Journal of Research and Rural Planning
Volume 15, No. 4, Autumn 2026, Serial No. 55, Pp. 123-141
eISSN: 2783-2007 **ISSN: 2783-2791**
http://jrrp.um.ac.ir

Original Article

Identification and Prioritization of Sociological and Institutional Barriers to Rural Economic Development in Mazandaran Province Using the Delphi Method

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Abstract

Purpose- Rural economic development is fundamental to balanced regional growth and reducing spatial inequalities, requiring integrated attention to economic, social, and institutional dimensions. Despite substantial natural and human resources, rural areas of Mazandaran Province face persistent structural challenges. Many of these constraints stem from sociological and institutional factors that have not been systematically identified or prioritized. This study aims to identify, categorize, and prioritize the sociological and institutional barriers affecting rural economic development in Mazandaran Province.

Design/methodology/approach- This applied, exploratory qualitative study employed the Delphi technique. The participants included 18 expert's university faculty in development sociology, economics, and rural planning, along with specialists from executive rural development agencies and local managers selected through purposive sampling based on expertise and regional experience. Data were collected in three rounds: initial identification of barriers through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires; evaluation of their importance using a Likert-scale questionnaire; and final prioritization through controlled feedback to achieve consensus. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, and Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance.

Findings- Barriers were classified into four dimensions: economic, social, cultural, and institutional. Major economic constraints included weak production and marketing infrastructure, limited access to financial resources, and reliance on traditional sectors. Social barriers involved declining social capital, youth outmigration, and weak participation. Cultural obstacles included conservative attitudes toward entrepreneurship and weak innovation culture. Institutional barriers such as centralized decision-making, bureaucratic complexity, poor inter-agency coordination, and ineffective support policies were identified as the most influential. Prioritization results indicated that institutional and social barriers exert the strongest impact on slowing rural economic development.

Originality/value- Sustainable rural development in Mazandaran Province requires addressing interconnected institutional and social weaknesses alongside economic reforms. Strengthening social capital, improving local governance, reducing bureaucracy, enhancing institutional coordination, and promoting rural entrepreneurship are essential to accelerating economic development.

Keywords- Rural Economic Development, Sociological Barriers, Institutional Factors, Delphi Method, Mazandaran Province.

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How to cite this article:
Bagerinia Amiri, S., Jafari Kelarijani, S. A., Mehrara, A., Shaki, M. H., Varedi, Sh. (2026). Identification and prioritization of sociological and institutional barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province using the delphi method. *Journal of Research & Rural Planning, 15*(4), 123-141.
http://dx.doi.org/10.22067/jrrp.v15i4.2608-1183

Date:
Received: 18-08-2026
Revised: 12-10-2026
Accepted: 013-10- 2026
Available Online: 13-10-2026

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of rural development has shifted from a purely agriculture-oriented and physical perspective to a multidimensional and spatial paradigm (Hodge & Midmore, 2008). Just as the modernization of physical and industrial infrastructure was regarded as a prerequisite for economic growth in the twentieth century, in the twenty-first century "social capital" and "institutional efficiency" have become the fundamental foundations of sustainability and dynamism in rural communities within regional development systems. Under these conditions, villages are defined not only as centers for the production of raw materials but also as living spaces whose economic success depends more than on natural resources on the quality of local governance, institutional capacities, and sociological structures (Li et al., 2024). From this perspective, the development gap between urban and rural areas is no longer understood solely through levels of financial investment but is redefined in terms of inequalities in access to institutional opportunities, decision-making power, and the cohesion of social structures (Mahon, 2023).

A major issue that must be considered is that the economic and social development of villages has always been one of the fundamental and strategic challenges for policymakers and planners in developing countries (Kim & Lee, 2022). Despite the emphasis of development programs on reducing the urban–rural divide and improving the livelihoods of rural communities, many of these areas still struggle with phenomena such as poverty, unemployment, migration, and declining quality of life (Atta-Ankomah et al., 2024). This situation indicates that traditional and one-dimensional approaches especially those focused solely on economic and physical aspects have been unable to address the deeper and more complex roots of rural underdevelopment (Badri et al., 2022).

This important issue in Mazandaran Province which possesses considerable potential natural, agricultural, and human resources raises the question of why implemented programs and investments have not yielded desirable and sustainable outcomes. It appears that, in addition to obvious economic and infrastructural barriers, a set of structural and institutional factors, as well as sociological components such as cultural patterns, mechanisms of social participation, and local governance structures, play a significant role in slowing or halting the development process. The lack of precise and systematic identification of these hidden barriers and their interactions has caused development interventions to lack the necessary effectiveness and has diverted resources toward temporary and inefficient solutions instead of addressing the root causes of problems. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the nature of these challenges and their influence on rural economic development is an unavoidable necessity for designing realistic and sustainable policies.

Despite the growing body of research on rural development, several gaps remain in understanding the barriers to rural economic development, particularly in the context of Mazandaran Province. Previous studies have examined specific aspects of rural development, including agricultural skills, rural women's entrepreneurship, sustainable entrepreneurship, educational inequality, and infrastructural constraints. Although these studies have contributed to identifying important economic, social, and managerial challenges, their findings are often organized around particular sectors, population groups, or individual dimensions of development. Consequently, a more integrated understanding of how economic constraints interact with sociological and institutional barriers remains necessary. In particular, the roles of social capital, local participation, entrepreneurial culture, administrative bureaucracy, institutional coordination, and centralized decision-making need to be examined within a common analytical framework.

A further gap concerns the systematic prioritization of these barriers. Identifying development constraints does not, in itself, establish which factors should receive priority in policymaking or how experts assess their relative importance. A structured approach is therefore needed to distinguish the most critical barriers from those that are comparatively less influential, while incorporating the knowledge and experience of specialists familiar with local development conditions. Moreover, the specific institutional and socioeconomic context of Mazandaran Province warrants particular attention, as its rural development challenges need to be understood in relation to local governance arrangements, productive capacities, and patterns of social

participation rather than inferred solely from findings reported in other geographical settings.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts a three-round Delphi approach to identify, classify, and prioritize the barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province across economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Its contribution lies in bringing these dimensions together within a single analytical framework and establishing a systematic ranking of the identified barriers based on expert assessments and the degree of agreement among participants. In this way, the study seeks to provide a context-sensitive empirical basis for understanding the relative importance of rural development constraints and informing more coordinated and locally responsive policy interventions.

Given these premises, the present study, drawing on modern institutional development approaches, seeks to examine how internal variables (entrepreneurial culture, social capital, and participation) interact with external pressures (centralized administrative systems and ineffective support policies) in explaining the economic situation of rural areas in Mazandaran Province. Accordingly, the main research question is: "What are the most important sociological and institutional barriers affecting rural economic development in Mazandaran Province, and how are these factors prioritized based on expert opinion?" The present study is organized into five sections. The first section introduces the research problem, its significance, and the existing gaps in the literature on rural economic development. The second section reviews the theoretical literature and previous studies on sociological and institutional barriers to rural development. The third section describes the research methodology, including the research approach, statistical population, sampling method, data collection tools, and the stages of the Delphi technique. The fourth section analyzes the findings, identifies the main dimensions of the barriers, and prioritizes them based on expert viewpoints. Finally, the fifth section presents the discussion, conclusion, policy recommendations, and research limitations.

