

# Research Paper: Analysis of Factors Accountable for Rural Economic Underdevelopment (Case Study: Rural Areas of Rasht, North of Iran)

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The current research aimed at identifying the obstacles affecting the underdevelopment of the rural economy of Rasht in the north of Iran.

**Method:** The research is a qualitative-quantitative applied study. The statistical population in this research is the villages of Rasht County. A group of researchers, specialists, and executive managers related to economic development were selected. These individuals are chosen using the qualitative research method and a snowball sampling method. Therefore, 20 researchers, experts, and managers were designated. The data analysis methods were qualitative (grounded theory) and FARAS.

**Results:** From the experts' point of view, the underdevelopment of villages in Rasht county is due to the weakness of databases for rural industries, lack of amenities and facilities, limited agriculture and livestock processing technology, the excessive number of organizations for rural affairs, and the lack of coordination between them, lack of legal and financial support, limited markets for agricultural and livestock products, and weakness of educational programs. Also, the results from ARAS fuzzy showed that the excessive number of organizations for rural affairs, with a weight of 0.441, is the most influential factor.

**Conclusion:** Examining the issues raised in the current research shows that the economic development of the villages of Rasht city is a complex phenomenon with many obstacles to sustainability. Therefore, knowing the different aspects of living in the village and their barriers is necessary to maintain the future of the villages of Rasht.

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## 1. Introduction

Villages are crucial for economic, social, and political development on local, regional, national, and international scales. Moreover, their challenges, such as underdevelopment, poverty, growing inequality, rapid population growth, unemployment, migration, and slum formation, have increasingly attracted the attention of villages and rural communities and, to some extent, even more than urban communities (Azkia & Ghaffari, 2004). Integrated and sustainable rural development is another long-term strategy with geopolitical importance that should be prioritized in rural spaces. This strategy requires resources and comprehensive rural infrastructure development (Rahimi & Tavasoli, 2012: 7). However, there are many obstacles and restrictions which hinder rural development. Indiscriminate exploitation of resources has gradually destroyed many spaces. Moreover, there are other problems like a decrease in the level of underground water, inference of saline aquifers to fresh water, the salinity of water and soil, soil erosion, deforestation, and water pollution (Yasoori, 2015: 10).

Fundamentally, economic problems are the core reasons for the structural weakness of villages (Saeidi, 1377: 1993), which stems from inequality in production, fewer work opportunities, and resources finance (Liu, 2008: 4), inequality of investment opportunities in the industry and agriculture sector (Peter, 2004: 7), and making small investments in the agriculture sector and lack of diversity in activities (Aileen, 2006: 32). Consequently, the outcome will be a lack of job variety, low level of employment, low level of production and productivity in the agricultural sector, low wages, instability of economic activities, and, as a result, poverty and economic dragging, and social and environmental instability of villages (Christoun, 2005).

In Iran, employment, lack of income, and poverty, especially in rural areas, are daunting to the people and policy-makers (Papoli-Yazdi & Ebrahimi, 2013). The problems are the same in many developing countries, but these countries have not conducted compatible solutions (Papoli-Yazdi & Ebrahimi, 2013). This is the same in Iran, and so far, practical, effective, and consistent solutions are yet to provide (Ebrahimzadeh & Paydar, 2018: 2). Despite five development programs before the 1978 revolution and six after the revolution to help the rural economy, these programs have yet to achieve desirable results (Seyed Alipour et al., 2015).

Many villages in Iran have the necessary capabilities for job creation in various sectors of agriculture, industry, and services. In this regard, Gilan Province, in general, and Rasht County, in particular, have sufficient environmental capabilities (agricultural lands, dense pastures, tourist attractions, etc.) and human capital (high education rate), as well as the addressability (access to the markets of neighboring cities). A review of the conducted studies shows that there are still obstacles to economic development in different regions, according to the conditions of that region. In this regard, the present research has been carried out to investigate factors accountable for rural economic underdevelopment in rural settlements of Rasht County.

