



Original Article

Explaining a Participatory Governance Framework for Sustainable Rural Tourism Development: A Qualitative Study in Western Mazandaran Province

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Abstract

Purpose- Sustainable rural tourism development requires the establishment of a governance system based on participation, institutional interaction, and local community empowerment. Despite the considerable tourism potential of western Mazandaran Province, the lack of a context-specific framework for participatory governance has posed challenges to the realization of sustainable development. Therefore, this study aims to explain a participatory governance framework for achieving sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province.

Design/methodology/approach- This applied research adopts a qualitative approach. Data were collected through 25 semi-structured interviews with academic experts, managers, and practitioners in the fields of tourism and rural development. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the thematic networks approach proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001).

Finding- The analysis of the data resulted in the extraction of 50 initial codes, 10 concepts, 5 basic themes, 3 organizing themes, and one global theme. The global theme of the study was identified as a participatory governance framework for sustainable rural tourism development based on institutional interaction, local community empowerment, and strategic management of natural and cultural resources. The findings showed that participatory governance can be effective when coordination and interaction among responsible institutions, genuine stakeholder participation, economic and social empowerment of local communities, integrated destination management, protection of natural and cultural resources, strategic planning, infrastructure development, and entrepreneurship promotion are pursued synergistically. Furthermore, the findings indicated that local community empowerment plays a driving role in enhancing participation, strengthening social capital, improving the quality of decision-making, and increasing the resilience of rural tourism destinations.

Practical Implications- Establishing integrated destination management mechanisms, strengthening coordination among responsible institutions, developing the capacities and skills of local communities, supporting local entrepreneurship and indigenous businesses, expanding stakeholder participation in decision-making processes, and protecting natural and cultural resources are among the most important strategies for achieving participatory governance and sustainable rural tourism development in the region.

Originality/value- The originality of this study lies in developing a context-specific participatory governance framework based on thematic analysis and tailored to the characteristics of western Mazandaran Province. By integrating institutional, managerial, and social dimensions, the proposed framework can serve as a practical basis for policymaking, planning, and managing sustainable rural tourism development at both regional and national levels.

Keywords- Participatory governance, Sustainable development, Rural tourism, Thematic Analysis, Western Mazandaran Province.



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1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most important sectors of the global economy and a major source of economic growth and development in recent decades. As one of the world's most dynamic economic activities, tourism plays a significant role in the economic and social development of regions and countries and is recognized in many countries as a leading industry and a major source of income and employment (Altassan, 2023; Javan & Mohammadi, 2025). Moreover, by strengthening local economies, improving public welfare, developing infrastructure, and supporting regional development, tourism makes a significant contribution to the achievement of sustainable development (Javan & Pourgharib, 2024).

Meanwhile, rural tourism has increasingly attracted the attention of policymakers and researchers as an effective strategy for sustainable development. Many rural areas face challenges such as weak governance, economic stagnation, declining employment opportunities, and environmental problems. Therefore, the development of rural tourism can play an important role in revitalizing rural communities by creating employment and income opportunities, diversifying local economies, preserving cultural and natural heritage, strengthening infrastructure, and improving social welfare (Javan & Jamini, 2025). Moreover, by strengthening economic structures and creating new development opportunities, rural tourism can contribute to regional development; however, realizing these potentials requires appropriate planning, effective management, and a reassessment of existing management mechanisms (Karampour et al., 2026). In this regard, rural tourism development can also improve the quality of life of local communities by diversifying economic activities, increasing household incomes, reducing migration, strengthening local identity, and protecting the environment (Naim Abadi et al., 2023; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015).

Despite these potentials, achieving sustainable tourism development is not limited to infrastructure development or the utilization of natural and cultural attractions; rather, it requires the active and empowered involvement of local communities throughout all stages of tourism planning, implementation, and management.

Effective participation can be achieved when local communities possess the necessary capacities in areas such as education, tourism skills, entrepreneurship, human capital, access to financial resources, and social capacities. Such conditions enable local residents to move from passive recipients of services to key actors in tourism management and development. Research evidence also indicates that community-based tourism, by enhancing economic, social, and cultural empowerment, particularly among rural women, provides a basis for increasing participation, strengthening human capital, and achieving sustainable development (Shamsoddini & Dehghani, 2024).

Furthermore, sustainable rural tourism development requires the empowerment of local communities across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Strengthening employment and income opportunities, enhancing local education and skills, increasing social participation, and promoting responsibility for environmental protection provide the necessary capacity for residents to participate effectively in tourism-related decision-making and create the conditions for participatory governance (Rezaei Tabar et al., 2025). In this regard, capacity building and empowerment through skills development, strengthening collaborative networks, enhancing local leadership, and increasing decision-making capacity not only strengthen local community support for tourism development but also constitute fundamental pillars of sustainable development and participatory governance in tourism destinations (Franco & Tracey, 2019; Khalid et al., 2019; Shafiei Sabet & Herati Fard, 2019).

In recent years, participatory governance has received increasing attention as one of the emerging approaches to tourism destination management. This approach emphasizes establishing institutional arrangements for collaboration, trust-building, transparency, continuous interaction, and the active participation of stakeholders in decision-making, planning, and management processes (Ghanbari Ghadikolaei et al., 2025). According to the collaborative governance model proposed by Ansell and Gash, the success of participatory governance depends on the development of face-to-face dialogue, mutual trust, shared commitment, a common

understanding of goals, appropriate institutional design, facilitative leadership, and the achievement of incremental outcomes. The realization of these components can help reduce conflicts, strengthen collaboration among stakeholders, and facilitate participatory decision-making, thereby enabling the sustainable management of tourism destinations (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Western Mazandaran Province, comprising the counties of Chalus, Nowshahr, Kelardasht, Abbasabad, Tonekabon, and Ramsar, is considered one of the country's major tourism areas due to its rich natural and cultural attractions, including the Hyrcanian forests, the Caspian Sea coast, tourism-targeted villages, eco-lodges, and cultural heritage. Despite these potentials, rural tourism development in the region faces challenges such as fragmented management, weak institutional coordination, limited local community participation, uneven infrastructure development, pressure on natural resources, and the unequal distribution of tourism benefits. These challenges indicate that the issue of rural tourism in the region is not merely a lack of tourism potential; rather, it is also related to how relationships among actors, institutions, and local communities are organized within development-related decision-making and management processes.

Within the literature on participatory governance in tourism, previous studies have mainly emphasized the importance of local community participation, social capital, stakeholder empowerment, institutional coordination, destination management, and the protection of natural and cultural resources. However, the fundamental issue is not merely the identification of these components; rather, how they are interconnected and interact within an integrated governance system remains insufficiently explained. In other words, although existing studies have demonstrated that resident participation, institutional support, and local community empowerment are among the factors contributing to tourism sustainability, it remains unclear how these components are connected at the destination level, what mechanisms transform stakeholder participation into an effective capacity for tourism decision-making and management, and how interactions among formal institutions, local communities, and other stakeholders can simultaneously support local economic development, equitable benefit distribution, and

the protection of natural and cultural resources. From this perspective, the existing research gap is not merely a geographical gap, but rather a conceptual gap in explaining how the components of participatory governance are organized and interact in the context of sustainable rural tourism development.

This research gap is particularly important in western Mazandaran Province, where the local economy's dependence on tourism, the simultaneous presence of multiple stakeholders, the involvement of numerous institutions, and the high sensitivity of natural and cultural resources have made tourism development a multidimensional and multilevel issue. Under such conditions, understanding the mechanisms of interaction among formal institutions, local communities, and other stakeholders, and explaining how participation, empowerment, institutional coordination, and sustainable destination management are interconnected, can provide a more appropriate basis for policymaking and planning for rural tourism.

Accordingly, the present study was conducted to explain a participatory governance framework for sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province and seeks to answer the following question: What are the themes and conceptual relationships that constitute this framework, and how are they organized within an integrated structure? To address this question, the perspectives of experts and practitioners in the fields of tourism and rural development were analyzed using a qualitative approach and thematic analysis method to identify and explain the components and conceptual relationships shaping participatory governance in the study context.

2. Research Theoretical Literature

Governance has shifted in recent decades from traditional state-centered models toward network-based, participatory, and multilevel approaches. From this perspective, the management of public affairs is no longer the sole responsibility of the government; rather, a range of governmental institutions, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and civil society participate in policymaking, decision-making, and program implementation processes. Within this framework, governance methods and instruments can be broadly categorized into hard and soft instruments. Hard or traditional instruments are primarily based

on laws, legal requirements, and hierarchical top-down structures, whereas soft instruments rely on interaction, dialogue, participation, trust-building, and collaboration among stakeholders and generally follow a bottom-up approach. Participatory governance methods and instruments fall within the category of soft instruments and, due to their greater reliance on collaboration and interaction, have demonstrated greater effectiveness in addressing complex development issues (Mirbagheri, 2023).

