Research Paper: Impact of Rural Tourism Development on Social Issues in Rural Areas (Case Study: Villages in West Azerbaijan Province)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The tourism industry in rural areas of developing countries has played an important role in the economic and social sustainability of the rural regions through diversity of income sources, reduction of immigration, etc. Rural tourism is a source of increasing income and plays an important role in the social, economic, and environmental development of villages. This research investigates the impact of rural tourism development on the social issues of rural areas.

Methods: It is of an applied purpose, and its method is descriptive-analytical, which uses library and field methods to collect data. Its statistical population is five villages that are the target of tourism in several villages around the West Azerbaijan province. The total number of households living in these villages is 1292 according to the census of 2024. The sample required to complete the questionnaire was 292, according to Cochran's formula. The experts investigated the validity of the questionnaire. The reliability of the variables is 0.86%, according to Cronbach's alpha test. Statistical tests such as t, correlation, and structural equations have been used for quantitative data analysis. The sustainable development of tourism questionnaire has 20 questions, which was designed by Chris et al. in 2006. It has three indicators (cultural dimension, environmental dimension, and social dimension).

Results: The findings showed that the development of rural tourism positively affects social issues. The cultural dimension has a positive effect on social issues, the social dimension has a positive effect on social issues, and the environmental dimension has a positive effect on social issues.

Conclusion: The results reveal that the development of rural tourism in rural areas is an essential element in emancipating villages from poverty, migration, and social and economic problems and is an important step in the direction of sustainable rural development.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, many planners are considering rural tourism as a major activity for rural development and have viewed this from different perspectives. Meanwhile, economists have labeled the tourism industry as an invisible export. This industry is a wide-ranging activity that has critical economic, social-cultural, and environmental impacts. For this, planning for rural tourism development requires understanding its outcomes and effects from the view of the host society, which would eventually lead to regional sustainable development. Development of rural tourism in rural areas can, on the one hand, play a major role in diversifying the economies of rural communities and laying the ground for sustainable rural development. On the other hand, it is considered a means for stimulating the growth and dynamism of the national economy through overcoming labels of underdevelopment and also improving the living standards of the local people in the region. Anyway, suppose rural tourism can play all the roles entrusted to it. In that case, it can help create or stimulate the development process to achieve sustainable development in rural areas while underlying local community sustainability in all economic, social, and cultural sub-branches, as well as the tourism industry itself.

Many planners in the present era have introduced rural tourism as a very important activity for the development of villages and have always paid attention to it from different perspectives; economists have called the tourism industry an invisible export. This industry is a broad activity that creates important economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts. Therefore, planning for the development of rural tourism requires understanding its effects and consequences from the perspective of the host society, which ultimately leads to the sustainable development of the region. The development of the tourism industry in rural areas, on the one hand, can play a very important role in diversifying the economy of rural communities and pave the way to sustainable rural development. On the other hand, it can stimulate the growth and dynamism of the national economy by overcoming the conceptions of underdevelopment and improvement of the living standards of local people in the region. However, if rural tourism can fulfill all the assigned plans well, it can be the creator or driver of the development process to achieve sustainable development in rural areas.

2. Literature Review

Rural tourism in the modern world is seen as one of the key sectors of economic activities. This critical economic activity has been viewed from different angles, with some considering it as part of the tourism market and others defining it to be a policy for rural development (Rokn al-Din Eftekhari et al., 2002). Rural tourism expanded since the 1950s onwards (Rezvani & Safaei, 2005: 112). Given the interesting economic outcomes of tourism development, initial studies during the 60s tended to concentrate on the positive effects of this phenomenon. In contrast, the 70s saw wide-ranging economic consequences, which were evaluated consequently. In this period, there was a predominately negative approach to tourism development, with the majority of researchers focusing on the negative impacts of this activity. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholarly criticisms led to a balanced approach to negative and positive effects (Aligholi-Zadeh, 2010: 54). Today, tourism development engenders huge economic, social-cultural, and environmental impacts on tourism-receptive regions. To get the most out of this industry, its impacts should first be recognized, and negative effects should be reduced while the positive impacts should be increased.

