

**PRA-BASED RURAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY : A CASE STUDY:  
ROSTAQ RURAL DISTRICT, YAZD, IRAN**

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**Abstract**

Given there are many rural areas in Iran, and also, the fact that they have a diversity of problems, needs, requirements and potentials, strategic planning at local level are one of the main methods to achieve the goals of rural development. This research aimed to study Rostaq rural district, Yazd, using analytic-descriptive method within the framework of strategic planning method by identifying advantages, strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of rural communities. The main question of this research was, “what are proper and optimal strategies of rural development in the studied area?” To answer this question, data collection was carried out using field studies and through holding participatory rural appraisal (PRA) courses. Data analysis was conducted using the SWOT model, and SPSS software. The results suggested that aggressive model was the best one considering internal and external situations in this area; and that, as the top priority, potentials and existing capabilities must be used to take opportunities of rural development.

**Keywords:** rural development, strategy, strategic planning, Rostaq rural district, SWOT model

**Introduction**

Iran’s rural areas are generally faced with problems. Paying special attention to such problems not only entails rural development, but also reflects priorities, and therefore, can be used in adopting proper rural development strategies (Rezvani, 2007: 13). It is because all problems and retardations such as widespread poverty, growing inequality, rapid population growth, and increasing unemployment is rooted in rural areas (Todaro, 1985: 255). However, such problems can only be solved through planning, because planning is an ongoing process (Mirakzadeh et al., 2011: 11), which helps people and society in such attempt to reach excellence and development (Motiei Langeroudi, 1997: 182).

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Given the fact that the main and decisive factor involved in economic, social and cultural development in every society is a choice of achievable goals inconsistent with economic, social and cultural conditions of that society (Sharifonnasabi, 1986: 5), planning on national level must develop macro policy goals of rural development from a strategic point of view. Goals and policies of rural development are operationalized on the district level, and therefore, rural development plans and projects in each rural area must be developed and executed in consistence with capabilities, capacities, challenges, limitations, and priorities of that district (Rezvani, 2011: 247). On the other hand, the necessity of reform and rural development planning becomes serious, comprehensive and significant only when there is an informed population that voices its demands based on its needs and requirements, and uses resources to provide facilities to meet its biological, social, and economic needs (Motiei Langeroudi, 2007: 24). It is because experiences from different parts of the world have suggested that people's capability and potential to contribute to the development process is much more than imagined (Mousavinezhad, 2002: 9). Under current circumstances, due to the presence of potential and actual capacities and capabilities in rural areas, and also, on account of human, legal, functional and territorial necessities, a clear plan must be developed, and the role of rural development in national and local development must be strengthened (Rezvani, 2011: 274). Such view requires a mechanism consistent with temporal and spatial condition in which people must participate in the planning process, and realization of such view require consideration of all aspects of rural development (Center of Excellence for Rural Studies and Planning, 2008).

Given the above said necessities, it is necessary and important in this research to use a strategic, comprehensive planning using local participation of groups of people through holding workshops and developing proper and optimal strategies in this region. It is because such strategic planning method that has a participatory bottom-up approach is more successful, compared with other methods. Sustainable development of Yazd Province is undoubtedly very much dependant on the development and preservation of rural areas, and therefore, special importance must be attached to rural development in the planning system of this province (Iranian Rural Development Institution, 2004: 12). Therefore, in addition to providing a proper environment for human life, it must be ensured that district development will be made possible in line with regional and national development by developing plans and strategies consistent with local requirements and capabilities of Rostaq rural district. Therefore, the primary question of this research was proposed as follows:

What are proper and optimal strategies for rural development of Rostaq rural district?

### **Literature**

Rural development plans are part of the development plan of every country, and are inspired by development theories (Papli, 2002: 39). In the period between the two world wars, and in the beginning of 1930s and 1940s, challenges arose between the governments and the oppositions. The result of such conflict was accepted by the government of the necessity of planning at all levels and in a comprehensive manner. After this period, and in the beginning of the World War II, the market mechanism replaced traditional planning method, and planning was criticized from different aspects. After the end of World War II, planning became popular in advanced industrialized countries (Eftekhari et al., 2011).

Although there have been isolated attempts at rural development in Iran since the start of this century, and rural development has been considered in development plans to some extent, it was not until Islamic Revolution that reform in Iranian urban communities occurred in a deep and widespread manner. However, as changes have occurred, problems and challenges related to urban development have also increased, to the extent that while many of previous problems are still remained unsolved, new challenges have also risen (Imani, 2008: 2).

