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Pro-poor tourism in Iran: the case of three selected villages in Shahrud

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ABSTRACT
This study sought to identify issues and challenges of pro-poor tourism (PPT) by concentrating on a tourism development program implemented in three selected villages of Shahrud County, Iran. The results indicated that the major proportion of financial and non-financial support in the tourism, employment, and poverty reduction (TEPR) program is provided for the private sector and dominant social groups. On the other hand, the poor’s lifestyle and deterministic viewpoint exacerbate the condition in terms of their engagement in tourism industry. The findings also support the idea that, since the government covers all the costs of the TEPR program, it tries to dictate its policies and plans to all stakeholders.

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Introduction
In recent years, international organizations and less developed countries have made attempts to use tourism as an instrument to reduce poverty (Suntikul, Bauer, & Song, 2009; Zarandian, Shalbafian, Ryan, & Bidokhti, 2016). It is believed that, in addition to its major contribution to the promotion of macroeconomic indicators (Schilcher, 2007), tourism has a good potential for reducing poverty in less developed areas (Truong, 2014). Thus, the concept of PPT has become a buzzword in the tourism literature since the early 1990s (Harrison, 2008; Scheyvens, 2012). In describing PPT, Ashley and Mitchell (2009) believe that this approach is intended to enhance the net benefits of the poor through developing tourism in the three dimensions of sustainable development (i.e. economic, social, and environmental dimensions). They also argue that tourism development should result in poverty reduction.

As a country with a lot of mineral resources, Iran is wealthy with a moderate per capita income. Nonetheless, the national wealth has not been distributed proportionately over the past 65 years (Salehi-Isfahani, 2009). Indeed, one and a half million Iranian families live in absolute poverty and depend on governmental charity organizations for their survival (Poverty Report in Iran, 2017). Since the Islamic revolution in 1978, the Iranian government has made attempts to distribute oil-based incomes properly to reduce poverty (Dadvar-Khani, 2012). For example, governmental charity organizations have tried to reduce poverty through pensions, food aids, low-interest loans, and subsidization of tuition fees. However, after 40 years of revolution, poverty has not reduced in Iran. Conversely, the number of poor families supported by governmental charity organizations has increased (Salehi-Isfahani, 2005, 2009).

As a result of the failure of previous policies, the government has recently made attempts to implement structural adjustment policies to decline its role in the country’s economy and give its business enterprises to the private sector (Seyfi, Hall, & Kuhzady, 2018). Nevertheless, studies
show that this policy has led to more poverty and inequality over the past 10 years. Therefore, in addition to direct financial helps provided for the poor, the government is trying to implement new plans to reduce poverty in underdeveloped areas (Shafik, 2016), hence aiming to reduce the undesirable effects of structural adjustment (Scheyvens, 2012; Schilcher, 2007). To this end, the government has allocated 2 million dollars from its sovereign wealth funds for implementing plans whose objectives are creating jobs and reducing poverty in rural areas. Tourism development constitutes a proportion of these plans. As a result, 464 villages have been selected as tourist destinations (Dadvar-Khani, 2012; Ghaderi, Abooali, & Henderson, 2017). These programs in Iran are called tourism, employment, and poverty reduction (TEPR) program. Thus, the current study aimed to examine the challenges and issues of one of these programs in Iran – namely TEPR program – with special focus on three tourism destination villages of Shahrud.

Literature review

A review of the literature on tourism and poverty reduction indicates that PPT is popular in developing countries because of the following reasons: (1) Tourism can boost the poor’s social capital (Anderson, 2015). (2) Tourism improves the distribution of wealth in the society (Ashley & Mitchell, 2009). (3) The creation of tourism businesses does not require a lot of financial resources. Thus, tourism can create numerous job opportunities for the poor (Ashley, Boyd, & Goodwin, 2000; Bah & Goodwin, 2003; Truong, Hall, & Garry, 2014). (4) Tourism can contribute to the development of general infrastructures in less developed regions (Bowden, 2005). (5) Tourism can contribute to preserving natural ecosystems and water resources. It can also reduce environmental damages. (6) Tourism can strengthen the family institution and contribute to the preservation of legacies, minorities’ customs (Butcher, 2011), and traditional architecture styles. It can also enhance the pride of the poor (Chok, Macbeth, & Warren, 2007; Zapata, Hall, Lindo, & Vanderschaeghe, 2011).

