

Research Paper: Participatory Rural Development Planning: Insights from Shahdad District

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper presents the lessons learned from applying participatory planning approaches in the preparation of village-level development plans for the Carbon Sequestration Project pilot areas in 33 pilot villages in the Shahdad district of Kerman.

Methods: Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques were employed to map local resources and priorities.

Results: The findings from the participatory process were validated by analysing existing development documents at both local and regional levels.

Conclusion: The results reveal that the priority programs and projects identified through participatory assessment techniques were, in some cases, not fully aligned with the programs of neighbouring villages or the regional development orientation. Our findings suggest that aligning the outcomes of the participatory assessment process with district-level documents can be a practical solution for integrated participatory-level planning (VLP) development.

1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the systemic approach to “development” has gained prominence, emphasising the long-term and interdependent impacts of the economy, society, and environment. This perspective, known as “sustainable development,” seeks to

balance development with environmental preservation and focuses on four aspects of sustainability: natural resource and environmental sustainability, social sustainability, economic sustainability, and institutional-managerial sustainability. The fundamental goal of sustainable development is to enhance the material and spiritual assets of human communities through capacity building and empowerment. Therefore, understanding the conditions and needs of human communities in both

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material and spiritual dimensions is considered a crucial step towards progress.

Within the context of national development, the comprehensive principles of spatial equality and the “right to development” for individuals and places (cities and villages) must be considered in the development management process (policy-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation). Several studies (such as [United Nations, 2013](#); [Afrouz et al., 2017](#)) highlighted that the right to development for local communities (rural areas) has often been neglected relative to their share, position, and function in the spatial economy of the territory, leading to significant instability in their natural, social, human, activity, and infrastructural assets.

Most studies on rural communities’ well-being and development level (e.g. [Anderson, 2001](#); [Azizpour et al., 2012](#); [Seydaie et al., 2016](#)) reveal that rural settlements face numerous challenges in the areas of environment and natural resources, economy, society, and community management. Some of these alarming challenges covered in development literature include:

Conversion of agricultural lands to residential, industrial, and service uses ([Morid & Lotfian, 2011](#)),

Degradation of forest and rangeland areas ([Asadi et al., 2022](#)),

Reduction of groundwater levels in the country’s plains ([Esfandyar et al., 2022](#)),

Severe soil erosion and increased pollution ([Esfandyari & Heydari, 2013](#)),

Aging of the rural populations ([Taghdisi & Ahmadi, 2012](#); [Mirlotfi & Pour Ebrahimi, 2016](#); [Sabzalian et al., 2020](#)),

Food insecurity among rural households ([Akbari et al., 2020](#); [Savari & Nousha, 2022](#)),

Decline in social capital, particularly social cohesion and trust ([Kiani & Shokrollahi, 2019](#)),

Weakening attachment to the village and its cultural assets,

Diminishing traditional agricultural production systems ([Mousavi & Mohamadzade, 2019](#)),

Lack of suitable job opportunities for youth ([Harandi & Fallah Mohsenkhani, 2017](#)),

Decreased purchasing power of villagers to meet their needs ([Rezaie et al., 2023](#)),

Increased market margins and reduced farmers’ (villagers’) share of the final product price; high economic investment risks ([Najafi, 2007](#)), and Inadequate access to infrastructure services aligned with the activity system ([Dolati et al., 2021](#); [Pourtaheri et al., 2011](#)).

The Shahdad district in Kerman Province, situated within the Lut Desert region, has lagged behind in development over the past decades and requires focused attention ([Natural Resources and Watershed Management of Kerman Province, 2014](#)). The primary objective of the Shahdad Villages Development Plans is to systematize practical participatory development initiatives within the villages. This project involves conducting a participatory assessment of resources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the village’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats; defining the village’s development vision based on the current evaluation of local resources and assets; developing the village’s development goals, strategies, and policies; and proposing programs, plans, and actionable projects for the village.