Today, attention to tourism produces considerable economic, social-cultural, and environmental privileges for rural and less-developed areas by generating income and developing infrastructure. While relying on its characteristics, tourism can effectively contribute to the mobility and dynamism of different economic sectors of local communities and thus help develop rural areas (Habibi-Koushkoohi et al., 2021). The tourism industry in the rural areas of developing countries plays a major role in the economic and social sustainability of rural areas by diversifying income sources, reducing immigration, etc. Rural tourism has been a source of increasing income and plays a major role in the social, economic, and environmental development of villages (Kurdlou & Ahmadi, 2020). Currently, many planners have viewed rural tourism as a key activity for rural development and have examined it from different aspects. Meanwhile, economists have labeled the tourism industry as an invisible export. This industry is a wide-ranging activity that has critical economic, social-cultural, and environmental impacts. For this, planning for rural tourism development requires understanding its outcomes and impacts from the view of the host society, which would eventually lead to regional sustainable development (Zarafshani et al., 2013).

2-1.Research background

Varmzyari et al. (2023) analyzed the components of societal tourism development in the rural areas of Marivan and Sarvabad. The statistical population of this research was the villagers over 15 years of age in the tourism target villages of Marivan and Sarvabad of the Kurdistan province. It used descriptive and inferential statistics, including mean comparison and exploratory factor analysis, to analyze the data. The findings of the exploratory factor analysis showed that the components of "inclusiveness and horizontal networking," "empowerment and strengthening of infrastructure," "open innovation and demand-orientation," "preserving local authenticity," and "profit and fair participation" are among the most important components of the development of societal tourism in rural areas. This study can have a major role in providing correct insight into promoting the participation of local communities in the tourism industry and their benefits. Hajarian (2023) studied the effective indicators of rural tourism development with a comprehensive approach to Razavi Khorasan villages. The present research is descriptive-analytical and fundamental in its purpose. It has used documentary and field methods to collect information. The statistical population of 19 selected villages is the target of tourism in the Khorasan-Razavi province, and the sample size of 339 households was estimated by Cochran's formula from among 3808 households living in rural settlements.

These individuals were selected by systematic random sampling. The partial least squares technique and Smart PLS software were used to test the conceptual model of the research and investigate the impact of the research dimensions on the development of rural tourism. As the results show, the t coefficients between the main research variables were above 1.96, which means that the relationship is meaningful and direct. Thus, social-cultural, economic, planning-management, and infrastructural-service dimensions have a positive and significant effect on the development of rural tourism. The value of R2 shows that 84.3% of the development of rural tourism is explained by achieving the four dimensions, and the economic dimension, with a coefficient of 0.89, has had a greater impact than other dimensions on the development of rural tourism. The value of the socio-cultural index (0.059) reveals that rural tourism development requires more attention to socio-cultural indicators. Indeed, the tourists' motivation increases by improving the socio-cultural index. The facilities and services, besides the attractions and resources of rural tourism, should be strengthened to gain more satisfaction from tourists, create employment and income, and achieve the goals by using these indicators. Kordloo and Ahmadi (2019) investigated the role of rural tourism in the social and economic development of villages in the villages of Lordegan, Chaharmahal, and Bakhtiari provinces. This research is descriptive-analytical using survey and library methods. Its statistical population includes villagers living in the rural areas of Lordegan. There are 9027 people and 2512 households, according to the census of 2016. The statistical population under study used Cochran's formula, and its sample size was 368.37, while the sample size was 369 for more accuracy.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the quantitative reliability of the questionnaire. The alpha value was calculated from 0.74 to 0.80 for different parts of the questionnaire. Statistical tests of the mean and variance of the responses and the one-sample t-test were used to obtain the views of the residents regarding the mentioned components. The results of the research showed that there is a significant relationship between rural tourism and the economic and social components of the research. As for the role of rural tourism in the economic and social development of rural areas, the income component has the highest impact (-1.36), and the poverty component (-1.11) has the lowest impact in the economic dimension; the participation component with an average (-1.33) had the highest impact and quality of life component with (-1.11) percentage had the lowest impact in the social dimension. The results of the one-sample t-test show that rural tourism has a negative and significant impact on the economic and social development of rural areas. Taghdisi et al. (2014) investigated and analyzed the challenges of rural tourism development from the perspective of the villagers of the tourism target villages of the West Azerbaijan province. The statistical population of the research included the villagers of the tourism target villages of the West Azerbaijan province, 381 of whom were selected through the Cochran formula and stratified sampling method with the proportional assignment. The data collection tool was a questionnaire whose validity was confirmable based on the opinions of relevant professors and experts. Cronbach's alpha method was used to measure the reliability of the questionnaire, and the calculated value indicates the appropriateness of the research tool (alpha = 0.89).

