



Leveraging Agritourism in Rural Areas in Developing Countries: The Case of Iran

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Over the past decades, agritourism has spread rapidly worldwide with the growing interest of tourists in learning about rural life and the farmers' need to increase their income with various economic activities. Diversifying business activities on the farm, primarily through agritourism, increases the farm's income and helps reduce the financial problems. Yet, the economic importance and consequently the cultural and social consequences of agritourism in rural areas have not been well studied, particularly in the developing countries. This study explores agritourism's cultural and economic consequences in unspoiled rural regions of Iran that have not yet experienced tourism as a sustainable economic activity. This study adopts a qualitative approach using the grounded theory method to the Varkaneh region located on the northern side of Mount Alvand in Hamedan province, Iran. Accordingly, interviews were conducted with four groups of tourists, local residents, experts, and local authorities. The interviews were transcribed and coded (open, axial, and selective) using the MAXQDA software and studied through the content analysis. The findings indicate that economic consequences arising from agritourism include improvement of economic development, increasing financial challenges, monetary recognition of new economic patterns, and requirement of economic and administrative measures. Cultural consequences include the emergence of cultural challenges, cultural promotion tools, culture-instilling strategies, pre-implementation management measures, post-implementation management measures, and cultural capacity development. The results could help local authorities to develop sustainable tourism plans in the rural areas with traditional agricultural livelihoods in developing countries.

Keywords: agritourism, unspoiled rural areas, developing countries, Iran, Hamedan

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INTRODUCTION

The efficiency and productivity of agricultural land have increased in importance due to the aggravation of climatic, environmental, energy, and economic crises in our time (Bonneuil et al., 2015; Faulkner et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2019; Khan, 2021). Among the different types of tourism, one way of transforming agricultural fields is to convert them into agritourism sites, mainly in urban areas or on their rural outskirts (Petrović et al., 2017; Adamov et al., 2020). "Agritourism" appeared in the past 25 years of 20th-century literature (Arroyo et al., 2013). According to the World Tourism Organization (2011), agritourism will be among the five significant factors in developing international tourism by 2020. The popularity of agritourism as a specific type of tourism is still on the rise (Santeramo and Barbieri, 2017).

The concept of agritourism is considered in various forms in the literature related to tourism and rural development, without a consensus on its different activities. Agritourism is often known as tourist farm, holiday farm, farm-based tourism, and rural tourism (Pérez-Olmos and Aguilar-Rivera, 2021). Depending on the epistemological framework, different authors have defined agricultural tourism from different perspectives, yet the lack of a common definition has limited the development of effective policies to support agricultural tourism (Rauniyar et al., 2021). However, the meaning of agritourism in this study is related to farming activities performed on the farm or in other agricultural environments for entertainment or education (Gil Arroyo et al., 2012). In other words, any action, activity, or service that is created in farms and gardens to attract visitors includes a variety of activities such as having tours, overnight stays, special events and festivals, on-farm shops, hunting, bird watching, hiking, horseback riding, and more, which are generally fun (Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008).

Agritourism has been proposed as an alternative solution to the severe economic depression in rural areas, facilitating the recovery of local economies (Hagglund et al., 2010; Tew and Barbieri, 2012). As a sustainable development strategy for rural communities, agritourism has recently been in the foreground for policy-makers, researchers, and governments (Sonnino, 2003). The advantages of agritourism include the potential for surplus income, fewer needs for funding in investment, making use of the existing assets, and minimal impact on the environment and recognized heritage (McGehee, 2007; Barbieri, 2013). Agritourism activities are various, consisting of any tourism-oriented action taken on farms directly related to the agricultural environment, crops, and farm stays (Sharpley and Sharpley, 1997; Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008). There are different attitudes to the scale of agritourism activities. These activities may be performed either on a microscale in rural areas by families and practitioners in agriculture (Kizos and Iosifides, 2007) or on a macroscale by hotels, restaurants, and catering businesses in the form of significant organized events (Ilbery, 1991; Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005; McGehee, 2007; Barbieri et al., 2008).

Agritourism is an economic activity on a farm to entertain visitors, generating income for the owner on a micro-economic level and contributing to the country's GDP on a macro-level (Parker et al., 2019). One of the main benefits of agritourism is the sustainability of rural communities, heritage, and cultural landscapes by providing job opportunities and increasing the income of local residents (especially women) (Ilbery, 1991; Fleischer and Tchetchik, 2005; Barbieri et al., 2008). In addition, it can improve the environment, enrich the local culture, and enhance the quality of life for both farmers and consumers (Khairabadi et al., 2020). In the last several decades, rural communities have experienced many challenges, such as migration, low prices of products, and economic recession (Varmazyari et al., 2018; Askarpour et al., 2020; Pérez-Olmos and Aguilar-Rivera, 2021; Rauniyar et al., 2021). Research findings show that in adverse economic circumstances (e.g., poor harvests or low prices), attracting tourists for agritourism purposes may be a complementary method of income generation for farmers

(Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Barbieri and Mshenga, 2008; Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Baig et al., 2020). The main purposes of agritourism are to attract new customers to the farm, inform people about farming, and improve the quality of life of farmers' families, which all indicate the economic and noneconomic benefits of agritourism (Tew and Barbieri, 2012).

