

## The Effect of Social Capital and Sustainable Development of Rural Tourism: A Case Study of Lavij Village in Iran

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**Abstract:** One of the most favourable development options in society's programs and policies is tourism development. The most important part of sustainable tourism development is promoting community participation on reliability, norms through members in it: social capital on human resource. In this regard, social capital is one of the most important variables that support community participation in many activities. The study was surveyed and analysed the utility of social capital in a village. Targeted region is Lavij village, Mozandaran province in Iran. The paper applies the focus to the region which has been one of famous tourist spot in the country although significant delay of regional development. The research method in this study was quantitative, and verified the process of regional development based on mutual relationship between social capital by residents and rural tourism. It is found that sufficient network, reliability in the target community based on residents' independent has constituted in this region. It was recognized that residents have strong mutual relationship which is essential element of social capital, even though it has not been influenced on active rural tourism industry. This paper can be classified into case study and its' definition will not be applied to any cases, especially on causal relation on economic activities, thus, it will be contributed to illustrate the state of cultural community with mutual relationship which has been continued since former generation.

**Keywords:** Social Capital, Tourism Industry, Lavij Village.

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### Introduction

One of the most favorable development options in a society's programs and policies is tourism development. Because its potential economic benefits directly and indirectly contribute to the cultural, biological and economic improvement of society (Moscardo, Murphy, McGhee, & Schurmann, 2017); Sustainable tourism development can also be seen as a motivation economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability (UNWTO: World Tourism Organization, 2013). The tourism economy is considered one of the fastest growing industries in the world, a tool for generating national income, one of the world's main economic pillars, and is one of the concepts, forms and pillars of sustainable development (Chaiyakot & Visuthismajarn, 2012). Rural tourism is recognized as one of the first industries that can contribute to the economic diversification of local communities (Babakhanzadeh, 2013). With the decline of traditional rural industries such as agriculture, mining, forestry over the past three decades, many rural communities needed alternative forms to strengthen their economic foundations (Reeder & Brown, 2005); therefore rural communities seek to find industries to boost and diversify their economies. Rural tourism is recognized as one of the first industries that can contribute to the economic diversification of local communities.

Moreover at the same time, tourism development has always been associated with harm to the environment. These destructions can lead to the loss of resources and conflict of interest between different stakeholders (Davies & Morris, 2004). In the context of development, social capital generally

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consists of three characteristics: Trust, interactions and cooperation. When these three elements are strong in societies, community residence are more likely to be able to use economic opportunities, community building, capacity building (Singh, 2015). Also, a significant portion of the literature on tourism social development suggests that stakeholder engagement and community-based planning should be included in the early stages of tourism development. Robson, J. and Robson, I. (1996) stated that when community residents participate in the planning process, tourism development is appropriately accepted by the local community.

All studies show that social capital influences tourism development. Research by Choi and Sirakaya (2006) show that the good work done and the co-operation of residents in society are the first essential components of sustainable development; And over the years of experience has shown that without the cooperation, support and participation of the local community, a sustainable tourism industry cannot be created (Choo & Jamal, 2009). Macbeth, Carson, and Northcote (2004) stated that tourism development requires a certain level of social, political, and cultural capital to be a successful tool for rural development and to sustain rural communities.

Previous research in this area also shows that good performance and the co-operation of residents in the host community are among the first essential components of sustainable development; Experience has shown over time that a sustainable tourism industry cannot be created without the cooperation, support and involvement of the local community (Choo & Jamal, 2009). The most important part of sustainable tourism development is the promotion of social participation through community members. In this regard, social capital is one of the most important variables that support community participation in many activities. Social capital is capable of improving cooperation between community members and coordinating the development of community-based tourism (Rachmawati, 2014). When community residents participate in the planning process, tourism development is appropriately accepted by the local community. Various studies have shown that social capital influences tourism development. For example, Kim (2009) stated that most forms of social capital affect residents' attitudes and their level of support for sustainable tourism development. In the discussion of social capital, societies in which social capital have an essential role, are better developed and sustainable in tourism than other societies. Because social capital is the kind of capital that is formed in relation to others and tourism is a service industry and their people and relationships are the main actors.