Data were described and analyzed using SPSS software. The ranking of the challenges of rural tourism from the villagers' point of view showed that the items of inappropriate roads and transportation routes, inappropriate and inadequate accommodation centers, and cold weather conditions were the most important problems. This research used factor analysis with the data summarization approach. Thus, the challenges of agricultural water management are divided into six factors,

including health problems, management and planning problems, infrastructure problems, cultural-social problems, economic problems, and natural and climatic problems. The findings revealed that among the above six challenges, four challenges of management and planning problems, infrastructure problems, cultural-social problems, and economic problems have a higher correlation with each other. As the results of the regression model showed, about 92% of the changes in the composite index explain the challenges of rural tourism development. Saqaei and Alizadeh (2013) investigated the challenges, opportunities, and solutions of tourism development in the villages of Bayazeh, Garmeh, and Misr in Khoro Biabank. Therefore, the presence of attractive natural and cultural resources, the location of the villages of this area next to the desert, and the busy route of Mashhad travelers near Khoro Biabank, respectively, with a weighted score of 0.32, 0.28, and 0.18 are the most important strengths.

The lack of accommodation facilities, the destruction of the cultural and natural monuments of the region, and migration from this village, with a weighted score of 0.28, 0.24, and 0.20, are the most important weaknesses. The tourist location of Isfahan has a weighted score of 0.40, the location of Khoro Biabank on the high-traffic route of Isfahan-Yazd-Mashhad has a weighted score of 0.24, the geographical location of Khoro Biabank with a weighted score of 0.24, and the geographical location of Khoro Biabanked with a weighted score of 0.20 are the most important opportunities. The worsening of the economic gap between Isfahan and other cities of the province with a weighted score of 0.20, migration from Khor villages to Isfahan with a weighted score of 0.18, and the lack of sufficient credits for the development of tourism in this region with a weighted score of 16.0 0 are the most important threats. Spring and autumn are the best seasons for tourism in this city. Akbarian Ronizi (2012) investigated the relationship between tourism development and social capital in rural areas in a case study: Solghan village (Tehran). The current research is applied and descriptive-analytical. The preparation of the required data is based on the field method. The statistical population of this research is the local households living in the villages of the area under study. There were 195 household heads, which was the sample size determined by Cochran's formula. Data analysis has been done using Spss software (descriptive and inferential statistics). The results show the existence of a statistically significant direct relationship between tourism development and social capital. Zarafshani et al. (2012) investigated the effects of tourism development in improving the economic-social indicators of the rural areas of the Rijab tourism region in the Kermanshah province. The sample size was estimated to be 270 people, of which 200 questionnaires were collected and analyzed by simple random method. The results of the factor analysis showed that tourism development in the area under study has four major consequences. These consequences include income generation, the creation of environmental problems, cultural development, and reduction of social capital. The results can bring achievements for the tourism organization. This means that the positive effects of tourism can be strengthened, and its negative consequences can be reduced by applying the results of this study.