2. Research Theoretical Literature

In rural development studies, especially when the focus of the research is on identifying social and institutional barriers, the use of multidimensional theoretical frameworks is of particular importance; because the economic development of villages is the result of a complex interaction among economic structures, formal institutions, cultural patterns, and social relations. Therefore, in analyzing the barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province, it is not possible to rely solely on economic approaches; rather, it is necessary to consider the role of institutional and sociological factors alongside one another. Accordingly, the present study is based on three complementary approaches, including new institutionalism theory, social capital theory, and the community-based development approach. These three approaches, by emphasizing the role of institutions, social networks, and local participation, provide the possibility of a more comprehensive explanation of the barriers and challenges of economic development in rural communities.

2-1. New Institutionalism Theory

New institutionalism is one of the most important theoretical approaches in analyzing the processes of economic and social development, which was expanded in the final decades of the twentieth century by thinkers such as Douglas North, Oliver Williamson, and Daron Acemoglu (Acemoglu, & Robinson, 2022; Krul, 2018). This approach is based on the fundamental assumption that the economic performance of societies depends not only on natural resources, physical capital, or labor force, but also on the quality and efficiency of the institutions that organize economic and social behaviors (Zhao & Liu, 2024). From North's perspective, institutions are a set of formal and informal rules that shape human interactions and, by reducing uncertainty, make the formation of sustainable economic activities possible. These rules include formal laws, government policies, administrative structures, social norms, and cultural patterns, which together create a framework for economic decision-making (North, 1991). According to this view, in societies where efficient, transparent, and accountable institutions exist, transaction costs are reduced and a suitable environment is created for investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship. In contrast, weak institutions, complex bureaucracy, excessive centralization in decision-making, and the lack of coordination among responsible organizations can constitute serious barriers to economic development (Khan et al., 2024). In many rural areas of developing countries, institutional inefficiency manifests itself

in different forms; including weak local management systems, the absence of effective support policies, limitations in access to financial resources, and administrative complexities that hinder productive economic activities (Rodriguez-Pose & Hardy, 2015).

In this regard, rural economic development is not merely the result of increased production or investment, but rather the outcome of creating efficient institutional structures that can provide the necessary conditions for the economic participation of rural people. In other words, if development policies are designed without attention to the quality of institutions, they may fail to achieve sustainable results even when financial and natural resources are available (Westlund & Borsekova, 2023). Under such conditions, reforming institutional structures, improving local governance, increasing coordination among development organizations, and reducing bureaucratic barriers are considered among the essential prerequisites for achieving economic development in rural areas (Besley et al., 2022). Therefore, institutionalism theory provides an appropriate basis for analyzing the role of managerial and policy structures in the formation or persistence of barriers to rural economic development.

2-2. Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory is one of the important approaches in the social sciences that examines the role of social relations, trust, and interaction networks in facilitating collective action and economic development (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002). This concept was first seriously introduced in the works of thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam, and gradually became one of the key concepts in the analysis of local and rural development. Social capital refers to a set of norms, values, communication networks, and mutual trust among individuals that facilitates cooperation and coordination in society (Portes, 1998). From Bourdieu's perspective, social capital is a type of social power resource that is formed through individuals' membership in stable networks of social relations (Bourdieu, 2006). Coleman also considers social capital as a factor that reduces the costs of social and economic interactions through creating trust and shared norms (Coleman, 2019). In contrast, Putnam emphasizes the role of public trust and civic participation in strengthening the efficiency of social and economic institutions. According to these views, societies that possess a high level of social capital usually enjoy greater cooperation, more active participation, and a higher ability to solve collective problems (Putnam, 2020). In rural communities, social capital plays a very important role in the development process. Kinship relations, mutual trust, cooperation in economic activities, and participation in local decision-making can provide the basis for the formation of collective economic activities, production cooperatives, and local initiatives. In contrast, declining social trust, weak collective participation, and the spread of individualism can hinder the formation of joint development actions (Liu et al., 2024). Widespread youth migration, declining social interactions, and weak local institutions are also among the factors that may weaken social capital in rural communities (Huang et al., 2023).

From the perspective of economic development, social capital acts as a complementary factor to physical and human capital. The existence of networks of trust and cooperation can facilitate the process of information exchange, access to resources, and the formation of economic activities (Zhang et al., 2024). For this reason, many development researchers believe that strengthening social capital in local communities can play an important role in the success of development programs (Sakamoto, 2024). As a result, social capital theory provides an appropriate framework for analyzing the role of trust, social participation, and relations among individuals in the formation or persistence of barriers to rural economic development.

2-3. Community-Based Development Approach

The community-based development approach is one of the important approaches in local and rural development studies that emphasizes the role of the active participation of the local community in the process of planning and implementing development programs. This approach emerged in response to traditional development models that were mainly designed from the top down (Turner & Hume, 2022). In traditional models, decisions were usually made at central levels and local communities had a limited role in determining priorities and implementing programs. Experience showed that such approaches, in many cases, were accompanied by limited success because of ignoring the real needs and capacities of local communities (Hrivnák et al., 2021). In contrast, the community-based

development approach emphasizes the principle that local residents should be regarded as the main actors in the development process. Within this framework, people's participation in decision-making, planning, and project implementation not only helps increase the efficiency of development programs, but also strengthens the sense of ownership and responsibility among community members (Oakley, 1991). Thinkers such as Robert Chambers and Norman Uphoff are among the theorists who have emphasized the importance of public participation and the empowerment of local communities in the development process (Chambers, 2022; Uphoff, 2019).

According to this approach, sustainable development is achieved when the internal capacities of the community are strengthened and individuals are able to play an active role in decision-making processes and resource management (Berkes et al., 2001). In rural communities, this can be realized through strengthening local councils, production cooperatives, self-help groups, and other people-based institutions. Such mechanisms make broader participation of rural people in economic and social activities possible and provide the ground for the formation of local initiatives (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). At the same time, the absence of appropriate institutional platforms for public participation, centralization in the decision-making system, and weak local mechanisms can hinder the realization of the community-based development approach. Under such conditions, development programs may be designed without considering the real needs of the community and, as a result, may lack the necessary effectiveness (Ahmed, 2024; Kim & Lee, 2023). Therefore, the community-based development approach provides an appropriate framework for analyzing the role of local participation, community empowerment, and the interaction between people and managerial institutions in the process of rural economic development.

Overall, the three theoretical approaches of new institutionalism, social capital, and community-based development complement one another in analyzing the barriers to rural economic development. Institutionalism theory emphasizes the role of governance structures and institutional policies in shaping the economic environment, while social capital theory addresses the importance of trust, cooperation, and social networks in facilitating economic activities. Alongside these two, the community-based development approach emphasizes the active participation of the local community and the empowerment of rural people in the development process. The combination of these three approaches makes it possible to provide a comprehensive analysis of the economic, social, and institutional barriers to rural development in Mazandaran Province and provides a theoretical basis for identifying and prioritizing these barriers in the present study.