Accordingly, social capital improves human relationships / people's adherence to social norms by creating mutual trust and engaging people in human networks, thereby attracting more tourists and achieving sustainable tourism.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Today, the sustainability paradigm has become a global concern in the tourism industry in general, and in the context of tourism development, the concept of sustainability has become a major focus of scientific and worldwide academic debate. Evidence suggests that tourism development has shifted from sustainable economy development to sustainable social development (Shelkhi, 2015). The Sustainable Tourism Approach examines tourism across borders and establishes a triangular relationship between the host community and the guest community with the tourism industry and intends to mitigate the pressures and crises between the sides of the triangle and to maintain a long-term balance (Rokneddin, Fftekhari, AbdolReza, and Qaderi, 2002), and other factors that play an important role in this regard. The amount of social capital available among the people is nowadays exploited alongside human, financial and economic capital. This concept refers to links and communications between members of a network as a valuable resource; by creating norms and mutual trust, the goals of the members are fulfilled. Nowadays, social capital matters more than economic, physical and human capital is needed for development. In a society, that lacks sufficient social capital, other capital is lost. Therefore, the issue of social capital is considered as a central principle for achieving development (Alvani, Taghavi, and Ali, 2002).

Sustainable tourism has different environmental, social, cultural and economic dimensions and based on Sustainable Development Dimensions Model without a healthy environment, social and economic health cannot be sustainable and without a healthy economy, there would be no resources and capacities for protection, promotion, restoration, environmental remediation and social development.

The full realization of sustainable tourism development depends on the sustainable development of tourism at the destination level being applied in all aspects of operations and principles. As a result, the welfare of the natural and human system is guaranteed and ensures the sustainable and integrated economic, environmental and social development of sustainable tourism. In this context, Babakhanzadeh (2013) stated that if people and their culture are commodities for tourism. In that case, they must be reasonably maintained; therefore sustainable development can be divided into three dimensions: Environmental dimensions (natural and built), economic aspects (local community and business) and social dimensions (host and visitor) (Razvani, 2008). Park and Yoon (2009) results showed that fruits, vegetables, and rice farmers who also served agricultural tourists had higher social capital.

Finally, they showed that some forms of government policy-making can increase social capital and control and manage conflicts between community residents; these policies include increasing the participation of residents in the tourism sector. Zao and Echtner (2011) study the concept of social capital to gain an understanding of the concept of tourism business development in Guangxi China, and showed that although these effects vary with the type of social capital, structural social capital has a significant positive impact on individuals' ability to create entrepreneurship as well as on the likelihood that individuals will create a tourism business. Social capital relates more to entrepreneurial ability, but does not examine its impact on the likelihood of launching a tourism business. Cognitive social capital has a marginal effect in both cases. Sawatsky (2008) states that nature-based tourism can provide an opportunity for economic development and act as an incentive to protect coastal biodiversity, which depends on the ability of the local community to successfully manage these areas.

Navabakhsh and Fadavi (2008) state that district social capital has a positive relationship with the development of Tehran's 5 district and the more developed region has a greater degree of public trust, awareness, formal partnership, and informal cooperative partnership. And significantly less religious participation, and institutional trust and informal charity participation were the same across the region, with no significant difference. By combining the three key concepts of ethnic culture, cultural capital and tourism, Karroubi (2007) discusses the main premise of the paper, namely the importance of ethnic culture as part of the cultural capital of any society and emphasizes the added value and rising coefficient of income and employment in tourism discourse reflects socio-cultural factors and economic variables. And says tourism as one of the country's most important sources of revenue has been neglected.

### **Features of Tourism in Iran**

- Kheiri & Nasihatkon (2016) pointed out the unique geographical position of Iran, the nation has a diverse climate where can be swam in southern coast and can be skied in the highlands of north and west at the same time. Archeological heritage tourism has significant impact on rising number of tourists, furthermore, a report in 2018 indicated the tourism type of Iran has been expanding : natural heritage; natural activity; theme park on suburban facility; carabanserai; urban resort with hot spring (JICA: Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2018).
- MCTH: Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts (2020) Iran has emphasized the potential elements which attract the tourists not only in domestic but also from neighbouring countries such as Azerbaijan, Iraq and Persian Gulf States on medical tourism filed due to the fluctuation of Iranian currency that leads to lower prices, as well as the development in medical research and technology

On the other hand, improper position of Iran's in international tourism has many reasons: 8-year Iran-Iraq war from 1980, unfavorable destination image, international sanctions and ongoing tension with Western powers (Ghaderi, & Henderson, 2012). Weak advertising, unable

regional conditions, and absence of efficient planning schemes in the tourism sector have all hindered the growth of tourism (Kheiri, Zeinabad, & Tabatabaie, 2016).

- 49 percent of Iranian tourists, efficiency require to stay in their friends' houses and kin's house (Pearce, & Moscardo, 2006). Those family trip are often undertaken with personal vehicles rather than public transport (ACECR, 2017). The family is the basic socio-cultural unit in Islamic society even in the field of tourism, thus 'non-Islamic behavior' by young excursionists in recent years (Valentine, Rice, and Nash, 2013). Namely, tourism industry in Iran hides the possibility of remarkable growth on abundant nature, heritage as well as new field of technology.

