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# A Comprehensive Framework for Selecting Tourism Target Villages: A Multi-Criteria Approach in Iran

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**Abstract**

**Background:** Rural tourism has become a key strategy for rural transformation, environmental protection, and sustainable development. However, coherent criteria for selecting tourism villages at both macro and micro territorial levels remain lacking, particularly in Iran.

**Objective:** This study aims to identify, classify, and prioritise the criteria for selecting Tourism Target Villages (TTV) in Iran within an integrated national framework.

**Method:** A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a systematic review of 12 relevant studies retrieved from Iranian scientific databases to extract initial criteria with a two-round Delphi survey of 22 purposively selected experts from five professional fields to validate and prioritise these criteria. Hierarchical scores were calculated for criteria groups, main criteria, and sub-criteria, which were then assigned to four effectiveness classes.

**Results:** The framework comprises eight criteria groups, 25 main criteria, and 90 sub-criteria. The tourism (0.89) and environmental (0.76) groups received the highest priority, whereas the managerial group (0.54) received the lowest. Tourist attraction, demand and market, vegetation, and climate were the top-ranked main criteria, and 57.8% of the sub-criteria demonstrated medium to very high effectiveness.

**Conclusion:** The proposed framework offers a transparent, evidence-based decision-support tool for Iran's TTV programme and a transferable model for other developing countries.

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## INTRODUCTION

Tourism has firmly established itself as one of the largest and most dynamic industries globally, exerting profound influence across economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions at both national and international levels (Viglia et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). Its development, however, cannot proceed haphazardly; it requires strategic and spatially informed planning that carefully evaluates the unique potentials and constraints of different regions based on their social, economic, and cultural endowments (Abram & Waldren, 2021; Liburd & Edwards, 2010; Sørensen & Grindsted, 2021).

Sustainable tourism development, in particular, demands a proactive approach one that begins with the systematic identification of attractions and capacities, followed by the formulation of context-sensitive plans that balance developmental aspirations with environmental and community well-being (Beeton, 2006; Stylidis & Seetanah, 2021). Among the diverse forms of tourism, rural tourism has emerged as one of the most significant and rapidly expanding segments worldwide. Rural tourism encompasses a rich tapestry of attractions cultural, historical, livelihood-based, and natural that are uniquely embedded in rural landscapes (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Wilson et al., 2001).

Since the 1970s, rural tourism has evolved from a niche interest into a mainstream component of rural development strategies in both developed and developing countries (Lane et al., 2015). Its growing prominence is not coincidental: rural tourism aligns closely with the principles of sustainable development by promoting environmental stewardship, cultural preservation, and economic diversification in areas that often face marginalisation and decline (Lane, 1994; Rosalina et al., 2021).

As Grilli et al., (2021) emphasise, while economic growth remains a central driver of rural tourism development, long-term viability depends critically on integrating environmental capacities and sustainability principles into planning and management frameworks. The development of tourism in rural areas can make a strong contribution to the rural economy and serve as a significant factor in supporting social, cultural and environmental development.

Rural tourism is a common feature of regional and local development policies, not only because of its economic potential, but also due to its impacts on the fair distribution of services and infrastructure development in rural areas (Kheiri et al., 2016). Historically, tourism development has been concentrated in urban centres and coastal areas, with rural tourism emerging more recently in response to two principal stimuli: the need for diversification as rural economies restructure under the pressures of globalisation and industrialisation (Radović et al., 2020), and the need for economic development activities that support sustainable development in rural areas (Lopez-Sanz et al., 2021).

The global significance of rural tourism has been increasingly recognised by international bodies. The United Nations Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) has championed rural tourism through its flagship "Best Tourism Villages" initiative, launched in 2021. This programme has attracted applications from numerous countries worldwide, with a growing network of recognised rural destinations that continues to expand annually. The initiative evaluates candidate villages across multiple criteria spanning economic, social, and environmental sustainability dimensions, with a focus on preserving cultural and natural heritage, strengthening community-based values, and advancing sustainability aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The 2025 edition recognised villages from around the world, and the call for 2026 applications is currently open, underscoring the sustained global commitment to rural tourism as a catalyst for rural prosperity, resilience, and well-being. This international momentum reflects a broader recognition that well-planned rural tourism can address pressing challenges such as rural depopulation, economic stagnation, and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems. Iran possesses exceptional natural, historical, and cultural assets that have long attracted tourists from around the world, creating favourable conditions for the development of tourism infrastructure (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2012).

The country's 37,000 villages, home to approximately 25.9% of the national population, are scattered across diverse geographical settings forest, rangeland, desert, mountainous, and coastal areas offering immense potential for rural tourism development (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2016). In response, the Iranian government has launched the "Tourism Target Village" (TTV) programme, which aims to sustainably develop rural tourism across the country by identifying and prioritising villages based on their suitability for tourism development, with the cooperation of local communities, businesses, and tourism policy-makers (Seedworker, A., & Mahmoudi, 2013).

More than 380 villages have been identified as having tourism potential, and over 120 villages have been officially designated as tourism-target villages based on specific criteria and indicators. However, the criteria used for these designations have not been systematically codified at the national level. The international recognition of Iran's rural tourism potential has gained tangible momentum. In 2025, Iran submitted eight villages Soheili (Hormozgan), Kandolus (Mazandaran), Palangan (Kurdistan), Mueil (Ardebil), Hasanlu (West Azarbaijan), Shafiabad (Kerman), Barghan (Alborz), and Fahraj (Yazd) for UN Tourism's Best Tourism Villages competition. Notably, Soheili village on Qeshm Island was officially recognised as one of the world's best tourism villages for 2025.

The selection process for these nominations was rigorous, involving a research collaboration with the University of Tehran that initially spotlighted 150 villages, narrowed to 50 based on specific criteria, and further refined to 24 potential nominees for 2025–2027. Key criteria for UN Tourism consideration include cultural and natural resources, environmental sustainability, tourism potential, economic stability, and safety. However, significant challenges remain. Studies indicate that Iranian villages continue to face underdevelopment, depopulation, economic and livelihood instability, limited economic opportunities, and poor quality of life (Badri, A., & Yari Hesar, 2009).

Rural tourism initiatives have often been hampered by inadequate infrastructure, inefficient management, and a lack of awareness among local communities (Rafiee, 2024). These challenges underscore the urgent need for scientifically grounded, systematic planning criteria that can guide the selection and prioritisation of tourism target villages. Without such criteria, public investment and promotional efforts risk being directed towards villages that lack the environmental, social, and institutional capacity to sustain tourism, thereby exacerbating rather than alleviating rural decline. Establishing a codified and scientifically validated set of selection criteria is therefore an urgent requirement for both policy and research.

Defining rural tourism can be complex, particularly when making international comparisons, as definitions and perceptions of rural areas vary significantly between countries. The importance of rurality for economic development and land-use considerations can differ substantially between developed and less developed contexts (Nelson et al., 2021). Nevertheless, research over the past three decades has attempted to explain and classify rural tourism products and services. Lane, (1994) proposed that rural tourism should be located in areas characterised by low population densities and extensive open space, typically with fewer than 10,000 residents. Moreover, the nature of such tourism experiences should be 'functionally rural', involving rural enterprises, contact with nature, and traditional activities.