3. Methodology

The current research is applied and descriptive-analytical, which used library and field methods to collect data. Its statistical population is five villages that are the target of tourism in several villages around the West Azerbaijan province. The total number of households living in these villages is 1292 according to the census of 2024. The number of samples was 292 samples using Cochran's formula, and the experts investigated the validity of the questionnaire. The reliability of the variables is 0.86%, according to Cronbach's alpha test. Statistical tests such as t, correlation, and structural equations have been used for quantitative data analysis. The sustainable tourism development questionnaire has 20 questions, was designed by Chris et al. (2006), and has three indicators (cultural dimension, environmental dimension, and social dimension).

Geographical location of the area under study:

West Azerbaijan Province is in the northwest of Iran and is bordered by the Republic of Azerbaijan and Turkey from the north, Turkey and Iraq from the west, East Azerbaijan Province and Zanjan Province from the east, and Kurdistan Province from the south. The area of the province is equal to 37,059 square kilometers; it is the thirteenth largest province of the country and constitutes 2.25% of the total area of the country. The population of the West Azerbaijan province is 3,265,219 people according to the 2015 census, which is 4.08% of the total population of the country; it is the eighth most populated province of the country. The West Azerbaijan province had, in 2016, 19 cities, 42 districts, 42 cities, 109 villages, and 3728 villages, and its center was the historical city of Urmia. Urmia is the largest and most populated city, Chaharborj is the smallest, and Barough is the least populated city in the province.

Figure 1. Geographical location of the area under study

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4. Findings

Analyzing the data to ensure the correctness of the hypotheses is of particular importance for any type of research. Most studies rely on the information collected from the research subject.

This test determines the proposed hypothesis about the average of the population at the error level α. It is used for quantitative variables and, in some cases, to detect the influence or lack of influence of a variable in the situation under investigation. For example, we use this test to check the effect or lack of effect of variables on a given phenomenon so that if the average of each variable is greater than a certain limit, that variable supposedly affects the given phenomenon. The results of the descriptive statistics test show that the average value of the sample is smaller or larger, but this should be confirmed through an inferential test.

Research model

Table 1. Normality of the variables with the test of kurtosis and skewness

Variables	Value of the kurtosis statistic	Value of the skewness statistic	Status
Social Issues	0.29	-0.76	Normal
Development of rural tourism	-0.35	-0.64	Normal
Cultural dimension	0.05	-0.58	Normal
Social dimension	1.40	-0.87	Normal
Environmental dimension	0.006	-0.69	Normal

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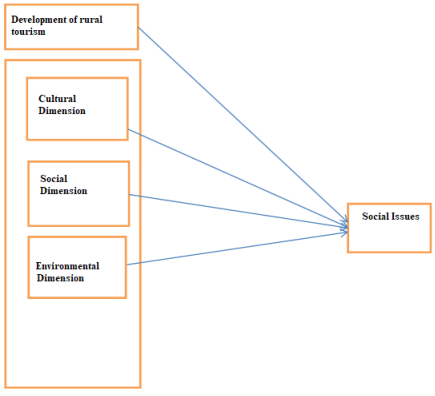

Figure 2. Conceptual model of the research

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Social issues: Development of rural tourism, Cultural dimension, Social dimension, Environmental dimension

The second output is for inferential statistics and presents the test results. If it is smaller than 5% as the value of Sig, the average is greater than the value of the test item.

According to the upper limit and the lower limit:

1- If the upper limit and the lower limit are positive, the average is greater than the value of the test case.

2- If the upper limit and the lower limit are negative, the average is smaller than the value of the test case.

If the upper limit is positive and the lower limit is negative, the mean is not significantly different from the value of the test item (Momeni, 2008).

The results of a one-sample t-test are presented below:

The assumption H0 is rejected for the variables of rural tourism development and social issues, as Sig was less than 5%. Because the upper and lower limits are positive, the average of these variables is higher than the average of the test case, so their status is favorable.