2-4. Empirical Research Background

Falsoleiman et al. (2025), in a study aimed at examining the skill requirements of agricultural development and the barriers to its training in the rural areas of Faryab County, showed that the penetration coefficient of skill training in horticultural, livestock, and agricultural activities varies across different rural districts, and that the Golashgerd rural district had the highest level of training penetration. Their findings also showed that the barriers to acquiring agricultural skills can be classified into individual, social, economic, and infrastructural–spatial barriers. Mohammadi (2025), in a study aimed at analyzing the barriers to the development of rural women's entrepreneurship in the villages of Marivan County, also concluded that weaknesses in management, policymaking, and development planning, and consequently the unsuitability of the business environment, are among the most important factors limiting women's entrepreneurship in rural areas. Also, Hosseinikahnouj & Sojasi Geidari (2025) with the use of the fuzzy Delphi method in examining the challenges and drivers of the development and commercialization of rural knowledge-based businesses showed that factors such as failure to employ creative and problem-finding human resources, financial instability, inability to adapt products to market needs, the expansion of administrative bureaucracy, and the absence of financial support for patent registration are among the most important barriers to the success and commercialization of knowledge-based businesses in rural areas. In addition, Darvari et al. (2025), in a study on the development of sustainable entrepreneurship in coastal villages, showed that economic barriers are the most important challenge to entrepreneurship development in these areas, followed respectively by infrastructural, support

and assistance, psychological, cultural, policymaking, and educational barriers. In foreign studies as well, different dimensions of rural development barriers have been considered. Chen (2025), in a study on educational inequality and social development in less developed areas, showed that weak human capital and limited access to education are important factors in the reproduction of poverty and deprivation in rural areas, and that the educational gap between urban and rural areas can reduce economic opportunities and social participation in these areas. Kumar & Singh (2025), through a systematic review of rural development studies, also concluded that many studies suffer from conceptual dispersion and weak theoretical frameworks, and that rural development should be regarded as a multidimensional process in which social, institutional, environmental, and governance factors simultaneously play roles. Saha et al. (2025), in examining development challenges in the villages of Bangladesh, also showed that rural underdevelopment is not caused only by economic limitations, but that factors such as limited access to education, low economic participation of women, weak communication infrastructure, and dependence on traditional production methods also play an important role in this regard. In this context, Shafieisabet & Khaksar (2024), by examining modern approaches to rural development planning, emphasized that an exclusive focus on economic indicators cannot lead to sustainable rural development, and that institutional, managerial, and social dimensions must also be taken into account in development planning. In addition, Cejudo-García et al. (2022), in a study on rural regional development, showed that achieving sustainable development in these areas requires coordination among economic activities, local institutions, public services, and social capital, and that weak institutional coordination and inequality in access to services are among the most important barriers to rural development. In general, a review of foreign studies shows that the barriers to rural development are not limited only to the lack of economic resources, but that social, institutional, managerial, and structural factors also play an important role in the formation of these barriers. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of rural development barriers requires simultaneous attention to the different economic, social, and institutional dimensions; an approach that has also been taken into consideration in the present study.

2-5. Critical Assessment of Previous Research

A critical assessment of the reviewed literature reveals both important contributions and areas requiring further investigation. Previous Iranian studies have identified diverse barriers to rural development, including skill deficiencies, limited entrepreneurial opportunities, financial constraints, infrastructural weaknesses, and shortcomings in policymaking and management (Falsoleiman et al., 2025; Mohammadi, 2025; Hosseinikahnouj & Sojasi Geidari, 2025; Darvari et al., 2025). These studies provide valuable empirical insights into specific sectors and population groups. However, their respective research focuses differ, making it necessary to examine how the identified barriers relate to one another within a broader framework of rural economic development. For example, research on agricultural skills and rural entrepreneurship highlights particular economic and human-capital constraints, whereas studies addressing knowledge-based businesses emphasize commercialization and institutional support. Although these perspectives are complementary, their findings do not, by themselves, establish the relative importance of the different categories of barriers across the wider rural development context of Mazandaran Province.

International studies further demonstrate that rural development is a multidimensional process shaped by the interaction of educational opportunities, human capital, infrastructure, social participation, institutional capacity, and governance arrangements (Chen & Liu, 2025; Shafieisabet & Khaksar, 2024; Cejudo-García et al., 2022; Kumar & Singh, 2025). An important contribution of this literature is its rejection of explanations that attribute rural underdevelopment exclusively to insufficient financial resources. Nevertheless, differences in geographical settings, institutional arrangements, and research objectives mean that findings from other regions cannot be directly generalized to Mazandaran Province without contextual assessment. Moreover, while the reviewed studies collectively identify a broad range of development constraints, a clearer comparative understanding is needed of their relative importance and the extent to which economic, social, cultural, and institutional barriers should be considered together in local development planning.

The theoretical approaches discussed in this study help address this analytical challenge. New institutionalism explains how governance structures, administrative procedures, and institutional coordination shape economic opportunities; social capital theory highlights the role of trust, networks, and collective action; and the community-based development approach emphasizes local participation and community agency. Considered together, these perspectives provide a basis for interpreting rural development barriers as interconnected rather than isolated problems. However, the theoretical integration of these perspectives must be accompanied by an empirical procedure capable of identifying and prioritizing the barriers relevant to the specific regional context.

In response to these considerations, the present study applies a three-round Delphi process involving experts familiar with rural development in Mazandaran Province. Its distinctive analytical contribution is the systematic identification, classification, and prioritization of economic, social, cultural, and institutional barriers within a single regional study. By combining qualitative identification with successive expert assessment and an evaluation of agreement, the study seeks to complement sector-specific research with a more integrated account of the constraints perceived as important by regional experts. The resulting priorities are intended to inform context-sensitive policymaking, while recognizing that expert consensus represents informed professional judgment rather than direct measurement of the causal effects of individual barriers.

3. Research Methodology

This study is applied in terms of purpose and qualitative with an exploratory approach in terms of nature, which was conducted using the Delphi technique. The main objective of the study is to identify and prioritize sociological and institutional barriers affecting rural economic development in Mazandaran Province. Considering the complexity and multidimensional nature of rural development and the necessity of utilizing the knowledge and experience of specialists, the Delphi method was selected as a systematic approach for collecting and converging expert opinions. Through several rounds of questioning and controlled feedback, this method seeks to achieve an acceptable level of consensus among experts regarding a research problem.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Research Experts

Row	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	14	78.8
		Female	4	22.2
2	Age	30–40 years	3	16.7
		40–50 years	8	44.4
		50–60 years	5	27.8
		Over 60 years	2	11.1
3	Education	MA	6	33.3
		PhD	12	66.7
4	Specialized Work Experience	10–15 years	4	22.2
		16–20 years	7	38.9
		More than 21 years	7	38.9
5	Organizational Affiliation	Universities and Academic Centers	7	38.9
		Executive Organizations Related to Rural Development	8	44.4
		Regional Planning and Management Centers	3	16.7

The statistical population of this study consists of experts and specialists familiar with issues of rural development in Mazandaran Province. These experts included university faculty members in the fields of development sociology, economics, rural planning, and geography; specialists and managers of executive agencies related to rural development (including the Agricultural Jihad Organization, the Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution, governorates, and provincial offices); and managers and experts with executive experience in regional planning and development. The sample was selected using purposive sampling. The criteria for selecting the experts were as follows:

1. Having academic education related to sociology, economics, planning, or rural development;
2. Having at least five years of research or executive experience in regional or rural development;
3. Sufficient familiarity with the economic and social conditions of Mazandaran Province;
4. Willingness to participate in the multi-stage research process.