2. Literature Review

Improving the living conditions in rural settlements requires a comprehensive understanding of development and planning paradigms. Approaches to community development can be categorized into traditional and modern (alternative) approaches. Planning approaches have evolved from centralized and technical planning to local and participatory planning over the last decades ([Ejlali et al., 2011](#)).

Traditional development theories and approaches include Modernization, Community Development, the Green Revolution, Basic Needs Provision, and Structural Adjustment Programs.

In the 1990s, the concept of development was revisited due to issues like poverty, inequality, unemployment, and severe environmental degradation. This led to the emergence of the sustainable development approach, which focuses on rational resource use and meeting current needs without compromising future generations’ abilities to meet their own needs. Sustainable Development aims to integrate conservation and development, meet basic human needs, achieve social justice, promote autonomy and cultural diversity, and maintain ecological integrity ([Papoli et al., 2010](#)).

Under the alternative approach, theories such as Decentralized Decision-making, Good Governance, Social Protection, Human Rights-based Approaches, Empowerment, and Capacity Development have gained attention. The Sustainable Livelihood Approach, inspired by sustainable development, emerged in the late 1980s as a comprehensive approach to rural development aimed at reducing and eradicating rural poverty (Carney, 1998; Dearden et al., 2002).

Among these approaches, the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) was chosen as the foundational approach for developing the rural areas of the Shahdad district. This approach is particularly suitable and effective for local communities living in natural resource areas. The international carbon sequestration project also requires local action and community empowerment to achieve its global goals, making sustainable livelihoods essential.

The sustainable livelihood approach, recognized as a modern local development planning approach since the 1980s (Chambers & Conway, 1992), has been widely endorsed and utilised by international organizations since the 1990s. A sustainable livelihood not only provides food, shelter, and other necessities but also preserves resources and opportunities for future generations while withstanding various shocks and pressures. This approach prioritizes people over resources and institutions, adopts a comprehensive perspective considering all stakeholders, acknowledges a dynamic system, leverages existing strengths, connects macro and micro levels, and ensures sustainability (Salvestrin, 2006).

The most well-known conceptual framework for the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) was developed by the Department for International Development (DFID) in 1999 (Shen, 2009). As shown in Figure 1, the SLF includes five components: assets (natural, physical, social, human, and financial capital), Transforming structures and Processes, Vulnerability context including stress and shocks, and Livelihood strategies and Outcomes (Jomapour & Ahmadi, 2011).

Based on the review of development planning approaches, the following procedural principles are applied for planning and preparing VLPs:

- **Spatiality:** Refers to a system of connections (flows, similarities, proximity, and territory) based on the role of settlements, emphasising that space (or territory) is an integrated whole.
- **Integration:** It involves participatory, multidisciplinary, and intersectoral processes, encompassing various planning domains and diverse goals, concepts, and tools.
- **Stakeholder Participation** is essential for achieving (sustainable) development at the local level. It requires the involvement of the entire local community in decision-making processes.
- **Inclusiveness:** Involves a wide range of actors and stakeholders in the planning process.
- **Action-oriented:** It emphasises the implementation of plans, policies, and strategies, with feasibility being a crucial principle for program execution.

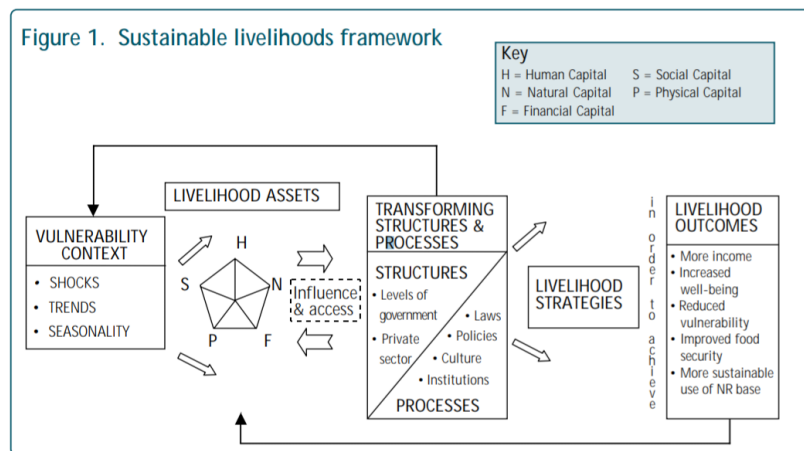


Figure 1. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework, developed by DIFD 1999 (noted in Shen 2009)