### The state of tourism in Lavij village

Lavij rural district is located in Mazandaran Province. This rural includes 16 villages, 12 inhabited and three uninhabited. Its population is around 3500 (Moosa Dokht, 2013). The village has a total area of 95 square kilometers which 80 percent of this area covered by forest.

The main occupation of the village residents is agriculture, handicrafts and animal husbandry. Among Lavij's physical and cultural attractions rivers, waterfalls, hot and cold spring, forest area and chalets, castles, shrines can be noted ( Kheiri, and Nasihatkon, 2016)



Figure (1): Targeted region: Lavij village in Mazandaran province  
(Made by the authors on <http://www.researchgate.net/>)

Kheiri and Nasihatkon (2016) illustrate in their study, it is clear that there is a correlation between rural tourism development and economic structure of sustainable livelihood in Lavij. Rural tourism development presents new opportunities for growth to local people by improving the flow of money in the villages (Lane, 1994) and creates a new maker for their handmade merchandises. Thus, there is a need for a systematic and long-term planning to develop rural tourism in Lavij. As well, it is essential for local people to get involved in the planning process. So the programs become compatible with the sustainable development process (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006). On the other hand, Honari, Goudarzi, Heidari, Emani (2010) pointed out the state of Lavij's tourism progress compared with Mazandaran province that small villages like Lavij has been neglected in spite of favorable nature, hot spring and geographical locations. It has given influence on many residents to migrate to cities in recent years, as well as growth of number of nonresidential.

Based on previous research, tourism industry in lavij region has not been progressing in spite of its' favorable circumstance. This paper follows these items: verify of existence of social capital by residents in Lavij village, furthermore, related to this, state of mutual relationship between social capital and sustainable tourism development.

**Research Methodology**

*Table (1): Research Questionnaire (Made by the authors)*

Questions	Index	Questionnaire
1, 6, 13, 19	Cultural dimension	Sustainable Tourism Development
2, 4, 7	Environmental dimension	
3, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20	Economic dimension	
5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12	social dimension	
1, 5, 8, 10, 15, 17, 19	Cooperation	Social capital
2, 4, 6, 8	Network	
3, 9, 13, 20	Reliability	
11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 21	Value	

The research method was quantitative. Required information have been collected using library resources such as books, articles, journals, internet texts, scientific reports and dissertations, etc., and then extracted by the experts’ viewpoints on effective factors in sustainable tourism development related with social capital.

170 residents of Lavij village were selected by random sampling as the study’s population. 42.4 percent of the respondents were female and 57.6 percent were male: for getting more detailed information. The questionnaires were distributed to 170 households, however to show gender of main person who participate in local community clear, respondents mentioned their gender.

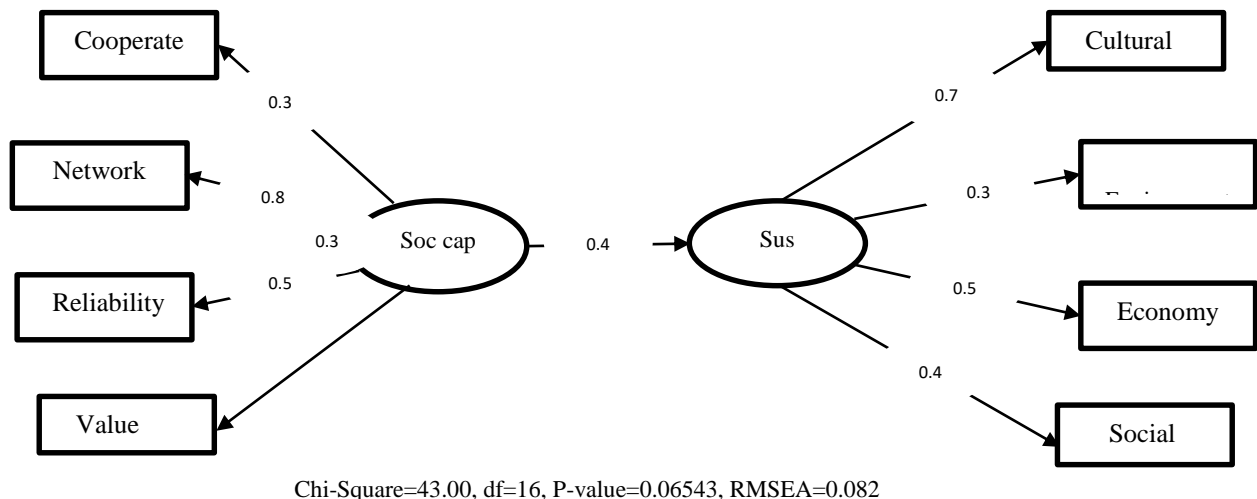
The main activities of the population were beekeeping, horticulture and handicrafts.