Participatory governance is one of the emerging approaches to governance that emphasizes the active participation of citizens and other stakeholders throughout all stages of policymaking, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. This approach seeks to achieve more sustainable, legitimate, and effective agreements by fostering continuous interaction among government, the private sector, and civil society (Halim, 2018). From a theoretical perspective, participatory governance is also considered a subfield of governance theory, with its primary objective being to deepen citizen participation in governance processes through participatory decision-making mechanisms (Fischer, 2012).

Participation is now recognized as one of the key pillars of sustainable development, and managers and planners seek to enhance the effectiveness of development programs and projects by promoting public participation (Mirbagheri & Jalili, 2023). One of the most important components of participatory governance is the active and informed participation of local communities in governance processes. Such participation encompasses the responsible involvement of residents in policymaking, planning, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of development programs and, through interaction among government, the private sector, and local communities, provides a basis for achieving development objectives (Mirbagheri, 2023). Developing and establishing an appropriate framework for stakeholder participation in tourism is also of particular importance, as considering stakeholders' perspectives and demands not only enhances transparency in planning but also strengthens cohesion, mutual understanding, and collaboration among them (Bahadori et al., 2022). Sustainable tourism development is also a comprehensive approach that simultaneously

addresses the economic, social, cultural, institutional, and environmental dimensions. From this perspective, the conservation of natural and cultural resources, alongside the achievement of economic benefits and social participation, is considered one of the main objectives of development (Esmailzadeh, 2023). Furthermore, sustainable rural tourism aims to improve residents' quality of life by maintaining a balance among environmental protection, economic development, social justice, and the preservation of cultural identity (Khadem Hosseini et al., 2025).

Rural tourism is recognized as one of the most important strategies for the development and revitalization of rural areas and can contribute significantly to rural development by creating employment, diversifying economic activities, increasing household incomes, and reducing regional inequalities (Imani & Madani, 2024). However, sustainable rural tourism development is a multidimensional process influenced by the interaction of economic, social, managerial, environmental, and human factors. Research has shown that residents' positive perceptions of the economic, social, and environmental benefits of tourism play a decisive role in their support for sustainable tourism development (Demirović Bajrami et al., 2020). Moreover, achieving sustainable development requires the coordinated management of influential factors, the strengthening of infrastructure, environmental protection, and the formulation of targeted policies (Weng et al., 2021).

In rural areas, participatory governance is particularly important, as tourism development, in addition to creating economic opportunities, can have far-reaching social, cultural, and environmental impacts. The active participation of rural municipalities, Islamic village councils, local communities, investors, tourism practitioners, and executive agencies can help reduce conflicts, improve the quality of decision-making, and facilitate the sustainable use of resources. In recent years, the sustainable rural tourism development approach has also shifted from a primary focus on economic benefits toward participatory governance, social justice, local resilience, and network-based management.

On the other hand, recent studies have shown that sustainable rural tourism development without the effective participation of stakeholders, particularly

local communities, faces serious challenges in planning and governance processes. In contrast, the adoption of participatory governance and the strengthening of collaboration among stakeholders can facilitate the achievement of sustainable outcomes, enhance the perceived value of the destination, and improve the quality of tourism governance (Reina-Usuga et al., 2024). Furthermore, local community participation is considered one of the fundamental pillars of sustainable tourism development, as it not only improves the quality of tourism products and services but also creates employment opportunities, preserves cultural values, promotes the equitable distribution of benefits, and strengthens long-term collaboration among all stakeholders (Imani & Madani, 2024).

However, participation can be effective only when local communities possess the necessary capacities and capabilities. Local community empowerment encompasses education, the enhancement of tourism-related skills, entrepreneurship development, strengthening human capital, access to financial resources, and increasing social capacities. These processes enable local communities to move from the position of service recipients to that of key actors in tourism management and governance. In addition to enhancing participation, this process can contribute to strengthening resilience and self-reliance and promoting the sustainable development of tourism destinations.

Alongside participation and empowerment, tourism destination management is also considered one of the essential pillars of participatory governance. Within the framework of destination governance, destination management encompasses a set of mechanisms for policymaking, planning, institutional coordination, and stakeholder coordination aimed at enhancing destination competitiveness, promoting sustainable tourism development, and fostering coordination among responsible institutions, the private sector, and local communities. In this framework, integrated destination management, the designation of a clear responsible authority, intersectoral coordination, and the active participation of stakeholders are considered key components of destination governance (Ghaderi et al., 2023).

In contemporary approaches, tourism destination management extends beyond the development of tourism infrastructure and encompasses a range of

strategic activities, including integrated planning, stakeholder coordination, conflict management, improving the tourism business environment, destination marketing, enhancing competitiveness, protecting natural and cultural resources, and continuously monitoring performance. Achieving these objectives requires the establishment of a destination governance system based on integrated management, stakeholder participation, and entrepreneurial approaches (Ghaderi et al., 2024).

2.1 Review of Literature

Recent studies indicate that participatory governance and stakeholder participation have become central to sustainable rural tourism development. Both domestic and international studies have examined the roles of local community participation, institutional capacities, destination management, empowerment, and resource conservation in tourism development from different perspectives. Reviewing these studies not only helps clarify the evolution of previous research but also reveals the existing research gaps.

Khaksar Shahmirzadi and Alipour (2026) conducted a mixed-methods study in Shahmirzad to examine local community participation in tourism development. The findings revealed a gap between the capacity of the local community and its actual role in tourism governance. Despite residents' support for participation, tourism development has not yet been institutionalized. The researchers emphasized strengthening participatory governance, institutional coordination, and participation-oriented planning. These findings are consistent with the present study in emphasizing the importance of local community participation and institutional interaction. Shamsoddini (2025) examined the role of local community participation in achieving sustainable rural tourism development. The results showed that the economic dimension of tourism was the most important factor influencing the sustainable development of rural communities, followed by the environmental, educational–recreational, and socio-cultural dimensions. The findings also emphasized that active local community participation, interaction between host communities and tourists, strengthening social capital, and participation-oriented planning are among the most important prerequisites for achieving sustainable rural tourism development and enhancing the resilience of local communities.

Tadayoni Nezhad et al. (2025) investigated the role of participatory governance dimensions in sustainable rural tourism development. The results indicated that local community participation and the effectiveness and efficiency of local management had positive and significant effects on sustainable rural tourism development, with these two variables explaining 34% of the variance in sustainable tourism development. The researchers concluded that strengthening genuine stakeholder participation, improving the efficiency of local management, participatory policymaking, and utilizing local capacities are among the most important requirements for achieving sustainable rural tourism development. Gholamian Sefiddarboni and Choobchian (2025) conducted a qualitative study based on the analysis of upstream policy documents to examine the synergy between good governance and participatory planning in implementing nature-based solutions. The findings showed that active stakeholder participation, transparency, interinstitutional collaboration, and multilevel governance are among the important factors contributing to the successful implementation of these solutions and sustainable development. This study is consistent with the present research in emphasizing the roles of participation, institutional coordination, and multilevel governance; however, the present study specifically focuses on participatory governance for sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province. Imani and Madani (2024), in a study Index, examined the role of local community participation in rural tourism development and sustainable employment creation. The findings showed that active local community participation, strengthening social capital, coordination among local institutions, rural tourism development, and sustainable employment creation have mutually reinforcing relationships. The researchers also emphasized that achieving sustainable rural tourism development requires strengthening participatory mechanisms, empowering local communities, and supporting managerial institutions. Chen et al. (2025) examined participatory governance structures in rural tourism. The results showed that despite the existence of similar formal structures and an emphasis on collaboration, actual governance structures varied across villages. The quality of relationships among actors, social