Rural tourism should exhibit local characteristics, with governance and development activities operating at this scale, while remaining diverse in nature to reflect the great variety of rural contexts. Rural tourism experiences usually involve extensive contact between tourists and host communities, as the working and living settings of rural communities are fundamental aspects of both the physical tourism product and the experiences on offer (Wu et al., 2022). Because of this intertwining of setting, communities and experiences, coordinated planning and a strategic approach are essential to anticipate and avoid tensions both between hosts and guests, and among different stakeholders within rural tourism destinations (Wilson et al., 2001).

In this context, the identification and selection of appropriate villages for tourism development constitutes a foundational step in the planning process one that has received insufficient attention in the academic literature. As Park et al., (2011) note, the identification of suitable areas for rural tourism development should be approached at both macro and micro levels: at the macro level, villages must be situated within identified territorial zones with strategic potential; at the micro level, their individual characteristics physical, social, economic, and cultural must be rigorously evaluated.

Spatial planning research in tourism has increasingly employed Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) models to support the identification and prioritisation of tourist attractions and destinations (Besermenji & Pannonica, 2018; Ferdowsi, 2025). In the process of strategic and spatial planning for rural tourism development, research has identified various criteria. Briedenhann, (2009) emphasised the need for decision-making criteria that incorporate cultural, social, environmental, and economic factors.

Bunruamkaew & Murayam, (2011) proposed criteria including ecosystem health, cultural heritage preservation, and environmental capacity for developing ecotourism in rural settings, linking these to tourist satisfaction, carrying capacity, public participation and awareness. Badri, A., & Yari Hesar, (2009) used criteria such as visual value, number of tourist attractions, ease of access, expandable space, proximity to primary tourism destinations, proximity to support service centres, and volume of tourism demand. However, these models vary significantly in their structure and application, and there is no consensus on a universal set of criteria for rural tourism village selection.

Most existing frameworks tend to emphasise either economic viability or environmental carrying capacity, often neglecting the socio-cultural and managerial dimensions that are equally critical for sustainable outcomes (Briedenhann, 2009; Marzo-Navarro et al., 2015). Despite these methodological advances, a critical gap persists: there is no coherent, nationally applicable set of criteria for selecting tourism target villages that integrates the full spectrum of relevant dimensions environmental, tourism, sociocultural, economic, physical infrastructure, design, architecture, and managerial considerations.

Previous studies have tended to focus on isolated dimensions or local case studies, without providing a systematic framework that can guide decision-making at the national scale (Briedenhann et al., 2006; Eftekhari et al., 2011; Shateri et al., 2018). This fragmentation is particularly problematic in countries like Iran, where rural tourism development has been identified as a major strategic priority by the government in recent years (Karimi et al., 2022; Seedworker, A., & Mahmoudi, 2013). Several studies have specifically addressed criteria for tourism development in Iran. Eftekhari et al., (2011) introduced 80 indicators for assessing the sustainability of rural tourism, of which 22 addressed social sustainability, 24 addressed economic sustainability, and 34 addressed environmental sustainability.

Shateri et al., (2018) applied criteria of natural attractions, human-made attractions, access, infrastructure and services, and land use to prioritise tourist villages in South Khorasan province. Salehpour et al., (2019), in a feasibility study on rural tourism development in Takab township, emphasised a sustainable development approach and proposed new regulations to protect the environment and preserve ecological balance, thereby paving the way for private and public sector investment.

They also recommended educational programmes for indigenous communities, professional training to optimise the use of natural and human resources, and enhanced marketing and promotion of tourism at local, national and transnational levels. Mousavi & Sharafi, (2020) identified and prioritised villages with tourism potential in Lorestan province by evaluating their capabilities for agricultural, natural, religious and historical tourism.

In a related study, Ferdowsi, (2025) focused on the site selection of ecotourism ecocamps in rural areas, providing a practical framework for spatial evaluation that complements these village-level assessments. Despite these contributions, previous studies have predominantly focused on local-level planning, with a notable absence of comparative and national-level analyses. Moreover, most Iranian studies have adopted fragmented perspectives some emphasising economic dimensions, others focusing on environmental or social aspects without integrating the full range of criteria required for comprehensive rural tourism planning (Badri, A., & Yari Hesar, 2009; Rafiee, 2024).

To date, no comprehensive study has developed a nationally applicable framework for selecting tourism target villages in Iran that integrates the full range of relevant criteria.

Previous research has either focused on isolated dimensions such as tourism factors alone (Badri & Yari Hesar, 2009) or addressed sustainability across only two or three dimensions (Eftekhari et al., 2011). This fragmented approach has contributed to the instability and limited success of rural tourism development in Iran. As Mousavi & Sharafi, (2020) observe, rural tourism studies in Iran have largely adopted three discrete perspectives: tourism development planning, tourism development management, and land use planning, without adequately integrating these viewpoints into a coherent framework.

Despite the growing body of literature on rural tourism, a critical research gap remains: no comprehensive, nationally-applicable framework exists that systematically integrates the full spectrum of relevant criteria including environmental, tourism, sociocultural, physical infrastructure, economic, design, architectural, and managerial dimensions for selecting tourism target villages, particularly in developing countries like Iran. To address this gap, the present study introduces a novel, evidence-based framework developed through a rigorous combination of systematic literature review and Delphi expert consultation.

The novelty of this study lies in its national scale of analysis, its integration of eight complementary dimensions within a single hierarchical structure of criteria groups, main criteria, and sub-criteria, and its combination of literature-derived criteria with expert-based weighting and effectiveness classification, an approach that has not been applied in previous Iranian or international studies on the selection of tourism villages. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in bridging the fragmented perspectives of tourism development planning, tourism management, and land-use planning, offering an integrated analytical model that captures the interdependence of multiple sustainability dimensions.

In terms of policy contribution, the proposed framework provides a transparent, operational, and prioritised set of criteria that can directly inform national-level rural tourism strategies, support the official Tourism Target Village programme in Iran, and serve as a benchmark for aligning local planning with international standards such as the UN Tourism Best Tourism Villages initiative. By doing so, this study not only fills a significant gap in the academic literature but also equips policymakers and practitioners with a practical decision-support tool for sustainable rural development.

The present study focuses on villages considered under the Iranian government's 'Tourism Target Village' (TTV) programme. Given the fragmented nature of previous studies and the absence of a nationally-applicable framework, the present study undertakes a systematic review of existing criteria and supplements it with expert judgment through the Delphi technique. The aim is to develop a comprehensive, integrated, and prioritised set of criteria for selecting tourism target villages in Iran a framework that can also be adapted for use in other national contexts. Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to identify the criteria relevant to the selection of tourism target villages, to classify them into criteria groups, main criteria, and sub-criteria, and to determine their relative priority and level of effectiveness in the planning process.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Study area

According to the purpose of this study, which is to determine the effective criteria in the process of selection and planning of Tourism Target Villages (TTV), the thematic and conceptual scope of this study is the national scale of Iran. There are 37,000 villages with a population of about 20.7 million people in Iran. This constitutes 25.9% of the total population of the country. The main occupation of the villagers is agriculture and horticulture (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2016). The country's villages are scattered across various geographical areas including forest, rangeland, desert, mountainous and coastal zones.

