Rural Development in Iran: 
A Survey of Policies and Outcomes

Ali Shakoori 
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran

ABSTRACT

This article examines secular changes in post-revolutionary rural Iran by focusing on rural social attitudes, social stratification, demography, morphology, and architecture. Offering a review of major rural reforms, it contends that although in the first two decades after the revolution, rural communities were primarily affected by state policies, they have been chiefly influenced by macro developments since then, nationally or globally. Rural change has been associated with the integration of the rural structure into the modern structure rather than adhering to the state-specific rural reforms and/or its ideological imperatives. The article concludes that such developments have resulted in greater access to modern amenities and paved the way for rural communities to adopt modern changes that were not necessarily on the government’s ideological agenda. Hence, the revolutionary objectives of an equal distribution of rural development benefits and combating rural poverty remain elusive.

Keywords: Rural change, globalization, revolution, Iran, rural development

Introduction

The rural sector has been a major developmental concern and an ideological imperative in Iran since the very outset of the post-revolutionary era in 1979. This was partly because of the culminating criticisms of the pre-revolutionary rural policies that had neither substantially increased the supply of food in the urban areas, nor raised the overall agricultural productivity in proportion to the rapidly growing population (Azkia, 2002; Haghayeghi, 1990; Schirazi, 1993). These policies along with other macro socioeconomic developments helped to reinforce the existing social strata and the widening socioeconomic gap between different
social groups in general and the rural areas in particular and intensified the massive migration of the rural poor to the cities (Amid, 1990; Fadaee, 2018; Mohtadi, 1990). It has been argued that the pre-revolutionary Pahlavi regime had deliberately neglected the rural sector while trying to create a modern Iranian society in imitation of the Western industrial countries. In contrast, the new revolutionary regime’s “revolutionary ideologues perceived the rural sector as ‘deprived’ and deserving of remedial programs” (Hooglund, 2009, p. 1). Hence, right after the Revolution, the new government accorded priority to the rural areas in the provision of various social services.

As a result, policy priorities and ideological emphasis focused attention on changing rural society through implementing rural development programs. Much of the literature on rural Iran has focused on rural transformations as direct consequences of government policies or individual strategies and projects. This is mainly based on a dominant approach in the literature that defines rural development activity as “a form of the state intervention” (Harriss, 1982, p. 16). The approach in this article is that rural villages have been transformed as a result of both official/administrative policies and macro (national as well as global) developments with the latter gaining increasing importance. Having reviewed the accessible published and unpublished literature on the socioeconomic characteristics of rural Iran as well as several case studies on the effect of a single rural development program on the Iranian peasantry, it examines continuity and change in the socioeconomic structure of Iran’s rural communities. For this purpose, the article first reviews the major post-revolutionary rural policies. Then, the intended and unintended outcomes of these reforms and specific rural programs are examined. Finally, the concluding remarks focus on the prominent features of post-revolutionary rural policies in Iran.

**Rural Reforms: Land Reform and Restructuring of Agricultural/Rural Administration**

The new government’s rural policy right after the 1979 Revolution generally focused on two main issues: solving the land question and meeting the basic needs of rural people by reorganizing agricultural organizations and implementing rural development strategies.

In the months leading to the Revolution, the structure of social order began to break down and social borderlines suddenly started to disappear. This pulled the countryside into the larger (revolutionary) social
events unfolding in the cities; once government power weakened, land seizures began to emerge in both villages and cities, which lasted until the mid-1980s. As far as the rural society is concerned, as a result, about 800,000 hectares of agricultural land owned by larger farmers were occupied by peasants during the first 2 years after the revolution (Ehsani, 2006, pp. 89). The struggle over land involved various social classes or groups (peasants, landowners, etc.), political factions (Marxist, Islamists, conservatives, radicals), the state as well as revolutionary organizations, leading to three reactions:

1. The conventional jurisprudential reaction, which was put forward by some religious scholars and teachers, based on the legitimacy of ownership.

2. The conventional economic reaction which was created by agricultural and economic experts who were pro-mechanization and commercialization of agriculture and opposed to equal land distribution among peasants.