Based on these criteria, 18 experts were selected to participate in the Delphi process. This number is considered appropriate for achieving scientific consensus in Delphi studies, due to the emphasis placed on the professional quality of participants (Table 1).

Regarding the data collection tools, two main instruments were used:

1. Semi-structured interviews:

In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore experts' views regarding the most significant barriers to rural economic development. These interviews included open-ended questions focusing on the social, cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions of rural development.

2. Delphi questionnaire:

Based on the findings of the qualitative stage, a questionnaire was designed consisting of a set of items related to the barriers to rural economic development. Experts assessed the importance of each factor using a five-point Likert scale (very low, low, medium, high, very high).

Regarding the implementation of the Delphi technique, the process was carried out in three rounds:

Round 1

At this stage, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open questionnaires to obtain experts' views on the main sociological and institutional barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province. The data obtained from this round were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed, resulting in the extraction of an initial set of indicators and barriers.

Round 2

In this round, the extracted indicators were organized into a structured questionnaire and presented to the experts to evaluate the importance of each factor. The data collected at this stage were used to calculate the mean and standard deviation of each indicator.

Round 3

In the third round, the statistical results of the second round were provided to the experts as controlled feedback. Experts were asked to reconsider their judgments if they wished, based on the overall results. This process helped increase convergence of opinions and achieve consensus.

Data analysis was conducted at both qualitative and quantitative levels:

• ***Qualitative analysis:***

Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis through open, axial, and selective coding. Similar concepts were categorized into conceptual themes.

• ***Quantitative analysis:***

Data from the Delphi questionnaires were analyzed in SPSS software. Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and ranking, were used to determine the importance of the barriers. Additionally, Kendall's coefficient of concordance was employed to measure the level of agreement among experts.

The formula for Kendall's coefficient is as follows:

$$W = \frac{12S}{m2\,(n3-n)}$$

Where:

W = Kendall's coefficient of concordance
S = sum of squared deviations of ranks
m = number of experts
n = number of indicators

To assess the reliability of the data collection tool, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. The reliability was evaluated in the second round of Delphi, which included 24 indicators remaining from the first stage. The results showed that Cronbach's alpha for the entire questionnaire was 0.87, indicating a desirable level of reliability and internal consistency among the indicators. Based on accepted criteria in social science research, alpha values above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability.

To further examine the reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's alpha was calculated separately for the four dimensions. As shown in the table, the alpha values for all dimensions were above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability of the questionnaire in the second Delphi round. Furthermore, the overall alpha coefficient (0.87) demonstrates a desirable internal consistency among the indicators (Table 2).

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for Different Dimensions of the Delphi Questionnaire

Dimension	Number of Indicators	Cronbach's Alpha
Economic	9	0.89
Social	6	0.85
Institutional	5	0.81
Cultural	4	0.78
Total Questionnaire	24	0.87

4. Findings

The present study was conducted based on three rounds of the Delphi method, with the aim of identifying, refining, and prioritizing the sociological and institutional barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province. The analysis of findings was carried out in four stages: extracting indicators in the first round, evaluating and refining indicators in the second round, achieving expert consensus in the third round, and finally, determining the final prioritization of barriers.

a) Results of the First Round of Delphi: Extraction of Indicators

In the first round, as previously explained, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 experts in the fields of development sociology, regional economics, rural planning, and executive management. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. In the open-coding stage, 63 initial concepts were extracted, which, after merging and refinement in the axial-coding stage, were consolidated into 24 main indicators. These indicators were categorized into four dimensions: economic, social, cultural, and institutional (Table 3).

Table 3. Dimensions and Indicators Extracted in the First Round of Delphi

Dimension	Indicators
Economic	Lack of investment in rural areas; weak economic and productive infrastructure; limited access to markets; shortage of financial and credit facilities; low productivity of agricultural activities; dependence of rural economy on traditional activities
Social	Out-migration of young labor force; decline in active rural population; weak social participation in development programs; low entrepreneurial skills; weak social capital and local trust; inequality of economic opportunities between rural and urban areas
Cultural	Weak entrepreneurial culture; low tendency toward economic innovation; conservative attitudes toward investment; low level of economic awareness; cultural resistance to economic change; weak culture of collective work
Institutional	Weak coordination among development institutions; administrative bureaucracy in development projects; instability of government support policies; centralized decision-making; weak regional planning; inefficiency of the rural business support system

b) Results of the Second Round of Delphi: Assessment of Indicator Importance

In the second round, a questionnaire containing the 24 extracted indicators was designed, and experts evaluated the importance of each indicator on a five-point Likert scale. Before analyzing the data, the reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was calculated at 0.87 indicating acceptable reliability. To analyze the data, mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variation were used. Indicators with a mean score below 3.50 or a coefficient of variation above 0.30 were eliminated (Table 4).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Indicators in the Second Round of Delphi

No.	Indicator	Mean	SD	CV
1	Lack of investment in rural areas	4.63	0.52	0.11
2	Weak economic and productive infrastructure	4.55	0.58	0.13
3	Out-migration of young labor force	4.48	0.61	0.14
4	Shortage of financial and credit facilities	4.42	0.64	0.14

No.	Indicator	Mean	SD	CV
5	Administrative bureaucracy in development projects	4.36	0.66	0.15
6	Weak coordination among development institutions	4.30	0.69	0.16
7	Low entrepreneurial skills	4.24	0.71	0.17
8	Limited access to markets	4.18	0.74	0.18
9	Weak entrepreneurial culture	4.10	0.76	0.19
10	Low tendency toward economic innovation	4.04	0.79	0.20

The descriptive statistics of indicators in Round Two show that experts identified a group of economic, institutional, and social factors as the most significant barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province. According to the results, the indicator "lack of investment in rural areas" with the highest mean (4.63) ranked first. This demonstrates that, from the experts' perspective, insufficient capital resources and weak investment flows constitute a fundamental developmental challenge.

Weak economic and productive infrastructure ranked second (mean: 4.55), highlighting the importance of transportation networks, logistical services, and production facilities for rural economic growth. The third most important barrier was "out-migration of young labor force" (mean: 4.48), indicating that the departure of skilled and active workers undermines local entrepreneurial and productive capacity. The "shortage of financial and credit facilities" (mean: 4.42) further reflects the limitations rural residents face in accessing financial resources to establish or expand economic activities.

Institutional factors including administrative bureaucracy and weak coordination also ranked among the high-importance indicators. Generally, the low coefficients of variation (mostly below 0.20) indicate a relatively high level of expert consensus. In this stage, four indicators were removed due to not meeting the required criteria (Table 5).