This diverse geographical and cultural context provides a unique opportunity to identify a wide range of criteria applicable to different types of rural tourism across the

country. Natural diversity, along with cultural diversity, has provided significant opportunities for tourism development in many villages. Iran was selected as the study context for three main reasons: (1) the country possesses over 37,000 villages scattered across diverse geographical landscapes, offering immense rural tourism potential; (2) the government has formally launched the Tourism Target Village (TTV) programme, yet no scientifically codified national framework exists for selecting these villages; and (3) previous studies in Iran have adopted fragmented approaches, highlighting the urgent need for an integrated national-level framework.

## Methodology framework

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining a qualitative systematic literature review with a quantitative Delphi expert prioritisation technique. The qualitative component enabled the extraction and classification of criteria from previous studies, while the quantitative component allowed for the prioritisation and weighting of these criteria based on expert judgments. To determine criteria on a national scale for selecting TTV, a systematic review process was used to extract and classify criteria from previous studies.

In the first stage, the groups of criteria, the main criteria, and effective sub-criteria were identified and classified, and in the second stage, the Delphi method was used to determine the importance of the criteria and their prioritisation. Figure 1 shows the framework and stages of the research, which involves five steps: determining the sub-criteria; determining the main criteria; determining the groups of criteria; prioritising the criteria; and classifying the effectiveness of the criteria.

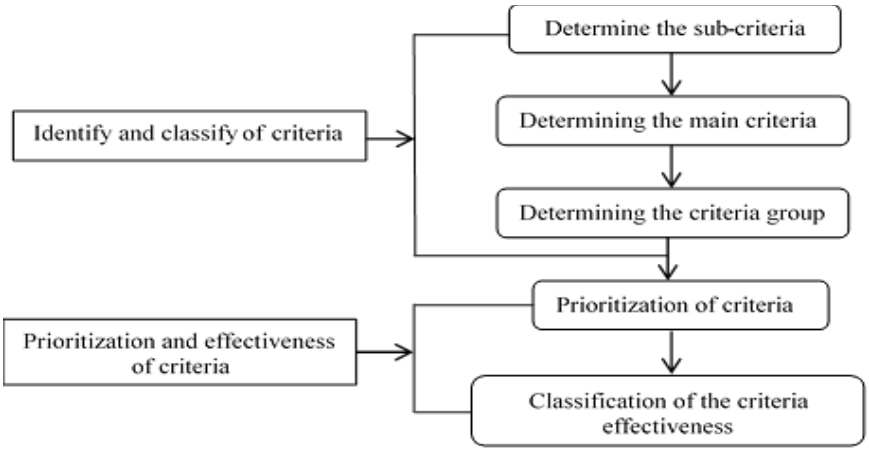


**Figure 1.** Research framework

## Identification and classification of criteria

This study utilised two types of data: (1) secondary data, extracted from a systematic review of 12 selected scientific articles published in Iranian databases, which provided the initial pool of criteria; and (2) primary data, collected through the Delphi questionnaire administered to the 22-member expert panel, which served to validate, refine, and prioritise the extracted criteria. To determine the indicators and criteria for selecting TTV, a systematic review process was used to select relevant scientific articles from previous studies into this topic. Articles were searched for in Iranian language databases from their inception until 2025.

The databases include University Jihad Scientific Information Center (www.sid.ir), the database of Iranian publications (www.magiran.com), and the comprehensive humanities portal (http://ensani.ir). In these searches, the keywords used were : sustainable rural development, sustainable tourism, rural tourism, rural planning, regional planning, and tourism target village. From 1524 articles identified in the first stage of the search, after 3 stages of review to remove dissimilar and unrelated articles, finally, 12 articles that were

most relevant to the research topic were selected to extract criteria (Askarpour & Mohammadinejad, 2021; Badri, A., & Yari Hesar, 2009; Darban Et Al., 2018; Eftekhari Et Al., 2011; Mahmoudi, 2016; Masoom Et Al. 2015.; Pourjafar Et Al., 2013; Roumiani Et Al., N.D.; Shateri Et Al., 2018).

Screening was conducted in three stages (title, abstract, and full text), and only articles that proposed or applied explicit criteria or indicators for rural tourism planning, site selection, or evaluation in Iran were retained. The criteria extracted from these articles were coded, duplicate and overlapping items were merged, and the remaining items were organised hierarchically into sub-criteria, main criteria, and criteria groups.

**Prioritization of criteria**

Upon compiling and classifying the criteria groups, main criteria and sub-criteria, the Delphi method was used to modify and complete the extracted criteria and also to determine the degree of importance and prioritization of the criteria (Briedenhann, 2009; Ocampo et al., 2018). The target population for the Delphi process comprised Iranian academic and executive specialists actively engaged in rural tourism planning, nature tourism, environmental management, or regional development at the national or provincial level. From this population, a panel of experts was purposively selected based on their professional backgrounds and direct involvement in tourism related decision making.

To implement the Delphi method, expert and executive groups were selected using a purposive (judgmental) sampling approach. The inclusion criteria required that each expert: (1) hold a master's or doctoral degree in a relevant field such as rural tourism, environmental planning, geography, or natural resources; (2) have at least five years of professional or academic experience in tourism planning, rural development, or environmental management; (3) have published at least three peer reviewed articles or executive reports on tourism or rural planning; and (4) have direct involvement in tourism policy making, execution, or advisory activities at the national or provincial level.

Based on these criteria, 22 experts were selected from five professional groups: five rural tourism experts, five nature tourism experts, three environmental and natural resources experts, four tourism executive managers, and five regional planning experts. The sample size was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation, meaning that data collection continued until no new criteria or information emerged from the responses.

The Delphi questionnaire was structured hierarchically: each expert first rated the importance of each criteria group, then rated the main criteria within each group, and finally rated the sub-criteria within each main criterion. The scores obtained at each level were subsequently used to derive the overall priority of the criteria. In the criteria classification hierarchy, the sub-criteria were within the main criteria and the main criteria were within the criteria group, thus the score of each sub-criterion could be affected by the score of the main criteria and criteria group , and as a result the score of each main criterion would also be affected.

In this regard, in Equation 1, the final score for each main criterion was calculated on the scale of all groups of criteria. In Equation 2 points of each sub-criterion in each criterion group were calculated and in Equation 3 final points of each sub-criterion were calculated in the scale of all groups of criteria. The score of each criteria group (CQS), each main criterion (MCS), and the initial score of each sub-criterion (SCS(M)) were obtained by dividing the mean expert rating by the maximum value of the rating scale (5), yielding normalised values between 0 and 1.

$$MCS_F = MCS * CQS \quad (1)$$

Where: $MCS_F$ is the Final Score of main criteria on the scale of all criteria groups, MCS is the Score of main criteria in each criteria group and CQS is the Score of criteria group.

$$SCS_G = SCS_M * MCS \quad (2)$$

Where: $SCS_G$ is the Score of sub-criteria in each criteria group, $SCS_M$ is the Initial score of sub-criteria in each main criteria and MCS is the Score of main criteria in each criteria group.

$$SCS_F = SCS_G * CQS \quad (3)$$

Where: $SCS_F$ is the Final score of the sub-criteria on the scale of all criteria groups, $SCS_G$ is the Score of sub-criteria in each criteria group and CQS is the Score of criteria group.