## 2. Literature Review

Furtado believes underdevelopment is a situation in which capital and labor are misused due to the need for coordination between economic factors and applied technology. As a result, society does not progress toward development, and underdevelopment occurs (Furtado, 1969). Some believe that underdevelopment is bound to the third world, lagging, developing, and underdeveloped countries with a large amount of geographical space and population. They assume that this situation was caused by many external and internal factors, although some theories, such as the dependency theory, emphasize external factors in a historical format. Accordingly, underdevelopment is supposed to be a situation that is caused by unequal relations between underdeveloped and developed countries. Also, forces from outside put pressure on underdeveloped countries and are the objective manifestation of dependency on the capitalist system (Azkia & Ghaffari, 2004). Economic and social experts have defined a series of criteria for underdevelopment, even though the concept is difficult to be determined. Underdevelopment can be defined in many ways, such as poverty, illiteracy and disease, unfair distribution of national income, administrative inefficiencies, or lack of social organization. Therefore, no exhaustive definition of underdevelopment can match the characteristics of each underdeveloped country (Azkia & Ghaffari, 2004).

In this regard, one of the pillars of development is the integration in eliminating the economic and social imbalances of the regions (Nazm Far, 2017: 159). As many researchers have stated, rural development should be the core of any discussion and negotiation in the national development process (Ake, 1996: 14). Rural development, i.e., improving the level of welfare and livelihood of villagers, has always concerned development policy-makers and planners (Rezvani et al., 2016: 27). Achiev-

ing the right balance between meeting new needs and strengthening economic diversity for economic development in rural areas is crucial.

Most people in rural areas depend directly or indirectly on natural areas for their livelihood, so most rural and agricultural planners have always underlined agricultural development activities (Conyers, 2002: 11). Today, different economic sectors rely on agriculture, and neglecting this sector will cause great damage to the growth and development of the country. The importance of the country's agricultural industry gets higher when the need for earnings from export and domestic consumption is growing (Motiee Langroodi 2012: 92). In addition to the farming sector, industrialization has tremendously affected human living conditions. Since the industrial revolution in Western Europe, industrialization has been a strategy for the economic development of other countries (Bakhtiari, 2013). In developed countries, evolution is associated with industrialization and the development of industries in connection to economic growth and standard of living. In developing countries, the efficiency and productivity in the industrial sector are significantly higher than in the agricultural sector because the industry could also manage to increase the efficiency of other sectors (Chenery et al., 1986).

Therefore, today, compared to other economically productive sectors, the industrial sector is a leading economic sector. Industrialization satisfies the needs of society, and the labor working in the industrial sector will benefit from better rights and social security. In addition to increasing the export of goods, the development of the industry can create more added value by increasing the quantity and improving the quality of the goods and gaining more national production and prosperity (Szi-mai & Verspagen, 2011). The tertiary sector of the economy, the service sector, after the agriculture and industry sector, has taken a good place in recent decades and significantly contributed to the economy's growth, development and job creation. Services, like other sectors of the economy, come across quantitative and qualitative changes over time (UNWTO, 2007: 11). Tourism is a relatively newer activity to create income and job opportunities, especially in the villages. Tourism has been expanding since the second half of the 20th century and is often regarded as the key to economic growth, whether in developing countries or developed countries (Font & Ahjem, 1999: 63). Developing the tourism industry in industrialized countries leads to the diversification of incomes and the balancing of the economy. In developing countries, on the other hand, it is an opportunity for export and job creation (Hall & Stephan, 1994: 457). In

this regard, to the inverse economic instability of rural communities, it is argued that the economy should be diversified in activities related to agriculture, industry, and services (Qasemi & Javan, 2013: 246).

The sustainable livelihood approach was proposed in the late 1980s as a response to the rapid changes in the rural economy and increasing the gap with rural livelihood, targeting reducing and eradicating rural poverty. This approach emphasizes a comprehensive framework for poverty reduction and rural development (Dearden, 2002). In the Oxford dictionary, sustainable livelihood is defined as a means of support for not only consumption and income but also a secure life. Chambers proposed the approach in the 1980s and was then recognized by the World Development and Environment Commission. Livelihood security, as a core to the sustainable livelihood approach, is defined by the World Development and Environment Commission: Livelihood is an adequate resource of food and cash to meet basic needs. Security refers to the security of ownership or access to resources and income-generating activities, which include assets to deal with risk and improve production resources for the household. Sustainable livelihood security is obtained through the land, fishing, hunting ownership, sustainable employment with sufficient wages, or additional activities in different villages (Shen, 2009).

The UK Government's Strategy for International Development in 1999 was one of the best approaches to sustainable livelihoods (Shen, 2009). This framework, with five components of the sustainable livelihood approach, is people-centered. The five fundamental components are human, social, natural, physical, and financial capital (Serrat, 2008). These assets are interdependent, and each one can complete the other assets. In general, The United Nations, in the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, recommends a series of integrated supportive activities to improve the sustainability of livelihoods among poor and vulnerable groups by strengthening resilience and coping strategies. Although this is an open process, the emphasis is on advanced technologies and social and economic investments. Also, the approach pays special attention to political and institutional issues affecting people's lives. Various supports are usually implemented at the regional levels with the community and household sub-levels (Krantz, 2001). Figure 1 shows a conceptual model of the research.