Table 5. Indicators Removed in the Second Round

No.	Indicator	Mean	SD	Reason for Removal
1	Low level of economic awareness among rural residents	3.21	0.98	Mean below threshold
2	Cultural resistance to economic change	3.08	1.02	Insufficient expert consensus
3	Weak culture of collective work	3.15	0.94	High CV and dispersed opinions
4	Dependence of rural economy on traditional activities	3.27	0.96	Did not meet minimum required score

c) Results of the Third Round of Delphi: Achieving Expert Consensus

In the third round, experts were provided with the results of the second round including means and rankings to revise their evaluations if necessary. Kendall's W was used to measure agreement (Table 6).

Table 6. Results of Kendall's Coordination Test

Statistical Index	Value
Number of Experts (N)	18
Number of Final Indicators (K)	20
Kendall's W	0.74
Chi-Square	253.68
Degrees of Freedom	19
Significance Level	0.000

The results indicate a high level of agreement among experts. Kendall's W = 0.74 confirms strong convergence of expert opinions, and the Chi-Square significance ($p < 0.05$) shows that this agreement did not occur by chance (Table 7, 8 and 9).

d) Comparison of Rankings Between Rounds Two and Three

Table 7. Comparison of Indicator Rankings in Rounds Two and Three

No.	Indicator	Rank (Round 2)	Rank (Round 3)	Rank Change
1	Lack of investment	1	1	-
2	Weak economic infrastructure	2	2	-
3	Out-migration of young labor force	3	3	-
4	Shortage of financial facilities	4	4	-
5	Administrative bureaucracy	5	5	-
6	Weak institutional coordination	6	6	-
7	Low entrepreneurial skills	7	7	–1
8	Limited market access	8	8	+1
9	Weak entrepreneurial culture	9	9	-
10	Low tendency toward innovation	10	10	-

(Note: From the 20 final indicators, only the 10 with the highest mean importance are included.)

e) Analysis of Main Dimensions

Table 8. Mean Importance of Barrier Dimensions

Main Dimension	Mean Importance (out of 5)	Final Rank	Interpretation
Economic	4.57	1	Highest weight and consensus; reflects the role of infrastructure, capital, and financial resources
Institutional	4.42	2	Related to administrative bureaucracy, weak coordination, and inefficiencies
Social	4.29	3	Reflects challenges in labor force, migration, and participation
Cultural	4.11	4	Lowest rank; influential, but with lower expert consensus

f) Distribution of Indicators Across Delphi Rounds

Table 9. Distribution of Indicators by Dimension in Different Delphi Stages

Dimension	Round 1	Round 2 (After Removal)	Round 3 (Final)
Economic	18	13	9
Institutional	14	10	6
Social	12	9	3
Cultural	10	8	2
Total	54	40	20

g) Final Ranking of Barriers

At the end of the third round of the Delphi process, out of all the indicators examined, 20 indicators succeeded in meeting the required criteria for final acceptance and were identified as the final indicators of rural economic development barriers in Mazandaran Province. However, to enhance analytical focus and highlight the most critical components, the final ranking section presents only the 10 indicators that obtained the highest average importance scores among the approved indicators. Therefore, the final ranking table reflects the top 10 indicators out of the 20 final indicators, rather than all accepted indicators (Table 10).

Table 10. Final Ranking of the Most Important Barriers to Rural Economic Development

Rank	Key Barrier	Mean Importance
1	Lack of investment in rural economic activities	4.78
2	Weak economic and productive infrastructure in rural areas	4.71
3	Limited access to financial resources and credit	4.65
4	Absence of cohesive planning and management in rural development	4.60

Rank	Key Barrier	Mean Importance
5	Weak governmental support for rural economic activities	4.55
6	Low levels of entrepreneurial skills and training in rural areas	4.49
7	Out-migration of young and active labor force from rural areas	4.43
8	Limited access to markets for rural products	4.37
9	Lack of transportation and communication infrastructure	4.31
10	Weak access to production technologies and innovations	4.26

h) Interpretation and Analysis

Based on the results of Table 10, several important points must be highlighted.

The first point concerns the dominance of structural and economic barriers. Shortage of investment, weak infrastructure, and limited access to financial resources are among the most critical challenges. The first-place ranking of insufficient investment indicates that, from the perspective of experts, directing capital flows toward rural productive activities is considered the primary prerequisite for development. Alongside this, the weakness of physical and economic infrastructure indicates that many villages in the province still face fundamental developmental issues such as transportation facilities, processing industries, and production support services.

In addition to these economic factors, the human capital crisis emerges as another major challenge. The ranking of young labor out-migration in third place demonstrates that the departure of skilled and energetic labor from rural areas weakens local productive and entrepreneurial capacities. This phenomenon, beyond being a result of limited employment opportunities, itself becomes a factor perpetuating economic stagnation in rural regions and forms a cycle of reproducing underdevelopment.

Furthermore, the results of Table 10 indicate the presence of institutional and managerial barriers to rural development. The prominence of administrative bureaucracy and weak coordination among executive agencies demonstrates that part of the developmental challenges stems from inefficiencies within management structures. Overlapping responsibilities among institutions involved in rural development and the complexity of administrative procedures not only slow the implementation of programs but also lead to the waste of scarce development resources.

Additionally, the skill gap and limited access to markets are identified as other significant obstacles to rural development in Mazandaran Province. Many rural products lack competitiveness in broader markets due to weak modern skills, absence of effective marketing, and limited integration into value chains.

Overall, it must be acknowledged that the issue of rural economic development in Mazandaran Province is confronted with a set of interconnected barriers that influence one another in a chain-like relationship. Accordingly, achieving sustainable development in these areas requires a comprehensive approach that simultaneously and coherently pursues institutional reforms, infrastructure enhancement, economic investment, human capital empowerment, and improved market access. Such an approach can help break the cycle of underdevelopment and promote economic dynamism in the rural regions of Mazandaran Province (Figure 1).