capital, and collaboration mechanisms influenced the formation of participatory governance. This finding is consistent with the present study in emphasizing stakeholder interaction and the need to understand the actual governance mechanisms operating in rural destinations. Fan et al. (2024), in a study entitled Resident Participation in Sustainable Tourism Environmental Governance in Rural Destinations, examined the factors influencing residents' participation in environmental governance. The results showed that economic motivations, institutional opportunities, governance knowledge, and willingness to participate were the most important factors promoting local community participation in tourism governance. The findings also indicated that increasing residents' participation facilitates the sustainable development of rural tourism destinations. Reina-Usuga et al. (2024), in a study entitled Rural Tourism, Participatory Governance, and Perceived Value: A Systematic Review of Research, reviewed trends in research on participatory governance in rural tourism. The results showed that stakeholder participation, particularly that of local communities, is one of the key pillars of successful sustainable rural tourism. The findings further indicated that although attention to participatory governance has increased in recent years, effective mechanisms for involving tourists in decision-making processes and creating spaces for dialogue remain challenging. The researchers emphasized that sustainable rural tourism development requires inclusive, participatory, and collaborative approaches involving all stakeholders. Lukoseviciute et al. (2024), in a study entitled Participatory Development and Management of Ecological–Cultural Routes in Sustainable Tourism Destinations, employed a qualitative approach and stakeholder participation to develop a strategy for the sustainable development of ecological–cultural routes. The results showed that the successful development of sustainable tourism destinations requires participatory governance, collaboration among stakeholders, the simultaneous protection of natural and cultural resources, integrated planning, improvement of tourism infrastructure, and enhancement of visitor and local community experiences. Furthermore, active stakeholder participation plays an important role in formulating sustainable management strategies and protecting

the ecological and cultural capacities of destinations. [Tong et al. \(2024\)](#), in a study entitled Institutional Building, Tourism Empowerment, and Community Participation: A Pathway to Sustainable Rural Tourism Development, showed that sustainable rural tourism development can be achieved when governance systems, the economic and social empowerment of local communities, and stakeholder participation are strengthened simultaneously. The equitable distribution of benefits and institutional support were also identified as key factors contributing to the sustainability of tourism destinations.

A review of previous studies shows that most research has emphasized the roles of local community participation, participatory governance, stakeholder empowerment, destination management, and resource conservation in sustainable rural tourism development. However, most of these studies have examined only specific aspects of participatory governance, while relatively few have attempted to develop a comprehensive framework based on qualitative data and thematic analysis. Furthermore, no study was identified that has employed thematic analysis to explain the dimensions

of participatory governance for sustainable rural tourism development while taking into account the specific characteristics of tourism-oriented villages in western Mazandaran Province.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Geographical Scope of the Research

The study area, western Mazandaran Province, is located along the southern coast of the Caspian Sea and the northern slopes of the Alborz Mountains. In this study, western Mazandaran Province comprises the counties of Ramsar, Tonekabon, Abbasabad, Chalus, Nowshahr, Kelardasht, and Noor. The study area is bounded by Gilan Province to the west, the Caspian Sea to the north, and the Alborz highlands and Qazvin Province to the south. According to the results of the 2016 Population and Housing Census, the populations of the counties within the study area were 25,312 in Ramsar, 56,636 in Tonekabon, 17,345 in Abbasabad, 39,105 in Chalus, 45,759 in Nowshahr, 8,067 in Kelardasht, and 39,350 in Noor, representing a total population of 231,574 ([Statistical Center of Iran, 2016](#)).

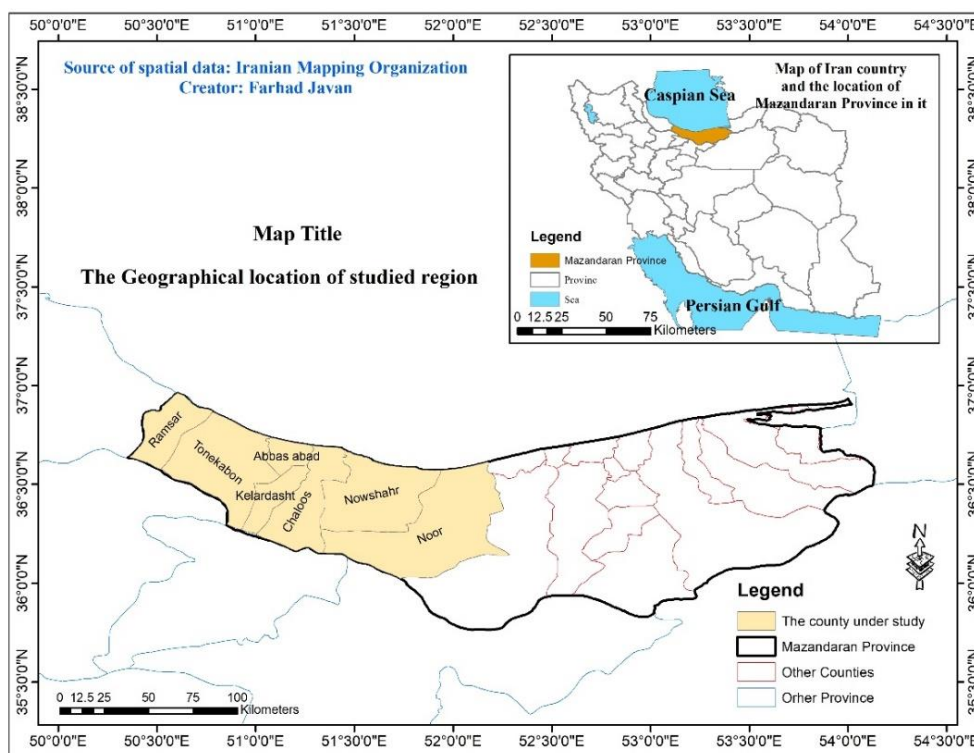


Figure 1. Geographical Location of the Study Area in Mazandaran Province, Iran

Administratively, the study area consists of seven counties, each with its own administrative structure and local management system. The demographic and spatial diversity of these counties, together with the distribution of tourism-oriented villages and the presence of multiple actors and institutions involved in tourism, provides a suitable context for examining participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development. Figure 1 illustrates the geographical location of the study area and its county-level administrative divisions.

The study area is also considered one of the important tourism zones in northern Iran due to its simultaneous access to the Hyrcanian forests, the Caspian Sea coast, mountainous highlands, rivers, waterfalls, orchards, and agricultural lands. Moreover, the presence of tourism-targeted villages, eco-lodges, handicrafts, local rituals, and convenient accessibility through major transportation corridors has created considerable potential for rural tourism development. However, tourism development in the area faces challenges such as fragmented management, land-use change, pressure on natural resources, increasing waste generation, unequal distribution of tourism benefits, and limited participation of local communities in decision-making. These characteristics make the study area an appropriate context for examining a conceptual framework of participatory governance for sustainable rural tourism development.

3.2 Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of its purpose and qualitative in terms of its approach. It employs thematic analysis to explain a conceptual framework of participatory governance for the sustainable development of tourism-oriented villages in western Mazandaran Province. Thematic analysis is a well-established qualitative research method that enables the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning

within textual data, thereby facilitating the extraction of themes, the explanation of relationships among them, and the development of a conceptual framework. In this study, the data were analyzed based on the thematic networks approach proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001).

The study participants consisted of experts, managers, and key stakeholders involved in rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province. They included faculty members, experts from relevant organizations, local managers, rural administrators and members of Islamic village councils, managers of eco-lodges, private-sector practitioners, tourism guides, and researchers. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed. In total, 25 participants took part in the study, and their composition based on professional position and relevance to rural tourism governance is presented in Table 1. Initially, participants were selected based on their specialized knowledge, executive or research experience, familiarity with rural tourism issues in western Mazandaran, and involvement in local development programs. Subsequently, additional participants were identified through referrals from the initial experts. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, and following 25 semi-structured interviews, no new codes or concepts emerged in the final interviews.

The unit of analysis in this study was the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders involved in rural tourism governance in tourism-oriented villages in western Mazandaran Province. Within this framework, the villages were considered the study context, while key stakeholders—including academic experts, managers and experts from relevant organizations, tourism and rural development practitioners, and other relevant actors—were considered the primary sources of research data.

Table 1. Composition of Study Participants by Professional Position

Participant Group	Number	Percentage
Faculty members and researchers in tourism and rural development	4	16
Managers and experts from government organizations related to tourism and rural development	5	20
Rural administrators of tourism-oriented villages	3	12
Members of Islamic village councils	3	12
Managers and owners of eco-lodges	4	16
Private-sector tourism practitioners and investors	3	12
Tourism guides and professional tourism practitioners	3	12
Total participants	25	100

The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were developed based on a review of the research literature, the research objectives, and the characteristics of rural tourism in western Mazandaran Province. The questions were then finalized after being reviewed and approved by experts in tourism, rural development, and qualitative research methodology. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded, fully transcribed, and prepared for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted in six stages based on the thematic networks approach proposed by Attride-Stirling. First, the interview transcripts were read several times to develop an in-depth understanding of the data. Subsequently, during the open coding stage, initial codes were extracted and organized into preliminary concepts through the constant comparison method. The concepts were then categorized according to their semantic similarity into five basic themes and subsequently into three organizing themes. Finally, by integrating the organizing themes, the global theme of the study, entitled *A Conceptual Framework for Participatory Governance of Sustainable Tourism Development in Tourism-Oriented Villages in Western Mazandaran Province Based on Institutional Interaction, Local Community Empowerment, and Strategic Management of Natural and Cultural Resources*, was identified, and the thematic network was developed.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, Lincoln and Guba's criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were employed. To enhance credibility, the preliminary findings were shared with several participants, and the coding process was reviewed by experts in tourism and qualitative research methodology. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the participants and the research process, while dependability was established through documenting the data collection and analysis procedures. Confirmability was ensured through maintaining research documentation, continuously comparing the data, and using participants' quotations.