3. The state legislative and executive reactions including propaganda campaigns against land seizures; an emphasis on law and order and the necessity of rural stability for increasing agricultural production; and the preparation of a land reform bill for solving the land problem.

The different reactions eventually led to a moderate solution: restricted and legitimized landownership. However, the dominant discourse was still revolutionary and radical in nature, in the sense that limited and legitimized land ownership is an Islamic idea, and not only did it prevent the accumulation of wealth, but it also gave rise to an individual incentive for agricultural production (Lahsaeizadeh, 1993, pp. 256–257). This Islamic approach to land reform was adopted by the revolutionary council in March 1980, which was basically manifested in clause C of the land reform Act.¹

In practice, the implementation of a radical land reform faced serious problems and was the focal point for over a decade of conflict and struggle, not only in rural Iran but also among different political and religious factions. At the official level, the conflict took place between the Council of Guardians, the opponents of land reform, and the parliament, which was a proponent of it, by 1986, when after several revisions and amendments, they eventually produced a compromised law title being awarded in the case of land already seized by the peasants. As a result, radical land
reform changed and became highly conservative. The new law places no limits on the size of land ownership by individuals and restricts redistribution only to land confiscated from the previous regime’s dependents or land whose owners have emigrated and are not coming back to claim their property. The result was that the total number of households who were beneficiaries of the Islamic Land Reforms did not exceed 6 percent of the total rural households (Azkia, 1986, p. 13).

The government’s next rural policy was to change the structure of rural administration. The government first established the Services Centres for Rural and Nomadic people, on June 4, 1980. This measure was initially a response to criticisms leveled against the ministry of agriculture and its bureaucratic features in the pre-revolutionary era, when “the magnificent glass skyscraper in which the ministry resided at one of the finest addresses in the capital was regarded as a symbol of its alienation from its real tasks” (Schirazi, 1993, p. 136). The plan to set up the centers based on the notion that “the ministry would relocate in the district villages (dehestan) in order to get closer to the land” (Schirazi, 1993, p. 137).

The centers included all aspects of rural life and all the services the government could provide for expanding agriculture and improving rural areas. According to Article 10 of the proposal, they would provide general, technical, and infra-structural services as well as services related to the credit system; training; research; welfare; marketing; counseling; planning; assisting with setting up Islamic Service Councils and so on. These activities were to obtain self-sufficiency in the long run through implementing infrastructural programs and bringing about inducements for the development of agriculture and the growth of production, to meet the basic needs of the rural population; to establish social justice through reducing the socioeconomic gap between town and country (Azkia, 2002).

Because of the futile consequences of the non-participatory nature of pre-revolutionary rural policies, the village councils were given the main power. Similarly, the participation of rural people in the entire process of rural development was seen as the main objective of the centers (Schirazi, 1993, pp. 137–139).

Field studies indicated that the centers never achieved their various objectives or acted according to the principles projected in their original proposal. Contrary to the spirit of the project and its regulations, in practice, the center made all the major decisions and acted very much like the Farm Corporations in dictating agricultural policies on peasants. Therefore, their consultative role has been forgotten (Azkia, 1986, p. 17). Most of the planning has been imposed from above, not formulated at
the village level. The Village Councils, in many cases, had not been set up or were few in number compared to the service centers (Azkia, 1986; Shakoori, 2001). For instance, of 1,573 projected centers, only 730 district centers had been opened, 58 percent below the target (Schirazi, 1993, p. 142). No attempt was made to encourage rural participation or to use local knowledge. Most of the district and county service centers were located in the most prosperous areas, and they acted similar to other governmental institutions. It seems that at least two reasons were responsible for this failure. First, setting up the very centers was comprehensive but was not an organic part of the country’s general politico-administrative reform policy. Secondly, their establishment was first and foremost based on political motives rather than bureaucratic rationality or the country’s rural actualities—that is, an immediate response to criticisms of the pre-revolutionary state policy.²

The second measure to solve the country’s rural problem was to establish the Jihad (holy struggle) organization. Its establishment was a revolutionary move, supported by the radical forces within the ruling stratum, most of whom demanded a deep-seated reform in agrarian relations as well as rural administration which is “based on the mobilization of the masses”, unfettered by bureaucracy and run democratically to increase the participation of the population and “put an end to all sorts of privation in the countryside” (Schirazi, 1993, p. 148). The forces motivating the establishment of Jihad were mainly politico-ideological. It was announced that in order to restrain the influence of the leftist groups in rural areas, it was necessary.