Despite the agricultural potential of Iran, agritourism has been largely excluded from urban management plans in this country. As Iran has a long history of sedentary life and agriculture, agritourism can be promoted all over the country. A potential advantage for agritourism in Iran is the existence of different climates, which makes it possible to grow a wide variety of crops. Iran's geography is suitable for various agritourism activities due to its specific rural life, the possibility of accommodation in villages, the combination of the methods of cattle raising, numerous cultural and rural festivals, and diverse flora, mainly medicinal herbs that can contribute to medical tourism (Varmazyari et al., 2018; Askarpour et al., 2020; Khairabadi et al., 2020). Although the arrival of tourists leads to an increase in income to invest in constructing commercial infrastructure, rapid and unplanned urbanization and over-tourism in rural and urban areas, if not managed, cause profound social and environmental consequences (Baig et al., 2020).

As implementing the agritourism concept in rural areas of Iran is an emerging phenomenon, this study aims to improve the capabilities and reduce the limitations by exploring the consequences of the agritourism phenomenon based on the experience of residents, tourists, local authorities, and experts. The main question of this study is to explore the economic and cultural consequences of agritourism in rural areas to facilitate economic development despite the issue of public acceptance among residents of those areas. According to the need to explain agritourism and make possible predictions about possible events in the field of research through understanding the mentalities of different groups involved, we used grounded theory in this study.

Using grounded theory, we seek to examine the implications of the agritourism approach for the unspoiled rural areas of Hamedan Province. This study was conducted in Varkaneh Village, located on Mount Alvand, Hamedan, Iran. This region has unspoiled rural areas with significant natural potential for agritourism, but it is necessary to investigate its cultural and economic consequences. The lack of economic infrastructure for agritourism may lead to negative consequences in these communities. Thus, by surveying local authorities, experts, tourists, and local residents, this study aims to identify the contexts, intervening factors, challenges, strategies, and cultural-economic implications of agritourism in the study area.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the flexible nature of agritourism and its dependence on contextual factors and native models, we used grounded theory, a methodology within the qualitative research paradigm. Grounded theory is used to devise a model based on regular data collection and analysis, which develops throughout the study

via constant interaction between data collection and analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). In this method, data collection begins with a description of the status quo. Rich data concerning people, places, actions, and events are collected without seeking any specific pattern or judging them. These descriptions are complemented with interviews, videos, photos, documents, and relevant statistics. The coding process analyzes the collected data, which are decomposed and conceptualized during the coding process and, finally, juxtaposed innovatively. Corbin and Strauss divide the coding process into open, axial, and selective phases. These phases are not necessarily separate; rather, they can contribute to each other during the study process (Corbin and Strauss, 2014).

In open coding, the events, actions, and interactions are conceptualized for further examination. By conceptualization, we mean that every part of the text that refers to interactions, opinions, and ideas will be extracted. In the axial coding phase, the aim is to establish a coherent relationship between the concepts generated in the previous phase. Underlying the formation of relationships in this phase is to focus on a category as the axial category and then place similar categories under the rubric of this main category. Finally, in the selective coding phase, the researcher uses abstract categories to develop a theory. All the theoretically saturated categories are put together logically based on the coded concepts from the first and second phases. Now the researcher selects the core category. It can be chosen in two ways. In the first method, the researcher may select one of the existing categories, whereas in the second method, they may determine or form a new category. Selection of the core category in this phase requires careful examination of the data from the two previous phases (Corbin and Strauss, 2014).

In this study, we interviewed 40 experts, local authorities, tourists, and local residents. The interviewees are described in **Table 1**. The subjects in the groups of experts and local authorities were sampled using the Snowball method, but for selecting the local residents and tourists, we tried to have an equal proportion of males and females to include both opinions in our results. Snowball sampling, or chain referral sampling, is considered a method that has been widely used in qualitative social research (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). In this way, the researchers usually start with a small number of initial participants who meet the research criteria and are invited to participate in the research. Participants are then asked to suggest other attendees who are eligible, so the participants themselves may potentially be willing to guide other people in turn. Snowball sampling usually ends when the collected information has reached theoretical saturation. Therefore, the researcher must actively and deliberately control the beginning of the process, progress, and end [Gil Arroyo et al., 2012, p. 3]. Some researchers criticize snowball sampling as a form of easy way based on “its selective bias as well as lack of external validity, generalizability, and representation” [Gil Arroyo et al., 2012, p. 4]. Another research limitation is the unknown nature of agritourism in Iran, so snowball sampling may provide a particular condition to find proper participants for this study despite the few experts.

The interviews were conducted in person from 1 April to 31 July 2019, with oral consent for recording the interview

sessions. The duration of interviews ranged from 10 min to 1 h, with the longer durations belonging to interviews with experts and managers. The MAXQDA software package was used for the coding process. After the coding process, 51 concepts were classified into 11 categories. The 11 extracted categories were categorized into the four dimensions of Strauss and Corbin's model: circumstances (causal, contextual, and intervening), the core category, strategies (interactions), and consequences. Finally, after the above steps, the intended grounded model of the study was devised.