Finally, the conceptual framework of the study was developed based on the relationships among the initial concepts, basic themes, organizing themes,

and the global theme. This framework provides a context-specific basis for explaining participatory governance in the sustainable development of tourism-oriented villages in western Mazandaran Province and can serve as a basis for policymaking, planning, and sustainable tourism management in the region.

4. Research Findings

The analysis of data obtained from 25 semi-structured interviews with experts, managers, and practitioners in rural tourism in western Mazandaran Province resulted in the identification of 50 initial codes during the open coding stage. These codes reflected the participants' key perceptions, experiences, and views regarding the requirements for participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development. The codes were extracted from the interview transcripts through the open coding process based on conceptual similarities and served as the basis for developing the initial concepts in the subsequent stage. Table 2 presents the main initial codes extracted from the data, along with examples of participants' statements.

The analysis of the initial codes shows that participants' perspectives on participatory governance were not limited to a single dimension but encompassed a range of institutional, managerial, economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. A considerable proportion of the codes emphasized the need for active participation of local stakeholders in tourism decision-making and planning processes. Codes such as resident participation, the role of rural municipalities and Islamic village councils, collaboration among executive institutions, and the participation of local investors indicate that, from the experts' perspective, the success of rural tourism development depends on establishing a participatory system and fostering effective interaction among local actors and responsible organizations.

Furthermore, another group of codes focused on the importance of local community empowerment and strengthening economic and human capacities. Local community training, the development of entrepreneurial skills, support for women and youth, the creation of sustainable employment opportunities, the development of eco-lodges, branding of local products, and the development of tourism value chains were among the issues that

participants identified as key prerequisites for enhancing the role of local communities in tourism development. These findings indicate that effective participation cannot be achieved without developing economic, social, and skills-based capacities.

On the other hand, a substantial proportion of the extracted codes focused on the conservation of natural and cultural resources and the establishment of sustainable management of tourism destinations. The protection of the Hyrcanian forests, conservation of water resources, preservation of agricultural land, management of villa development, control of unauthorized construction, preservation of local architecture and culture, waste management, and control of tourism carrying capacity indicate that, from the experts' perspective, tourism development can be achieved only when the principles of sustainability are observed and the region's natural and cultural assets are protected.

Alongside these issues, codes such as integrated destination management, strategic planning, the

development of transportation and communication infrastructure, digital marketing, the use of smart technologies, networking among tourism practitioners, the establishment of local cooperatives, equitable benefit distribution, enhanced economic resilience, and improved quality of life among rural residents indicate that, from the participants' perspective, participatory governance requires institutional coordination, smart management, equity in benefit distribution, and the utilization of innovative capacities for sustainable tourism development.

Overall, the analysis of the initial codes indicates that participatory governance for sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province rests on three fundamental dimensions: stakeholder participation and interaction, local community empowerment, and sustainable management of resources and tourism destinations. These initial codes provided an appropriate basis for integrating similar concepts and extracting the initial concepts in the subsequent stage of the analysis.

Table 2. Initial Codes Extracted from Expert Interviews on Participatory Governance in Sustainable Rural Tourism Development in Western Mazandaran Province

No.	Initial Code	Sample Interview Statement from Experts
1	Residents' participation in village tourism planning	Unless local residents have a role in the tourism planning process, no village plan can achieve genuine sustainability.
2	Active role of rural municipalities in tourism management	Rural municipalities should move beyond merely providing services and become key actors in organizing and managing village tourism.
3	Participation of Islamic village councils in tourism decision-making	The Islamic village council can serve as an important link between local residents and executive institutions in tourism-related decision-making.
4	Cooperation between rural municipalities and the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts Department	Without continuous coordination between the rural municipality and the Cultural Heritage Department, tourism initiatives will remain fragmented and ineffective.
5	Coordination among county-level executive organizations	One of the fundamental issues is that county-level executive organizations should move away from overlapping activities and act in a coordinated manner.
6	Local community trust in tourism managers	Without the trust of the local community, even the best tourism plans will encounter social resistance.
7	Transparency in the allocation of tourism funds	Transparency in the allocation of tourism funds is a prerequisite for gaining the trust of local residents and stakeholders.
8	Accountability of officials to rural residents' demands	Officials must be accountable to rural residents' demands because tourism development is meaningless without listening to local people.
9	Participation of local investors in tourism development	Local investors, due to their cultural and social knowledge of the villages, can play a more effective role in balanced tourism development.
10	Private-sector investment in eco-lodges	Private-sector investment in eco-lodges can both improve service

No.	Initial Code	Sample Interview Statement from Experts
		quality and create new economic opportunities.
11	Development of eco-lodges	Eco-lodges are successful when they are developed based on local identity and the actual needs of the destination.
12	Improvement of accommodation and hospitality services	If the quality of accommodation and hospitality services does not improve, tourists' length of stay and satisfaction will decline.
13	Training local communities in tourism	Training the local community is the foundation of informed participation in rural tourism development.
14	Training local tourism guides	Trained local guides can improve the tourist experience while providing an accurate representation of the village's culture and environment.
15	Strengthening rural entrepreneurship skills	Tourism development will not lead to sustainable employment unless the entrepreneurial spirit and skills of rural residents are strengthened.
16	Supporting women in tourism businesses	Rural women have considerable potential in producing and providing tourism services and products and should receive targeted support.
17	Youth participation in tourism activities	Rural youth can serve as a driving force for innovation and dynamism in tourism activities.
18	Creating sustainable employment in rural areas	If tourism cannot generate sustainable employment, its contribution to rural development will be temporary and limited.
19	Diversifying rural household income sources	Tourism becomes valuable when it can reduce rural households' dependence on a single source of income.
20	Marketing local products and handicrafts	Local products and handicrafts become economically viable when their marketing is strengthened alongside tourism development.
21	Branding indigenous products of western Mazandaran Province	Branding local products can strengthen the region's identity and enhance the destination's competitiveness.
22	Development of agricultural tourism	Agricultural tourism is an important regional potential that can offer tourists an authentic rural experience.
23	Development of forest tourism	The region's forests represent an important comparative advantage for tourism development, but such development must be strictly controlled.
24	Development of coastal tourism	Coastal tourism has considerable potential in western Mazandaran, provided that it is integrated with other rural tourism capacities.
25	Development of mountain tourism	Mountain tourism can create a more diverse pattern of tourist attraction throughout the year.
26	Conservation of the Hyrcanian forests	Any tourism plan in this region must regard the conservation of the Hyrcanian forests as a red line.
27	Conservation of local water resources and rivers	Water resources and local rivers are vital assets of rural communities, and tourism development should not place additional pressure on them.
28	Controlling unauthorized construction in villages	Unauthorized construction is one of the serious threats to the spatial and environmental identity of tourism-oriented villages.
29	Managing villa construction and land-use change	If villa construction and land-use change are not properly managed, tourism development will lead to the degradation of the foundations of rural communities.
30	Preservation of agricultural and orchard lands	The preservation of agricultural and orchard lands must be considered alongside tourism development to maintain the livelihood balance of rural communities.
31	Conservation of vernacular village architecture	Vernacular architecture is one of the key elements of destination attractiveness and should not be sacrificed to non-local construction patterns.
32	Preservation of local customs, traditions, and culture	If local culture is not preserved during tourism development, the destination will lose its most important identity asset.
33	Waste management in tourism-oriented	An increase in tourists without an appropriate waste management