Pearson's correlation coefficient is one of the criteria for determining the correlation between two variables. It shows the intensity and type of (direct or inverse) relationship. This coefficient is between 1 and -1. If there is no relationship between two variables, it is equal to zero. Pearson's correlation coefficient is a parametric method used for data with a normal distribution or a large number of data (Momeni, 2016).

Partial least squares approach to structural equation modeling

Researchers are well aware of the covariance-based structural equation modeling used in SMART-PLS 4.10 software. Indeed, many social and behavioral science researchers consider covariance-based methods inappropriately synonymous with structural equation modeling (Chin, 1998). Chin (1998) attributes this popularity to the existence of user-friendly software such as Lisrel, Amos, and EQS. These methods try to predict the parameters of the statistical population by finding the covariance matrix that matches the covariance matrix observed in the data. Thus, these methods require the normality of data distribution.

The above figure shows the output of the PLS command of the algorithm. This command is used to extract external load coefficients and path coefficients. As the figure shows, the research items have an external load above 0.3, and we do not need to remove the item.

T coefficients are reported for research paths. T-coefficients above ±1.96 to ±2.58 are significant at the 0.05 level, and T-coefficients above ±2.58 are significant at the 0.01 level. As Figure 3 shows, the t-coefficient of rural tourism development on social issues is significant at the 0.05 level; the rest of the coefficients are positive and significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 2. One-Sample T-test results

Variables	Mean	Sig.	Upper limit	Lower limit
Social Issues	3.78	0.00	3.87	3.65
Development of rural tourism	3.75	0.00	3.86	3.58
Cultural dimension	3.82	0.00	3.92	3.73
Social dimension	3.86	0.00	3.95	3.78
Environmental dimension	3.68	0.00	3.83	3.59

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Table 3. Results of correlation test assumptions

Research model	Correlation coefficient	Error level	Sig.	Hypothesis
1- Development of rural tourism on social issues	0.685	0.05	0.00	Accepted
2-Cultural dimension on social issues	0.589	0.05	0.00	Accepted
3- Social dimension on social issues	0.494	0.05	0.00	Accepted
4- Environmental dimension on social issues	0.551	0.05	0.00	Accepted

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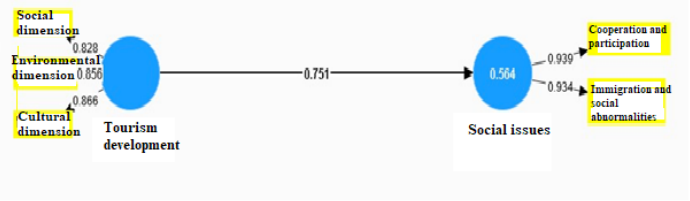

Figure 3. Standard coefficients of the research model

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Cooperation and participation, immigration and social abnormalities, Social Issues, Development of tourism, Social dimension, Environmental dimension, Cultural dimension

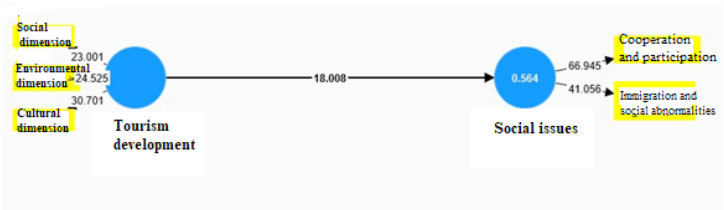

Figure 4. T-test of the research model

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Cooperation and participation, immigration and social abnormalities, Social Issues, Development of tourism, Social dimension, Environmental dimension, Cultural dimension