FIELD STUDY

Located in western Iran, the province of Hamedan has only 1.2% of the country's area while it contains 2.42% of the total population, and its share of the total agricultural production of the country is somewhere around 4.5%. It has an important position among the 31 provinces of Iran. Among all the provinces, it ranks 6th in farm products, 13th in horticultural products, and 9th in livestock products. The province's total area of arable land is 724,000 ha, of which 661,000 ha belong to farms and 63,000 ha to fruit orchards. Also, in 2009, ~28.4% of the active workforce were employed in the agricultural sector, and more than 24% of the added value of the province belonged to the farming sector (Khorami, 2016; Mirsafdari and Mohamadifar, 2018; Naderi Mahdei et al., 2018; Shams et al., 2018). Hamedan, the province's capital, is a historical city with great tourist potential and many natural and rural attractions. Alvand Mountains are located in the south of Hamedan County. With an area of 15,690 ha, the rural region of Varkaneh occupies 37% of the northern side of Mount Alvand. According to Iran's 2016 population census, the population of this region was 8,012, which was distributed among 10 settlements. Varkaneh Village has characteristic stone architecture with a homogeneous step-like fabric on a mountainous slope and green scenery with many orchards and farms. Ekbatan Dam (or Shahnaz Dam), one of the most critical dams in the province, is located in this area, and hence water shortage has not been a severe problem in Varkaneh. In addition, this region enjoys many mountainous areas, various medicinal herbs, numerous water springs, rivers, orchards, valleys, and natural forests, for which it has been defined as a potential tourist spot in upstream policies (Zarei and Baba-Alipour, 2018; Fathinia et al., 2021). The geographical location of Varkaneh is depicted in **Figure 1**.

Further studies should investigate whether tourist arrivals affect the local climate or the weather conditions that influence tourists' decisions to visit destinations. Research shows that the massive presence of tourists may affect the local climate indicators. Accordingly, we need to develop a comprehensive tourism policy by studying various factors like climate comfort for tourists and identifying potential risks for them (Baig et al., 2021).

FINDINGS

As mentioned in the “Research method” section, the data were analyzed by Strauss and Corbin's three-step coding, namely,

TABLE 1 | The demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

Interviewed group	Number	Sex	Characteristics of the interviewed group	Age range	Education
Experts	10	9 males, 1 female	University professors of agriculture, tourism, urban design, soil science, and urban planning	30–60 years old	Master's to doctorate
Local authorities	10	7 males, 3 females	Mangers of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, the Regional Water Organization, the Agricultural Organization, the Department of Environment, the Housing Foundation, and Village Administrations	35–60 years old	Bachelor's to doctorate
Local residents	10	5 males, 5 females	Men and women living in Simin village, Hamedan, including farmers, orchardists, cattlemen, homemakers, and storekeepers	18–70 years old	Illiterate to master's degree
Tourists	10	5 males, 5 females	Female and male tourists who visited Simin village for recreational purposes	25–60 years old	High school diploma to doctorate

open, axial, and selective coding. Coding was performed line by line using the MAXQDA software package. The most important findings are presented in **Table 2**.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES

According to the participants, “conflicts between local culture and tourist activities” are likely due to the “traditional, enclosed culture” of the residents. They emphasized “respect for the residents’ privacy” as a significant issue in agritourism activities. Concerning cultural challenges, one of the local authorities stated as follows:

We should try to implement those agritourism activities that require the construction of buildings on the village’s entrance with the same materials, fabric, and architecture as the village’s so that we would not violate the residents’ privacy. (Participant 1)

AREAS THAT REQUIRE INSTILLING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

The participants highlighted the importance of identifying areas that need instilling appropriate behavior, e.g., “raising awareness among the residents about the cultural advantages of agritourism,” “boosting the spirit of hospitality among the residents,” and “improving the consumption culture of residents and tourists.” According to one of the experts,

Orchard owners should attractively prepare their orchards with beautiful platforms and other facilities and charge an entrance fee; then, they can warmly welcome tourists and let them into their orchards. They can traditionally receive tourists; I mean, people should be allowed to enter and do whatever they wish, for example, having a barbecue, making tea, or taking a walk. And in the end, they can pay some money and take a basket of fruit from the orchard. (Participant 11)

MANAGERIAL MEASURES BEFORE IMPLEMENTATION

According to the interviews, administrative actions are necessary before and after implementing agritourism projects. The essential

actions in the view of the participants are “performing systematic cultural investigations,” “creation of cultural infrastructure in the region,” “examination of cultural consequences,” and “enhancing cultural capacity.” As one of the experts puts it:

When it comes to agritourism, one question is whether the infrastructure, particularly social and cultural infrastructure, exists; the next issue is the local people’s reaction and whether they will help if they don’t benefit. Things will get difficult if people don’t help. (Participant 8)

ECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE

Economic activities can lead to environmental consequences, which confirms the necessity of economic studies before the beginning of any economic activity. Economic knowledge was mentioned by one of the local authorities as follows:

Economic benefits aside, we may also face negative consequences. If tourists come to a rural area, environmental damage can turn into a serious threat. This must be managed so that every economic activity planned to be done in an area must follow certain guidelines that the Department of Environment has determined. (Participant 1)