For a long time, development (in general) and tourism (in particular) have been pursuing poverty reduction as a tacit purpose (Zeng, 2018). On the other hand, PPT is aimed at maximizing the net benefit for the poor. From this perspective, the poor constitute the main focus of any practical initiative (Sharpley & Naidoo, 2010). It is argued that tourism can benefit poor people and big business, or that tourism growth can bring profits to the industry and result in a bigger slice of the tourism pie for the poor. Thus, in the World Sustainable Development Summit held in August, 2002, in Johannesburg, Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty (ST-EP) was launched to alleviate poverty as an objective of development in the new millennium (Spenceley & Meyer, 2012). Since then, this program has been implemented in many poor African, South Asian, and East Asian countries (Scheyvens, 2007).

Reviewing the existing studies shows that, despite numerous limitations, tourism development in some less developed areas has alleviated poverty and empowered the poor (Croes & Vanegas, 2008; Duygan & Bump, 2007; Rogerson, 2006). Jiang, DeLacy, Mkiramweni, and Harrison (2011), for example, have demonstrated a significant, negative association between tourism development and the poverty rate. Studies carried out in rural areas of Tanzania further show that families which are involved in the tourism industry are less likely to suffer from poverty in comparison with those that are engaged in traditional businesses like animal husbandry and agriculture (Duygan & Bump, 2007). Similar studies in rural areas of China (Muganda, Sahli, & A Smith, 2010), Kilimanjaro and Zimbabwe (Anderson, 2015), Sapa in Vietnam (Truong et al., 2014), Barabarani in Tanzania, Sini in Kenya (Mutana, Chipfuva, & Muchenje, 2013), and Fiji (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012a, 2012b) demonstrate that tourism development has led to poverty reduction to some degree.

The majority of countries where tourism development and poverty reduction plans have been implemented possess a small and weak economy (Ashley, Roe, & Goodwin, 2001; Sharpley & Telfer, 2014). Nonetheless, there are some rentier countries with a lot of wealth where a large
number of poor people live. Despite their great wealth, such countries have not been able to eliminate poverty (Karl, 1997).

**Rural tourism in Iran and the three selected villages**

In tourism destination villages, the tourism development program is known as TEPR. Accordingly, about 464 villages have been selected as tourism destinations based on their natural, historical, and cultural attractions (Ghaderi et al., 2017). The main objective of these plans in reducing poverty and enhancing employment rate among villages (Dadvar-Khani, 2012). The government has given some special privileges to these rural areas (Dadvar-Khani, 2011; Rezavani, Badri, Torabi, & Malekan, 2016). Some of them include designing tourism development plans, allocating low-interest loans, holding training classes, designing advertisements to attract tourists, restoring the traditional structure of villages, and developing appropriate transportation systems (Zarandian et al., 2016). Based on reports, these plans are financed by governmental budgets (Khodadadi, 2016; Seyfi et al., 2018).

TEPR has been implemented in three villages of Shahrud, namely Abr, Qale-ye Bala, and Reza Abad. According to reports, these three villages have turned into popular tourist attractions over the past 8 years (Figure 1). They are located in Turan National Park, which is regarded as the second important biosphere region in the world following Serengeti National Park in Tanzania (Tourism development plan of Shahrud, 2017). Because of its unique natural and animal attractions, Turan National Park is known as the Iranian Africa. More than 250 species, including mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians, live in this region. The most famous species are Asian cheetah and Persian zebra (Farhadinia et al., 2009). Thus, many tourists who love nature are attracted to this biosphere. As a result, tourism-related businesses have flourished in rural areas of Turan National Park in recent years. Therefore, a significant increase has taken place in selling

![Figure 1. The location of the selected villages in Iran and the south west of Asia.](image-url)
artifacts and farming products, accommodating tourists in ecolodges, and guiding tours ("Tourism development plan of Shahrud," 2017).

Nonetheless, still, a large number of the poor live in the selected villages, with their survival largely depending on the support provided by governmental charity organizations ("Poverty Report in Iran, 2017"). According to the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, due to climate changes and water well drying in recent years, the quality of people’s lives in these three villages has dwindled, meaning that the poor has become more vulnerable. The authorities hope that they can reduce poverty in these villages by implementing tourism programs (Pratt & Alizadeh, 2018; Soltani, Angelsen, Eid, Naïeni, & Shamekhi, 2012; Thompson et al., 2018).

**Methodology**

Content analysis, which is a qualitative method, was used to extract issues and challenges of PPT in the selected villages. Content analysis is an appropriate procedure for obtaining valid and reliable results from texts in order to accumulate knowledge, present facts, and provide practical guide for describing performance (Dwyer, Gill, & Seetaram, 2012).