3. Methodology

The Shahdad district in Kerman was the study area for this research. According to the statistics provided by the Iranian Statistical Center (2016), the Shahdad district in Kerman province has a population of 14,572, of which 64.2% are rural (49 inhabited villages) and 35.8% are urban (one urban settlement) (Figure 2).

Shahdad has a rich historical background and is one of the earliest settlements and civilizations in ancient Iran, with approximately 6000 years of history. This district, which is the largest in Iran's political-administrative divisions (29,452 square kilometres) and more than two and a half times the size of Qatar, has unique and rare features. These include:

The hottest point on earth with temperatures over seventy degrees Celsius.

The centre of the ancient state of Aratta with unique historical artefacts.

The largest Nebkas in the world with heights over 15 meters.

The largest Yardangs (Kaluts) globally, showcasing exceptional geological formation.

All these natural and historical heritages are located within the Lut Desert, a vast area that is also a UNESCO World Heritage site ([wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerman Province](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerman_Province)).

Developing a community or village development plan at the local level requires adopting qualitative and participatory approaches to identify the capacities and pri-

orities of local residents. Furthermore, it is necessary to coordinate the development intervention priorities resulting from individual villages to harmonize their impacts and enhance their synergies at the regional level. In doing so, this study employed a combination of library and documentary methods, as well as field studies using Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques. Consequently, the epistemological approach governing this research is pragmatism (a combination of subjectivism and objectivism), and its methodology is mixed (qualitative-quantitative).

Two groups were the main participants in the planning process: villagers and experts from local state organizations (researchers, managers, and specialized executive experts). The statistical population of this research includes all 33 pilot villages of the Shahdad Carbon Sequestration Project. Additional statistical data and information were obtained by referring to statistical sources and reports from local and regional organisations.

To prepare and develop the VLPs, a comprehensive understanding of ecological, social, economic, spatial-physical, institutional structures, and cultural characteristics was achieved through a participatory approach. The needs of rural communities were identified and prioritized, and based on the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), policies and strategies to reduce and control the problems facing rural development were formulated. Based on the future vision of the villages, priority programs and projects, especially in the fields of economic and sustainable livelihoods, were formulated.

Practically, this research was designed in five key sections:

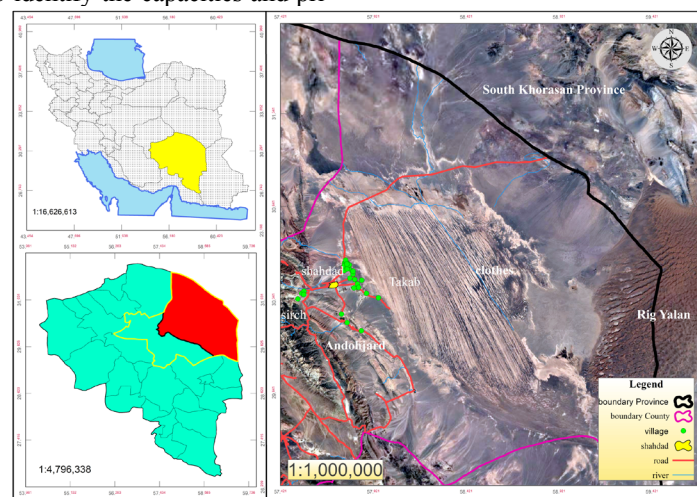


Figure 2. Location of Shahdad district in Kerman province and the country (Source: Iranian Statistical Center & JSRD Google Earth)

In the first stage, global experiences related to the subject and some successful global examples were studied and reviewed.