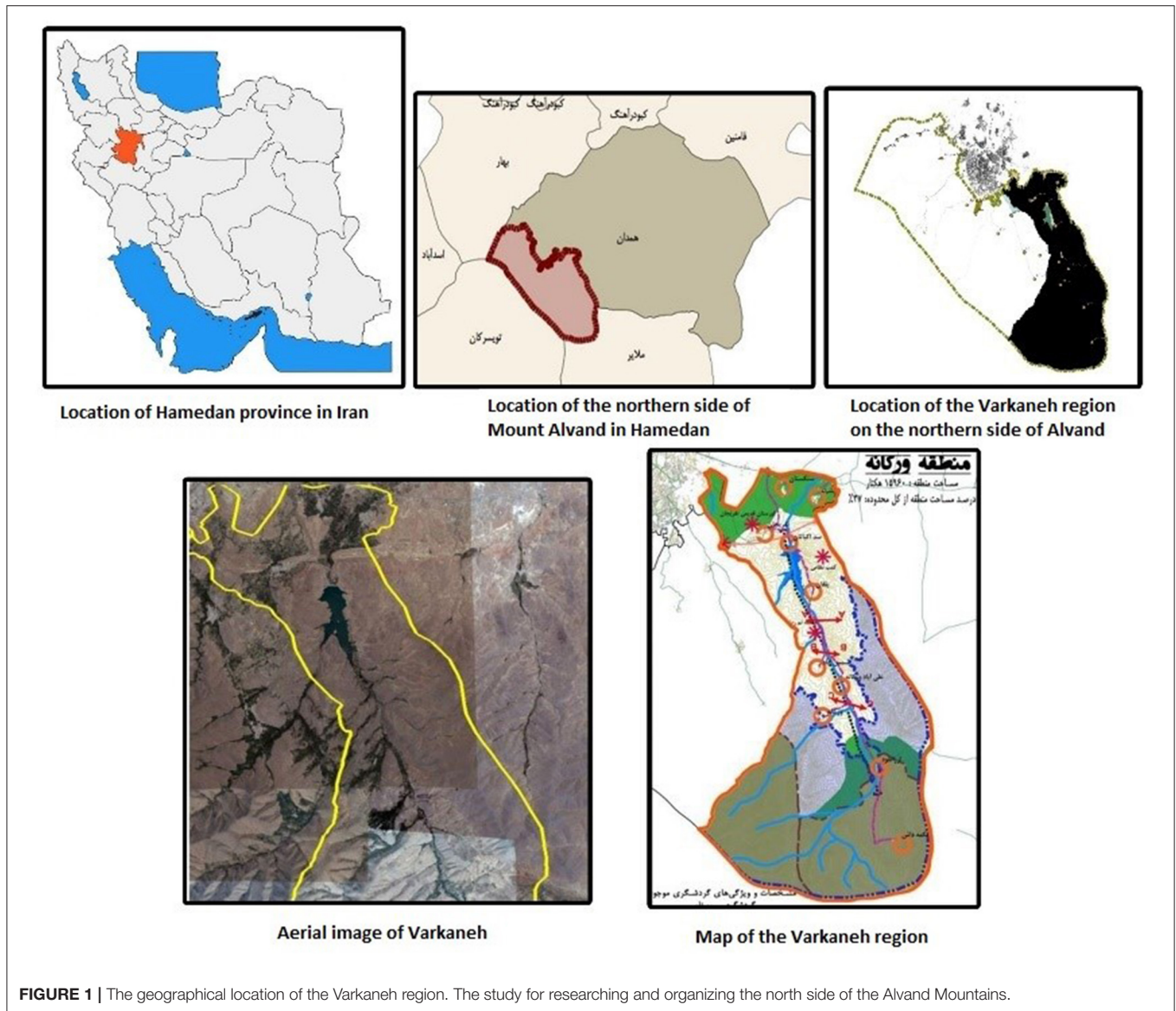
CULTURAL CAPACITY

Apart from agritourism, the study area has distinctive cultural characteristics, which the interviewees mentioned. Its major cultural and historical features are “traditional culture,” “local customs,” “historic monuments,” and “distinctive architecture.” According to one of the local residents,

A striking feature of the villages in this area is the architecture. The architecture is old and uses local materials. Plus, some of the villages have been registered as national historical sites. (Participant 6)

TOOLS FOR IMPROVING CULTURE

Due to the sensitivity of cultural issues in agritourism, it is necessary to instill appropriate cultural behavior and attitudes. Of course, this requires the use of various tools such as “leaflets



and brochures,” “media and social networks,” and “facilitator offices and institutions.” In this regard, one urban manager stated as follows:

We need to prepare tourism packages for this area; TV and newspapers and other media should get involved and present these packages to the public. (Participant 5)

STRATEGIES OF INSTILLING APPROPRIATE CULTURE

In addition to emphasizing the necessity of instilling the right culture and using suitable tools, it should be noted that all this will not be successful unless proper strategies are adopted. As the participants suggested, correcting wrong attitudes and improving tourism culture through

continuous education are appropriate strategies. Moreover, any measure that establishes cultural interaction between citizens and villagers could be a proper strategy. As an expert put it,

That we prevent people from entering natural places just because bad consequences may happen is not a reasonable idea. There are solutions to this. For example, we should provide the incoming tourists with sufficient educational content. We should also educate those who want to offer tourist services in an area. (Participant 4)

MANAGERIAL MEASURES AFTER IMPLEMENTATION

These measures are taken to ensure that the sites are not simply abandoned after implementing agritourism projects. Some of the

TABLE 2 | The final extracted categories and subcategories.

