

Environmentally-Compatible Villages

During the last couple of centuries, with the accelerated industrial and technological growth around the world, the poverty and unprivileged nature of rural areas have become more apparent. Since compared to urban dwellers, rural communities have lower average income levels and do not have access to acceptable levels of social services, these rural classes are considered more poor and vulnerable, which, in some cases, results in their migration to cities. The reason behind this can be attributed to the geographical scattering of villages, lack of cost-effectiveness for providing social and professional services, lack of specialized agricultural practices (low productivity), limited land resources (given the population growth), and lack of proper management by the authorities. Therefore, in order to mitigate severe poverty in rural areas, improving the living standards and quality of life of village dwellers, creating jobs, and increasing the productivity of these communities, the “rural development” scheme was devised. In order to further its activities, the CIWP has focused on the necessity of considering environmental compatibility and rural activities to realize the concept of environmentally-compatible villages. The current book covers some of the experiences of this project in this regard.

By definition, rural development plans are considered as part of the development programs of any country, and these plans are employed for transforming the socioeconomic structure of rural communities. Therefore, rural development can be considered as an important factor for improving the living conditions of people who belong to the low-income class living in villages and for promoting their self-efficacy in the course of the macro development of the country.

In the past, some managers and policymakers tasked with the promotion of rural development would only focus on ‘agricultural development’. However, nowadays,

the results of various studies have shown that rural development cannot be achieved only through this strategy. A village has a community with different social dimensions, and therefore, it requires multi-faceted development (i.e., rural development) instead of just the development of business and a system called 'agriculture'. However, it should be noted that through successful agriculture, rural development is not necessarily achieved. This is because, firstly, the benefits of agricultural development will not be provided to all the villagers (they will mainly be enjoyed by land owners, especially large land owners), and secondly, increasing agricultural productivity reduces the need for human workforce (at least in the long term), which will reduce the rate of employment among villagers and increase their level of poverty, forcing them to migrate towards cities.

In this regard, based on ambiguous perceptions about rural development, and considering the modern issue of sustainable development at the global level, the issue of sustainable rural development gradually replaced the concept of rural development. Sustainable rural development does not mean maintaining or expanding the physical area of the village. This type of development can be considered as the reconstruction of the village; namely, the reconstruction of the village in terms of intellectual, cultural, economic, technological, and environmental aspects. Therefore, it can be said that sustainable rural development involves a unity among social, economic, cultural, and environmental aspects aimed at increasing the level of living standards and wellbeing of rural communities.

Accordingly, once the idea of sustainable rural development was proposed, a number of strategies were gradually introduced for implementing this type of development by scientific communities and even local communities as well. One of the strategies proposed with regards to sustainable rural development involves the notion of environmentally-compatible villages. Environmentally-compatible villages are

considered among ideal residential settlements where people have positive interactions with each other, and their energy and capacity is spent for achieving economic, social, and environmental sustainability. In fact, it can be said that environmentally-compatible villages constitute a small and practical macrocosm of modern ideal sustainable settlements; namely, settlements formed by following environmental principles and based on simultaneous consideration of economic and social development. The main objective of establishing or expanding this new type of villages is to create a real-life example of sustainable development at the small rural scale; a small-scale development where humanistic and environmental values are recognized and implemented as the main principle.

Accordingly, this text has been written to introduce the concepts and functions of environmentally-compatible villages. So far, there has been a lot of research performed and published by various scientific communities around the world on the characteristics of this type of settlements. Consequently, a number of real-life examples of such villages have been formed all around the world. Therefore, the current text is in parallel with conceptualizing this type of villages in the world in line with valuable global experiences in the field of sustainable rural development with the aim of introducing the concepts and strategies of this novel type of settlements. When preparing this text, attempts were made to get inspired by various types of environmentally-compatible villages around the globe.

In general, environmentally-compatible villages are based on a combination of three basic dimensions, including social, ecological, and spiritual issues. Each of these dimensions might be more or less pronounced depending on the village, or any of them might not be present in a particular village at all. In fact, an environmentally-compatible village is a community where people live together in pursuit of sustainable environmental, economic, and social goals. Accordingly, based on the

conceptualization of such villages, there are numerous environmentally-compatible villages around the world formed based on each of the three above-mentioned dimensions. However, the process of the development of such villages varies based on the society.

Concepts such as environmentally-compatible villages, green cities, and other similar notions are ideal and abstract concepts introduced as a response to human concerns about the unlimited development of the age of technology. What is an environmentally-compatible village really? Can this idea be implemented? What are some of the strategies for implementing such an idea? These questions, as well as tens of others, inspired the authors to carry out broad studies in the field of environmentally-compatible villages and the measures taken for developing such villages around the world. The outcome of these studies involved identifying various characteristics and features of environmentally-compatible villages. In fact, the authors, at first, listed the features and functions of a large number of environmentally-compatible villages all around the world, followed by classifying these characteristics into different categories. Accordingly, the authors have found a number of suggested categories for the development of such villages and the strategies for developing them. According to the authors, the contexts for developing environmentally-compatible villages or sustainable rural development compatible with the conditions in Iran can be summarized in the following seven different categories: sustainable livelihood, waste and wastewater management, optimal management of energy resources, improving the environment, optimal management of water and agriculture, promotion of health, and cultural, social, and spiritual development.

Due to its geographical location and the physical conditions of the Iranian plateau, which made Iran to be at a higher altitude compared to the adjacent countries, the

country of Iran has gained unique natural and cultural features. For instance, the number of plant species in Iran is almost equal to the total number of plant species in Europe. This is also true about the intact and unique cultures latent in various regions, especially villages, of Iran. So far, a large number of villages have been identified in Iran with unique cultural, architectural, and natural conditions, and it is possible that many similar villages have not yet been identified. However, despite these unique features, unfortunately there hasn't been sufficient attention paid to rural development, especially sustainable rural development, in Iran. Nonetheless, in recent year, positive steps have been taken in this regard. Therefore, this issue has also impacted the development of environmentally-compatible villages in Iran. Due to this lack of attention and focus, there hasn't been a significant example for the development of environmentally-compatible villages in Iran since rural development strategies have mainly been limited to improving model tourism villages or improving valuable rural contexts. Accordingly, some examples of rural development projects related to tourism in Iran have been introduced in the following. These examples include Esfarayen Village in Northern Khorasan Province, Kazaj Village in Khalkhal County in Ardabil Province, Kandolus Village in Mazandaran Province, Khafr Village in Isfahan Province, and so on.