**Determine the importance and effectiveness of criteria**

Because the importance and effectiveness of each criterion in TTV selection are different, in this next stage the impact and priority of the criteria were determined. Table 1 below shows how to separate the affected classes. Accordingly, four categories of impact were identified, namely very high effectiveness, high effectiveness, medium effectiveness and low effectiveness. Main criteria and sub-criteria were ranked in descending order of their final scores, with criteria of equal scores sharing the same priority rank, and each priority rank was then assigned to the corresponding impact category.

**Table 1.** Classification of the effectiveness of the sub-criteria

| Impact category | Priority class |
|---|---|
| Very high effectiveness | 1 to 5 |
| High effectiveness | 6 to 10 |
| Medium effectiveness | 11 to 20 |
| Low effectiveness | More than 20 |

**Delphi validation, consensus, and reliability**

The Delphi process was conducted in two iterative rounds. In the first round, the preliminary list of criteria derived from the systematic review was presented to the 22 experts, who independently rated each criterion on a five-point Likert scale (1 = very low importance, 5 = very high importance) and provided qualitative feedback. After compiling the results, a second round was conducted in which experts were provided with the aggregated scores and anonymised feedback from the first round, and were then asked to re-evaluate their ratings.

The questionnaire used in both rounds was validated through a pilot test with three independent experts who assessed its clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness; minor wording adjustments were made based on their feedback before the first round was launched. The Delphi process was terminated after the second round, as the mean scores for all criteria showed negligible change (<5%) and no new criteria were proposed, indicating that theoretical saturation had been achieved.

Consensus among experts was assessed using the coefficient of variation (CV), calculated as the standard deviation divided by the mean score for each criterion. A CV of ≤0.30 was considered indicative of acceptable consensus, and only criteria reaching this level of agreement were retained in the final framework. Across all retained criteria, the average CV was 0.22, reflecting a satisfactory level of consensus among the expert panel.

To assess reliability, the test-retest method was applied by asking five of the experts (randomly selected) to re-rate the entire set of criteria two weeks after the second round. The intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) for the test-retest scores was calculated as 0.87 (95% CI: 0.79–0.92), indicating excellent stability of responses. Furthermore, the validity of the proposed framework was assessed through expert triangulation, whereby the consistency of responses across the five professional groups (rural tourism, nature tourism, environmental experts, tourism executives, and regional planners) was compared and found to be largely convergent.

Combined with the achievement of theoretical saturation, this multi-stage validation process ensures that the final framework reflects both the breadth of expert opinion and the

robustness of the prioritisation procedure. These procedures collectively confirm the validity, consensus, and reliability of the Delphi-based criteria prioritisation. The application of the Delphi technique in this study is further supported by recent methodological advancements, such as the integrated Delphi-entropy framework proposed by Zhao et al., (2025) for sustainable rural tourism assessment, which reinforces the validity of combining expert judgment with systematic weighting procedures.

### Data analysis

Data from each Delphi round were analysed using descriptive statistics, namely the mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation of each criterion. Final scores were then computed using Equations 1–3, the criteria were ranked according to these scores, and the frequency and percentage of criteria in each effectiveness class (Table 1) were calculated for the main criteria, the sub-criteria, and each criteria group. The results are presented in tables and figures in the following section.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Identify and classify criteria

Findings showed that there were 90 sub-criteria identified, which could be classified under 25 main criteria, and eight criteria groups (Table 2). The eight criteria groups include environmental, tourism, sociocultural, economic, physical infrastructure, designing, architecture, and managerial (Fig. 2).

**Table 2.** Number of main criteria and sub-criteria

| Criteria group | Main criteria | Sub-criteria |
|---|---|---|
| Environmental | 6 | 16 |
| Tourism | 4 | 16 |
| Sociocultural | 3 | 19 |
| Economic | 2 | 7 |
| Physical infrastructure | 3 | 11 |
| Designing | 3 | 9 |
| Architecture | 2 | 7 |
| Managerial | 2 | 5 |
| Total | 25 | 90 |

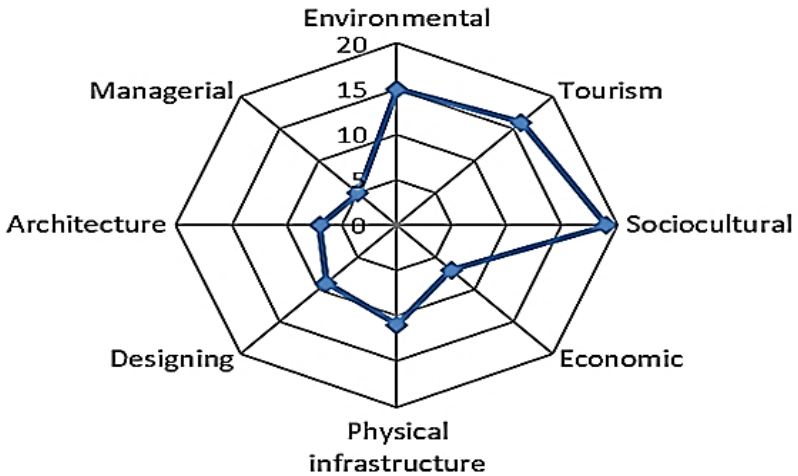


**Figure 2.** Distribution of the number of sub-criteria in each criteria group

### Environmental criteria group

Environmental criteria group consisted of six main criteria including environmental hazards, sensitive habitats, vegetation, land form, land area and climate. For the environmental hazards criterion, it was ranked fifth (score 0.56) on the overall priority and had four sub-criteria (i.e. active faults, liquefaction, flooding, and soil erosion). Sensitive habitats criterion was ranked eighth (score 0.48) in priority with one sub-criterion (i.e. protected areas), whereas the vegetation criterion was second (score 0.72) in the priority ranking that had three sub-criteria (i.e. type of vegetation, density, and canopy of trees).

As for the land form criterion, it was ranked eleventh (score 0.40) in the priority with three sub-criteria (i.e. elevation, slope, and slope direction). The land area, and climate criteria were positioned thirteenth (score 0.32) and third (score 0.64) in the priority and had one (i.e. customary system) and four sub-criteria (i.e. temperature, precipitation, wind, and humidity) respectively. Table 3 below shows a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the environmental criteria group.

**Table 3.** Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the environmental criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Typ** | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Environmental hazards | 0.56 | 5 | Active Faults | 0.50 | 7 |
| | | | Liquefaction | 0.45 | 10 |
| | | | Flooding | 0.34 | 18 |
| | | | Soil Erosion | 0.39 | 15 |
| Sensitive habitats | 0.48 | 8 | Protected areas | 0.48 | 9 |
| Vegetation | 0.72 | 2 | Type of vegetation | 0.65 | 2 |
| | | | Density | 0.50 | 7 |
| | | | Canopy of trees | 0.58 | 3 |
| Land form | 0.40 | 11 | Elevation | 0.32 | 19 |
| | | | Slope | 0.36 | 17 |
| | | | Slope Direction | 0.28 | 22 |
| Land area | 0.32 | 13 | Customary system | 0.28 | 22 |
| Climate | 0.64 | 3 | Temperature | 0.58 | 3 |
| | | | Precipitation | 0.51 | 6 |
| | | | Wind | 0.45 | 10 |
| | | | Humidity | 0.48 | 9 |

### Tourism criteria group

Tourism criteria group had four main criteria, which included tourist attraction, position to axis and destination, demand and market, and tourism facilities and services. The tourist attraction criterion was ranked first (score 0.81) in the overall priority and had four sub-criteria (i.e. natural attraction, cultural attraction, religious attraction, and historical attraction). For the position to axis and destination criterion, it was ranked fourth (score 0.63) in the priority with five sub-criteria (i.e. proximity to tourist target villages, access to special tourist areas, access to attractions, access to tourist routes, and access to tourism hubs).