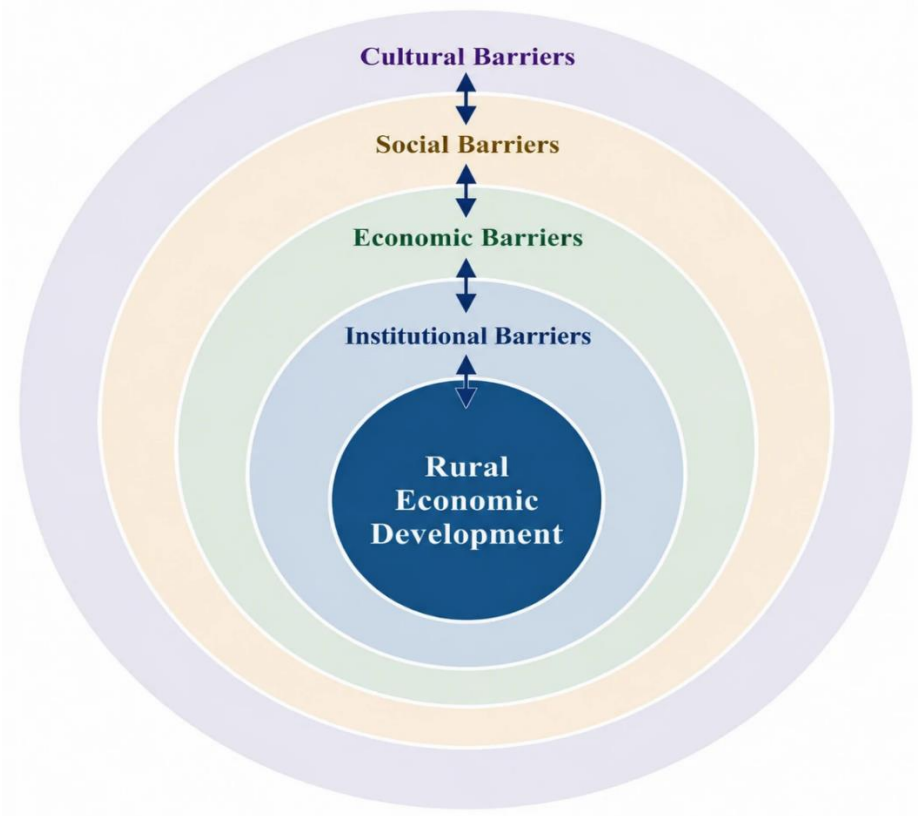


Figure 1. Model of the Sociological and Institutional Barriers to Rural Economic Development in Mazandaran Province

The final model of the study indicates that the barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province are multilayered, chain-like, and mutually reinforcing in nature, and none of the dimensions operates independently. In this model, institutional barriers are located at the central core and serve as the foundation for the emergence of other constraints. Factors such as administrative bureaucracy, centralization, and weak coordination among the institutions responsible for development disrupt the process of decision-making and implementation of development programs, and consequently limit the possibility of attracting investment, supporting economic activities, and implementing development projects. Therefore, institutional weakness provides the grounds for the emergence of many problems in other areas.

At the next level are the economic barriers, which represent the tangible manifestation of institutional limitations. Insufficient investment, weak infrastructure, limited access to financial and credit resources, and weakness in rural product markets are among the most important challenges that directly affect production, employment, and the income level of rural households. At the third layer are the social barriers, which include the migration of young and skilled labor, the decline in the active population, and weak social participation. The reduction of economic opportunities leads to the migration of human resources and, consequently, to a decline in development capacities within rural society.

At the outermost level are the cultural barriers, which affect the development process in the long term. Factors such as weak entrepreneurial culture, low inclination toward innovation, and conservative attitudes toward change can reinforce the persistence of developmental stagnation. Overall, this model shows that rural economic development requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach in which institutional reforms, the strengthening of economic infrastructure, and social and cultural empowerment are addressed simultaneously.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Rural development is one of the fundamental components in achieving sustainable development in different societies. Rural areas, in addition to being responsible for a significant share of agricultural production and ensuring food security, play an important role in preserving natural resources, maintaining population balance, and sustaining settlement systems. Therefore, rural development is not merely synonymous with increasing economic production; rather, it is a

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multidimensional process that encompasses improvements in the economic, social, institutional, and cultural conditions of rural communities. Achieving this can enhance the quality of life of rural residents, reduce poverty, and create equal opportunities for development. In Iran as well, rural development holds special importance, since a significant portion of the country's population lives in rural areas and these regions play a major role in agricultural production and food security. However, many villages in the country face challenges such as weak infrastructure, insufficient investment, limited employment opportunities, migration of young labor, and shortcomings in certain managerial structures. These conditions have caused the development gap between urban and rural areas to persist, and have made the need for effective policies in rural development more pressing.

Accordingly, the authors of the present study aimed to identify and prioritize the sociological and institutional barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province. The main research question was centered on identifying the most significant social, economic, institutional, and cultural barriers affecting the economic development of rural areas in the province and determining the relative importance of these barriers.

The findings of this study first indicated that the economic development of rural areas in Mazandaran Province is influenced by a set of barriers across economic, social, institutional, and cultural dimensions, which affect one another through a chain-like relationship. In the economic dimension, insufficient investment in rural productive activities was identified as the most important barrier, reflecting a weak flow of capital toward productive rural sectors. Additionally, weak economic and service infrastructure such as processing industries, transportation facilities, and marketing networks constitutes another major challenge in this domain. Limited access of rural producers to financial and credit resources is also considered another important economic barrier that restricts the development of economic activities.

In the social dimension, the migration of young labor from villages to cities was identified as one of the fundamental challenges. This issue reduces the active population, weakens productive capacities, and diminishes economic dynamism in rural areas. Furthermore, a decline in motivation for economic activity among some rural residents and weak social participation in certain development activities were also identified as key social barriers in the study's findings.

In the institutional dimension, administrative bureaucracy, the complexity of licensing procedures, and weak coordination among executive agencies involved in rural development were identified as the most significant institutional obstacles. The presence of complex and sometimes overlapping administrative structures leads to slow and inefficient implementation of development programs.

In the cultural dimension as well, weak entrepreneurial culture, low inclination toward innovation, and the limited number of successful economic experiences in some rural areas were identified as factors that can slow the economic development process. Together with other economic and institutional barriers, these factors create a cycle of reproduced underdevelopment in certain villages.

Accordingly, comparing the results of the present study with previous research shows a considerable alignment across many cases. The findings of this study correspond with those of Falsoleiman et al. (2025), as that study also emphasized economic and infrastructural barriers to rural development. This alignment can be attributed to similarities in economic structures and levels of infrastructural development in many rural areas, which cause development challenges to have similar characteristics across regions. Likewise, the results of this study are consistent with those of Mohammadi (2025), in which weak policymaking and inefficiencies in certain managerial structures were identified as factors limiting economic activities in rural areas. This alignment can be traced to the decisive role of managerial institutions in directing development programs and their impact on the economic performance of rural regions.

At the international level, the findings are consistent with those of Chen (2025), whose study shows that weak human capital and migration of young labor from rural to urban areas constitute one of the most important challenges in rural development. The similarity between these findings and the results of the present study indicates that migration and the declining rural workforce represent shared challenges among many developing countries. The results of this study are also aligned with those of

Shafieisabet & Khaksar, (2024), in which limited economic opportunities and infrastructural weaknesses were identified as the main barriers to rural development. This alignment suggests that rural development in many regions of the world faces similar structural challenges, the resolution of which requires coordinated and long-term development policies.

Overall, the findings of the present study indicate that the economic development of rural areas in Mazandaran Province is constrained by a set of multidimensional barriers that operate within an interconnected system. Therefore, overcoming these challenges requires adopting a comprehensive approach that simultaneously addresses the economic, institutional, social, and cultural dimensions of development.