Concepts	Category	Category type
The conflict between the local culture and tourism activities Using local people for doing tourism activities to reduce cultural conflicts The residents enclosed, traditional culture Cultural clashes between residents and tourists Respect for the villagers' privacy	Cultural challenges	Causal conditions
Raising awareness among the residents (as a cultural advantage of agritourism) Boosting the spirit of hospitality among the residents Improving the consumption culture of both the residents and tourists	Areas that require instilling appropriate behavior	Intervening conditions
Conducting systematic cultural studies The necessity of creating cultural infrastructure in the region Examining the cultural consequences before any administrative measure The need to enhance the cultural capacity	Managerial measures before implementation	Intervening conditions
The necessity of examining the environmental consequences of economic activities The necessity of conducting economic studies before beginning any economic activity	Economic knowledge	Intervening conditions
Revitalizing and presenting the traditional culture of the region Presenting and preserving local customs and culture Existence of historical monuments as cultural heritage The unique architecture of the area as a cultural heritage	Cultural capacity	Contextual conditions
Using leaflets and brochures to educate people and promote appropriate attitudes Using media and social networks to promote the local culture and present the region to the public Founding full-time facilitator offices and institutions	Tools for improving culture	Strategies
Correction of wrong attitudes by facilitator institutions Improving the travel culture of tourists via constant education Increasing cultural interaction between citizens and villagers	Strategies for instilling appropriate culture	Strategies
Providing legal regulations for improving the tourism culture in the region Organizing cultural events during the harvest season Creating suitable accommodation places to promote the culture of ecotourism Revitalizing and presenting the region by holding exhibitions	Managerial measures after implementation	Strategies
Creating startups in the region Selling local products through creating seasonal markets Branding the region based on local products Creating workshops and factories for processing local products Following the lead of the traditional economic model of the region Supplying land to people who are interested in starting agritourism projects but do not have any property Using private sector investors in agritourism Informing the residents about the economic advantages of agritourism	Economic and administrative measures	Strategies
Preventing rural-urban migration through agritourism Increasing income by selling local products Creating economic vitality Creating economic prosperity Improving the employment situation in the region Economic development and growth Decreasing unemployment in all social classes and age groups Enhancing economic welfare Preventing young people from migrating to other regions to find a job	Economic empowerment of local residents	Consequences
Dependence of the region's stability on economic conditions Coordination between the economic model and other sectors Uncontrolled construction as a result of the flourishing of the economy and tourism in the region A direct relationship between economic and religious issues	Possible conflicts and bureaucratic obstacles	Consequences

required post-implementation measures of agritourism include “provision of legal regulations,” “holding cultural events during and after the harvest season,” “creating accommodation places for ecotourism,” and “revitalizing and presenting the area through holding exhibitions.” As an urban manager stated:

Some residents may resort to illegal construction of buildings to attract more tourists, but these buildings may be out of keeping with the rural landscape. We must prevent these cases. Relevant organizations should impose strict rules for this and prosecute those who violate the rules. (Participant 1)

ECONOMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES

The many concepts related to these measures in the interview results indicate the importance of implementing the associated strategies by managerial institutions. Some of these measures with the aim of direct sale of the villagers' products include "selling the products on seasonal markets," "branding the region based on the local products," "creating workshops and factories for processing the products," and "supporting the formation of startups." In this regard, one of the experts stated:

We can create a series of local markets in this area to sell local farm products to tourists; this can generate income for the local people, attract more tourists, supply the products to the market, and create a brand for the region. (Participant 15)

In addition, "supplying land for agritourism activities to those who do not have any property" and "attracting investors from the private sector for participating in agritourism projects" may contribute to the economic prosperity and all-inclusiveness of agritourism activities. According to an urban manager:

There is a plan to give sloped land plots to people for developing orchards. By giving these plots to people, the government can both help people earn income and attract tourists to improve the local economy. So, young people will not be forced to migrate to large cities, and instead, they can participate in local tourism and make a living in their own village. (Participant 2)

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF LOCAL RESIDENTS

According to the participants, if the strategies are implemented correctly in the region, they can "cause agritourism to prevent migration to cities," "increase income through selling local products," and "result in vitality and economic prosperity," and "reduce unemployment by preventing young people from migrating to other places for finding a job." According to one of the residents,

The first and the most important consequence of agritourism in this region, particularly in the current economic conditions of our society, is employment and income. (Participant 7)

Another inhabitant said,

If agritourism is implemented appropriately, the village's young people won't migrate to cities; instead, they can use the tourism opportunities and have an income and remain in their own village. (Participant 2)

POSSIBLE CONFLICTS AND BUREAUCRATIC OBSTACLES

Our results indicate that tourism planning on this scale, especially in developing countries, often leads to potential conflicts between

different sectors due to "the dependence of the region's stability on economic conditions," "the difficulty of coordination between the economic and different sectors," and "the direct relationship between economic and religious issues." A tourist for whom the security of the region was substantial commented as follows:

I think the most important advantage of agritourism for the region is a development and economic growth. If the economy runs well, everything will get better, and politics will also improve. If somebody has enough money, they won't commit crimes. Finally, the components of a good society will be realized. (Participant 8)

Furthermore, the consequences of "uncontrolled construction as a result of the flourishing of economy and tourism in the region" lead local authorities to demand strict legal permissions for agritourism activities, which will create many bureaucratic obstacles in the way of those who are interested in initiating agritourism projects in a developing country like Iran where there is no integrated management system. As an urban manager stated:

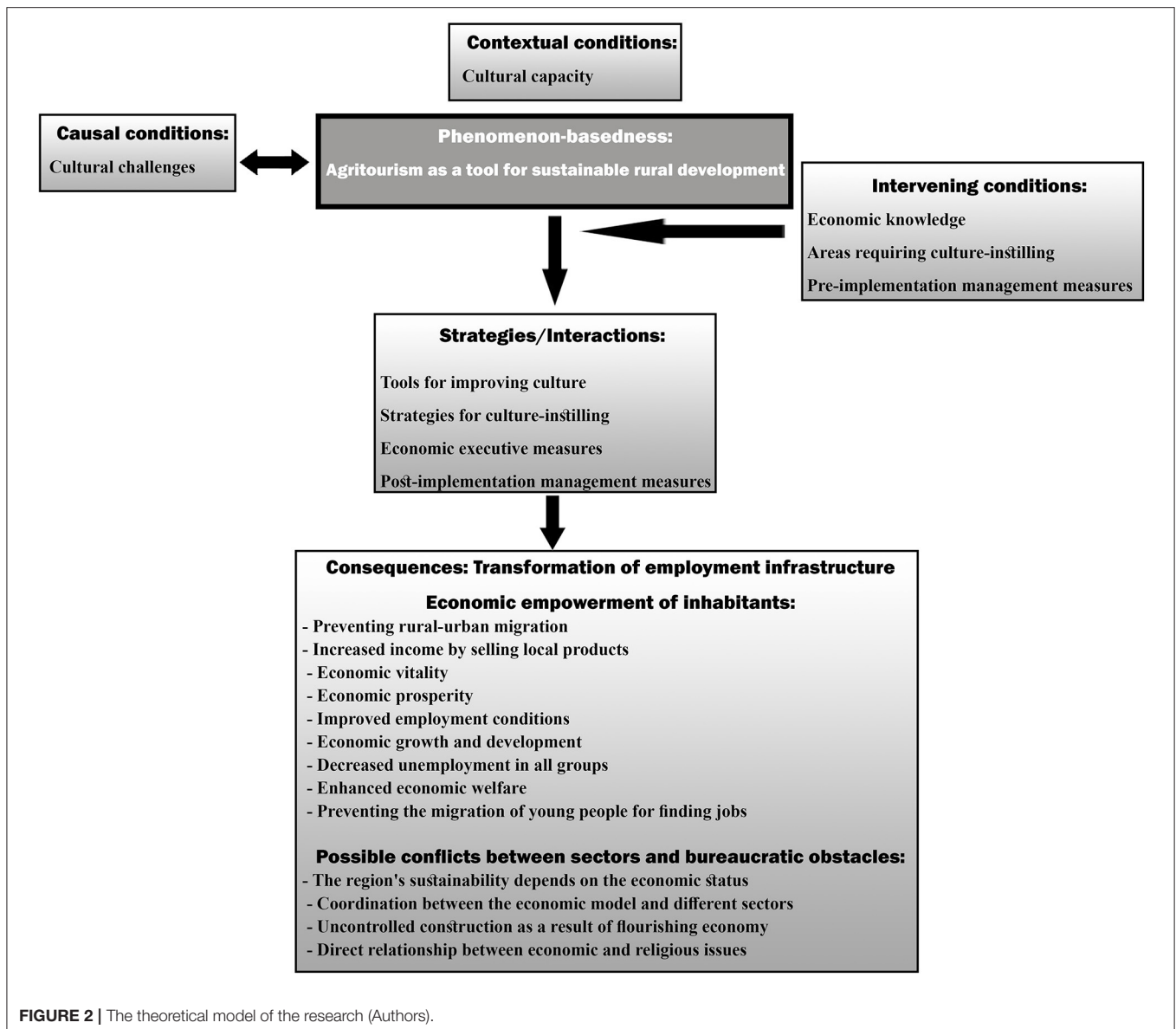
When tourism catches on in this region, the value of properties will increase, land uses will get converted, and many villas will be built; these are the negative consequences. (Participant 12)

Finally, it should be noted that all of the mentioned concepts are related to each other in "transforming the employment infrastructure" in the region.

In the end, the categories were put together in the selective coding phase to establish a systematic relationship between them. Next, the main categories were linked to each other in a paradigm model (grounded model) around the core category. In fact, the model offers a formal categorical description to analyze and explain the relationships. This procedure is referred to as combining the core category and refining the resulting constituents. The model can be depicted as a formal but conceptual diagram. The devised grounded model of the research is shown in **Figure 2**.

DISCUSSION

As agritourism has been presented as a type of tourism in rural areas to achieve sustainability, we should deal with various factors (Adamov et al., 2020). According to the findings, if the necessary infrastructure is provided, agritourism can be considered a sustainable development method and a phenomenon-based dimension of rural areas. Results show that the other concepts revolve around sustainability, the prolonged nature of tourism activities in the study area, and the limiting and facilitating factors, contexts, strategies, and consequences. One of the problems of agritourism activities in rural areas, particularly in developing countries, is the short-term duration of these activities due to the lack of infrastructure and the incompatibility of plans with cultural contexts and traditional economic models. Due to the long history of its settlements, our study area has a specific economic model that requires systematic investigation.



Our interviews suggest that the study area residents have specific values that they think may be threatened by the development of agritourism. In addition to economic, political, and social differences, urban and rural areas significantly differ in their cultural characteristics. The reason is that most novel ideas are first developed in urban centers and then diffused to other areas, and this is always a cause of difference between cities and their surrounding areas (Fathinia et al., 2021). Performing agritourism activities requires the visit of urban tourists to rural areas, which may trigger cultural conflicts between tourists and local residents. These conflicts may arise from the enclosed society of rural people and their unwillingness to conform to the tourists' lifestyle. One possible solution is to involve native people in permanent, long-term agritourism activities to prevent

outsiders from entering the region, thereby developing tourism without violating the residents' privacy. If not observed, these causal conditions can negatively affect the implementation and sustainability of agritourism activities in an area.