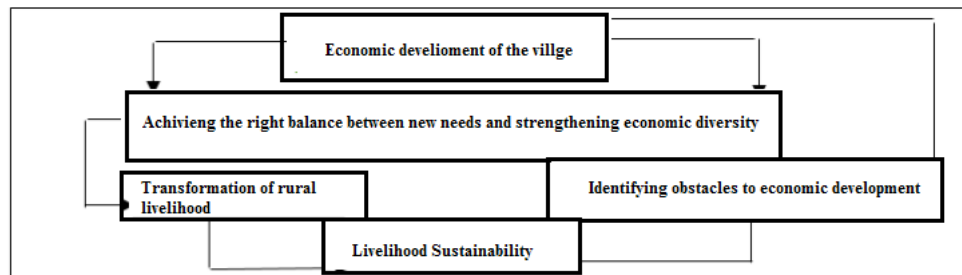


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study



Several studies have been conducted about underdevelopment, but no analysis has been achieved with the grounded theory method, specifically in Rasht County. In this section, the study presents some of the related studies.

Rezaei et al. (2016) studied obstacles and solutions to developing green entrepreneurship in Kermanshah County. They found that the main challenges to green entrepreneurship are infrastructural, educational, technical, and managerial support.

Also, government support makes people participate in investments and partnerships in producing green products. Also, promoting green labeling and changing consumption behavior can help develop green entrepreneurship. Jahanshahi and Jalalian (2017) evaluated the attitude of experts about obstacles to rural development in Alborz Province. They concluded that economic and political factors and planning institutions are the reasons for the lack of development of villages in Alborz Province. Najafi Kani (2019) investigated challenges and bottlenecks of economic development in the villages of Dashli Boroon District. They suggested that the most critical challenges to the economic development of border villages are environmental, institutional, social, and infrastructure challenges. These issues explain 84.35% of the total variance, and the remaining 15.65% is related to factors outside the study's scope. Hajipour & Karimi-pour (2020) analyzed obstacles to the sustainability of rural production in the Central District of Boshrouyeh County and concluded that in the eight studied villages, there are 28 obstacles to the development and sustainability of the production system. Some of these obstacles go back to land reforms and institutional foundations in rural society, the most important of which are small ownership and small farms. The other obstacle category is the irrational performance of the planning system in rural production and economy. Dorri Sedeh and Tavakoli (2021) investigated obstacles to green economy development in entrepreneurship in rural areas of Isfahan Province. They concluded that educational, structural-

environmental, management-technical, and support-motivational barriers are, respectively, the most critical obstacles to developing a green economy in the rural areas of Isfahan province. Khayri et al. (2022) analyzed the barriers to diversifying economic activities in the villages around Urmia Lake. They compared the villagers' perspectives on barriers to diversifying the rural economy and institutional management. Factors such as the villagers' lack of access to loans and financial resources, the absence or inappropriateness of financial services, and the lack of government and private investment have had a greater impact than other factors in creating barriers to diversifying the economic activities of the villages in the region.

Pindado and Sanchez (2017) analyzed the most important factors affecting agricultural entrepreneurship development in European countries. They concluded that age, gender, household income, education, entrepreneurial experience, entrepreneurial skills, Entrepreneur networks, and economic factors affect entrepreneurship. Zinchuk et al. (2018) investigated the challenges of sustainable economic development in rural areas. They found that mechanisms for sustainable development policy in rural areas promise directions for developing local areas and innovative solutions for environmental and social problems. Finally, Kulikov (2020), in research about rural areas of Kazakhstan, found that the participation of public structures, local governments, government organizations, and the private sector in the future can transform rural areas towards economic, social, and ecological development.

### 3. Methodology

The research is a qualitative-quantitative study in a sequential approach and based on the purpose it is applied. The statistical population in this research is the villages of Rasht County. A group of researchers, specialists, and executive managers related to economic development were selected. These individuals are chosen using the qualitative research method and a snowball sampling

method. Therefore, 20 researchers, experts, and managers were designated. In the first part, the extracting factors in rural tourism development with the grounded theory approach, which is a qualitative approach. In the second part, the FARAS model was used to rank and rate the importance of each barrier.