It can be said that in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> Development Plans, such new concepts as participation, capacity building, empowerment and sustainable development, comprehensive and integrated development consistent with alternative approaches to rural development have been introduced in goals, and policies of rural development, but unfortunately, the effect of such approaches and concepts on executive and operational plans has been very weak, with classic approaches dominating the activities in this field (Rezvani, 2011: 118).

There have also been many researches on strategic planning. In a paper titled "Strategic Planning and Development of Tourism using the SWOT Model in Minor Lavasan Rural District", Eftekhari and Mahdavi (2005) studied provided a strategy for tourism development in rural districts of Lavasan. Regarding strategic planning for economic development with participation approach, and development of models for strategic planning for the educational system, Hajiahmadi, lame, Qasemi, and Mohaqeqi (2009) studied the strategic planning process and its achievement from the perspective of the members of strategic committees. Additionally, in a research launched by the Center Defense Strategy Studies, Qazizadeh (2009) studied features of strategic planning for military organizations.

### **Methodology**

To achieve the research's objectives, first a combined method (survey and descriptive-analytic methods) was applied. Data collection was conducted using library-based studied, field studies, including direct and indirect observation, and interview. The results of such investigations were used in this research after verifying them against the statistics and data obtained from experts in different organizations and departments.

Given the results from the studies conducted on external environment (weaknesses and strengths), and internal environment (threats and opportunities) of Rostaq Rural District, for the purpose of obtaining a better knowledge of the current condition, and completing the information, a questionnaire covering all aspects of economic, socio-cultural, physical, environmental, and managerial-instructional life of Rostaq Rural district was developed using the opinions of experts and scholars in the field related to the subject of this research, including university professors, Agricultural Jihad Organization, and Yazd's Governor's Office. The validity of each parameter (item) included in the question as calculated using Likert's Scale (five point scale ranging from 1 (very low) to five (very high)). The sample size was 367, which was selected using Cochran's formula. The questionnaire was administered to 367 residents of all rural areas of Rostaq Rural District. The data from completed questionnaires was analyzed using SPSS software, and by weighting the intended items, SWOT matrix was completed, so that the results would be reflected in the strategic factor evaluation matrix. Then, based on participatory rural appraisal method (group interview with people, and authorities, and holding meetings and workshops), participatory

(consultative) rural appraisal workshops in the presence of experts in the field of rural development, and the members of councils and rural managements of rural areas of Rostaq Rural District.

In this method, techniques of participatory rural appraisal and SWOT analysis (participatory style) were applied. This technique is very useful in analysis of the current condition of an organization, so that it not only considers the current conditions, but also future opportunities and threats. Methodologically, PRA is a shortcut method of data collection, which enables scientific researches using different methods (B. Bhandrai, 2003: 9). At the same time, PRA is a new method to study rural data, people’s priorities, aspirations, and potentials to involve in affairs. This method also offers probabilities for improving conventional methods, and replacing resources management method (Kumar, 1993: 188). Techniques of this method can be used in any situation, whether urban or rural (Caverstro, 2003: 3).

**SWOT Analytic Model**

SWOT analysis was originally used as a preliminary planning tool for business activities (Azkiya et al., 2008: 142). One of the proper methods of analyzing measures taken in the process of planning is SWOT model, which a strategic tool to analyze the intra-organizational strengths and weaknesses (Pears and Robinson, 1997: 307). This method (strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities) is the direct product of Harvard University. According to this method, a proper strategy can maximize the strengths and opportunities at the same as minimizing weaknesses and threats (Harrison and John, 2003: 192).

**Table 1 – SWOT matrix or TOWS matrix and manner of determining strategies**

SWOT matrix	Strengths	Weaknesses
(Opportunities)	S-O Strategies	W-O Strategies
Threats	S-T Strategies	W-T Strategies

Source: Eftekhari et al. (2010: 10)

**Studied Area**

Sadug County, covering an area of 5,486 km<sup>2</sup>, is located in northwest of Yazd Province, at 53° 15’-54° 40’ and 31°46’- 32°15’20”N, and has two districts:

- The central district, including Kazab Rural District, and Khezrabad City.
- The central district, including Ashkezar City, and Rostagh Rural District (Dictionary of Yazd’s Hamlets, 2006: 12-15).

**Empirical Analysis**

Appraisal of the internal environment of Rostaq Rural District, and studied rural areas, was aimed at identifying and categorizing the internal strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of making plans to strengthen good internal grounds and eliminate impediments. Such appraisal was

conducted on socio-cultural, economic, physical, managerial-institutional, and environmental aspects of sustainable development.