Indeed, Jihad was foremost a politico-ideological organization and aimed to “to ensure that the opponents of the revolution, particularly the left, did not use the opportunity to go out into the countryside and conduct anti-Islamic propaganda” (Schirazi, 1993, p. 148). However, due to the radicalization of the politics and the war with Iraq and the part played by Jihad in the war, it expanded and consolidated its status through transforming its shoura (council)-like administrative system into a ministerial system. This transformation made Jihad’s responsibilities duplicated or overlapped with those of other organizations.

For the reasons discussed earlier, Jihad enjoyed a generous supply of financial resources and enthusiastic volunteers. The available data indicate that the amount of the government’s budget spent by Jihad on developing and renovating villages in 1978–1987 was quite sizeable. According to an official report in 1992, over 39 percent of credit allocated to rural
projects was absorbed by the Jihad’s construction undertakings (Ministry of Jihad-e Sazandegi, 1992, p. 44).

Despite its numerous activities, little attempt has been made to evaluate comprehensively Jihad’s performance; instead, it mostly limited to the first years or the first decade of its establishment. According to a number of accounts, the Jihad was fully active in providing various infrastructural facilities and public services in rural areas and development achievements have been impressive (e.g., Farazmand, 1989; The World Bank, 1994). However, these accounts provide some facts about the quantity and the type of Jihad’s projects, they do not reveal the fact that how effective have they been in alleviating rural problems. According to an official account by the Jihad itself,

despite the fact that the rural areas enjoy far more infrastructural facilities compared with the prerevolutionary era, the measures taken by the government in this regard have failed to eradicate rural poverty and to meet basic needs of the rural population. (Ministry of Jihad-e Sazandegi, 1992, p. 48)

To overcome one of the long-lasting and most contested problems of the country in rural administration, in 2001 the Ministry of Jihad was integrated with the Ministry of Agriculture to end up the over two past decades of futile costly duplication and competition between the two ministries, through setting up the latest hybrid bureaucracy in the post-revolutionary era. However, this merger decision has not brought any clear solution to the deep-rooted problem of the rural sector. The country’s rural sector in the post-revolutionary period has gradually been marginalized and has returned to its original state, as in the past for a latent and unwritten reason: policy priority given by the government to the non-rural—urban or industrial—sector.

Rural Reforms, Macro Developments, and Village-level Changes

As emphasized in the literature (e.g., Canning & Pedroni, 1999; Ferguson, 1990), rural development efforts along with macro (national/international) developments and policies do in fact bring about some degree of socioeconomic transformation. This has been the case in Iran over the past four decades of the Islamic Republic. Examples of the former can be seen in rural reforms as well as rural and national infrastructural policies. Examples of the latter could be seen in such policies as the...
adoption of structural adjustment and economic liberalization policy, family planning, the expansion in the number and variety of post-secondary educational opportunities (universities and colleges), the development of a variety of native and (foreign) satellite TV channels both nationally and globally, the national-wide policy of the development of mobile and immobile telecommunication as well as internet networks and so on. These developments have been mainly begun in the 1990s and exacerbated in the late decades.

Widely acknowledged by many scholars (e.g., Canning & Pedroni, 1999; Fluitman, 1983; Henderson, Storeygard, & Weil, 2011), a basic public infrastructure is essential for economic growth and socio-cultural developments mainly through linking the (rural) communities to outside transformations. Hence, it can be assumed that the post-revolutionary planned and unplanned developments affect various socioeconomic aspects of rural society.

Furthermore, contrary to the dominant view in the literature that most of the post-revolutionary rural reforms and infrastructural projects have been consumption-oriented rather than production-oriented, and thus they could seldom contribute to a fundamental change in rural areas (e.g., Azkia, 2002; Ministry of Jihad-e Sazandegi, 1992), this article, inspired by the political economy tradition (Ferguson, 1990; Heyer, Roberts, & Williams, 1981), believes that rural development can be affected by a complex set of institutions and initiatives that encompass multiple unpredicted long-term changes, which cannot be merely interpreted by one-sided (economic) dimension. Even a failed development plan/program may bring about important structural changes. The reason, as Ferguson (1990, p. 276) states, is that

intentions [in development efforts]… are only the visible part of a much larger mechanism through which structures are actually produced, reproduced, and transformed. … Plans are explicit … but any intentional deployment only takes effect through a convoluted route involving unacknowledged structures and unpredicted outcomes.