Every rural area has its own cultural capacity depending on its location and historical conditions, and this capacity indicates the positive aspect of its rural culture. All rural areas have local customs as their intangible cultural heritage, and the rich historic architecture further complements this in our study area. In an attempt to identify the different aspects of agritourism development, the authors (Sadowski and Wojcieszak, 2019) emphasized natural and cultural appeal and pointed out that this particular destination appeal is essential in agritourism development. Thus, along with the planned

strategies, agritourism activities should also maximize this cultural capacity as part of the contextual conditions (LaPan and Barbieri, 2014; Khamung, 2015a).

This study shows that, among the different factors involved in the sustainable development of agritourism in the study area, some are notably more important than others, which means that the success of agritourism largely depends on the efficiency of performance regarding these factors. One of these factors is the economic knowledge of the area, which can be obtained by examining the environmental consequences of the economic activities as well as economic investigations before starting any action. According to our findings, cultural conflicts are an obstacle to agritourism activities. Therefore, a necessary intervention in developing agritourism is to identify areas that require instilling appropriate behavior and attitudes. Providing suitable conditions and infrastructure for agritourism is not always dependent on the residents, experts, and tourists. Another problematic factor in developing countries is managerial measures, especially before implementation. These measures include coordination between different actors, division of tasks, and preparing feasibility study plans in other areas. In the management sector, networking among various fields can be a good solution for establishing coordination among agritourism institutions (Doh et al., 2017). The authors (Baig and Zehra, 2020) believed that good governance and easy access to tourist destinations are the essential factors in tourists' decision to choose a place to visit. On the contrary, constant government change prevents tourism from growing because political stability and investment are deeply interconnected. There is a severe need for public institutions and local government support to invest in the tourism sites (Baig and Zehra, 2020). Also, agritourism feasibility studies can also be implemented with multiple aims such as energy production, conversion of orchards and farms to tourist destinations, agritourism sites, and agritourism services (Roman and Roman, 2016; Rezaei and Nastaran, 2017; Lanfranchi and Giannetto, 2018; Toader and Mocuta, 2018).

Our findings indicate that agritourism in unspoiled rural contexts has the highest frequency of interactions. Hence, realizing the agritourism potential of the area in an intended manner depends on implementing different strategies such as improving and instilling appropriate culture, managerial measures after implementation, and economic and administrative measures to provide the infrastructure found in the model of this study. The findings show that the realization of agritourism requires identification of the prerequisites for instilling the idea of accepting this phenomenon among the rural population. Instilling appropriate culture highlights the necessity of constant education in the region about various topics offered by facilitator institutions to improve tourism literacy and allow for peaceful interaction between tourists and residents. The results suggest that the tools to instill a tourism culture may include leaflets, brochures, and media and social networks. According to Padmaja and Vasanthi (Padmaja and Vasanthi, 2019), the role of agritourism actors, public tourism development companies, NGOs, the press, and tour guides are vital in instilling agritourism culture. Some studies in line with our findings addressed other managerial measures such as

providing legal regulations for improving the tourism culture in the region (Centner, 2010), organizing cultural events during the harvest season (Khamung, 2015b; Cairns, 2016; Chase et al., 2018; Seaman, 2019), creating suitable accommodation places to promote the culture of ecotourism (Kumbhar, 2012; Matei, 2015; Akif et al., 2018), and revitalizing and presenting the region by holding exhibitions (Li et al., 2015; Pedreira and Fidalgo, 2017; Tang et al., 2020). If performed for a long time, they can result in the sustainability of agritourism activities. The last group of strategies includes the administrative measures of agritourism to improve the region's economic status. It is essential that the planned administrative measures must follow the lead of the region's traditional economic model and be complemented by updating the technological capacity. Specific administrative measures such as branding the area based on local products and then selling those products through seasonal markets are complementary. As mentioned earlier, branding can be found on a specific product.

An example of this is the branding of a particular type of meat through agritourism, which is discussed in a study of the effect of agritourism on the purchase of meat in certain rural areas in North Carolina (Kline et al., 2016). Not all people living in rural areas own land plots and orchards. Therefore, the government should offer plans for supplying land to people interested in starting agritourism projects but who do not have any property. In addition to the government, this can also be done by private sector investors. According to DeLay et al. (2019), some of the obstacles to development and sustainability in agritourism are land use and division regulations, high prices of buying or hiring land, and people who do not possess any property. Finally, another solution to contribute to economic prosperity and sustainability in agritourism in the region is to create startups, workshops, and factories to process local products (Lane, 2018). Agritourism startups are an option for developing agritourism on small-scale farms. For instance, Seedlab Tasmania is a startup project to present foods and beverages (MacTavish-West, 2020).

As mentioned above, all the concepts revolve around agritourism as a tool for sustainable development, and agritourism itself aims to transform employment infrastructure as its main achievement. As stated in the literature, there are many motivations for agritourism. However, the main reason for it was to improve the economic conditions (Firlej and Niedziółka, 2007; Srisomyong and Meyer, 2015; Khorami, 2016), particularly in terms of employment (Bwana et al., 2015; Van Sandt and Thilmany McFadden, 2016; Halim et al., 2020), to prevent a decline in agriculture and the migration of rural populations to cities. Research findings indicate that the implementation of agritourism in our study area can contribute to income generation, vitality and economic prosperity, employment, and the prevention of rural–urban migration.