5.1. Recommendations

1. Improving institutional structures and reducing administrative bureaucracy: One of the most important steps in facilitating rural economic development is reforming administrative processes and increasing coordination among executive agencies involved in rural development. Reducing administrative complexity, clarifying licensing procedures, and establishing coordinated mechanisms among responsible institutions can help attract investment and ensure effective implementation of development programs.
2. Strengthening economic and productive infrastructure in rural areas: Developing infrastructure such as transportation networks, processing industries, storage and processing facilities for agricultural products, and marketing networks can play a crucial role in enhancing rural economic productivity. Investment in these areas not only reduces production costs but also improves rural producers' access to broader markets.
3. Empowering human capital and developing entrepreneurial skills: Strengthening professional and entrepreneurial skills among rural residents especially youth can create the foundation for local businesses and reduce migration. Organizing practical training courses, supporting innovative ideas, and establishing entrepreneurship consultation centers in rural areas can promote economic dynamism.
4. Strengthening entrepreneurial and innovation culture in rural communities: Sustainable economic development in rural areas requires changing mindsets and reinforcing a culture of participation, creativity, and innovation. Supporting cooperative activities, promoting successful rural entrepreneurial models, and strengthening social and local networks can contribute to the formation of new and sustainable economic activities in these regions.

5.2. Limitations of the Study and Future Research

Despite its contributions to identifying and prioritizing barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province, this study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

1. Expert-based assessment: The study relied on the judgments of 18 experts selected through purposive sampling. Although their professional knowledge provided valuable insights into rural development challenges, their assessments may not fully capture the experiences and priorities of rural households, entrepreneurs, farmers, and other local stakeholders.

2. Geographical scope: The research focused exclusively on Mazandaran Province. Given the differences in socioeconomic conditions, institutional arrangements, productive capacities, and local governance across regions, the identified priorities should not be generalized directly to other provinces without further empirical investigation.

3. Methodological characteristics of the Delphi technique: The three-round Delphi process facilitated the systematic identification and prioritization of barriers based on expert assessments and consensus. However, the resulting rankings reflect the perceived relative importance of the barriers rather than direct measurements of their actual effects on rural economic development.

4. Scope of empirical validation: Although the study classifies barriers into economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions, the findings are based primarily on expert evaluations. Further research using quantitative indicators and field-level data could examine how these barriers are associated with measurable outcomes, such as rural employment, household income, entrepreneurship, and the sustainability of local economic activities.

5. Prioritization versus policy effectiveness: The study establishes a hierarchy of perceived barriers but does not directly evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to address them. Future research could assess the feasibility, costs, and outcomes of targeted policy measures, particularly those addressing the highest-priority

barriers, and investigate whether coordinated interventions across economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions produce more sustainable rural development outcomes.

Addressing these limitations through comparative regional studies, broader stakeholder participation, quantitative analysis, and evaluations of policy interventions could strengthen the empirical basis for rural development planning. Such efforts would also help translate the priorities identified in this study into more context-sensitive, coordinated, and evidence-based policy recommendations for Mazandaran Province and comparable rural settings.

Acknowledgements

The current paper is extracted from the doctoral dissertation of the first author (Somayeh Bagerinia Amiri) in the Department of Management & Ecomonomy, Faculty of Human Sciences, Qas, C, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr, Iran.

Author Contributions

The authors contributed equally to the development and preparation of this research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the authorship or publication of this article.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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*. نویسندهٔ مسئول:

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Journal of Research and Rural Planning
Volume 15, No. 4, Autumn 2026, Serial No. 55, Pp. 123-141
eISSN: 2783-2007 **ISSN: 2783-2791**
http://jrrp.um.ac.ir

Original Article

شناسایی و اولویت‌بندی موانع جامعه‌شناختی و نهادی توسعه اقتصادی روستایی در استان مازندران با استفاده از روش دلفی

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چکیده مبسوط

۱. مقدمه

توسعه اقتصادی روستایی فرایندی چندبعدی است که علاوه بر منابع مالی، ظرفیت‌های تولیدی و زیرساخت‌های فیزیکی، از ساختارهای اجتماعی، الگوهای فرهنگی و کیفیت نهادهای مدیریتی تأثیر می‌پذیرد. با وجود برخورداری استان مازندران از ظرفیت‌های طبیعی، کشاورزی و انسانی قابل‌توجه، مناطق روستایی این استان همچنان با چالش‌هایی نظیر کمبود سرمایه‌گذاری، محدودیت فرصت‌های اشتغال، مهاجرت نیروی کار جوان، ضعف زیرساخت‌های تولیدی و ناکارآمدی برخی سازوکارهای مدیریتی مواجه‌اند. استمرار این مسائل نشان می‌دهد که تبیین مشکلات توسعه روستایی صرفاً بر اساس کمبود منابع اقتصادی کافی نیست و باید روابط متقابل میان موانع اقتصادی، اجتماعی، فرهنگی و نهادی نیز بررسی شود. ازاین‌رو، پژوهش حاضر با هدف شناسایی، طبقه‌بندی و اولویت‌بندی موانع مؤثر بر توسعه اقتصادی روستایی در استان مازندران انجام شده است تا با تعیین مهم‌ترین محدودیت‌ها، زمینه لازم برای تدوین سیاست‌های یکپارچه و متناسب با شرایط منطقه‌ای فراهم شود.

۲. مبانی نظری تحقیق

چارچوب نظری پژوهش بر تلفیق سه رویکرد نهادگرایی جدید، سرمایه اجتماعی و توسعه جامعه‌محور استوار است. بر اساس رویکرد نهادگرایی جدید، عملکرد اقتصادی جوامع تنها به منابع و سرمایه فیزیکی وابسته نیست، بلکه کیفیت قوانین، سیاست‌ها، ساختارهای اداری و سازوکارهای تصمیم‌گیری نیز در شکل‌گیری فرصت‌های اقتصادی نقش تعیین‌کننده دارند. در این چارچوب، تمرکزگرایی، پیچیدگی بوروکراتیک و ضعف هماهنگی میان سازمان‌های مسئول می‌توانند هزینه فعالیت‌های اقتصادی را افزایش داده و زمینه سرمایه‌گذاری و کارآفرینی را محدود کنند. نظریه سرمایه اجتماعی نیز با تأکید بر اعتماد متقابل، شبکه‌های ارتباطی، همکاری جمعی و مشارکت اجتماعی، این عوامل را از پیش‌شرط‌های اقدام جمعی و توسعه اقتصادی محلی می‌داند. بر اساس رویکرد توسعه جامعه‌محور، مشارکت فعال ساکنان روستا در تصمیم‌گیری، برنامه‌ریزی و اجرای طرح‌ها، موجب افزایش تناسب برنامه‌های توسعه‌ای با نیازهای محلی و تقویت احساس مسئولیت و مالکیت اجتماعی می‌شود. تلفیق این سه رویکرد، مبنایی برای تحلیل هم‌زمان محدودیت‌های اقتصادی و نقش عوامل اجتماعی، فرهنگی و نهادی در توسعه اقتصادی روستایی فراهم می‌کند.