Both demand and market, and tourism facilities and services criteria were ranked second (score 0.72) and sixth (score 0.54) respectively in the priority whereby they had four (i.e. international market, national market, regional market, and local market) and three (i.e. accommodation, catering places, and other facilities) sub-criteria each. Table 4 below outlines a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the tourism criteria group.

**Table 4.** Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the tourism criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Typ | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Tourist attraction | 0.81 | 1 | Natural attraction | 0.49 | 8 |
| | | | Cultural attraction | 0.73 | 1 |
| | | | Religious Attraction | 0.57 | 4 |
| | | | Historical attraction | 0.65 | 2 |
| Position to axis and destination | 0.63 | 4 | Proximity to tourist target villages | 0.38 | 16 |
| | | | Access to special tourist areas | 0.31 | 20 |
| | | | Access to attractions | 0.56 | 5 |
| | | | Access to tourist routes | 0.50 | 9 |
| | | | Access to tourism hubs | 0.44 | 11 |
| Demand and market | 0.72 | 2 | International market | 0.50 | 7 |
| | | | National market | 0.65 | 2 |
| | | | Regional market | 0.58 | 3 |
| | | | Local market | 0.43 | 12 |
| Tourism facilities and services | 0.54 | 6 | Accommodation | 0.43 | 12 |
| | | | Catering places | 0.48 | 9 |
| | | | Other facilities | 0.38 | 16 |

**Sociocultural criteria group**

There were three main criteria in the sociocultural criteria group, which included: cultural characteristics, population characteristics, and security. Cultural characteristics was ranked fifth (score 0.56) in the overall priority and had nine sub-criteria (i.e. food, clothing, celebrations, mourning, dialect, local games, handicrafts, life tools, and ethnicities). As for the population characteristics, and security criteria, they were positioned seventh (score 0.49) and fourth (score 0.63) in the priority, each had eight (i.e. number of population, population transformation, sexual composition, literacy, healthcare, migration, income, and unemployment) and two (i.e. social security, and psychological security) sub-criteria respectively. Table 5 below presents a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the sociocultural criteria group.

**Table 5.** Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the sociocultural criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Typ | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Cultural characteristics | 0.56 | 5 | Food | 0.28 | 22 |
| | | | Clothing | 0.34 | 18 |
| | | | Celebrations | 0.50 | 7 |
| | | | Mourning | 0.22 | 27 |
| | | | Dialect | 0.11 | 35 |
| | | | Local games | 0.17 | 30 |
| | | | Handicrafts | 0.45 | 10 |
| | | | Life tools | 0.06 | 37 |
| | | | Ethnicities | 0.39 | 15 |
| Population characteristics | 0.49 | 7 | Number of population | 0.44 | 11 |
| | | | Population transformation | 0.15 | 32 |
| | | | Sexual composition | 0.24 | 26 |
| | | | Literacy | 0.29 | 21 |
| | | | Healthcare | 0.34 | 18 |
| | | | Migration | 0.10 | 36 |
| | | | Income | 0.20 | 28 |
| | | | Unemployment | 0.39 | 15 |

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Typ | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Security | 0.63 | 4 | Social security | 0.56 | 5 |
| | | | Psychological security | 0.41 | 13 |

## Economic criteria group

Economic criteria group consisted of two main criteria, namely livelihood and ownership. The livelihood criterion was ranked twelfth (score 0.36) in the overall priority and had four sub-criteria (i.e. agriculture, livestock, fishing, and other activities). On the other hand, the ownership criterion was ranked thirteenth (score 0.32) in the priority with three sub-criteria (i.e. government ownership, private ownership, and customary ownership). Table 6 below provides a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the economic criteria group.

**Table 6.** Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the economic criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Typ | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Livelihood | 0.36 | 12 | Agriculture | 0.32 | 19 |
| | | | Livestock | 0.29 | 21 |
| | | | Fishing | 0.25 | 25 |
| | | | Other Activities | 0.22 | 27 |
| Ownership | 0.32 | 13 | Government ownership | 0.26 | 24 |
| | | | Private ownership | 0.22 | 27 |
| | | | Customary ownership | 0.29 | 21 |

## Physical infrastructure criteria group

Physical infrastructure criteria group had three main criteria, that included access to routes, land use, and infrastructure facilities.The access to route criterion was ranked seventh (score 0.54) in the overall priority and had five sub-criteria (i.e. access to highway, access to grade 1 road, access to grade 2 road, access to dirt road, and access to the nomadic road). As for the land use, and infrastructure facilities criteria, they were ranked ninth (score 0.48) and tenth (score 0.42) in the priority with each had two (i.e. internal land use, and external land use), and four (i.e. power transmission lines, gas transmission lines, access to water resources, and telecommunication lines) sub-criteria respectively. Table 7 below shows a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the physical infrastructure criteria group.

**Table 7.** Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the physical infrastructure criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Typ | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Access to routes | 0.54 | 7 | Access to highway | 0.49 | 8 |
| | | | Access to grade 1 road | 0.43 | 12 |
| | | | Access to grade 2 road | 0.38 | 16 |
| | | | Access to dirt road | 0.32 | 19 |
| | | | Access to the nomadic road | 0.27 | 23 |
| Land use | 0.48 | 9 | Internal land use | 0.43 | 12 |
| | | | External land use | 0.38 | 16 |
| Infrastructure facilities | 0.42 | 10 | Power transmission lines | 0.34 | 18 |
| | | | Gas transmission lines | 0.25 | 25 |
| | | | Access to water resources | 0.38 | 16 |
| | | | Telecommunication lines | 0.29 | 21 |

### Designing criteria group

There were three (i.e. landscape, land shape diversity, and aesthetic value) main criteria in the designing criteria group. The landscape criterion was ranked fourteenth (score 0.27) in the overall priority and had three sub-criteria (i.e. diversity of perspectives, depth of sight, and angle of view). For the land shape diversity and aesthetic value criteria, they were ranked sixteenth (score 0.21) and fifteenth (score 0.24) respectively in the priority. The land shape diversity criterion had four sub-criteria (i.e. microtopography, slope changes, elevation changes, and direction changes), whereas the aesthetic value criterion had two sub-criteria (i.e. natural and artificial attractiveness, and vegetation). Table 8 below outlines a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the designing criteria group.