For data collection, a questionnaire was designed 21 questions: some of answers are duplicated. Each index was collected using a questionnaire on 5-point Likert type scale with ‘strongly disagree’ at the lowest end and ‘strongly agree’ at the highest end to assess the status of social capital and rural tourism, free descriptive answers were allowed, additionally.

In this study, SPSS Amos was used to estimate mutual relationship between social capital and sustainable tourism development.

**Research Findings**

The results showed that social capital has a significant effect on sustainable tourism variable at 99% confidence level. Social capital enhances sustainable tourism development in Lavij Village.



*Figure (2): Conceptual Model of Research (Made by the authors)*

The conceptual model of the research includes all independent and dependent variables and the relationship between social capital variables and sustainable tourism development.

The results of factor analysis of the conceptual model of research shown in Figure 2 shows that all indicators of social capital and sustainable development have acceptable t values (greater than 1.96) and factor loadings (greater than 0.5) and they are a good indicator for them. Also the P value is greater than 0.05 which confirms the model.

**Table (2): Fit indices of the research model and its results (Made by the authors)**

result	Fit Indicator	Optimal Value	Fit index
ok	0.96	Higher than 0.9	NFI
ok	0.95	Higher than 0.9	NNFI
ok	0.98	Higher than 0.9	CFI
ok	0.082	less than 0.1	RMSEA
ok	0.95	Higher than 0.9	GFI
ok	0.89	Higher than 0.8	AGFI
ok	0.019	The smaller and closer to zero	PMR
ok	0.98	Higher than 0.9	IFI

After defining the model, there are several ways to estimate the goodness of fit of the model with the observed data. In general, several indices are used to evaluate the fit of the model, which is shown in Table 2, the optimal value of each and also the value obtained in this study. As can be seen in the table, all the indicators are suitable indicating the fit of the model.

Social capital is constituted by strong network, reliability in regional residents, on the other hand, the cultural element rooted in Laji village which has inherited from former generation give influence on tourism development as well as economic state. Those results indicate that social capital and sustainable tourism development have mutual relationship, though the most striking aspect is correlation of economy and sustainable tourism development. The research acknowledged the tourism project has neither progressed very much nor benefiting for residents in spite of rich natural resource in Lavij village through descriptive questionnaire by respondents. As previous research illustrated the residents in Lavij village are mostly involved in agricultural, craft work on small scale tourism industry in derived land from earlier generation, in addition, some respondents urged cooperative neighbors are essential condition to engage in any kind of commerce.

Moreover, recent trend indicates some farm activities by household unit. It has caused movement of residents from Lavij village to other cities, however, in other words, people are satisfied with those economic elements in various as a member of community.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study confirm previous work and show that social capital can give an influence on sustainable tourism development (Park et al., 2012; Macbeth et al., 2004; Chaiyakot et al., 2010), furthermore show that collaboration among residents has the most impact on achieving sustainable development, which Kim (2009) also found in their research. The case of Lavij village illustrated the existence of strong bond among residents. Network management with successive generation of kin leads their reliability, and cooperation. The study defined those are contributing factors of social capital as human resource in this region. The good work done and the cooperation of the residents in the host community are among the first essential components of sustainable development. Experience has shown over time that a sustainable tourism industry cannot be created without the cooperation, support and participation of the local community. Social capital enables participants to be more effective in working together and to pursue a common goal. In addition, reliability and reciprocity increase cooperation by reducing transaction costs.

Secondly, the study acknowledged agricultural industries and craft products with small scaled tourism trade have taken place with some farm activity in this region thus, penetration of sustainable tourism

industry to residents directly: some employees involving with national projects are excluded. In terms of tourism revenue, a relatively large proportion of 170 respondents do not benefit greatly from tourism development, it should be designed to promote a better distribution of income among residents, more than that, there is a need a systematic and long- term planning to planning to develop rural tourism in Lavij . As well, it is essential for local people to get involved in the planning process. So the programs become compatible with the sustainable development process (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006).

One of the limitations of the research was the difficulty of analyzing the economic concept of people in lavij village. The project of tourism has not made satisfactory progress for residents, however the findings demonstrated the current agricultural industry since successive generations of kin has an impact on sustainable livelihood assets. The study confirmed the state of social capital on strong mutual relationship since former generation in Lavij village and it is more likely to make sustainable tourism development through rich natural resource, however it is denied that local people aspire to improve the flow of money spontaneously. For developing rural regional prosperity, it is one of the best measures to create tourism industry and sustain it by residents who share a strong bond: defined essential social capital and sustain its' development, thus not applicable to all rural region. The case of Lavij village was one of them. The value of stabilizing and improving on own lives have rooted as cultural society since former generation and it provides residents affording and reassurance. Nevertheless it will be a feature task to utilize natural resources for means of residents' livelihood to prevent from declining population.

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