Rasht County is located in the center of the province and connected to the Caspian Sea and Anzali County from the north, Rudbar County from the south, Siahkal, Lahijan, Astana Ashrafieh Counties from the east, and Someh Sara County, Foman and Shaft cities from the west. The occupied area is 1427 square kilometers, comprising six districts (Central, Khomam, Khoshkebijar, Lasht-e Nesha, Kuchesfahan, and Sanger) and seven cities (Rasht, Khomam, Khoshkebijar, Lasht-e Nesha, Kuchesfahan, Sanger and Loleman) and 18 rural districts and 293 villages. The population in this county is 918,445 people, 698,014 urban residents, and 220,431 rural residents. In other words, 76% of the urban and 24% of the rural population.

#### 4. Findings

Descriptive findings are the respondents' gender, age, education, and occupation. As Table 1 shows, out of the 20 respondents examined in this research, 17 people (85%) are men, and 3 (15%) are women. The average age of the respondents was 37 years. However, the maximum age is 63, and the minimum is 26. Therefore, 75 percent of the respondents are between 35 and 50. Also, based on the respondents' education level, six people had a master's degree, and 14 people, or 70 percent, had a doctoral degree. Fifteen people, or 75 percent of the respondents, were university professors, and five (25.00) were experts working in rural organizations.

This section presents a set of factors responsible for economic underdevelopment in Rasht County's villages. These obstacles are based on the grounded theory and the views of experts (university professors and economic and rural development experts). The results are illustrated in Table 2.

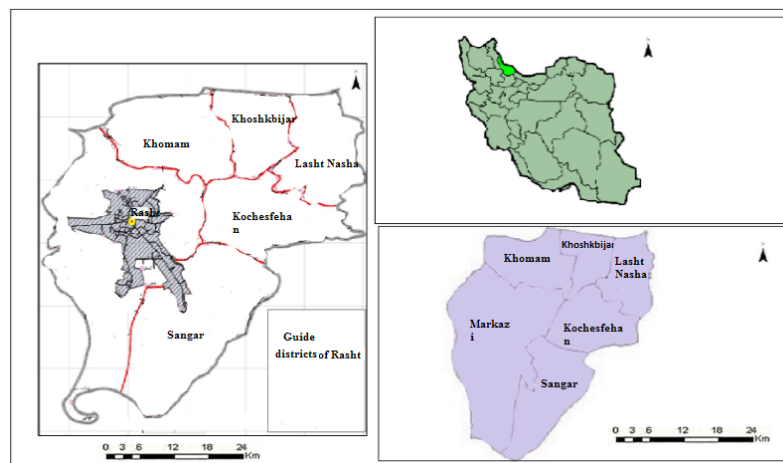


Figure 2. Located area of the study



Table 1. Gender, age, education, and occupation (experts)

Respondent's education		Respondent's occupation		Respondents' Age			Respondents' Gender		Row
Doctoral	Postgraduate degree	Specialists and experts	University professors	More than 50	35-50	25-35	Female	Male	
14	6	5	15	3	15	2	3	17	Frequency
70.00	30.00	25.00	75.00	15.00	75.00	10.00	15.00	85.00	Percent
20		20			20		20		Total
100%		100			100%		100%		