**Table 8**. Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the designing criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Typ** | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Landscape | 0.27 | 14 | Diversity of perspectives | 0.24 | 26 |
| | | | Depth of sight | 0.22 | 27 |
| | | | Angle of view | 0.19 | 29 |
| Land Shape Diversity | 0.21 | 16 | Microtopography | 0.17 | 30 |
| | | | Slope changes | 0.19 | 29 |
| | | | Elevation changes | 0.15 | 32 |
| | | | Direction changes | 0.13 | 34 |
| Aesthetic value | 0.24 | 15 | Natural and artificial attractiveness | 0.22 | 27 |
| | | | Vegetation | 0.19 | 29 |

### Architecture criteria group

Architecture criteria group consisted of two main criteria, rural structure and architectural typology. The rural structure criterion was positioned ninth (score 0.45) in the overall priority and had four sub-criteria (i.e. rural texture, relationship of rural elements, shape of alleys, and public service). On the other hand, the architectural typology criterion was ranked eleventh (score 0.40) in the priority with three sub-criteria (i.e. rural house materials, environmental adaptation, and house architecture). Table 9 below presents a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the architecture criteria group.

**Table 9**. Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the architecture criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Typ** | Score | Priority | Typ | Score | Priority |
| Rural structure | 0.45 | 9 | Rural texture | 0.40 | 17 |
| | | | Relationship of rural elements | 0.36 | 20 |
| | | | Shape of alleys | 0.31 | 23 |
| | | | Public Service | 0.27 | 22 |
| Architectural typology | 0.40 | 11 | Rural house materials | 0.28 | 22 |
| | | | Environmental adaptation | 0.32 | 19 |
| | | | House architecture | 0.36 | 17 |

### Managerial criteria group

Managerial criteria group involved two main criteria, namely documents and plans, and participation. There were two sub-criteria (i.e. upstream documents, and downstream documents) in the documents and plans criterion which was ranked eighteenth (score 0.16)

in the overall priority. As for the participation criterion, it was ranked seventeenth (score 0.18) in the priority and had three sub-criteria (i.e. local participation, investment participation, and government participation). Table 10 below shows a summary of the key score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the managerial criteria group.

**Table 10.** Score and priority of main criteria and sub-criteria of the managerial criteria group

| Main criteria | | | Sub-criteria | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Typ** | **Score** | **Priority** | **Typ** | **Score** | **Priority** |
| Documents and plans | 0.16 | 18 | Upstream documents | 0.14 | 33 |
| | | | Downstream documents | 0.13 | 34 |
| Participation | 0.18 | 17 | Local participation | 0.16 | 31 |
| | | | Investment participation | 0.14 | 33 |
| | | | Government participation | 0.13 | 34 |

## Priority of criteria groups

Findings revealed that tourism, and managerial criteria groups had been considered as the highest and lowest priority, with a score of 0.89 and 0.54 respectively. Other criteria groups in accordance to their priority were environmental (score 0.76), sociocultural (score 0.73), physical-infrastructural (score 0.68), architecture (score 0.64), economic (score 0.60), and designing (score 0.58). Fig. 3 shows the score of the criteria groups.

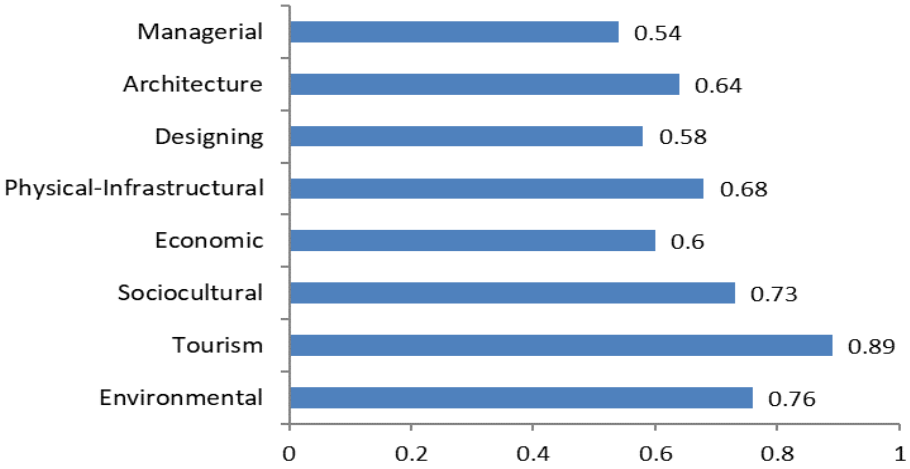


**Figure 3.** Score of the criteria groups

## Status of criteria effectiveness

Tables 11 and 12 show the frequency and percentage of the effectiveness classes of the main criteria and sub-criteria. Of the main criteria, 32% were classified as having very high effectiveness, followed by high (28%), medium (40%), and low effectiveness (0%). Of the sub-criteria, 11.1% fell within the very high class, 15.6% within the high class, 31.1% within the medium class, and the remaining 42.2% within the low class; thus, 57.8% of the sub-criteria demonstrated medium to very high effectiveness. As shown in Table 12, the criteria groups with the largest shares of very highly effective sub-criteria were tourism (37%), environmental (19%), and sociocultural (5%), whereas the designing and managerial groups (100% each) and the economic group (86%) had the largest shares of sub-criteria with low effectiveness.

**Table 11.** Effect status of the sub-criteria

| Influence class | Main criteria | | Sub-criteria | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Very high effectiveness | 8 | 32 | 10 | 11.1 |
| High effectiveness | 7 | 28 | 14 | 15.6 |
| Medium effectiveness | 10 | 40 | 28 | 31.1 |
| Low effectiveness | 0 | 0 | 38 | 42.2 |

**Table 12.** Percentage frequency distribution of the effectiveness classes of sub-criteria in each criteria group

| Criteria group | Very high effectiveness (%) | High effectiveness (%) | Medium effectiveness (%) | Low effectiveness (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Environmental | 19 | 44 | 25 | 12 |
| Tourism | 37 | 25 | 38 | 0 |
| Sociocultural | 5 | 10 | 33 | 52 |
| Economic | 0 | 0 | 14 | 86 |
| Physical infrastructure | 0 | 9 | 64 | 27 |
| Designing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |
| Architecture | 0 | 0 | 57 | 43 |
| Managerial | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100 |

## Analytical overview of the priority pattern

Beyond mere numerical reporting, the priority scores reveal a clear and theoretically meaningful gradient. The tourism criteria group (score 0.89) and environmental criteria group (score 0.76) together account for approximately 30% of the cumulative score of the eight criteria groups (1.65 of 5.42), and they also contain the largest shares of sub-criteria with very high effectiveness. This pattern reflects a dominant 'asset-based' planning mindset that prioritises tangible natural and market endowments over less visible governance and design dimensions. In contrast, the comparatively lower scores assigned to managerial (0.54), designing (0.58), and economic (0.60) criteria, together with the concentration of their sub-criteria in the low effectiveness class, indicate a systemic undervaluation of institutional capacity, aesthetic planning, and livelihood diversification in the current rural tourism planning discourse.

This imbalance is not merely an artefact of expert judgment; it mirrors a broader pattern observed in developing countries, where immediate 'pull factors' consistently overshadow the 'push factors' such as strategic management and participatory governance that are essential for long-term sustainability. Furthermore, the dispersion of scores across the main criteria (ranging from 0.81 for tourist attraction to 0.16 for documents and plans) underscores the heterogeneity of expert priorities and highlights the need for a differentiated approach to policy implementation.