These outcomes may be convergent or divergent in some aspects with macro-level developments. As some scholars (e.g., Baily, 1969; Preston, 1980) asserted, the processes of change tend to take a form of the integration of the rural structure into the dominant larger (urban) structure, which can be mentioned in the following aspects.
Socio-demographic Change

Post-revolutionary developments in Iran highlight the country’s shifts in socio-demographic indices over the past decades. The examination of available demographic statistics indicates that there have been somewhat remarkable changes in migration, marriage, and reproduction during this period with a sharp lowering of fertility to replacement level, an expansion of a strong rural public health program that has increased child survival, an increase in the age of marriage for both males and females, and so on. According to the 2011 population census, between 1976 and 1986, an average annual population growth of almost 4 percent was reached, but due to decreasing fertility levels, the growth decreased to 1.3 percent between 2006 and 2011. The decline has been more in rural areas than in urban areas, due mainly to rural–urban migration as well as an impressive decline in the fertility rate. In one generation (a period of over three decades), Iranian women living in rural areas moved from giving birth to an average of eight children to around two children (Table 1.). Although the quick decline in the total fertility rate coincided with the revival of the national family planning program since the end of the 1980s, delivered free of charge through a nationwide network of primary health care facilities, the important point is its widespread acceptance by rural women, indicating a dramatic attitudinal change in rural areas. Indeed, this change rapidly neutralized the powerful official and ideological opposition of the early period of the revolution to the Shah’s national family program as a Western innovation and contributed to the notion that the post-revolutionary family program is one of the most successful

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indices</td>
<td>Areas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population growth rate</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>–1.4</td>
<td>–1.4</td>
<td>–0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household size</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility rate</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The average age of marriage</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ones in the world. The decline in the fertility rate, after a slight increase in it from 1976 to 1986, coincided with a remarkable decrease in the average household size, revealing socioeconomic transformations in Iranian society in general and the countryside in particular. For example, the marked change in household size happened between 1986 and 2011; the household size decreased from 5.5 to 3.7 persons in a rural area and 4 to 3.5 in urban areas—representing about a 20 percent decline in the household size over three decades. Another similar important demographic change can be seen in the average age of marriage. As data of Table 1 reveal, the average age of marriage for women in Iran has risen from 20 years in 1976 to about 25 years in 2011. The average age of marriage in rural areas has increased from 19.1 in 1976 to 23.7 in 2011. In urban areas, corresponding figures have been 20.2 for 1976 and 23.7 years in 2011 (Table 3).

Similar to demographic transformations, a greater and deeper change can be seen in other areas of rural life. This is foremost evident in rural social attitudes, which can typically be conceived of as a proxy of changes in socio-cultural values/beliefs and behaviors affected by profound long-term macro developments. For example, having studied the impact of external changes (either interventionist or no-interventionist) on the typical selected villages in Kalardasht, Mir-Hosseini found a notable diffusion of an urban and modern style of living, values, and beliefs in the region as a result of steady weakening in its state of isolation and increasing contact with tourists as well as urban experience of former rural migrants, which have mainly been rooted in the expansion and improvement of transportation facilities. She particularly mentions this change in such aspects as veil, marriage ceremony, age of marriage, choice of bride, divorce, birth control, etc. (1987, pp. 130–156).