Source: Findings, 2022





**Table 2.** Effective obstacles in the lack of economic development of the villages of Rasht County

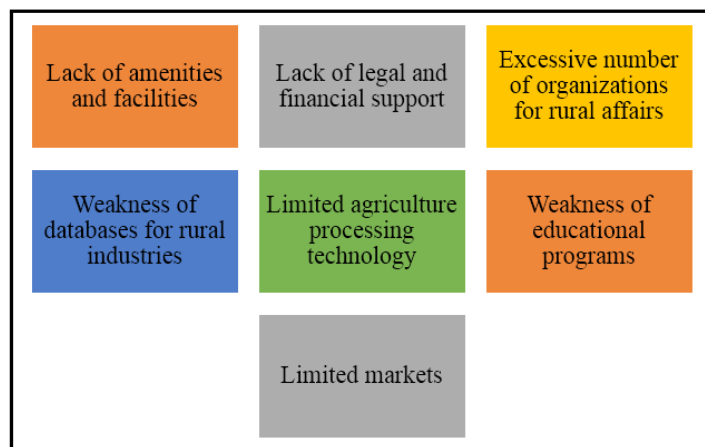
Category	Semantic units
Weakness of databases for rural industries	Weakness of comprehensive plans to identify capabilities for establishing rural industries
	Lack of a suitable and strategic program in the villages
Lack of amenities and facilities	The economic sanction and no access to some industrial production devices in the village
	Limited access of farmers to agricultural input
Limited agriculture and livestock processing technology	The low quality of some products supplied by rural industries and the non-compliance of these products with the needs of consumer markets
	Low-quality and not competitive products
	Weakness in product innovation
Excessive number of organizations for rural affairs and the lack of coordination between them	Weakness of participatory perspective among the officials
	Weak economic development management and integrated support by relevant organizations
	Weakness of holistic perspective in rural managers
	Lack of improvement and monitoring of the rural market
Lack of legal and financial support	Weakness of insurance for agricultural products
	No appropriate plan for processing industries in the agricultural sector
	Top-down planning in villages
Limited markets for agricultural and livestock products	Weak competitive rural industries in comparison to industries
	Price fluctuations in manufactured products of rural market
	Lack of supply quality (marketing, advertising, variety of products)
Weakness of educational programs	Lack of creativity and innovation among villagers
	Lack of situational knowledge among rural experts

Source: Research Findings, 2022



Table 2 and the paradigmatic model of Figure 3 show the obstacles to development from the experts' point of view. They stated that the underdevelopment villages in Rasht county is due to the weakness of databases for rural industries, lack of amenities and facilities, limited

agriculture and livestock processing technology, the excessive number of organizations for rural affairs, and the lack of coordination between them, lack of legal and financial support, limited markets for agricultural and livestock products, and weakness of educational programs.

**Figure 3.** Factors accountable for rural economic underdevelopment of the villages in Rasht County  
Source: Research Findings, 2022

In the following, the FARAS model was used to rank and rate the importance of each of the barriers. The fuzzy ARAS model is a hierarchical fuzzy model used to rank indicators. The coefficient of each of the semantic units is analyzed. The final Tables 3 and 4 are demonstrated here.

As shown in Table 3 and 4 and Figure 4, the excessive number of organizations for rural affairs with a weight of 0.441, lack of amenities and facilities with a weight of 0.401, weakness of educational programs with a weight of 0.393, lack of legal and financial support with a weight of 0.390, weakness of databases for rural industries with a weight of 0.369, limited markets with a weight of 0.338, limited agriculture processing technology with a

weight value of 0.318, respectively, have the highest to lowest impact on the economic underdevelopment.

After examining and ranking each obstacle, it was considered necessary to investigate them using storytelling.

#### Excessive number of organizations for rural affairs

Experts believe that excessive numbers of organizations responsible for villages are the reasons for not realizations of the goals of economic development programs in the villages of Rasht. These organizations might be working correctly at the first stage, but later they will lack coordination and organizational cohesion.

**Table 3.** The optimization function and the degree of desirability in each obstacle

Lack of amenities and facilities			Lack of legal and financial support			Excessive number of organizations for rural affairs			Limited agriculture processing technology			Weakness of databases for rural industries			
$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	
0.200	0.190	0.200	0.200	0.190	0.198	0.209	0.220	0.200	0.156	0.156	0.180	0.180	0.189	0.178	$\otimes S$
	0.211			0.200			0.221			0.162			0.180		$S_j$
	0.401			0.390			0.441			0.318			0.369		$K_j$

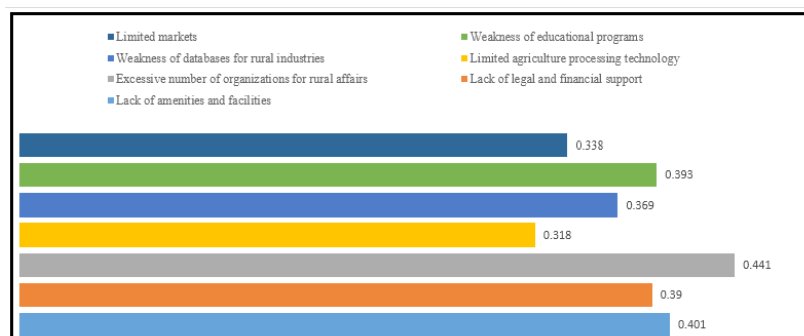
Source: Research Findings, 2022



**Table 4.** The optimization function and the degree of desirability in each obstacle

Weakness of educational programs			Limited markets			
$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	$\gamma$	$\beta$	$\alpha$	
0.221	0.2000	0.200	0.198	0.170	0.177	$\otimes S$
	0.193			0.168		$S_j$
	0.393			0.338		$K_j$

Source: Research Findings, 2022



**Figure 4.** Ranking of the factors accountable for rural economic underdevelopment of the villages in Rasht County

Source: Research Findings, 2022



### **Lack of amenities and facilities**

Several experts suggested that the realization of economic development does not happen due to economic sanctions, the lack of infrastructure facilities like agricultural machinery, and the lack of access to raw materials and other products.