First, strengths and weaknesses in socio-cultural, economic, physical, managerial-institutional, and environmental areas were collected from answers provided to all questions of the questionnaire, and organized in order of frequency. Next, by holding participatory rural appraisal workshops, focused on theoretical fundamentals, and strategic plan of rural development, problems were identified using a combination of expert and participatory methods within the framework of PRA method, with views of rural participant being obtained using conventional techniques of PRA method. Finally, the results that were common between the results from the questionnaire and a participatory appraisal workshop, and the results from using opinions of authorities and experts (Delphi method), which included the most important strengths and opportunities as well as weaknesses and threats existing in Rostaq Rural District from the perspective of rural development, were identified and provided.

#### **Analysis of Strategic Factors affecting Rural Development of Rostaq Rural District**

Ten internal strengths, eleven internal weaknesses and eight external opportunities and nine external threats were identified and put forward for further consideration. In examining these factors using the SWOT method, internal factor evaluation (IFE) and external factor evaluation (EFE) were conducted on factors affecting rural development of Rostaq Rural District. To determine the weight of each factor, and to identify strategic factors of high and low importance, opinions of relevant experts and lecturers of doctoral degree courses on rural planning and rural development were obtained, and weight of each factor was normalized between zero and one.

#### **Results of Internal Factor Evaluation conducted on Factors affecting Rural Development of Rostaq Rural District**

Using normalized weights, scoring and weighted scores, the importance of each point and effect of each point on rural development of Rostaq Rural District, was calculated as separately shown in table 3.

The data collected by SWOT method suggested that, from the common view (people, authorities and experts), the two components of fertility of soil and farmland (weighted score of 0.24), possibility of integrating farmlands (weighted score of 0.19), and the potential to increase production of greenhouse products (weighted score of 0.18), were respectively the most important strengths; while, on the other hand, shortage of farm water (weighted score of 0.24), bad location of greenhouses and animal farms, production of environmental pollution, and low efficiency of agricultural production (weighted score of 0.22) were the most important internal weaknesses of Rostaq Rural District in terms of rural development.

**Table 2 – Internal factors evaluation (IFE) matrix of factors affecting rural development in Rostaq Rural District**

	SWOT	Weight	Normalized Weight	Score	Weighted Score
Strengths	S1: Informed, learned young manpower	15	0.044	3	0.13
	S2: Historical monuments and cultural heritage of the region	18	0.053	3	0.16
	S3: Popularity of localism among the residents of Rostaq	13	0.038	3	0.11
	S4: Good opportunities and grounds for increasing production of greenhouse products	15	0.044	4	0.18
	S5: Possibility of integrating farmlands	16	0.047	4	0.19
	S6: Proper ways of communication between Rostaq and neighboring regions	17	0.05	3	0.15
	S7: Relatively good cooperation between the council and rural management	11	0.032	3	0.10
	S8: Fertile soil and farmlands	20	0.059	4	0.24
	S9: Exploiting vast expanse of barren lands for the establishment of installations and equipment and expansion of tourism industry	14	0.04	4	0.16
	S10: Existence of Agricultural Jihad Center in Sadrabad of Rostaq	13	0.038	4	0.15
	Total		0.445		1.56
Weaknesses	W1: Insufficient insurance coverage of agricultural and livestock products	14	0.04	3	0.12
	W2: Destruction of historical and ancient monuments	18	0.053	3	0.16
	W3: Insufficient opportunities for cultural and social participation of young people	14	0.04	2	0.08
	W4: Young educated people leaving Rostaq	16	0.047	3	0.14
	W5: Insufficient farm water	20	0.059	4	0.24
	W6: Insufficient processing and production industries	15	0.044	3	0.13
	W7: Low efficiency of agricultural producers	19	0.056	4	0.22
	W8: Insufficient sports complexes to be used by young people	16	0.047	3	0.14
	W9: Weak performance of local cooperatives in terms of improving the condition of farmers and cattle farmers	17	0.05	3	0.15
	W10: Insufficient green spaces	18	0.053	4	0.21
	W11: Bad location of animal farms and greenhouses, and production of environmental pollution	19	0.056	4	0.22
Total		0.545		1.81	
Sum total			1		3.37