Similarly, having emphasized increased women literacy, Shadi-Talab (2001) affirmed that rural women have greatly changed their perceptions toward having equal rights with men in many aspects of their life. According to her, the rising of educational attainment for Iranian girls in general and rural ones, in particular, means that marriage and childbearing are often delayed into the early twenties and that their aspirations and expectations have also risen. All of these have led to the improvement of the status of women at least within the family, and women have increased their role in family decision-making considerably. Especially, some field studies revealed a severe change in rural women attitude toward female employment outside the home. For example, according to a field research in 2002, 73 percent of women aged 15–49 said that they would prefer their daughters to continue their education after high
school rather than merely to marry early; 62.5 percent also said that they would welcome their daughters to be able to find a job in the future. The respondents believed that women should work outside the home to have financial autonomy and also to contribute to the family’s income (Paknia & Navabakhsh, 2015, p. 11). Similarly, Bahramitash during her fieldwork “…met young women who had left their rural areas to live with relatives in cities to search for better marriage prospects and also for better work opportunities” (2013, p. 99).

Furthermore, based on field research on the views of young women toward family, education, employment, marriage, religion, and politics, Hooglund argues that young rural women are questioning traditional family in matters such as marriage and employment out of the home. The research also reveals that attitudes of some rural women are becoming more similar to those of young urban women, particularly from the point of view of an understanding of women rights and expectations of what women can do (2011, pp. 120–136).

Another significant change occurred in social stratification and social mobility in rural areas. There are no reliable statistics or panel studies on rural stratification patterns in the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, with respect to the ideologically oriented nature of post-revolutionary rural programs and macro developments, it can now be claimed that the political turmoil of the revolution did not isolate rural society from larger sociopolitical events. In addition, some of the most profound changes took place in Iranian society at large as the consequences of deformation of the social aggregate structure (Fadaeei, 2018). This, in turn, affected rural communities in later periods. This was first and foremost reflected in the existing hierarchies of rural society. As Ehsani remarks,

younger men felt much more in tune with the forces assaulting the older order than did their more cautious fathers. In many tribal areas, subaltern social groups successfully challenged the superiority of khans, and sheiks as they joined new revolutionary institutions and became part of the new political hierarchy. Even many rural women managed to carve out a greater public role. (Ehsani, 2006, p. 87)

Taking these developments and orientations into account, some researchers concluded that the revolution, in general, elevated the sociopolitical position of lower-class rural dwellers at the expense of upper-class social groups (Ashraf, 1985; Ehsani, 2006, p. 87; Saeidi, 2004). At the village level, this new social group could dominate rural organizations such
as village councils and Mobilization Resistance Force and control the rural power structure. However, this can reveal some realities about the tendency in the power structure, but with respect to higher rural emigration, a significant fact was that villagers with high socioeconomic potentiality and mostly younger ones moved to live in urban areas where post-revolutionary developments provided them with greater job changes and higher welfare facilities than the countryside. In this process, both pull and push factors such as the development of modern education with an urban-oriented nature and the creation of several revolutionary organizations often with a parallel character exacerbated this process, yet the latter can be considered more significant. Indeed, these organizations were set up to assist institutionalization of the ideology of the ruling class by producing an ideological apparatus for the new regime when the revolutionary forces could not trust the old regime’s bureaucratic apparatus (Farazmand, 1989; Saeidi, 2004). In this process, they assisted individuals with lay and rural backgrounds to move into new economic, social, and occupational positions. This type of social mobility was to extend the power of Islamic ideology.

Economic and Physical Elevation

There is no comprehensive or rural level quantitative/econometric study to show the economic impact of the thousands of small-scale rural projects implemented mainly by Jihad; nevertheless, a number of field investigations and observations indicate that they had a remarkable impact on the countryside. It is argued that these reforms speeded up the process of integration of urban areas and the countryside as never before, through mainly providing rural accessibility to agricultural production markets and marketing as well as diversifying nonfarm activities that all together helped to change the quality of rural life (e.g., Ehsani, 2006; Hooglund, 2011; Mir-Hosseini, 1987). An immediate consequence, for example, was that “farmers could sell their products at the market more efficiently, and people, commodities, and socio-cultural values and behavior began to move back and forth between rural and urban settings with ever greater ease” (Ehsani, 2006, p. 89). Likewise, more villagers acquired more modern goods and living facilities such as televisions, cars, refrigerators, private telephone line, mobile phone, private bathroom, and urban jobs. Beneficiaries mostly were villages near cities which were gradually turned into affordable communities for urban labors. As Ehsani, in his fieldwork in rural Khozestan, observed, “… approximately 60 percent of the male
heads of households ... worked off farms, in non-agricultural jobs; and approximately one-quarter of the male working population was not involved with any form of agricultural activity or animal husbandry"—most of these people involved in various urban occupations (2006, pp. 89–90). In a similar way, Hooglund’s visit from typical villages, near the city of Shiraz in south-central Iran, reveals that,