In the second stage, studies and reports of various projects in the study area (Shahdad district and pilot villages) were examined and summarized; part of these studies was conducted within the framework of this project using a qualitative approach and participatory assessment techniques. Based on the review of information and existing reports from the area and considering the data needed to develop the village development plans, a set of participatory assessment techniques, including participatory transect walks, direct observation, interviews with councils and rural elites, participatory resource mapping; brainstorming; problem tree analysis; pairwise ranking matrix of issues; SWOT analysis, were implemented in every village. Additionally, livelihood resource analysis and cost-benefit analysis of major livelihood activities in the area were conducted through questionnaires and interviews with identified leading individuals and local community experts.

The third stage focused on understanding the natural and human environment of the villages (explaining the current situation of the villages) within the proposed conceptual framework (sustainable livelihood approach), encompassing three main components of local communities: assets, vulnerable components, and structures and processes. Studies in this section included the status and structures of the natural, cultural-social, economic, and physical-spatial environment, institutional structures, and development indicators. The main basis of the analyses in this section was existing studies and reports, official statistics and documents, field visits, and participatory assessments. It is also noted that given some previous studies conducted in the Shahdad area and Kerman province, understanding the vulnerable context was achieved through studying previous reports, including village master plans and the Shahdad sustainable development plan. Furthermore, rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal aimed at engaging stakeholders provided a more precise understanding of the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of each vil-

lage, as well as their capital capacities. The preparation of local community development plans and the future vision of the villages is highly influenced by their livelihood capacities and the engagement of these communities; therefore, a comprehensive study of each village with a participatory assessment approach was a key part of the proposed study framework. This was achieved by holding participatory workshops (using participatory assessment techniques) with local rural communities (e.g. Figure 3) and brainstorming workshops with experts from local organizations. The fifth stage of this study, according to the proposed practical framework, is dedicated to “developing the village development plans,” in which, using the strategic planning approach (SWOT) and integrating the findings of the previous sections, the village development plan was formulated and presented in the form of vision, goals, strategies, policies, and executive programs and projects.

4. Findings

1) Rural Needs and Priorities:

As previously mentioned, the identification of developmental needs and priorities for the villages was derived from the integration of findings from participatory assessment workshops and the results of reviewing higher-level plans and previous studies. Based on this process, the developmental issues and priorities of the Shahdad villages can be categorised into four groups: 1. Agricultural production and livelihood needs; 2. Infrastructure and service needs; 3. Needs related to natural resources and the environment; and 4. Social and cultural issues and needs.

2) Development Vision of the Pilot Villages:

A vision is an ideal image of the future that, through comprehensiveness, attractiveness, integration, clarity, and realism, facilitate the proper and logical structuring of development. The anticipated position and functions of the area, as outlined in higher-level documents, particularly the Kerman Province Spatial Planning Document, were considered to formulate the development



Figure 3. Participatory mapping of the village resources in community workshops

vision for the villages. Alongside this document, the priorities, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified from participatory planning workshops were considered when formulating the development vision for the villages.

3) Strategic Goals of the VLP

To set strategic goals for the villages, insights gained from reviewing higher-level development documents and the results of participatory workshops with the local community and relevant governmental organizations were utilized. The following goals were developed:

- Conservation, sustainable utilization, and development of natural resources and the environment;
- Creation of new livelihood opportunities and environmentally compatible jobs, while increasing productivity in the production of goods and services;
- Enhancing the livability of rural settlements.

A key aspect of designing strategic goals is emphasizing the central role of natural resources and the environment as the foundation for village development. Achieving other strategic goals of the village development program will be possible through the conservation, sustainable utilization, and development of natural resources and the environment (as a strategic goal), which includes strategies to improve the rural economy and enhance the livability of rural settlements (Figure 4).