### **Weakness of educational programs**

Another practical obstacle to the lack of economic development in the villages of Rasht city is the weakness of educational programs. Weaknesses in educational programs are investigated in two communities. The first one is the residents in the rural areas of Rasht and the lack of education in creativity and the expansion of innovation among them. Economic development has a long way to go. Therefore, it is necessary to create training workshops for both the local community and rural experts.

### **Lack of legal and financial support**

From the point of view of experts, economic development is aligned with rigid laws. In this regard, the village has no supervision of rural markets and processing industries due to rigid laws and a top-down planning approach. Also, one of the other effective obstacles is the lack of financial support to ensure access to agricultural inputs for farmers.

### **Weakness of databases for rural industries**

Among the other obstacles raised is the weakness of databases related to rural industries. From the experts' point of view, there are no comprehensive plans to identify capabilities in the villages of Rasht County for the establishment of new rural industries. Also, a suitable and strategic program in the villages for economic development has not yet been planned.

### **Limited markets**

From an expert's point of view, the sales market's limitation is implied by low competitiveness in villages with large industries, fluctuations in the prices of manufactured products in rural markets, and unfavorable supply quality (marketing, advertising methods, variety of products).

### **Limited agriculture processing technology**

According to experts, innovation is relatively weak in the rural industry due to the low quality of some products supplied by rural sectors of the villages of Rasht County

and the non-compliance of these products with the needs of consumer markets, low quality and not competitive products and finally the weakness in product innovation.

## **5. Discussion**

The current research aimed to identify factors responsible for economic underdevelopment in the villages of Rasht County. From the experts' point of view, the underdevelopment of villages in Rasht county is because of the weakness of databases for rural industries, lack of amenities and facilities, limited agriculture and livestock processing technology, the excessive number of organizations for rural affairs, and the lack of coordination between them, lack of legal and financial support, limited markets for agricultural and livestock products, and weakness of educational programs. The results from ARAS fuzzy showed that an excessive number of organizations for rural affairs with a weight of 0.441, a lack of amenities and facilities with a weight of 0.401, weakness of educational programs with a weight of 0.393, lack of legal and financial support with a weight of 0.390, weakness of databases for rural industries with a weight of 0.369, limited markets with a weight of 0.338, limited agriculture processing technology with a weight value of 0.318, respectively, have the highest to lowest impact on the economic underdevelopment.

Examining the issues raised in the current research shows that the economic development of the villages of Rasht city is a complex phenomenon with many obstacles to sustainability. Without knowing the different aspects of living in the village and their obstacles, it is impossible to maintain the future of the villages of Rasht. If development programs are planned with trial and error and without conducting comprehensive studies, achieving sustainable development will be difficult, and it will cause new problems in the life and future of the villages. Knowing and understanding the components of sustainable economic development and its goals is the fundamental step for overcoming the obstacles and finding appropriate solutions and strategies. Finally, based on the results, it can be said that realizing the economic development of the villages of Rasht requires the assistance and coordination of all executive bodies related to rural development. It is possible to formulate, implement and evaluate the solutions appropriate to the existing conditions of the villages. Exploiting the current capacities in the rural areas of Rasht, improving the social dignity of the villagers in the national economy, and ultimately, creating the necessary platform for the prosperity and equity-oriented progress of the villages are the crucial goals of rural development. These find-



ings are consistent with the study of Rezaei et al. (2016), Karim et al. (2017), Sardar Shahraki et al. (2018), Jahanshiri and Jalalian (2017), Dorri Sedeh and Tavakoli (2021), Khayri et al. (2022), Kulikov (2020). Finally, in line with the results of the obtained results, we suggest the followings:

Employing and using the experts and qualified people educated in various sectors and using the new knowledge of management and production in the agricultural sector of Rasht County.

Designing specific programs by setting the priorities of specific goals and strategies for economic development in the villages of Rasht County due to the different production conditions for the development of agriculture, animal husbandry and other activities.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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