According to some researchers, agritourism is considered a key factor for local economic development, particularly for marginalized rural areas with environmental and cultural heritage (Shah et al., 2020). The beneficial effects of agricultural tourism include increasing incomes on agritourism farms, enhancing the local economy by increasing sales taxes, promoting the generation of local employment, and stimulating

local businesses (Broccardo et al., 2017). In other words, agricultural tourism supports economic development by increasing the demand for local products and other rural goods and services (Boz et al., 2018). The direct strengthening of agritourism activities has additional effects on the local economic system as a whole. It has indirect positive effects on the entire local economic structure regarding public investment and capital attraction outside the rural area (Ammirato et al., 2020). The study supports the strong potential of agricultural tourism sites to attract out-of-town tourists who then spend money at local services like restaurants, gas stations, and hotels in rural areas. Agricultural tourism may expand the potential of the local tax base and make communities more resilient during periods of recession, as agricultural tourism is a relatively inexpensive alternative to other types of travel (Van Sandt and Thilmany McFadden, 2016). But, the new generation of farmers defines agricultural tourism as a challenge to increase their quality of life rather than an economic development tool (Chiodo et al., 2019).

There is evidence that the sustainability of the settlements in this region depends on the economic status, and, in the Iranian context, the economic level is closely related to religious issues. Srisomyong and Meyer (2015) confirms this point and states that although agritourism can bring economic advantages to rural communities, it may also lead to social conflicts. Agritourism does not always result in positive consequences. Our findings show that agritourism is likely to lead to uncontrolled construction, the settlement of non-native people in the region, macroscale land uses, and dealing land businesses. Land use needs to be addressed by strict regulations. The author (Wendt et al., 2021) pinpointed the necessity of legal limitations to prevent the land dealing businesses caused by agritourism. Finally, another critical issue is establishing coordination between the proposed economic model and different sectors and organizations. However, given that developing countries like Iran do not have an integrated management system to facilitate coordination between different sectors, those interested in initiating agritourism projects are often trapped in bureaucratic administrative procedures that need to be resolved by local authorities. The author (Monaldi and Ramsingh, 2020) mentioned the disappointment and high costs imposed by these bureaucratic procedures for receiving permissions, certificates, and financial aids.

Employing agritourism in the COVID 19 era, this study was conducted before the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. After the initial lockdown periods worldwide, agricultural tourism farms have become a good choice during the COVID-19 epidemic. However, agritourism is considered to impact the tourism market significantly. Yet, studies indicate that tourists in the COVID-19 era have shown more concern about health issues than before to prepare a sanitary environment to attract urban and rural tourism in a specific geographical area (Adom et al., 2021). For example, sanitizing public spaces, using hand sanitizers, and limiting the maximum number of people allowed on the farm and in spaces to keep a safe environment during tourist visits (Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al., 2020).

Additionally, in the economic field, some studies state that urban agritourism was profitable for farmers in 2020

because of public interest in visiting places with low population density near their settlements (such as rural areas) (Roman and Grudzień, 2021). However, some farmers avoid tourists due to transmitting the disease, causing cultural conflicts (Lin et al., 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to study the effects of COVID-19 on sociocultural and economic dimensions, cultural conflicts, and health infrastructure required by the development of agritourism.

CONCLUSION

Agritourism in developing countries is very different from that in developed countries (Bhatta and Ohe, 2020). Based on the little experience implementing agritourism in developing countries, it seems logical to attempt more to attract tourists, even through public learning based on socioeconomic contexts (Varmazyari et al., 2018). Therefore, this study explores the economic and cultural challenges of agritourism development to facilitate agritourism development in rural areas of Iran. According to Bhatta and Ohe (Bhatta and Ohe, 2020) and Savage et al., 2020, policy-makers in developing countries need to promote the role of women in the agritourism industry, keep control of the quality of the farms, provide subsidies for farmers, and plan the development of agricultural tourism. In addition, the participation of the different stakeholders and reducing the adverse effects on society through innovation in agricultural tourism may lead to sustainable agricultural tourism. Malkanthi and Routry (2011) also believe that there are several possibilities for developing agritourism in developing countries. However, there are still some problems with the success of agritourism development in these countries, including providing the infrastructure, proper education, and training of farmers, providing a sufficient budget, and improving waste management as well as environmental protection in rural areas. Moreover, the role of small-scale businesses can facilitate the development of agritourism in the rural economy, which needs more studies in developing countries due to a lack of cross-sectoral coordination in policy-making and funding (Khairabadi et al., 2020).

This study aimed to investigate the cultural-economic consequences of agritourism and its effect on sustainable development in unspoiled rural regions in underdeveloped countries. The findings suggest that, after overcoming cultural challenges as causal factors, using cultural potential as contextual factors, gaining economic knowledge, instilling appropriate culture, and taking managerial measures before implementing projects, agritourism in the study area can achieve its primary goal, i.e., sustainable rural development. It will bring about both positive and negative consequences. The direct consequences are the transformation of employment infrastructure in the region and the economic empowerment of the residents. However, these may further lead to challenges such as uncontrolled construction and an illegal business of land plots resulting from economic prosperity. Legal regulations must inhibit this situation.

Although the results clarify the feasibility of agritourism consequences in certain areas, a significant limitation of the study is that these consequences have not been further investigated in

other contexts. The study's requirements, administrative policies, and other achievements in the Iranian context may benefit the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts; Urban Renewal Organization; National Organization for Civil Registration; Housing Foundation; and municipalities. On an international scale, the findings may provide guidelines for the feasibility of agritourism in unspoiled rural areas that can be followed by organizations and researchers in the field of tourism in various countries, particularly in developing countries.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was not provided for this study on human participants because we had verbal and written consent. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AL: designing research method and conducting research. OK: conducting research and writing paper. Both authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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