4) Development Strategies and Policies:

This study aims to develop and present participatory strategies for rural development that effectively achieve the fundamental objectives and future vision of rural development. To this end, we analyzed the village’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) within the SWOT framework. The strategies derived from this process are categorized into four groups.

1. Strength-Opportunity Strategies (SO): These strategies were formulated and selected based on external opportunities and internal strengths. The primary goal of these strategies is to utilize opportunities to enhance internal strengths optimally. The three strategies in this group are:

- Development of inter-sectoral linkages based on the advantages of the agriculture and tourism sectors;
- Development of sustainable tourism in the village and the surrounding desert area;
- Development of participatory management of natural resources and the environment.

2. Weakness-Opportunity Strategies (WO): These strategies were developed based on external opportunities and internal weaknesses. The main objective of this category of strategies is to exploit opportunities to compensate for internal weaknesses. The optimization of the management and utilization of water and soil resources is the main strategy in this category.

3. Strength-Threat Strategies (ST): These strategies were devised considering external threats and internal strengths. Diversifying Local community livelihood is the main strategy in this group. These strategies aim to mitigate the adverse effects of external threats by appropriately leveraging internal strengths (also referred to as strategies for converting threats into opportunities).

4. Weakness-Threat Strategies (WT): These strategies were formulated based on external threats and internal weaknesses. The primary goal of this category of strategies is to reduce internal weaknesses and protect against the adverse effects of environmental threats. These strategies are defensive in nature, with enhancing resilience and maintaining rural sustainability being the main strategies in this group.

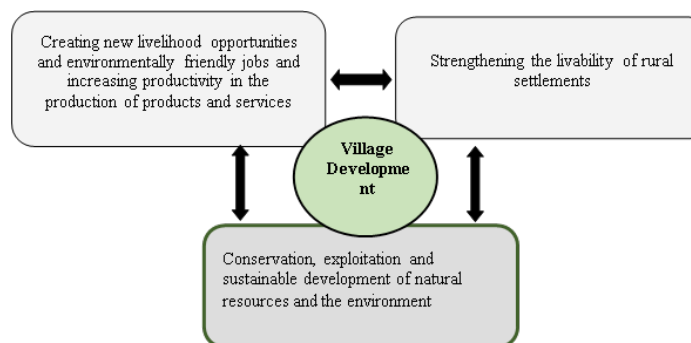


Figure 4. The relationship between the development goals of Shahdad villages

5) Assessment and Categorization of Key Strategies:

Table 1 lists the six initial strategies derived from the analysis of the SWOT analysis. As the data in the table shows, the extracted strategies are categorized into three groups: business and livelihood development, natural resources and environment, and infrastructure and settlement sustainability.

6) Village Level Development Policies:

Determining strategies paves the way for adopting rural development policies. These policies are designed and formulated based on the region’s overall structural and functional characteristics and strategies. Table 2 details these policies, broken down by strategy.

7) Development Programs and Project:

In the Shahdad rural development plan, the development programs are the product of a strategic planning process formulated through a participatory process. In other words, strategic planning, based on the overall development orientations of the Shahdad region and Kerman province, begins with the determination of fundamental development goals. Then, in line with these goals, as well as the situation and priorities identified in participatory workshops, a vision for rural development in the region is defined. Subsequently, rural development strategies and policies are determined, and finally, development programs and projects are formulated to ensure the realization of the envisioned vision. Furthermore, the participatory needs assessment process at community workshops results in the formulation and prioritization of development programs and projects in each village.