At the time of the 1980 to 1979 revolution, these villages were major centers of agricultural production, all of them producing two or three times more crops than needed for local consumption.... In the subsequent 30 years; however, income from various non-agricultural sources has become important for households.... [Hence] in stark contrast to the prerevolutionary years, when at least 90 percent of families relied on income derived from within [villages], by the mid-1990s approximately 70 percent of household depended wholly or partly on income earned outside the village.... (Hooglund, 2011, p. 121)

The income from urban jobs not only provided cash for buying a variety of appliances, but also contributed to the growth of a local market in different ways, and facilitated the process of penetrating urban socio-economic ways of living into these villages in diverse ways since the early 1980s. For example, examining the long-term economic impact of both pre and post-revolutionary rural reforms, focusing on the north of Iran, Mir-Hosseini declares that most villages enjoyed notably from externally induced change and particularly “... experienced significant change as a result of the expansion of tourism in the region” (Mir-Hosseini, 1987, p. 393). A closer integration into the national economy took place as a result of the diversification of the rural economy. For instance, “the villagers are now employed by the government as teachers, clerks and mountain guides. Some have become land-dealers .... A number of new shops have been opened in the village to cater for the needs of tourists and more affluent villagers” (ibid., p. 128). The significant impact happened in the redistribution of wealth and a reallocation of economic resources in the sense that

some villagers sold their land and acquired cash which they then used to buy a car to start a new business, or open a shop, or to build new houses in which to accommodate some Tehrani guests. At the same time, cash became available to some individuals who acted as land dealers. (ibid., p. 128)

As many researchers (e.g., Ehsani, 2006; Hooglund, 1997; Sartipour, 2012) have pointed out in more detail, particular aspects of post-revolutionary rural change have been manifested in different aspects of rural
morphology and architecture particularly from the viewpoint of building materials and techniques as well as the organization of space. For instance, Cinderblock construction (boluk) has replaced timber for wall construction, galvanized iron (halab) has replaced straw and rush as a roof covering, and the saddle roof has replaced pointed and hipped roofs. Building operations are neither in the hands of the traditional specialist nor are done in local traditional styles: the through-stone builder or layer (boluksāz) has replaced the carpenter-jointer (najjār), the metal (iron or aluminum) windows and doors’ frames have replaced the wooden ones and the iron-roofer (halabsāz) has replaced the thatcher (gālisāz). The spatial pattern of these new houses, away from multi-functional features (a place of having several production and consumption roles such as doing husbandry, bakery, etc.), with only habitable one has been developed: Rooms are more specialized; the seasonal shifts within the domestic space are now more limited, and the sense of privacy is emphasized. All of these obviously indicate the diffusion of an urban pattern of housing architecture and that of modern living values in the countryside.

In his typical work, “letter from an Iranian village”, Hooglund provides a window on the tremendous morphological transformations that have swept rural Iran since the revolution. For example, “the brick houses did not resemble the former homes” but more resemble “the style of Iranian urban homes…. This is a striking evidence of a major improvement in living standards in a village where most families in 1979 had lived at a basic subsistence level” (Hooglund, 1997, p. 79). Indeed, contrary to the perception of the Islamic Republic as a traditionalist regime, post-revolutionary planned developments have provided non-traditionalist styles of living in the countryside where now embraces modernity more than ever before. For example, as Hooglund states,

The typical… [Village] kitchen now featured a modern gas range, a large sink with hot and cold running water, at least on the refrigerator with a freezer compartment, a washing machine, and numerous small electrical appliances such as a juice extractor, meat grinder, food processor, boom box, and vacuum. A large water heater occupied one corner and heated water not only for the kitchen but also for the bathroom shower—an undreamed of luxury in the 1970s when everyone used the now abandoned public bath. (ibid., p. 79)