No.	Initial Code	Sample Interview Statement from Experts
	villages	system will rapidly reduce the environmental quality of villages.
34	Management of tourism carrying capacity	Every village has a specific carrying capacity, and exceeding it can generate serious social and environmental consequences.
35	Reducing tourism-related environmental pollution	Tourism should be managed in a way that minimizes pollution and maximizes compatibility with the environment.
36	Improving access roads to tourism-oriented villages	Without adequate road access, many of the tourism potentials of villages will remain practically underutilized.
37	Development of tourism transportation infrastructure	Adequate transportation infrastructure is a prerequisite for the balanced distribution of tourists across villages and surrounding areas.
38	Development of communication and Internet infrastructure	Today, tourism development is almost impossible without efficient Internet and communication infrastructure.
39	Digital marketing of tourism destinations	A significant part of promoting tourism villages should be carried out through digital marketing and an effective presence in cyberspace.
40	Use of smart technologies in destination management	Smart technologies can contribute to better management of information and services and even help control tourist flows at destinations.
41	Networking among rural tourism practitioners	When rural tourism practitioners collaborate through a network, their learning capacity and influence can increase severalfold.
42	Establishment of rural tourism cooperatives	Tourism cooperatives can provide an appropriate mechanism for collective participation and benefit distribution at the village level.
43	Cooperation between farmers and tourism practitioners	Linking farmers with tourism practitioners can facilitate the development of more authentic local experiences and a stronger local economy.
44	Development of the value chain for local products and tourism	Real added value is created when local production, tourism services, and consumer markets are connected.
45	Equitable distribution of tourism benefits among residents	If tourism benefits are not distributed equitably among residents, dissatisfaction and local conflicts will emerge.
46	Enhancing the economic resilience of tourism-oriented villages	Tourism should contribute to increasing the economic resilience of villages rather than creating new and fragile dependencies.
47	Improving the quality of life of rural residents	The ultimate goal of tourism development should be improving the quality of life of rural residents, rather than merely increasing the number of tourists.
48	Strategic planning for tourism development in western Mazandaran Province	The region needs an integrated strategic plan to move tourism development beyond short-term and fragmented initiatives.
49	Integrated management of rural tourism destinations	Integrated destination management means that all local and external actors operate within a coordinated framework.
50	Establishment of a sustainable participatory governance system for rural tourism	Sustainable rural tourism development can be achieved when participatory governance is institutionalized and sustainably established across the region.

Based on the 50 initial codes extracted, the next step involved examining codes with conceptual similarities through a constant comparison process in terms of semantic similarity, content overlap, and thematic relationships, and organizing them into initial concepts. This process not only reduced the dispersion of the data but also enabled a transition from the descriptive level to conceptualization. Ultimately, 10 initial concepts were identified. As shown in Table 3, these concepts represent the main dimensions of

participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province.

The results presented in Table 3 show that the initial codes were organized into ten key concepts encompassing different dimensions of participatory governance. Concepts such as local community participation, local governance and management, institutional cooperation and networking, and trust and social capital highlight the importance of interaction and coordination among stakeholders in

tourism decision-making and management processes. In contrast, the concepts of human and economic capacity building, conservation of natural resources and local heritage, physical development management, destination innovation and marketing, and sustainable tourism governance emphasize the need to strengthen local capacities, ensure the sustainable use of resources, develop infrastructure, and enhance destination competitiveness. Overall, these concepts constitute the initial conceptual framework of the study and provided the basis for extracting the basic themes in the subsequent stage of the analysis.

Overall, the results of this stage indicate that the initial concepts identified represent the main dimensions of participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province. In addition to covering institutional, social, economic, and managerial dimensions, these concepts also reflect the distinctive characteristics of the region, including the conservation of the Hyrcanian forests, management of villa development, expansion of eco-lodges, marketing of local products, and management of multifunctional destinations. These concepts provided the basis for extracting the basic themes in the subsequent stage of the analysis.

Table 3. Integration of Initial Codes and Formation of Initial Concepts

No.	Initial Concept	Integrated Initial Codes
1	Local community participation	Residents' participation, women's participation, youth participation, establishment of tourism cooperatives, cooperation between farmers and tourism practitioners
2	Local governance and management	Role of rural municipalities, role of Islamic village councils, cooperation between rural municipalities and the Cultural Heritage Department, integrated destination management, strategic planning
3	Institutional cooperation and networking	Coordination among executive organizations, intersectoral cooperation, networking among tourism practitioners, participation of local investors
4	Trust and social capital	Local community trust, sense of belonging, equitable distribution of benefits, reduction of local conflicts
5	Empowerment and human capital development	Local community training, tourism guide training, entrepreneurial skills, support for women, youth participation
6	Economic empowerment and development of local businesses	Sustainable employment, income diversification, eco-lodges, marketing of local products, branding of local products, value-chain development
7	Conservation of natural resources and local heritage	Conservation of the Hyrcanian forests, water resources, agricultural lands, vernacular architecture, local culture, waste management, tourism carrying capacity
8	Physical and environmental development management	Control of unauthorized construction, management of villa development, development of access roads, transportation infrastructure, communication infrastructure
9	Destination innovation and marketing	Digital marketing, smart technologies, improvement of service quality, forest, coastal, mountain, and agricultural tourism
10	Sustainable tourism governance	Economic resilience, improvement of quality of life, establishment of a participatory governance system, long-term tourism development planning

In the subsequent stage of the analysis, the 10 initial concepts were organized into five basic themes based on their semantic proximity, conceptual relationships, and role in explaining participatory governance. This level of analysis reduced the complexity of the concepts while revealing the main dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation and providing a coherent framework for explaining participatory governance

in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province. As shown in [Table 4](#), the basic themes were formed by integrating conceptually related concepts and served as the basis for extracting the organizing themes in the next stage of the analysis.

The results presented in [Table 4](#) show that the initial concepts were organized into five basic themes that explain the main dimensions of

participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development. Local participation and governance emphasizes cooperation and coordination among local stakeholders and institutions, while social capital and local community empowerment highlights the role of trust, training, and human capacity building in enhancing residents' participation and sense of responsibility. In addition, tourism-based local economic development emphasizes the creation of sustainable employment, development of local businesses, and strengthening of the tourism value chain. Sustainable management of tourism destinations, in turn, reflects the need for integrated planning, infrastructure development, innovation, and the use of modern technologies. Finally, resource conservation and sustainable governance indicate that the continuity of tourism development depends on protecting natural and

cultural assets and establishing a sustainable governance system. overall, the basic themes extracted from the data indicate that participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province results from the interaction of institutional, social, economic, managerial, and environmental dimensions. These themes, while synthesizing the initial concepts, provide a coherent framework for explaining the conceptual framework of participatory governance and demonstrate that tourism development in the region requires not only local community participation but also institutional coordination, human capital empowerment, strengthening of the local economy, smart destination management, and conservation of natural and cultural resources. These findings provided the basis for extracting the organizing themes in the next stage of the analysis.

Table 4. Formation of the Basic Themes of the Study

No.	Basic Theme	Related Initial Concepts
1	Local Participation and Governance	Local community participation; local governance and management; institutional cooperation and networking
2	Social Capital and Local Community Empowerment	Trust and social capital; empowerment and human capital development
3	Tourism-Based Local Economic Development	Economic empowerment and development of local businesses
4	Sustainable Management of Tourism Destinations	Physical and environmental development management; destination innovation and marketing
5	Resource Conservation and Sustainable Governance	Conservation of natural resources and local heritage; sustainable tourism governance

In the subsequent stage of the analysis, the five basic themes were classified into three organizing themes based on their conceptual relationships, semantic overlap, and role in explaining participatory governance. At this level of analysis, an attempt was made to organize the basic themes into broader dimensions so that the conceptual structure of the conceptual framework for participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development could be explained with greater coherence. As shown in Table 5, the organizing themes reveal the linkages among the basic themes and provide the basis for the formation of the study's global theme.

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that the organizing themes represent the overarching dimensions of participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province. Institutional interaction and

governance emphasizes the establishment of institutional mechanisms, coordination among organizations, and the active participation of stakeholders in decision-making processes. Economic empowerment and destination competitiveness highlights the role of strengthening economic capacities, developing local businesses, promoting entrepreneurship, and enhancing the competitiveness of tourism destinations in achieving sustainable development. Moreover, sustainable destination management and resource conservation emphasizes integrated planning, smart destination management, and the protection of natural and cultural resources as prerequisites for tourism sustainability. overall, the analysis of the organizing themes indicates that participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province results from the interaction of three

complementary and interdependent dimensions. Participatory governance and institutional interaction provide the institutional and social foundations necessary for stakeholder participation and coordination among local institutions. Economic empowerment and destination competitiveness strengthen the economic and entrepreneurial capacities of local communities and create the basis for sustainable development of the tourism economy. Sustainable destination management and resource

conservation, meanwhile, provide the managerial and environmental framework required to protect natural and cultural assets and guide tourism development. The coordinated interaction of these three dimensions constitutes the foundation for developing the conceptual framework of participatory governance for sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province and provides the basis for identifying the overarching theme in the final stage of the analysis.