## Discussion

While evidence indicates that rural tourism has played a key role in the social and economic development of rural areas in developed countries (Ghaderi et al., 2025), this positive outcome has not always been replicated in developing countries. In contexts marked by social and economic inequality, rural tourism has often failed to generate prosperity and improvement, contributing instead to the instability of rural development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2022; Rosalina et al., 2021; Schellhorn, 2007). Studies in Iran confirm that despite government efforts to adopt integrated spatial and participatory policies including national development programmes that encompass tourism development Iranian villages remain underdeveloped.

These villages continue to suffer from depopulation, economic and livelihood instability, limited economic opportunities, and poor quality of life (Badri et al., 2021). Consequently, rural tourism development in Iran requires reconsideration through scientifically grounded and codified planning. In this regard, the application of effective planning criteria is essential, and the selection of tourism-target villages represents the crucial first step toward achieving the broader goals of rural tourism development an objective that lies at the heart of the present study.

This study adopted an integrated approach to identify, classify, and prioritise the full range of factors affecting the planning and selection of Tourism Target Villages (TTV) in Iran. The findings revealed a comprehensive framework comprising eight criteria groups, 25 main criteria, and 90 sub-criteria, encompassing environmental, tourism, sociocultural, economic, physical infrastructure, design, architectural, and managerial dimensions. The breadth of this framework distinguishes it from previous Iranian studies, which have tended to adopt fragmented perspectives. For instance, while Seedworker, A., & Mahmoudi, (2013) applied a similar integrated approach to nature tourism criteria, no such macro-level study had previously been undertaken for rural tourism in Iran.

Most earlier rural tourism studies adopted a narrow, sectoral approach such as Badri, A., & Yari Hesar, (2009), who considered only tourism-related factors. Even those studies that claimed a holistic perspective typically addressed only two or three dimensions of the planning process. Eftekhari et al., (2011), for example, identified 80 indicators, but these were confined to the social, economic, and environmental aspects of sustainability, overlooking infrastructure, design, architecture, and management. This lack of integration has been a significant contributing factor to the instability of rural tourism development in Iran.

The highest priority assigned to tourism criteria (score 0.89, with tourist attraction scoring 0.81) can be attributed to several converging factors. First, in the Iranian context and indeed in most developing countries tourism development is primarily driven by the immediate economic and employment opportunities associated with attracting visitors. Second, the tangible nature of tourist attractions (e.g., historical sites, natural landscapes, cultural heritage) makes them readily identifiable and measurable, thus more amenable to planning frameworks than abstract institutional or design criteria.

Third, international benchmarks such as the UN Tourism Best Tourism Villages initiative explicitly prioritise cultural and natural resources, reinforcing a supply-side planning logic. However, this high priority also carries a risk: overemphasis on attractions without corresponding attention to carrying capacity, visitor management, and community resilience may lead to the very unsustainability that rural tourism seeks to overcome. This interpretation aligns with the findings of Gössling, (2002), who cautioned that attraction-driven tourism without infrastructure and governance support often undermines the resources upon which it depends.

A closer examination of the rural tourism literature in Iran reveals three dominant perspectives: tourism development planning, tourism development management, and land-use planning (Mousavi & Sharafi, 2020). However, these perspectives have rarely been synthesised. To achieve sustainable rural tourism development, it is necessary to integrate these viewpoints and consider the multiple dimensions of rural tourism simultaneously (Bargeman & Richards, 2020; Viglia et al., 2020). The present study contributes to this integration by providing a unified framework that bridges these perspectives through a comprehensive set of criteria.

The findings further indicated that more than two-thirds of the identified sub-criteria (approximately 68.9%) fell within four criteria groups: sociocultural, environmental, tourism, and physical infrastructure. Moreover, the sub-criteria within these four groups demonstrated the highest levels of overall effectiveness. This suggests that tourism planning for target villages at the national scale must address a wide range of sociocultural, environmental, tourism, and infrastructural issues. Nonetheless, criteria from the remaining

groups economic, design, architecture, and management should not be overlooked, as they also play important roles in the planning and selection process.

This observation is consistent with international studies. Arbolino et al. (2021), for example, identified environmental, social, and economic criteria as essential for achieving tourism sustainability in Italy. Similarly, Briedenhann (2009) found that economic viability, while important, must be balanced with cultural, social, and environmental considerations for rural tourism projects to succeed in contexts such as South Africa. However, beyond merely stating consistency, it is important to recognise that this alignment arises from shared structural conditions rather than mere coincidence.

In both the Italian case Arbolino et al., (2021) and the present Iranian context, the primacy of environmental, social, and tourism criteria reflects a common challenge faced by developed and developing countries alike: the difficulty of operationalising intangible governance and design criteria in formal planning frameworks. This shared difficulty suggests that the observed ranking is not idiosyncratic to Iran but reflects a more fundamental tension in rural tourism planning namely, the persistent gap between what planners value conceptually and what they can measure operationally.

This interpretation introduces a theoretical dimension that extends beyond simple empirical comparison. A comparison with previous criteria-based studies further clarifies the contribution of the present findings. Shateri et al. (2018), who prioritised tourist villages in South Khorasan province using the TOPSIS technique, relied mainly on natural and human-made attractions, access, infrastructure and services, and land use.

The present results confirm the central role of attractions and access, but they also show that sociocultural criteria, particularly security and cultural characteristics, rank among the top priorities when village selection is considered at the national scale. Similarly, Badri and Yari Hesar (2009) emphasised visual value, ease of access, proximity to tourism destinations, and the volume of tourism demand, which correspond to the high scores obtained in this study for the demand and market and position to axis and destination criteria; however, their site-selection model did not incorporate managerial, design, or architectural dimensions.

At the international level, the Delphi-based studies of Briedenhann (2009) in South Africa and Ocampo et al. (2018) in the Philippines likewise relied on expert consensus to establish multidimensional indicator sets in which socio-cultural and environmental aspects feature prominently, while Bunruamkaew and Murayam (2011) demonstrated in Thailand that natural landscape, topography, and accessibility are key determinants of ecotourism site suitability.

Zhao et al. (2025) further showed that combining Delphi judgement with systematic weighting improves the robustness of sustainable rural tourism assessment, which supports the hierarchical scoring procedure adopted here. Unlike these studies, which addressed a single dimension, a single region, or a specific form of tourism, the present framework integrates eight dimensions at the national scale and explicitly quantifies the relative weakness of managerial and design criteria, a finding that has rarely been reported in comparable research.

The importance and priority of criteria are likely to vary depending on the scale of analysis whether at the macro (national) or micro (regional/local) level. The framework developed in this study can serve as a reference for preparing planning indicators at both national and sub-national scales. As Park et al., (2011) observed, the priority of criteria may shift according to regional and local conditions. Consequently, some criteria that appear less significant at the national level may become highly important at the local level. In the present study, sub-criteria such as cultural attraction, national market, historical attraction, type of vegetation, canopy cover, regional market, and temperature received the highest priority scores.

This pattern indicates that the planning and selection of tourism destination villages are inextricably linked to key criteria related to attractions, market demand, vegetation, and

climate. The entanglement of tourism and environmental criteria in the priority rankings underscores the fact that sustainable rural tourism development cannot be achieved without due consideration of environmental factors (Li et al., 2020). Furthermore, while some researchers have emphasised the importance of environmental indicators for tourism planning, Hughes, (2002) cautioned that focusing solely on the physical protection of tourism environments is insufficient for achieving genuine sustainability.