Source: Research's findings

**Table 3 – External factors evaluation (EFE) matrix of factors affecting rural development of Rostaq rural area**

SWOT		Weight	Normalized Weight	Score	Weighted Score
Opportunities	O1: Multiplicity of efficient bank networks and sufficient funds in the region	18	0.067	3	0.20
	O2: External market and investment	17	0.063	4	0.25
	O3: Good infrastructure (electricity, gas, telephone utilities, etc.	15	0.056	3	0.17
	O4: Rostaq being located midway on the strategic Yazd-Meybod Road	16	0.059	4	0.24
	O5: Adjacency of Sento transit road and Rostaq Rural District	18	0.067	4	0.27
	O6: Diverse and good opportunities for job creation in the region	16	0.059	4	0.24
	O7: Good opportunities of developing tourism industry in the region	14	0.052	4	0.20
	O8: Opportunity of support from rural development authorities	16	0.059	3	0.18
Total			0.48		1.75
Threats	T1: Weak educational system in terms of raising levels of popular culture	14	0.052	3	0.16
	T2: Lack of link between regional industries and internal activities in rural areas	17	0.063	3	0.18
	T3: Improper distribution of duties collected on district level	11	0.041	3	0.12
	T4: Insufficient regional plans for creation and expansion of specialized activities	14	0.052	3	0.16
	T5: Insufficient financial and expert support from Islamic councils of the rural district	12	0.044	2	0.09
	T6: Air pollution of the region due to existence of industrial zone	19	0.071	4	0.28
	T7: Natural disasters such as sand storm and droughts	15	0.056	3	0.17
	T8: Settlement of foreign nationals in Rostaq	19	0.071	4	0.28
	T9: Existence of brokers in agricultural sector	16	0.059	3	0.18
Total			0.51		1.61
Sum total			1		3.36

Source: Research’s findings

**Results of External Factor Evaluation (EFE) for Factors affecting Rural Development of Rostaq Rural District**

To organize and categorize external factors in two categories of opportunities and threats existing in Rostaq Rural District, normalized weight, scoring and weight score was used to calculate the importance and effect of each point with regard to rural development of Rostaq Rural district, as separately shown in table 3.

Components of adjacency of Sento transit road and Rustaq rural district (weighted score of 0.27), availability of external markets and investment (weighted score of 0.25), the rural district being located midway in Yazd-Meybod Road, and thus, the availability of a diversity of creation of job opportunities potentials in the region (weighted score of 0.24) were on the next levels of priority in terms of opportunities. However, on the other hand, immigration of foreign nationals to Rostaq Rural District, air pollutions caused due to the industrial zone in the region (weighted score of 0.28) are the most important threats faced by Rostaq Rural District.

**Table 4 – Matrix of the main goals and strategies affecting rural development of Rostaq rural district**

	Goals	Strategies
Economic	Raising efficiency and competitiveness of the agricultural sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening management using bank funds and credits for the purpose of improving conditions for production of greenhouse products using features of integration of farmlands and increasing efficiency of production, and exploiting the opportunity provided by the adjacent Sento transit road</li> </ul>
	Environmental capacity building and empowerment of manpower to ensure sustainable growth of rural economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening organized manpower to ensure effective efficiency of diverse fields with good potential for creation of job opportunities</li> </ul>
	Diversifying crops and rural economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening and identifying new external markets, etc. with support from the Agricultural Jihad Center</li> </ul>
Socio-cultural	Improving cultural identify of rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Restoration and rehabilitation of historical monuments and cultural heritage, and preservation thereof, and improving grounds for development of the tourism industry</li> <li>Strengthening the spirit of localism with support from tourism authorities</li> </ul>
Physical	Physical improvement and renovation of rural settlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploiting the vast expanse of barren land, etc., and developing tourism</li> </ul>
Managerial-institutional	Improving management system of rural development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening cooperation between councils, rural management and planners.</li> </ul>

Source: Research's findings

### **Setting Rural Development Goals and Strategies for Rostaq Rural District using SWOT Model**

Given the findings, and results from internal and external factor evaluation matrix (weighted scores of 3.37 and 3.36 were obtained from IFE and EFE matrices, respectively; and the intersection of the perpendicular lines constructed through the two points shows the area that is the very area that must be subject of aggressive strategies), given the research questions (1. How does strategic-participatory planning result in rural development in Rostaq Rural District? 2. What are proper and optimal strategies in rural development of Rostaq Rural District?), and considering the objectives of the research, the main goals and strategies, aggressive strategies (OS) affecting rural development of Rostaq Rural District, which were the top priority of strategic planning for this region, were developed and provided in economic, socio-cultural, managerial, institutional, ecological, and physical areas, as shown in table 4.

### **Conclusion**

Given it is essential to develop rural development strategies according to participatory approach, the objective of this research was defined as obtaining knowledge of the current conditions (economic, social, cultural, ecological, *etc.*), and study of strengths and weakness, and threats and opportunities of the current conditions of Rostaq rural area. It was because such knowledge is necessary for achieving sustainable development, and developing proper strategies for Rostaq rural area. Therefore, in the process of sustainable rural development in Iran's rural areas, participatory rural appraisal for design of problems, execution and evaluation is among the necessary requirements and priorities of development, as it leads to the empowerment of rural residents.

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