Table 5. Organizing Themes of the Study

No.	Organizing Theme	Related Basic Themes
1	Institutional Interaction and Governance	Local Participation and Governance; Social Capital and Local Community Empowerment
2	Empowerment and Local Economic Development	Tourism-Based Local Economic Development
3	Strategic Management and Resource Conservation	Sustainable Tourism Destination Management; Resource Conservation and Sustainable Governance

In the next stage of the analysis, the three organizing themes were integrated based on their conceptual linkages and complementary roles in explaining the phenomenon under study, leading to the identification of the overarching theme. The overarching theme represents the highest level of abstraction in thematic analysis and captures the central concept emerging from the interaction of all organizing themes. Accordingly, the overarching theme of the study was identified as: *"A Conceptual Framework for Participatory Governance of Sustainable Tourism Development in Tourist-Oriented Villages of Western Mazandaran Province Based on Institutional Interaction, Local Community Empowerment, and Strategic Management of Natural and Cultural Resources."* this overarching theme constitutes the final conceptual framework of the study and explains that achieving sustainable tourism development in the study area requires coordinated interaction among management institutions, empowerment of the local community, and strategic management of natural and cultural resources.

The findings indicate that the overarching theme emerged from the interaction of three organizing themes, suggesting that sustainable tourism development in the rural areas of western Mazandaran Province depends less on the expansion of physical infrastructure or an increase in tourist numbers than on the quality of the governance system, the extent of stakeholder participation, and the way natural and cultural

resources are managed. Within this framework, institutional interaction and governance provide the basis for coordination among executive agencies, effective participation of local communities, strengthening the role of rural municipalities and Islamic village councils, transparency, accountability, and mutual trust, thereby creating the conditions necessary for integrated destination management. Local community empowerment strengthens the capacity of local residents to actively participate in tourism development by enhancing human, social, and economic capital through education, the development of entrepreneurial skills, support for local businesses, greater participation of women and young people, and the use of indigenous knowledge. Alongside these two dimensions, strategic management of natural and cultural resources emphasizes integrated planning, the protection of Hyrcanian forests, water resources, agricultural lands, vernacular architecture and local culture, control of unauthorized construction, management of tourism carrying capacity, development of infrastructure in accordance with environmental capacity, and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits.

Overall, the findings from this stage indicate that the conceptual framework of participatory governance for sustainable rural tourism development constitutes an integrated and multidimensional system shaped by the mutual interaction of three dimensions: institutional

interaction, local community empowerment, and strategic management of natural and cultural resources. These dimensions have complementary and mutually reinforcing relationships, such that the effectiveness of each dimension depends on strengthening the others, while weaknesses in any one of them may undermine the efficiency of the governance system and the sustainability of tourism development. Accordingly, the overarching theme suggests that achieving sustainable tourism development in the rural areas of western Mazandaran Province requires the establishment of a participatory governance system grounded in stakeholder participation, institutional coordination, local community empowerment, and strategic management of natural and cultural resources.

In the subsequent stage of the thematic analysis, the relationships among the basic themes, organizing themes, and the overarching theme were presented in the form of a thematic network to provide an integrated representation of the conceptual structure of the extracted framework. The thematic network resulted from the integration of the findings obtained through the preceding

stages and illustrates how the initial data derived from the interviews, through successive stages of coding, conceptualization, and thematic organization, led to a coherent conceptual framework for explaining participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development. In addition to illustrating the hierarchical relationships among the different levels of analysis, the thematic network reveals the interdependence and interaction among the key components of the framework. As shown in Figure 2, the overarching theme of the research is positioned at the highest level of the thematic network, entitled A Conceptual Framework of Participatory Governance for Sustainable Tourism Development in Tourist-Oriented Villages of Western Mazandaran Province Based on Institutional Interaction, Local Community Empowerment, and Strategic Management of Natural and Cultural Resources. This theme emerged from the synergy among the three organizing themes and indicates that achieving sustainable tourism development is possible only through the simultaneous interaction of institutional, social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

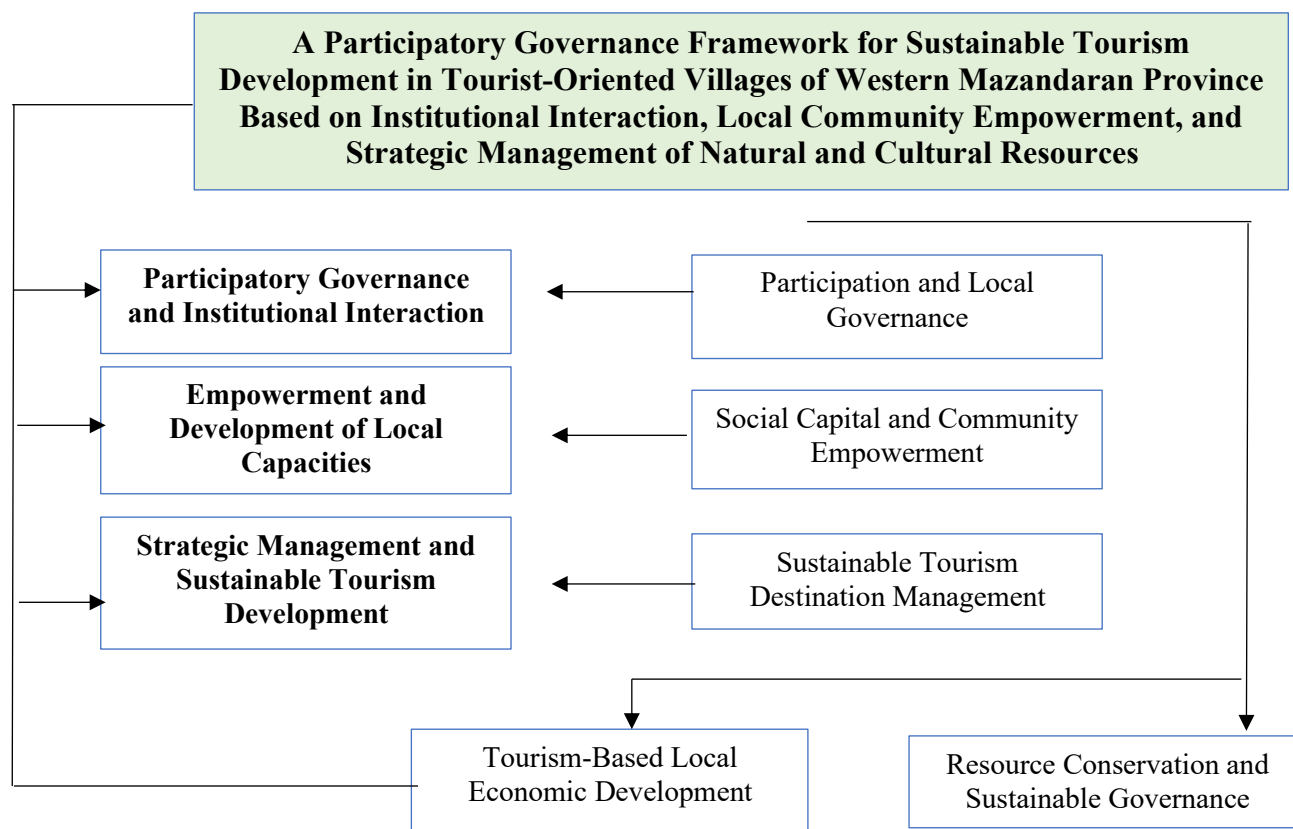


Figure 2. Thematic Network of the Participatory Governance Framework for Sustainable Tourism Development in Tourist-Oriented Villages of Western Mazandaran Province

Within this structure, participatory governance and institutional interaction are grounded in two basic themes, namely stakeholder participation and interaction and transparent, trust-based governance. These themes highlight the role of coordination among local institutions, active community participation, transparency, and mutual trust in shaping a participatory governance system. Empowerment and development of local capacities, drawing on the basic theme of local empowerment and capacity development, emphasizes the development of human capital, enhancement of skills, entrepreneurship, strengthening of local businesses, and increasing the capacity of local communities to participate in tourism development. In contrast, strategic management and sustainable tourism development comprises two basic themes, namely tourism development management and support and sustainability and conservation of natural resources, highlighting the need for strategic planning, development of appropriate infrastructure, utilization of tourism potentials, and protection of the region's natural and cultural resources.

