in the village	0.048	7	15
W4.lack of transportation and communication facilities in the village	0.036	8	16
W9. Lack of land for agricultural activities	0.025	9	17
W3.Lack of agricultural water resources for various agricultural activities	0.019	10	18
O3. The possibility of providing free insurance for villagers	0.41	1	19
O1. Having entrepreneurship fields and a variety of job opportunities in the village	0.184	2	20
O2. trend towards rural tourism outside the village	0.155	3	21
O4. Improving the quality of communication services (telephone, internet, post bank, audio and television networks, satellite, etc.)	0.123	4	22
O5 .areas of encouraging the necessary infrastructure for the development of tourism and ecotourism	0.043	5	23
O7 .Access to financial and credit services outside the village	0.041	6	24
O6. Guaranteed purchase of agricultural products	0.040	7	25
T6. lack and lack of investment in the village	0.349	1	26
T2 .lack and lack of economic development infrastructures such as cold storage, roads between farms, etc., in the village	0.216	2	27
T5 .and the lack of production and value chains in the village	0.198	3	28
T4 .The lack of formation of rural development cooperatives based on small capitals of villagers	0.106	4	29
T1 .Lack and absence of necessary training to promote rural culture, especially in villages that accept immigrants	0.068	5	30
T3 .lack of attention and neglect of environmental hazards in the village	0.031	6	31
T7. existence of social disputes with neighbouring villages	0.029	7	32

Strategy Review (WO)

• Physical and environmental improvement of villages (sewerage, directing surface water, etc.);

• Enjoying and providing access to rural services and facilities;

• Preventing fragmentation of agricultural lands;

• Participation of the residents in the implementation of the physical plans of the village;

• Investigating the capacities and physical limitations of the villages of Rasht city to implement the development plans

Diversification Strategy (ST)

• Creation of conversion industries and technical services in the village;

• Access to rural services and facilities for villages;

• Training of villagers in various dimensions of sustainable rural development;

• Access to rural services and facilities for villages;

• Rural participation in rural development, especially economic development;

• Increasing social capital and welfare of local communities;

• More communication of the villagers with other communities and diverse cultures and raising the level of local people's culture, preserving and perpetuating cultural values and promoting local identity;

• Training people to participate in decision-making in the development of the rural tourism industry;

• Training people in the development of opportunities, activities and entertainment for tourists based on the principles of sustainable development;

Defensive Strategy (WT)

• Preservation of the natural environment in immigrant villages, especially the management of changing the use of agricultural land to other uses;

• Participation of villagers in rural development, especially economic and cultural development;

• Management of environmental hazards in villages (earthquake, flood, fire, crime and delinquency);

• The participation of local people in management and planning, as well as attracting their participation in the development of the village economy with the potential to preserve and protect natural resources and the environment;

5. Discussion

Today, one of the challenges facing the rural society of our country is the moving of the active workforce from the village to the city. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the adopted policies for economic and social modernization have increased the emergence of the migration phenomenon of. This migration trend has created a series of fundamental changes in the economic and social structure of the country. The surge of migration from the village to the city is still a vital national issue that can be the bottleneck of the country's development which requires a systemic approach to rural development and strategies based on the land needs and capacities in different rural areas and different time conditions. According to many previous studies, despite the reduction of the rural population (according to 2016 census), the importance of rural residents and rural areas in the Iran's economy is yet to be revealed. Ignoring the importance of the villages and their rights pushed the human capital out of the villages and promoted the uncontrolled growth of the cities. Therefore, the lack of optimal population distribution and the uneven concentration of the population and resources gradually created problems in the regional balance. The existence of regional disparities, which can become the basis of social, economic and even political inequalities, is a crucial point to consider in rural communities.

In this regard, the current research evaluated SWOT factors in the framework of the AHP model. The results showed that the existence of employment conditions within the village (final weight, 0.315), the existence of recreational and tourist attractions of the village (final weight, 0.274) and increasing the safety of the village against risks such as floods and earthquakes (final weight, 0.163) are the most important strength respectively. Shrinking agricultural lands (final weight, 0.284), the existence of permanent and seasonal unemployment in the village (final weight, 0.195), and insufficient income of villagers (final weight, 0.158) are the most im-

portant weaknesses. Having entrepreneurship opportunities and a variety of job opportunities in the village (final weight, 0.184), the tendency to rural tourism outside the village (final weight, 0.155) and improving the quality of communication services (telephone, internet, Post Banks, radio and television networks, satellites, etc. (final weight, 0.123) are the most important opportunities. Also, the lack of investment in the village (final weight, 349/ 0), the lack or absence of economic development infrastructures such as cold storage, and roads between farms in the village (final weight, 0.216) and the lack of production and value chains in the village (final weight, 0.198) are the most important threats in the studied area. Therefore, the results of the integration of SWOT factors and the AHP model were concluded in 32 SWOT priorities. The top 10 priorities are as follows:

• Providing free insurance for villagers (final weight, 0.41) opportunity (O3)

• lack of investment in the village (final weight, 0.349) threat (T6

• Existence of employment opportunities inside the village (final weight, 0.315) strength (S5)

• Shrinking agricultural land plots (final weight, 0.284) weakness (W6)

• Existence of recreational spaces and tourist attractions in the village (final weight, 0.274) strength (S1)

• lack or absence of economic development infrastructures such as cold storage, roads between farms in the village (final weight, 0.216) threat (T2)

• Absence or lack of production and value chains in the village (final weight, 0.198) threat (T5)

• Permanent and seasonal unemployment in the village (final weight, 0.195) weakness (W7)

• Entrepreneurship opportunity and variety of job opportunities in the village (final weight, 0.184) opportunity (O1)

• increasing the safety of the village against risks such as floods and earthquakes (final weight, 0.163) strength (S2)

Based on these issues, the study found a strategy from diversity, defensive, revision and offensive strategies.

In conclusion, instabilities in the rural areas of Rasht have decreased the potential of these areas to maintain their current functions. Population decline in these areas is associated with the deterioration of the facilities and the drop in production and ultimately population movement. The slow process of development in rural settlements leads to population instability. migration and a dysfunctional economic, social, and environmental structure for rural settlements.

Currently, most of the rural areas and settlements of Rasht city are excluded from regional planning, which is required to be considered to reduce the spatial imbalances in the rural areas, especially in low-income villages. The results of the study are consistent with the study of Ahmadi and Tawakli (2014) and Arabi et al. (2018).

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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