First, the concept of poverty should be clarified in the study (Sharpley & Naidoo, 2010). This thousands of people consulted during the World Bank’s Definitions of Poverty study revealed that being poor meant four things to them: lack of assets (physical, environmental, social, human); lack of basic resources (e.g. food, shelter, land); the absence of basic infrastructure (e.g. health clinics, transport), and last but definitely not least, lack of voice, power and independence, making them vulnerable to exploitation and humiliation. In this article, Based on available statistics and data, people who are supported by governmental charity organizations are regarded as poor. These organizations provide financial support for the poor depending on their conditions such as income, physical status, and house quality. The charity organizations pay a fixed amount of monthly pension to each poor family (Poverty Report in Iran, 2017).

Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used for finding the participants. More precisely, the interviewed participants were asked to introduce new individuals who were willing to take part in the study (Dwyer et al., 2012). Semi-structured individual interviews were used to collect data from people who were engaged in tourism-related businesses in the selected villages for 2–8 years prior to the study. The participants were selected from among the poor, the ones who had experienced a financial transformation in their lives, local authorities/managers, Non-poor residents, and investors (Flick, 2014; Sofaer, 1999). The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation and threshold of information usefulness.

In total, 30 participants were interviewed in this study. 33.33% of them were poor, 20% were government staff members, 16.66% were local investors and local authorities, and 13.33% were Non-poor residents. Also, 80% of the interviewees were male, while 20% were female. It should be noted that, because of traditional and religious beliefs of Iran, females are less involved in socioeconomic activities, hence a smaller number of female participants.

In order to conduct interviews, appointments were arranged with the participants. The interviews were conducted in the participants’ house or work place. Prior to each interview, the participants were informed about the research objectives and written consent was obtained from them for participating in the study. Their responses were also tape recorded following their agreement. The interviewees were further assured that their data would remain strictly confidential and would be used only for research purposes. Then, the research team, comprising three tourism experts, raised the main questions (Eriksson & Koivunen, 2015; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2015). On average, each interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes with a standard deviation of 10 minutes. The main questions had to do with tourism experiences and their impact on poverty reduction.
Results

The participants believed that centralized, government-led management and planning was one of the major obstacles hindering the poor from engagement in tourism businesses. In this regard, Ashley et al. (2000) argue that a crucial principle in PPT is decentralization and real participation of the poor in the decision making and implementation of tourism development programs. However, the managers and planners of tourism in the selected villages had no thorough understanding of participation and gave little value to it. Indeed, the research team's investigation revealed that the implemented plans which were supposed to encourage local people's participation had not achieved this objective in practice and had not observed the very basic principles of participation theories. In fact, participation was viewed as the acceptance of governmental plans by non-poor residents. In a similar vein, Spenceley and Meyer (2012) claim that problems related to paper work and operationalization of tourism programs constitute a major obstacle in enhancing the poor's participation in tourism industry. On the other hand, since the governmental organizations had a limited understanding of the concept of participation, they materialized this notion merely in the form of some short, survey-based meetings.

In general, the TEPR program was implemented in the selected villages without any true participation on the part of the stakeholders. In this regard, the poor had by far less participation than the other residents of the villages because governmental organizations did not trust them. Khavarian-Garmsir, Pourahmad, Hataminejad, and Farhoudi (2018) argue that, because Iran's government depends on oil-based revenue, it does not feel any need to consult people for eliminating their problems. To develop the TEPR program, the government has allocated loans with low interests to those who are willing to enter the tourism business. Due to high inflation rates in Iran, these days a normal loan has an interest of 18%. However, the interest rate of loans devoted to the development of the TEPR program ranges from zero to 4%. They should also be paid back in a long period of time, with the paying back process beginning one year after granting the loan. There are nonetheless some obstacles making it difficult for the poor to receive these loans. Indeed, the poor cannot meet the conditions required for receiving these low interest loans.

All the participants believed that most of the major tourism businesses in the selected villages were managed by investors who lived in cities, with the least degree of attention being paid to the poor in this tourism development program. The results showed that this policy has led to high economic leakage in the selected villages.

Moreover, according to the results obtained through interviewing the stakeholders, no significant difference had taken place in the negotiation power of the poor in political and local decision making processes. This could be attributed to the governmental structure and the top-down system of implementing programs. In the organizational and hierarchical system of Iran, governmental managers are used to giving commands in a top-down manner. A review of the available literature displays that the countries with a rentier economy suffer from excessive centralization in the political system as well as chaotic and disorganized bureaucracy (Karl, 1997; Steiner, 2006). Thus, such governments do not like to implement collaborative plans in which ordinary people should participate.