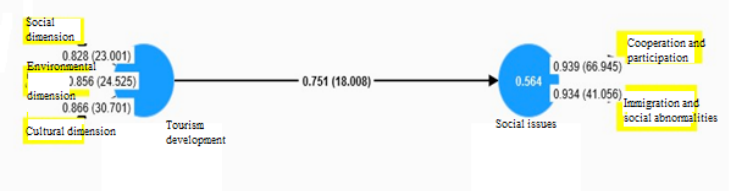

Figure 5. Path coefficients of the research model

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Cooperation and participation, immigration and social abnormalities, Social Issues, Development of tourism, Social dimension, Environmental dimension, Cultural dimension

The above figure shows the output of the algorithm's PLS command. This command is used to extract external load coefficients and path coefficients. As the figure shows, the research items have an external load above 0.3, and we do not need to remove them.

The second criterion for generally assessing reliability is internal consistency. A traditional measure of internal consistency is Cronbach's alpha, which provides an estimate of reliability based on the internal correlation of observed representative variables. Cronbach's alpha assumes that all predictors are equally stable (all predictors have equal loadings on the construct). However, PLS-SEM prioritizes references according to their reliability. Cronbach's alpha is sensitive to the number of items per index and tends generally to underestimate internal consistency reliability. The value of this index should be above 0.7. The following table shows the value of this index for research constructs.

Reliability is a composite variable between zero and one, where a higher value indicates a higher level of reliability. It is generally interpreted in the same way as Cronbach's alpha. Specifically, composite reliability values of 0.6 to 0.7 are acceptable in an exploratory study.

Table 4. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the research constructs

Components	Cronbach's alpha
Social Issues	0.859
Development of rural tourism	0.810

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Table 5. Acceptable value of composite reliability (CR)

Field of study	Accepted value
Exploratory studies	0.6 to 0.7
In scientific research, advanced stages	0.7 to 0.9
Undesirable values	Above 0.95

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Table 6. The composite reliability coefficient of the research constructs

Components	Composite reliability
Social Issues	0.934
Development of rural tourism	0.887

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A common measure for establishing convergent validity at the construct level is the average variance extracted (AVE). This criterion is defined as the average value of the total power of the second power of each construct (sum of multiple powers divided by the number of powers). Therefore, the average variance extracted (AVE) is equal to the contribution of a construct. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0.5 or higher shows that, on average, the construct describes more than half of the variance of the determiners. Conversely, the value of average variance extracted (AVE) less than 0.5 indicates that, on average, more error than the variance described by the constructs remains in the items. The average variance extracted (AVE) of each reflective construct should be evaluated. As for reflective measurement models, the relationships between the latent reflective variables and the corresponding representations must be estimated (external loadings).

The criterion value for this index, as mentioned, is above 0.5. As the above tables show, the acceptable value for acceptance of the fitting of the measurement model is above 0.7 according to Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The results show that this value is higher than the acceptable value for all structures. The composite reliability value should be above 0.7, and this value is always slightly higher than Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The value of this statistic is also within its acceptable range. Finally, we have the extracted average variance index, which is above 0.5.

5. Discussion

The results show that the development of rural tourism in rural areas is an essential element for saving villages from poverty, migration, and social and economic problems and an important step in the direction of sustainable rural development.

Recommendations

- Development of local tourism businesses and prevention of capital leakage outside the village;

- Expansion of tourism culture through the development of scientific tourism centers;

- Launching cheap tourism tours by private agencies in cooperation with the Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization of the province;

- Paying special attention to the dimension of entrepreneurship in the region to develop tourist attractions;

- Formation of small local associations can help the interaction between the host and guest communities for the sustainability of village tourism, strengthen the strengths, and reduce the conflict and negative effects between the three parties involved in Tourism: the local community, the host community, and the natural environment;

Table 7. Value of average variance extracted (AVE) of the research constructs

Components	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Social Issues	0.877
Development of rural tourism	0.723

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- Feasibility and definition of new tourism capabilities in the place for investment and participation of the private sector. A village with reasonable prices has an important role in expanding group tours to visit incentive points for travel and encouraging domestic tourists.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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