۳. روش تحقیق

پژوهش حاضر از نظر هدف، کاربردی و از نظر ماهیت، کیفی با رویکرد اکتشافی است که با استفاده از روش دلفی در سه دور انجام شد. مشارکت‌کنندگان شامل ۱۸ نفر از اعضای هیئت علمی حوزه‌های جامعه‌شناسی توسعه، اقتصاد، برنامه‌ریزی روستایی و جغرافیا، کارشناسان دستگاه‌های اجرایی مرتبط با توسعه روستایی و مدیران دارای تجربه در برنامه‌ریزی منطقه‌ای بودند که به روش نمونه‌گیری هدفمند انتخاب شدند. در دور نخست، داده‌ها از طریق مصاحبه‌های نیمه‌ساختاریافته و پرسش‌های باز گردآوری و با استفاده از کدگذاری باز، محوری و انتخابی تحلیل شد. در دور دوم، شاخص‌های استخراج‌شده در قالب پرسش‌نامه‌ای با طیف پنج‌درجه‌ای لیکرت در

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اختیار خبرگان قرار گرفت و اهمیت هر شاخص بر اساس میانگین، انحراف معیار و ضریب تغییرات ارزیابی شد. شاخص‌های دارای میانگین کمتر از ۳٫۵۰ یا ضریب تغییرات بیشتر از ۰٫۳۰ حذف شدند. در دور سوم، نتایج دور قبل به‌صورت بازخورد کنترل‌شده ارائه شد تا امکان بازنگری ارزیابی‌ها و دستیابی به توافق بیشتر فراهم شود. تحلیل‌های آماری با استفاده از نرم‌افزار SPSS و ضریب توافق کندال انجام گرفت. آلفای کرونباخ کل پرسش‌نامه برابر با ۰٫۸۷ بود که بیانگر پایایی مطلوب ابزار پژوهش است.

۴. یافته‌های تحقیق

نتایج دور نخست به استخراج ۲۴ شاخص و طبقه‌بندی اولیه موانع در چهار بعد اقتصادی، اجتماعی، فرهنگی و نهادی منجر شد. پس از ارزیابی‌های متوالی، ۲۰ شاخص در مرحله نهایی تأیید شدند. ضریب توافق کندال برابر با ۰٫۷۴ و مقدار معناداری کمتر از ۰٫۰۵ بود که نشان‌دهنده توافق قابل‌توجه میان خبرگان در رتبه‌بندی شاخص‌هاست. بر اساس میانگین اهمیت ابعاد، موانع اقتصادی با میانگین ۴٫۵۷ در رتبه نخست، موانع نهادی با میانگین ۴٫۴۲ در رتبه دوم، موانع اجتماعی با میانگین ۴٫۲۹ در رتبه سوم و موانع فرهنگی با میانگین ۴٫۱۱ در رتبه چهارم قرار گرفتند.

در رتبه‌بندی نهایی شاخص‌ها، کمبود سرمایه‌گذاری در فعالیت‌های اقتصادی روستایی با میانگین ۴٫۷۸ مهم‌ترین مانع شناخته شد. ضعف زیرساخت‌های اقتصادی و تولیدی با میانگین ۴٫۷۱ و محدودیت دسترسی به منابع مالی و اعتباری با میانگین ۴٫۶۵ در رتبه‌های دوم و سوم قرار گرفتند. فقدان برنامه‌ریزی و مدیریت منسجم توسعه روستایی با میانگین ۴٫۶۰، ضعف حمایت‌های دولتی از فعالیت‌های اقتصادی روستایی با میانگین ۴٫۵۵ و پایین‌بودن سطح مهارت‌ها و آموزش‌های کارآفرینی با میانگین ۴٫۴۹، رتبه‌های بعدی را به خود اختصاص دادند. مهاجرت نیروی کار جوان و فعال با میانگین ۴٫۴۳، محدودیت دسترسی به بازار محصولات روستایی با میانگین ۴٫۳۷، ضعف زیرساخت‌های حمل‌ونقل و ارتباطات با میانگین ۴٫۳۱ و دسترسی محدود به فناوری‌های تولید و نوآوری با میانگین ۴٫۲۶ نیز در میان ده مانع اول قرار گرفتند. این یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهند که محدودیت‌های سرمایه‌گذاری و زیرساختی در کنار ضعف‌های مدیریتی، کمبود مهارت و مهاجرت نیروی انسانی، از مهم‌ترین موانع ادراک‌شده توسعه اقتصادی روستایی در استان هستند.

۵. بحث و نتیجه‌گیری

یافته‌های پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که توسعه اقتصادی روستایی در استان مازندران با مجموعه‌ای از موانع به‌هم‌پیوسته مواجه است و رفع جداگانه هر یک از آن‌ها نمی‌تواند به پایداری نتایج توسعه‌ای منجر شود. اگرچه موانع اقتصادی در رتبه‌بندی ابعاد جایگاه نخست را دارند، ضعف‌های نهادی و مدیریتی می‌توانند بر امکان جذب سرمایه، اثربخشی حمایت‌های دولتی و اجرای طرح‌های زیربنایی تأثیر بگذارند. هم‌زمان، محدودیت فرصت‌های اقتصادی و ضعف ظرفیت‌های محلی، زمینه مهاجرت نیروی کار جوان را تقویت کرده و توان تولیدی و کارآفرینی روستاها را کاهش می‌دهد. بنابراین، توسعه اقتصادی پایدار مستلزم اتخاذ رویکردی یکپارچه با تأکید بر اصلاح فرایندهای اداری، کاهش بوروکراسی، تقویت هماهنگی میان دستگاه‌های اجرایی، بهبود زیرساخت‌های تولید و حمل‌ونقل، تسهیل دسترسی به سرمایه و بازار، توسعه آموزش‌های مهارتی و کارآفرینی و تقویت مشارکت و سرمایه اجتماعی است. با توجه به اتکای پژوهش بر قضاوت ۱۸ خبره و محدودبودن قلمرو آن به استان مازندران، نتایج بیانگر اولویت‌های ادراک‌شده متخصصان است و نباید بدون بررسی‌های تکمیلی به سایر مناطق تعمیم داده شود. انجام مطالعات میدانی با مشارکت مستقیم روستاییان و ارزیابی کمی پیامدهای سیاست‌های پیشنهادی می‌تواند زمینه اعتبارسنجی بیشتر یافته‌ها و ارتقای اثربخشی برنامه‌های توسعه روستایی را فراهم سازد.

کلیدواژه‌ها: توسعه اقتصادی روستایی، موانع جامعه‌شناختی، عوامل نهادی، روش دلفی، استان مازندران.

تشکر و قدردانی

مطالعه حاضر برگرفته از رساله دکتری سمیه باقری‌نیا امیری گروه مدیریت و اقتصاد، دانشکده علوم انسانی، واحد قائم‌شهر، دانشگاه آزاد اسلامی، قائم شهر، ایران. است.

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How to cite this article:
Bagerinia Amiri, S., Jafari Kelarijani, S. A., Mehrara, A., Shaki, M. H., Varedi, Sh. (2026). Identification and prioritization of sociological and institutional barriers to rural economic development in Mazandaran Province using the delphi method. *Journal of Research & Rural Planning, 15*(4), 123-141.
http://dx.doi.org/10.22067/jrrp.v15i4.2608-1183

Date:
Received: 18-08-2026
Revised: 12-10-2026
Accepted: 013-10- 2026
Available Online: 13-10-2026