Table 1. Categorizing strategies in three strategic areas

| Strategic Area | Strategies |
|--|---|
| Business and livelihood development | Developing inter-sectoral links based on the advantages of the agricultural and tourism sectors |
| | Development of sustainable tourism in the village and the surrounding desert area |
| | Diversification of local community livelihood resources |
| Natural resources and environment | Optimization of the management and utilization of water and soil resources |
| | Development of participatory management of natural resources and the environment |
| Infrastructure and settlement sustainability | Enhancing resilience and sustaining the village settlement |



Table 2. Development policies in connection with the overall goal and strategies of VLP

| Overall Goal | Strategies | Policies |
|---|---|---|
| Creating new livelihood opportunities and environmentally compatible jobs, and increasing productivity in the production of goods and services. | Developing inter-sectoral links based on the advantages of the agricultural and tourism sectors | Creating and developing value chains for key agricultural and tourism products and services Reforming the marketing system for rural products and services |
| | Developing sustainable tourism in desert areas | Protecting and developing the natural, historical, and cultural heritage of the village and region Creating social-political settings to attract national and international tourists |
| | Diversifying the livelihood resources of the local community | Identifying, creating, and developing small and home-based rural jobs related to agricultural and tourism activities Developing activities based on the use of renewable energy Directing economic and financial support and facilities |
| Protecting, utilizing, and sustainably developing natural resources and the environment | Optimizing the management and utilization of water and soil resources | Protecting and restoring degraded natural resource areas Optimizing the utilization of groundwater resources Managing floods and surface runoff |
| | Developing participatory management of natural resources and the environment | Developing institutional-organizational capacities of the local community Empowering the local community |
| Enhancing the livability of rural settlements | Improving the resilience and sustainability of rural settlements | Combating and controlling environmental hazards |
| | | Developing rural infrastructure and services |



As outlined in this clear conceptual framework, sustainable development of rural areas in the long term requires comprehensive and integrated planning and implementation of development programs. However, identifying priority projects highlights the necessity of mobilizing resources and capacities for immediate action on the projects that either support and underpin production relating to the livelihoods of the villagers or enhance the livability of the village and the resilience of the local community against environmental hazards. Accordingly, the implementation of the planned projects is proposed in three time frames: short-term (3 years), medium-term (5 years), and long-term (10 years). It should be noted that the implementation of many of these projects, in addition to the cooperation and collaboration of local organizations, requires empowerment and skill enhancement of the local community. Finally, the estimated costs for each project are calculated based on the list of goods and services prices issued by the [National Planning and Budget Organization \(2022\)](#). In some cases, regional considerations and the specific prices of the Shahdad area have also been taken into account.

5. Discussion

To prepare and draft the Village Level Plans (VLP) for the pilot villages of the Shahdad Carbon Sequestration Project, a comprehensive understanding of the ecological, social, economic, spatial-physical, institutional structures, and cultural characteristics was required. To achieve this, participatory workshops were conducted to identify and prioritize the needs and priorities of rural communities. The findings from the participatory process were validated by analyzing existing development documents at both local and regional levels. Using strategic planning approaches and SWOT analysis, the vision, strategies, policies, and plans for the development of pilot villages were formulated. Subsequently, priority programs and projects, especially in the areas of business and sustainable livelihoods, were elaborated.

In summary, the methodological lessons learned from the experience of preparing village-level development plans in the Shahdad Carbon Sequestration pilot villages can be summarized in the following points:

1. Preparing local-level development plans requires adopting qualitative and participatory approaches to identify the capacities and strategies of local residents. Therefore, it is necessary to use a combination of library and documentary methods, as well as field studies based on rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal techniques. The epistemological approach of pragma-

tism (combining subjectivism and objectivism) and a mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative) can be considered. Of course, different methodologies can also be designed, taking into account different strategies in rural development, such as integrated rural development and sustainable rural development.

2. To draft rural development plans, it is necessary to study and analyze the environmental and natural resources, population, economic and livelihood status, and social and managerial structures of the villages. Given the variability of these factors in each village, the document should be prepared separately for each village with a participatory approach. However, the development plan for each village and its realization depends on the characteristics and conditions of the entire geographical area. Therefore, in preparing the document for each village, besides analyzing each village's specific needs and priorities, the capabilities, limitations, opportunities, and threats of the entire area must also be considered.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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