The thematic network further indicates that these three dimensions have a mutually reinforcing and complementary relationship, and none of them can independently ensure the realization of participatory governance. Effective stakeholder participation cannot be sustained without local community empowerment and continuous institutional support; empowerment, in turn, cannot achieve the desired effectiveness without strategic management and appropriate economic opportunities; and tourism planning and management will face considerable challenges in the absence of social trust, meaningful participation, and the protection of natural and cultural resources. Therefore, the thematic network presented in this study delineates the final conceptual framework and demonstrates that sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province requires synergy among institutional interaction, local community empowerment, and strategic management of natural and cultural resources

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study showed that participatory governance in sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province

cannot be regarded merely as a managerial mechanism for increasing stakeholder participation; rather, it should be understood as a form of network governance whose effectiveness depends on the quality of interaction among local institutions, rural communities, the private sector, and governmental agencies. From this perspective, the findings indicate that the main challenge of tourism governance in the study area is not simply the presence or absence of stakeholders in decision-making processes, but rather the establishment of mechanisms for coordination, trust-building, shared responsibility, and transforming participation into collective action. This interpretation is consistent with Gash and Ansell's (2008) emphasis on face-to-face dialogue, trust, shared commitment, and institutional design, while the findings of the present study further highlight the importance of coordination across different levels of governance and its linkage with the specific conditions of rural destinations. Therefore, participatory governance in western Mazandaran can contribute to sustainable development only when it moves beyond symbolic participation and becomes an effective mechanism for collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

In the first dimension, namely participatory governance and institutional interaction, the findings revealed that the multiplicity of organizations responsible for tourism, natural resources, the environment, cultural heritage, and local governance may, in the absence of effective coordination mechanisms, lead to fragmented decision-making, institutional overlap, and reduced policy effectiveness. This finding is consistent with the results of Shamsoddini (2025), Tadayoni Nezhad et al. (2025), and Imani and Madani (2024), who emphasized the importance of participation, local management effectiveness, social capital, and institutional coordination. However, the present findings suggest that institutional coordination is not merely one of the contributing factors; rather, it provides the enabling context for the activation of other components of participatory governance. Without coordination among institutions, even greater participation by the local community does not necessarily result in coherent decision-making or sustainable outcomes. Accordingly, from an implementation perspective, establishing an inter-institutional coordination mechanism at the

destination level, clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of relevant agencies, and creating a regular platform for the participation of local community representatives, the private sector, and government institutions can be considered among the key requirements for tourism governance in the region.

In the second dimension, namely local community empowerment, the findings showed that participation can lead to sustainable outcomes only when it is accompanied by the enhancement of knowledge, skills, social capital, and economic capacities. Accordingly, local community participation should not be limited merely to attendance at meetings or expressing opinions on tourism projects; rather, it should contribute to greater decision-making capacity, access to resources, entrepreneurship, and an equitable share of tourism benefits. This finding is consistent with [Fan et al. \(2024\)](#), who highlighted the role of resident participation, institutional opportunities, and governance knowledge, as well as with the findings of [Reina-Usuga et al. \(2024\)](#) concerning the need for inclusive stakeholder participation. At the same time, the present study indicates that empowerment should be viewed as the link between participation and local economic development, since participation without the necessary capacity for action and decision-making may become limited and ineffective. Accordingly, tourism skills training, support for local businesses, facilitation of access to financial resources, strengthening collaborative networks, and increasing the role of women and local groups in decision-making can be considered important practical measures in this regard.

In the third dimension, namely strategic management, sustainable development, and resource conservation, the findings showed that rural tourism development cannot be sustainable without simultaneously considering its economic, social, environmental, and cultural dimensions. The Hyrcanian forests, the Caspian Sea coastline, rivers, natural landscapes, and local culture of western Mazandaran are not merely resources for tourism exploitation; rather, they constitute strategic assets of the destination. This interpretation is consistent with the findings of [Lukoseviciute et al. \(2024\)](#) regarding the need for integrated planning and the simultaneous conservation of natural and cultural resources. It is

also in line with the findings of [Tong et al. \(2024\)](#), who argue that sustainable rural tourism development results from the interaction of governance, empowerment, institutional support, and equitable benefit distribution. Accordingly, tourism policymaking in the region should be based on environmental carrying capacity, control of tourism pressures, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and assessment of the impacts of development.

Overall, a comparison of the findings of the present study with those of previous research indicates that, while the results confirm the importance of participation, empowerment, institutional coordination, and resource conservation, they place greater emphasis on the need to integrate these components within a comprehensive governance system. In other words, the main contribution of the present study cannot be reduced to demonstrating the separate importance of each of these factors; rather, its explanatory value lies in revealing the interrelationships among them. Institutional interaction provides the foundation for participation, empowerment transforms participation into actual capacity for action, and strategic management directs this capacity toward resource conservation and sustainable development. Accordingly, weakness in any one of these dimensions may undermine the effectiveness of the others.

Accordingly, the most important policy implication of the study is the shift from sectoral and centralized management toward network-based and participatory governance in rural tourism in western Mazandaran Province. At the institutional level, establishing a coordination mechanism among relevant agencies and creating a regular platform for stakeholder dialogue are essential. At the local level, empowering residents through training, support for local businesses, and strengthening their participation in decision-making should be prioritized. At the destination-management level, tourism development programs should be aligned with environmental protection requirements, cultural heritage conservation, and the carrying capacity of rural areas. Moreover, a more equitable distribution of tourism benefits and a stronger role for local communities in decision-making can contribute to enhancing trust in, and the legitimacy of, the governance system.

Based on the findings of the study, the following practical recommendations are proposed to strengthen participatory governance and promote sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province. First, tourism authorities and local governments should establish a rural tourism governance coordination task force at the regional level to facilitate regular interaction among government agencies, village managers, Islamic village councils, local communities, and the private sector, while clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder. Second, the Provincial Department of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, together with local authorities, should expand community-based training and empowerment programs focusing on tourism skills, entrepreneurship, marketing, and management of local businesses, while facilitating local stakeholders' access to financial and institutional support. Third, to ensure meaningful participation by local communities, mechanisms should be established to involve village representatives in decision-making concerning tourism projects, investments, and the distribution of tourism benefits. Fourth, the agencies responsible for environmental protection, natural resources, and cultural heritage, in cooperation with local authorities, should incorporate the environmental and cultural carrying capacities of tourist-oriented villages into tourism planning and strengthen systems for monitoring the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism activities. Finally, supporting small-scale businesses, ecotourism accommodations, handicrafts, and local products, together with transparent mechanisms for distributing tourism benefits, can strengthen the link between local community participation, economic development, and destination sustainability.

Finally, the present study shows that sustainable rural tourism development in western Mazandaran Province is not the outcome of the independent performance of a single institution or policy, but rather the result of the interaction among three dimensions: participatory governance and institutional interaction, local community empowerment, and strategic management of sustainable development. Accordingly, the conceptual framework developed in this study emphasizes the need for synergy among these three dimensions and demonstrates that tourism sustainability can be strengthened when social participation, institutional coordination, and resource conservation are integrated within a coherent management system. This approach can contribute to enhancing the resilience of tourist-oriented villages, improving the quality of life of local communities, and ensuring the long-term conservation of the region's natural and cultural assets.

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

Conflict of Interest

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Original Article

تبیین چارچوب حکمرانی مشارکتی در توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی: مطالعه‌ای کیفی در غرب استان مازندران

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چکیده مبسوط

۱. مقدمه

گردشگری روستایی در دهه‌های اخیر به‌عنوان راهبردی برای توسعه پایدار نواحی روستایی مورد توجه قرار گرفته است؛ زیرا از طریق ایجاد اشتغال و درآمد، تنوع‌بخشی اقتصادی، تقویت زیرساخت‌ها، حفظ میراث طبیعی و فرهنگی و ارتقای کیفیت زندگی می‌تواند به توسعه جوامع محلی کمک کند. با این حال، تحقق این ظرفیت‌ها تنها به توسعه زیرساخت و افزایش گردشگران وابسته نیست، بلکه به نحوه تعامل دولت، جامعه محلی، بخش خصوصی و سایر ذی‌نفعان نیز بستگی دارد. در این میان، حکمرانی مشارکتی با تأکید بر مشارکت ذی‌نفعان، تعامل نهادی، اعتماد، شفافیت، توانمندسازی و تصمیم‌گیری جمعی، زمینه مناسبی برای مدیریت پایدار گردشگری روستایی فراهم می‌کند. غرب استان مازندران با برخورداری از جنگل‌های هیرکانی، سواحل دریای خزر، چشم‌اندازهای کوهستانی، روستاهای گردشگری، اقامتگاه‌های بوم‌گردی و میراث فرهنگی، از مناطق مهم گردشگری کشور است؛ اما با چالش‌هایی همچون مدیریت پراکنده، ضعف هماهنگی نهادی، مشارکت محدود جامعه محلی، توسعه نامتوازن زیرساخت‌ها، فشار بر منابع طبیعی و توزیع نابرابر منافع مواجه است. از این‌رو، مسئله اصلی پژوهش، چگونگی سازمان‌یابی مؤلفه‌های حکمرانی مشارکتی و تعامل میان آن‌ها برای تحقق توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی است. بر این اساس، پژوهش حاضر با هدف تبیین چارچوب حکمرانی مشارکتی توسعه پایدار گردشگری در روستاهای گردشگری غرب استان مازندران انجام شده است.