Therefore, the government does not support the poor in official or unofficial ways. Almost half of the poor are engaged in unofficial tourism related businesses in the selected villages. Due to lack of support from planners and managers, they do not have any job security.

The findings of studies carried out in Ethiopia (Kubsa, 2007) and Gambia (Bah & Goodwin, 2003) show that the poor's engagement in unofficial businesses has led to their empowerment. The unofficial businesses in the selected villages majorly comprise selling pickles, jam, artifacts, and dried fruit as well as renting traditional houses to tourists. The poor try to make more money through engagement in these unofficial businesses.
Power

Unequal power relations also hinder the poor from garnering the benefits of tourism. The dominant social class of the villages and investors who come from outside the villages typically establish complicated connections with the government, hence gaining all the benefits of the TEPR program. Karl (1997) believes that, in countries with rentier systems, a new social class is formed and reaps all the major benefits of distributing financial resources. Regarding the way governmental resources of the TEPR program are distributed.

Thus, the poor find themselves in a condition whereby, instead of trusting and supporting them, authorities grant facilities to the powerful people. In order to evade the difficulties of empowering the power and making them directly engaged in the tourism industry, governmental managers have given more power and freedom to the dominant social class in the villages and investors who come from outside the villages. Governmental managers and planners believe that these powerful people can utilize governmental resources in the best possible way. They also believe that the new businesses established by these powerful people can present indirect job opportunities for the poor.

The results of this study indicate that, The results of the poor play no role in decision makings. Furthermore, there is an unequal, one-way power relation between the investors and the poor. The research participants claimed that the investors do not insure their workers to avoid the consequences of the labor law in Iran. Thus, the poor have little job security. Therefore, despite the fact that the labor law of Iran appropriately supports the workers, the law is not suitably enforced.

Training

Training is one of the basic principles for empowering the poor (Sharpley & Naidoo, 2010). Since rural residents are less knowledgeable and skillful than their urban counterparts, providing general and specialized training for them can play a significant role in enhancing capacities and empowering rural regions (Scheyvens, 2012). Tourism can boost the motivation of poor families to train their children. It can also lead to human resource development through the provision of training in official and unofficial sectors of tourism (Ashley et al., 2000). Verdugo (2007) argues that, with regard to the supply, the government has an important role in providing necessary training for expanding the knowledge base of the local community. Following this viewpoint, the government has launched general and specialized training programs in the selected villages.

The results of the interviews showed that holding training classes in the selected villages has improved empowerment in the local community. The experiences gained in Tunisia (Halioui & Schmidt, 2017) and South Africa (Butler, 2017; Rogerson, 2006; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012) also show that the governments’ general and specialized training has empowered the poor. These training programs encompass a wide range of tourism-related skills, e.g. how to treat the tourists, how to prepare artifacts, how to manage ecolodges, etc.

The training programs are offered by the Department of Natural Resources and Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts, and Tourism Organization of Shahrud.

However, the results of the interviews indicated that equal training opportunities are not provided for all villagers, especially the poor. Due to their lack of knowledge and financial constraints, many of the poor villagers have not been able to attend training classes aiming at enhancing tourism-related skills (Salehi-Isfahani, 2009; Schilcher, 2007). On the other hand, because of their social isolation and lack of self-confidence, the poor typically believe that they cannot learn the necessary skills to be engaged in tourism-related businesses. They believe they don’t have the required talent. They argue that if they had any talent, they would have identified it in the past, so they could eliminate poverty. Thus, they believe attending these training programs is useless.
Invitations are not sent to all the villagers to take part in these training programs. In fact, only powerful people, such as investors and dominant social classes in the villages, are invited to participate in the training classes. Thus, in the overall structure of tourism-related training, no unique training is offered to the poor. Governmental organizations have concentrated on training more capable groups (Butler, 2017; Manyara & Jones, 2007). On the other hand, the content of the training programs is not appropriate in the light of the poor’s condition. They are more suitable for people who enjoy a minimum financial and mental capacity. To be able to get engaged in tourism industry, the poor require special training (Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013).

To attend some of the specialized courses, the participants should pay a tuition. Although such training classes are subsidized by the government, the poor do not have enough financial resources to pay the tuition fees. Some of the poor refrain from paying such tuition fees because they don’t see any bright future for themselves in the tourism industry.