The findings of the present study reinforce this view, as they demonstrate that environmental criteria were not considered in isolation but were consistently interwoven with tourism, sociocultural, and infrastructural criteria. This interconnectedness suggests that a narrow focus on environmental protection alone would be inadequate for selecting tourism target villages. An important implication of the findings is that the presence of a few tourist attractions alone is insufficient to qualify a village as a tourism destination.

The high priority assigned to environmental criteria (such as vegetation and climate), infrastructure criteria (such as access to routes and facilities), and sociocultural criteria (such as security and cultural characteristics) indicates that a broader range of factors must be considered. If tourism development proceeds without adequate attention to these complementary criteria, it risks undermining the very cultural, historical, and natural attractions upon which it depends (Gössling, 2002).

This observation reinforces the need for a balanced and integrated approach to village selection. Another noteworthy aspect of the identified criteria is their differential functional roles in the planning process. Some criteria play an opportunity-creating role (e.g., tourism criteria), others play a limiting or constraining role (e.g., environmental hazard criteria), and still others serve both functions simultaneously (e.g., sociocultural criteria, which can both attract tourists and impose limitations related to carrying capacity and cultural sensitivity). This dual or multi-functional nature of criteria merits further investigation in future research.

The marked contrast between the high priority assigned to tourism and environmental criteria and the lower priority assigned to managerial and design criteria offers a theoretically significant insight. This ranking reflects a pragmatic, short-term oriented planning culture prevalent not only in Iran but also in many developing countries such as India, China, and Southeast Asian nations, where tangible natural and market assets are prioritised over the less tangible governance and aesthetic dimensions required for long-term sustainability. While planners intuitively recognise the 'pull factors' of tourism such as attractions and climate they often underestimate the 'push factors' including institutional capacity, strategic planning, and participatory governance that are essential for sustaining those attractions over time.

The theoretical contribution of this ranking lies in explicitly quantifying this imbalance, thereby providing an empirical foundation for rethinking planning priorities. This pattern is consistent with evidence from China, where Li et al. (2020) showed that rural tourism-driven land-use change in the Erhai Lake Basin altered the provision of ecosystem services, indicating that resource-led tourism growth without adequate planning and management generates environmental costs.

The notably low priority assigned to managerial criteria (score 0.54) and economic criteria (score 0.60) warrants deeper critical reflection. In the Iranian context, the marginalisation of managerial criteria can be traced to two structural factors: (1) the fragmented institutional landscape, where responsibility for rural tourism is divided between the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Agriculture, resulting in unclear governance mandates and weak coordination; and (2) a historical planning culture that prioritises physical and infrastructure development over institutional capacity-building, which is often perceived as slow, intangible, and politically unrewarding.

Similarly, the relatively low influence of economic criteria reflects a shift in rural tourism policy away from purely profit-driven models towards socio-cultural and

environmental conservation goals, as evidenced by Iran's TTV programme objectives. However, this de-emphasis on economic viability carries the risk of creating dependency on public subsidies, undermining long-term sustainability. Regarding generalisability, while the specific weights may vary across socio-cultural and ecological contexts, the *structure* of the framework encompassing eight interdependent dimensions is inherently transferable.

Developing countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Egypt, which face similar challenges of rural marginalisation and fragmented planning, can adapt this framework by recalibrating priorities through local Delphi exercises and substituting context-specific indicators. Thus, the framework offers a flexible template rather than a rigid prescription. The empirical findings of this study can be further theorised through the lens of push-pull theory and institutional theory. In tourism studies, push-pull theory posits that destination choice is shaped by internal 'push' factors (e.g., desire for escape, novelty, self-actualisation) and external 'pull' factors (e.g., attractions, accessibility, climate).

Applying this framework to planning priorities, the high scores assigned to tourism and environmental criteria represent the pull factors of rural tourism planning tangible attributes that attract tourists and investment. Conversely, the low scores assigned to managerial and design criteria reflect the neglect of *push factors* the institutional and aesthetic conditions that, while not immediately visible, are necessary for sustaining the appeal of tourist destinations over time.

This interpretation aligns with the broader organisational literature on institutional voids, which suggests that in developing countries, the absence of strong mediating institutions (e.g., professional planning bodies, transparent governance mechanisms) leads planners to over-rely on visible, measurable assets. The present study contributes to this theoretical discourse by empirically quantifying the magnitude of this imbalance, thereby providing a foundation for future research on institutional capacity in rural tourism planning. From a policy perspective, the prioritised criteria offer a concrete, operationally relevant tool for the Iranian TTV programme.

The framework can serve as a transparent checklist for evaluating candidate villages, guiding the allocation of public investment towards locations with optimal natural and market potentials, while simultaneously flagging villages that require targeted capacity-building in managerial or infrastructural domains before they can be formally designated. Furthermore, the framework's modular design anchored in a systematic literature review and validated through expert consensus renders it inherently transferable to other developing countries facing similar challenges of rural depopulation and fragmented planning.

While the specific weightings of criteria may shift across socio-cultural and ecological contexts, the overarching classification structure provides a comprehensive template that can be adapted by substituting local indicators and recalibrating priorities through a contextual Delphi exercise. This flexibility enhances the practical utility of the framework beyond Iran, contributing to the broader global discourse on sustainable rural tourism planning.

This study has several limitations. The systematic review was restricted to Persian-language databases, the Delphi panel consisted exclusively of Iranian experts, the Delphi technique is inherently subject to judgement-related biases, and the framework has not yet been empirically validated through field application to village samples. These limitations should be considered when interpreting and transferring the findings.

## CONCLUSION

This study developed an integrated framework for selecting Tourism Target Villages in Iran, comprising eight criteria groups, 25 main criteria, and 90 sub-criteria. The findings answer the research objective by demonstrating that tourism and environmental criteria hold the highest priority, followed by sociocultural and physical infrastructure criteria,

whereas managerial, design, and economic criteria remain undervalued. Tourist attraction, demand and market, vegetation, and climate emerged as the decisive main criteria.

Theoretically, the framework unifies the fragmented perspectives of tourism planning, management, and land-use planning into a single hierarchical model. Practically, it provides Iran's TTV programme with a transparent tool for evaluating candidate villages and allocating public investment, while signalling the need to strengthen institutional capacity. Future research should validate the criteria through field application and comparative Delphi studies in other countries.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest. This research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest. The experts who participated in the Delphi survey contributed solely as respondents and had no role in the analysis and interpretation of the data, the writing of the manuscript, or the decision to publish the results.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Beytollah Mahmoudi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, and Writing – review & editing. As the sole author, Beytollah Mahmoudi conceived and designed the study, conducted the systematic review of Iranian scientific databases, designed and administered the two-round Delphi survey, analysed the expert data and calculated the scores and priorities of the criteria, prepared the tables and figures, wrote the manuscript, and read and approved the final version for submission.

## GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE STATEMENT

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the author used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, to improve language clarity and grammatical structure, to restructure the abstract and conclusion in accordance with the journal's format, to check the internal consistency of the reported figures and tables against the underlying research data, to format the in-text citations and reference list in the reference manager, and to assist in drafting comparative statements with previously cited studies. Generative AI was not used to collect or generate research data, nor to produce the findings and conclusions of the study. All AI-assisted output was carefully reviewed, verified against the original data and sources, and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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