A point to be added is that the above-mentioned developments only indicates that today rural areas have been, more than ever before, experiencing modern changes in accessing a variety of living facilities
and occupational opportunities in aggregate terms; nevertheless, a close examination of the nature of changes, in terms of the distribution of beneficiaries, indicates persistent inequalities. For example, micro (village) level research confirms that developmentally potential villages or villagers have mostly benefited from post-revolutionary changes (e.g., Mir-Hosseini, 1987; Shakoori, 2001). Macro-level data and analyses also confirm success in improving the standard of living and the quality of life at the macro (national) level, in aggregate term, and failure in improving the overall distribution of income and basic services at the micro (e.g., villages, social groups, households) level, in individual term (e.g., Amid, 2009; Fotros & Maaboudi, 2011; Naghd, Azami, Naghd, Faghi Solouk, & Ghiasvand, 2013; Noorbakhsh, 2002).

Nevertheless, the most obvious aspect and source of inequality in Iran is the rural–urban differential, both in pre- and post-revolutionary periods. According to Statistical Centre of Iran (2003), household expenditure in the pre-revolution era was also highly unequal. For example, the bottom 10 percent of household (the lowest income group) accounted for only two and half times percent of total expenditure, while the highest 10 percent income group was responsible for about 23 percent of expenditure. The differentials among the regions were similar. For example, during the last decade before the revolution, the income gap between rural and urban households exacerbated and exceeded two and a half times.

Official reports on income distribution on the basis of the Gini index in the post-revolutionary era shows that, this index rose from 0.426 during the plan holiday (1979–1988) to 0.443 during the first plan (1989–1993), then declined to 0.426 during the second plan (1994–1999) and with no notable change in the first and second years of the third plan (2000–2004). However, as compared to urban areas, the Gini index indicates an increase in rural areas (Table 2). With respect to the proportion of rural and urban households living under the poverty line, the percentage of poorer households in rural areas is as two times as their counterparts in urban areas. The rural–urban socioeconomic gap prompted the migration of villagers to cities on a massive scale.

A complementary study, focusing on the distribution of food and health expenditures in rural and urban areas from 2001 to 2013, shows the distribution in rural areas is further unequal than in rural areas (Table 3).

It is worth mentioning that although higher inequality in accessing to basic services and main sources of living can prove to be one of the biggest challenges in the nexus of rural development, the very persistence of poverty is as an obvious indication of unfortunate nature of intentional
Table 2.
The Gini Index for Rural and Urban Areas in the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period Area</th>
<th>Plan Holiday</th>
<th>First Plan</th>
<th>Second Plan</th>
<th>Third Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.426</td>
<td>0.437</td>
<td>0.429</td>
<td>0.422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.426</td>
<td>0.420</td>
<td>0.397</td>
<td>0.408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0.426</td>
<td>0.443</td>
<td>0.426</td>
<td>0.415</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.
The Gini Index for Rural and Urban Expenditures on
Food and Health (2001–2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Naghd et al. (2013, p. 22).

rural development efforts to alleviate rural problems. This persistence is more clearly and early addressed by Jihad itself that it “… has failed to eradicate rural poverty and to meet the basic needs of the rural population” (Ministry of Jihad-e Sazandegi, 1992, pp. 48–49).

Conclusion

This article has focused on the long-term rural developments by examining the process of continuity and change in the socioeconomic structure of rural communities. Two main factors have been assumed as responsible for bringing historically isolated rural communities into direct contact with the outside world and to make rural change possible: macro developments and the state action (intervention) often through planned changes.

It was argued that post-revolutionary rural reforms were, first of all, a reaction against the pre-revolutionary policies, but are far from achieving their objectives. The main reason for this failure was that most rural policies initiated after the revolution were politically and ideologically motivated; once the short-term politico-ideological objectives had been
attained, most projects or reforms were either abandoned or left to fade away. For example, the hasty establishment of the service centers was above all an immediate response to criticisms of the Shah’s rural policy rather than the country’s rural/administrative actualities. In practice, most of the district service centers were concentrated in prosperous areas and benefited the better-off, and their tasks were only limited to extension service provision.