۲. مبانی نظری تحقیق

مبنای نظری پژوهش بر مفاهیم حکمرانی مشارکتی، توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی، توانمندسازی جامعه محلی و مدیریت پایدار

مقصد استوار است. حکمرانی مشارکتی با گذار از الگوی دولت‌محور به الگوی شبکه‌ای و تعاملی، بر مشارکت دولت، جامعه محلی، بخش خصوصی و سایر ذی‌نفعان در سیاست‌گذاری، تصمیم‌گیری، اجرا و ارزیابی تأکید دارد و اعتماد، گفت‌وگو، تعهد مشترک، شفافیت و هماهنگی نهادی را از الزامات آن می‌داند. توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی نیز رویکردی چندبعدی است که ابعاد اقتصادی، اجتماعی، فرهنگی و زیست‌محیطی را هم‌زمان مورد توجه قرار می‌دهد. در این چارچوب، مشارکت محلی زمانی به پایداری منجر می‌شود که با توانمندسازی اقتصادی و اجتماعی، آموزش، ارتقای مهارت، دسترسی به منابع و تقویت سرمایه اجتماعی همراه باشد. همچنین، مدیریت پایدار مقصد مستلزم برنامه‌ریزی یکپارچه، هماهنگی ذی‌نفعان، زیرساخت متناسب، نوآوری و حفاظت از منابع طبیعی و فرهنگی است. مرور مطالعات پیشین نشان می‌دهد که مشارکت محلی، هماهنگی نهادی، توانمندسازی، مدیریت مقصد و حفاظت از منابع، عناصر کلیدی توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی‌اند؛ با این حال، این مؤلفه‌ها اغلب به‌صورت جداگانه بررسی شده‌اند. بنابراین، خلأ اصلی پژوهش حاضر، ارائه تبیینی یکپارچه از تعامل این مؤلفه‌ها در قالب چارچوبی بومی و متناسب با ویژگی‌های روستاهای گردشگری غرب استان مازندران است.

۲. روش تحقیق

پژوهش حاضر از نظر هدف، کاربردی و از نظر رویکرد، کیفی است و با روش تحلیل مضمون انجام شده است. مشارکت‌کنندگان شامل خبرگان دانشگاهی، مدیران و کارشناسان مرتبط با گردشگری و توسعه روستایی، دهیاران، اعضای شوراهای اسلامی، مدیران اقامتگاه‌های بوم‌گردی، فعالان بخش خصوصی، سرمایه‌گذاران، راهنمایان گردشگری و پژوهشگران بودند. نمونه‌گیری به‌صورت هدفمند و گلوله‌برفی انجام شد و پس از ۲۵ مصاحبه نیمه‌ساختاریافته

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داد این سه بعد به صورت متقابل و مکمل عمل کرده و ضعف هر یک، اثربخشی سایر ابعاد را کاهش می دهد.

۴. بحث و نتیجه گیری

یافته های پژوهش نشان می دهد که حکمرانی مشارکتی در توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی غرب مازندران فراتر از حضور ذی نفعان در تصمیم گیری است و به صورت نظامی شبکه ای، بر تعامل نهادی، توانمندسازی جامعه محلی و مدیریت راهبردی منابع استوار است. این یافته با مطالعات پیشین درباره مشارکت محلی، سرمایه اجتماعی، هماهنگی نهادی و مدیریت پایدار مقصد همسو بوده و بر ضرورت پیوند هم زمان این مؤلفه ها تأکید دارد. در این چارچوب، هماهنگی میان نهادهای گردشگری، منابع طبیعی، محیط زیست، میراث فرهنگی و مدیریت محلی برای کاهش موزی کاری و افزایش اثربخشی تصمیمات ضروری است. همچنین، مشارکت جامعه محلی زمانی به توسعه پایدار منجر می شود که با آموزش، توانمندسازی، حمایت از کسب و کارهای بومی و توزیع عادلانه منافع همراه باشد. توسعه گردشگری نیز باید متناسب با ظرفیت های محیطی و فرهنگی روستاها و با اولویت حفاظت از منابع هدایت شود.

در مجموع، توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی در غرب مازندران حاصل تعامل سه بعد حکمرانی مشارکتی و تعامل نهادی، توانمندسازی جامعه محلی و مدیریت راهبردی منابع طبیعی و فرهنگی است. بنابراین، تقویت هماهنگی بین نهادی، مشارکت واقعی روستاها در تصمیم گیری، حمایت از کسب و کارهای بومی و اقامتگاه های بوم گردی، حفاظت از منابع و استقرار مدیریت یکپارچه مقصد، مهم ترین الزامات سیاستی پژوهش محسوب می شوند. چارچوب پیشنهادی می تواند مبنایی برای سیاست گذاری توسعه پایدار گردشگری روستایی در منطقه باشد و در پژوهش های آینده با روش های کمی و مدل سازی معادلات ساختاری اعتبارسنجی شود.

کلیدواژه ها: حکمرانی مشارکتی، توسعه پایدار، گردشگری روستایی، تحلیل مضمون، غرب استان مازندران.

تشکر و قدردانی

مطالعه حاضر حامی مالی نداشته و حاصل فعالیت علمی نویسندگان است.

و دستیابی به اشباع نظری پایان یافت. واحد تحلیل، ادراک و تجربه ذی نفعان کلیدی حکمرانی گردشگری روستایی در روستاهای گردشگری غرب استان مازندران بود. داده ها از طریق مصاحبه های ۴۵ تا ۷۵ دقیقه ای گردآوری و پس از پیاده سازی، با استفاده از الگوی شبکه مضامین آترید-استرلینگ تحلیل شدند. در این فرایند، کدهای اولیه استخراج و کدهای مشابه در قالب مفاهیم، مضامین پایه، سازمان دهنده و مضمون فراگیر سازمان دهی شدند. برای افزایش اعتبار یافته ها نیز معیارهای اعتبار، انتقال پذیری، قابلیت اطمینان و تأیید پذیری به کار گرفته شد.

۳. یافته های تحقیق

نتایج تحلیل ۲۵ مصاحبه به استخراج ۵۰ کد اولیه، ۱۰ مفهوم، ۵ مضمون پایه، ۳ مضمون سازمان دهنده و یک مضمون فراگیر منجر شد. مفاهیم اولیه شامل مشارکت و حکمرانی محلی، همکاری و شبکه سازی نهادی، اعتماد و سرمایه اجتماعی، توانمندسازی سرمایه انسانی و اقتصادی، حفاظت از منابع طبیعی و میراث بومی، مدیریت محیطی، نوآوری و بازاریابی مقصد و حکمرانی پایدار گردشگری بود. پنج مضمون پایه شامل مشارکت و حکمرانی محلی، سرمایه اجتماعی و توانمندسازی جامعه، توسعه اقتصاد محلی مبتنی بر گردشگری، مدیریت پایدار مقصد و حفاظت از منابع شناسایی شد که در سه مضمون سازمان دهنده تعامل و حکمرانی نهادی، توانمندسازی و توسعه اقتصاد محلی و مدیریت راهبردی و حفاظت از منابع قرار گرفتند. تحلیل شبکه مضامین، مضمون فراگیر پژوهش را «چارچوب مفهومی حکمرانی مشارکتی توسعه پایدار گردشگری در روستاهای گردشگری غرب استان مازندران مبتنی بر تعامل نهادی، توانمندسازی جامعه محلی و مدیریت راهبردی منابع طبیعی و فرهنگی» نشان داد. در این چارچوب، تعامل نهادی موجب هماهنگی، مشارکت، شفافیت و اعتماد؛ توانمندسازی جامعه محلی از طریق آموزش، مهارت آموزی و حمایت از کسب و کارهای بومی، موجب تقویت مشارکت ساکنان؛ و مدیریت راهبردی با تأکید بر برنامه ریزی یکپارچه، زیرساخت متناسب، کنترل ساخت و ساز، ظرفیت برد و حفاظت از منابع، زمینه توسعه پایدار را فراهم می کند. یافته ها نشان



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