Lifestyle

Another factor hindering the poor’s full engagement in tourism industry is the difference in the lifestyle of the poor and the tourists. Scheyvens (2012) believes that an obstacle in tourism development is the conflict of interests between the tourists and the local community. The tourists of the selected villages commonly belong to the urban middle class, with their special beliefs, norms, and values. More precisely, they have adopted new (modern) values. In contrast, the poor in the selected villages believe that the beliefs, values, and norms of urban middle class citizens are harmful.

The results of the study show that, in the course of time, some non-poor villagers have changed their mind believing that tourists pose no threat to their local culture. However, the poor still strongly hold the idea that tourism is dangerous for their traditions, hence they oppose it. The poor believe that the behavior and appearance of most tourists are not in line with Islamic values (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012; Zarandian et al., 2016).

Furthermore, many villagers believe in determinism, hence attributing all difficulties to metaphysical factors. In comparison, the poor are more deterministic and traditional than typical villagers. As a result of their beliefs, the poor suffer from feeling powerless (Butler, 2017; Islam & Carlsen, 2012; Truong, 2014). The poor think they are powerless people who have limited capabilities and cannot control their future. Some poor villagers have a rather suitable tourism related job, e.g. renting their traditional houses to tourists, selling pickles and jam, etc. However, they have no motivation to get further engaged in tourism businesses to enhance their income. The results of the study demonstrate that, in addition to traditional beliefs, the distribution of money by governmental charity organizations among the poor and the monthly subsidies given by the government to each Iranian citizen have discouraged the poor from improving their lives. As such, the poor have adjusted their livelihood in the light of the pension they receive from the government and their low income. For some poor families, the monthly subsidies provided by the government and the financial support received from Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation amount to 60% to 70% of their total income.

Conclusion and implications

The findings of this study shed light on the issues and challenges of the TEPR program as implemented in three selected villages of Iran. In this program, the government plays a crucial role in all the three levels of planning, implementation, and supervision of tourism industry. On the other hand, the government believes that the development of the private sector can result in the creation of more jobs and poverty reduction. Thus, a considerable proportion of the resources allocated to the TEPR program has been given to the private sector. However, a large bulk of resources has been presented to rentier groups who are well connected to the government. The results of this study
indicate that, in the absence of powerful civil society, the private sector has gained a lot of strength as a result of governmental supports. Similarly, the review of the literature shows that, although in rentier governments pro-poor strategies are proposed, the final winners always are the monopolist private sector and rentier groups that are connected to the government (Craig & Porter, 2006; Hanjra & Culas, 2011; Karl, 1997; Steiner, 2006). As a result, the poverty reduction programs based on tourism development in the selected villages have failed to benefit the poor.

Overall, a monopolist private sector and a government which is in charge of planning are the major characteristics of the TEPR program implemented in the selected villages. Ghosh and Siddique (Ghosh & Siddique, 2017) believe that governments should play the role of strong coordinators and develop strategies for directing the benefits of tourism toward the poor, hence fair promotion of tourism. The results of this study also showed that a rentier governmental system dominating Iran over the past 65 years and 40 years of providing direct financial aid by governmental charity organizations to the poor have changed their expectations of and attitude toward the way they should improve their condition. Thus, the poor in the selected villages prefer slim benefits of governmental charity organizations to attempts for improving their life conditions.

Suggestions are made for dealing with the problem. (1) Teaching formal and informal jobs for the rural poor as well as how to use these jobs. (2) Targeting the poor in tourism programs, so that they will benefit from the benefits of tourism activities. (3) Formation of training classes to educate the poor about their training responsibilities. (4) Provide making-decision opportunities for the poor: Definition of responsibility for all stakeholders. (5) Applying practices that empower the poor in rural areas.

Finally, countries such as Iran earn great revenues through oil sales, but the oil industry does not create many jobs. So, in these countries, unemployment and poverty are often high. Moreover, the governments of these countries have not been able to invest in productive industries. On these accounts, it is suggested that future studies examine the experiences of investing oil revenues in the tourism industry to develop the retarded regions. In this sense, the question to answer is ‘what are the issues and challenges involved in the realization of PPT through investment of rentier incomes in underdeveloped regions?’

Finally, this study suffers from some limitations, some of which are mentioned here. The specific features of Iran (e.g. being governed by a religious government and suffering from the consequences of international sanctions) make it difficult to generalize the findings to other rentier countries. Moreover, the traditional structure of the studied communities was a major obstacle in interviewing women. Thus, the researchers was forced to use a female interviewer. Another limitation of the study has to do with the fact that the data related to the poor were obtained from governmental charity organizations. These organizations resisted sharing the required information at first. It took the researchers two months to convince the authorities to have access to the required data.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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