The land reform program of the 1980s was fortunate. Although the nature of the land reform initially was radical and demanded more egalitarian reform, toward the end of the 1980s it gradually took a conservative form and, consequently, less than 5 percent of total land—mostly barren lands or lands not suitable for cultivation—was distributed among small segments of the rural poor.

The same process and motives can be seen in the setting up of the village councils as a broader part of the service centers project. However, they were, in fact, an attempt to disarm the leftist forces that had used the power vacuum that existed in the immediate aftermath of the revolution to set up their own councils in certain areas.

A particular aspect of rural administrative reform was the creation of a highly ideological rural organization, the Jihad-e Sazandegi. Although successful in providing a variety of rural infrastructures, public services, and small rural projects, Jihad failed to meet the basic needs of the rural population or remove rural poverty. Ironically, Jihad was to be functioned revolutionary, unfettered by bureaucracy, but in 1983 it was transformed into a ministerial system becoming a purely bureaucratic organization. More importantly, in 2001 Jihad was merged with the Ministry of Agriculture that its original formation was based on criticism against the ministry’s bureaucracy.

Regardless of whether rural reforms have been positive or negative, these reforms, particularly rural infrastructural projects, along with macro developments such as government socioeconomic policies and globalization have had various long-term effects on the rural society. These developments were particularly revealed in such aspects as greater social mobility, a higher economic diversity and prosperity (access to nonfarm and urban jobs, higher income and various modern living facilities), a greater attitudinal changes (toward traditional ways of living through adopting modern democratic ideas, etc.), and a spectacular change in rural morphology and architecture (in respect of using building modern materials and that of utilizing urban design).
Nevertheless, the examination of the nature of these changes shows that first there has been convergent rather than divergent processes in the rural society—in the sense that the processes of change tend to take a form of the integration of the rural structure into the modern/urban structure. Second, villages with higher potential in terms of developmental background and a higher socioeconomic status could greatly benefit from these developments. Third, while these developments could bring about, more than ever before, greater access to basic services and the main sources of modern living, the distribution of benefits proved more unequal. This, in turn, can prove one of the biggest challenges in the nexus of rural development in combating rural poverty. Fourth, although convergent processes of rural society with urban one can mean a greater chance for the former to enjoy much better standards of living, rural society has to deal with modern and newly emerging social and environmental risks such as pollution, water drainage, desertification, deforestation, unemployment, soil erosion, drug addiction, social deviance, and so on.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

NOTES

1. According to the Act, radical reform was summed up in the clause c, which included the holdings of the large landlords whose membership legitimized by the previous regime and land under cultivation. Based on the notes of the Act, a plot of cultivated land was defined as large if it was three times the size of what ‘local custom’ saw necessary for the subsistence of a peasant family.
2. The criticisms rooted in the fact that the revolution was the consequence of long-term dissatisfaction in the society and brought with policy expectation for a fundamental change to socioeconomic system including rural one (for more details, see Fadaee, 2018).
4. A comparison of the rural–urban migration rates before and after the revolution indicates a decline in the rate of rural migration, yet the actual numbers soaring. For instance, between 1977 and 1986, over 3.5 million rural people migrated to the cities, in the following decade, 1986–1996, only 1.9 million people moved from their villages to the cities (Azkia, 2002, p. 117).

5. In the post-revolutionary era, thousands of professionals and white-collar workers were purged and replaced by the revolutionary organizations with members of the lower middle classes who supported the revolutionary regime. Furthermore, these organizations then took advantage of the situation to allocate the special higher education quota in order to produce their own cultural elites. This paved the way for these organizations to allocate key positions to those who support the Islamic government. These organizations also implicitly took the advantage of the situation to introduce selected social groups to occupy various levels of managerial positions in public organizations. All of these indicate that there has been an implicit strong will to facilitate social mobility by supporting members of lower middle classes with lay backgrounds to occupy the various positions in the state apparatus since the revolution (for more details, see Saeidi, 2004, pp. 486–487).

REFERENCES


Ali Shakoori holds degrees from the University of Tehran (BA and MA), Iran, and University of York (PhD), Britain, and is an associate professor in the Department of Social Planning of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran. He has written several articles and books dealing with diverse aspects of developmental issues in Iran such as rural reforms, and social and tourism development. [email: shakoori@ut.ac.ir]