

**An analysis of the effects of religious tourism on economic
development in rural settlements
Case study: hinterland of Mashhad County**

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Religious tourism with all of its components and varieties, due to its prominent structural and functional properties has found an outstanding place in the global tourism, so that its influence field, according to the World Travel and Tourism Organization, comprises 26% of the world tourism currents. Khorasan Razavi province, thanks to the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (AS) is the most important religious tourist attraction of Iran that hosts a large number of national and international tourists. Currently, there are 403 holy shrines in the province, 47 of which equivalent to 11.7% of them are located among urban settlements and 356 holy shrines, equivalent to 88.3% of them are located in rural areas of the province. Studies have shown that due to the constraints of the agricultural sector, the service sector (especially tourism) among different economic sectors is a viable option to enable the rural economy and support the agricultural sector and industry, as tourism is an activity that can create job opportunities for many people inducing the people with a variety of different skills and knowledge in various age groups. In addition to direct job opportunities, tourism activates other economic sectors such as transport, food, fuel, energy, crafts, construction, etc. Although tourism is not the solution to all problems of rural areas, it can have significant economic effects, and it can make ground for enabling the local people, human resource development, economic diversification and growth, and create more job opportunities, resolve the issue of unemployment, and reduce the rural migration (especially among the youth). With regard to above points, this study seeks to answer this question: To what extent does religious tourism have an impact on the development of the rural economy?

Today, a major part of tourism literature focuses on economic outcomes and positive role of tourism in creating jobs and new opportunities. The jobs related to this industry are not very lucrative; however, they have many benefits for villagers. The sale of agricultural products, creation of equal opportunities in employment, formation and distribution of balanced public funds in rural communities and improved rural projects are also the other positive effects of tourism. Generally, in recent years tourism as a very effective economic factor has been the focus of attention and its development can increase economic activities and create a variety of jobs in rural areas, most of which are in service sector of the economy. Increased production and sale of handicrafts, development of hotel and transport services, opening new markets, etc., create new jobs which consequently, reduce unemployment and migration from rural area to urban ones, and the surplus labor from agriculture and livestock raising goes to the service sector, even the migration process is likely to be reversed due to the boom in these areas. Tourism development makes people turn to productive activities, it also brings about economic growth and poverty reduction which result in the expansion of social services and investment growth in those regions. Thanks to its characteristics and economic effects, the tourism industry can effectively play a major role in development of different economic sectors of local communities in rural areas, which would eventually result in economic dynamism in rural areas. In this study, tourism has been introduced as an instrument for sustainable development with emphasis on the economic dimension

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because these attitudes and approaches are adopted with regard to important goals such as satisfaction of tourists, benefit for the owners, protection of the resources and the integration of society in tourism planning.

Methodology

The study is an applied one conducted in descriptive-analytical method. In this study, religious tourism (independent variable) was studied with 11 components, and the rural economy (dependent variable) was examined with variables of employment including 10 components and 16 indices, and "income" with 21 components and 32 indices. In this study, the 'village' has been the unit of analysis. The data extracted from the questionnaires were analyzed using the methods of statistical data analysis in SPSS Software Package. To determine the influence field of the metropolises, two models were used: "maximum influence field of tourism in metropolises" and "Rupert model" and based on these models, the influence field of tourism in Mashhad County was 59 Kilometers. Ten villages having holy shrines were randomly selected from this influence field. According to Cochran formula, the number of tourists were 196. Test reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient which was 0.85 and confirms its good reliability.

Research Findings

The study results show that there is a direct and significantly strong correlation between development of religious tourism and economic boom in employment and income increase. As development of religious tourism results in economic boom in rural economy, job creation, and generating more income. We used simple linear regression to examine the 'effects of religious tourism on economic boom in job creation and income generation'.

The adjusted determination coefficient in analyzing the effects of religious tourism on economy, employment, and rural income respectively were: 0.77, 0.68, 0.79 which show the essential role of 'religious tourism' in explaining the variance of dependent variable of 'economy, employment, and rural income'. As the statistic F of the independent variable is able to well explain the changes of the dependent variable of the rural economy in employment, and rural income; the statistical hypothesis about the impact of religious tourism on the rural economy in both employment and rural income are confirmed. Furthermore, the regression equation with the standard Beta coefficient is as follows:

$$Y (\text{Rural economy}) = (1.29) + (0.892) (\text{Religious tourism})$$

$$Y (\text{Rural employment}) = (1.204) + (0.846) (\text{Religious tourism})$$

$$Y (\text{Revenue}) = (1.37) + (0.902) (\text{Religious tourism})$$

Conclusion

Findings show that villages having better conditions in terms of religious tourism, enjoy a better situation than other similar villages. According to the results of regression test, religious tourism has significant effects on boom in rural economy in employment and income.

Participation of all stakeholders including the local people, tourists, local authorities at all stages of decision-making and policy-making to manage the effects of tourism on regional economic development, to get Dehyaris and rural councils involved in this field could be effective; advertisement and marketing programs also play an essential role in well publicizing an area as a tourist destination for the tourists, in a way that there is a direct relationship between the qualitative and quantitative development of advertising coverage and the sales of major and minor components of tourism products.

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