Critical Reviews
No. 8
September 2026
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Development of Nomadic Communities: A Path Toward Destruction

Fatemeh Sadat Sakhaei
Master of Landscape Architecture, University of Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This article takes a historical and critical look at policies affecting Iran's nomadic communities and examines how, in many periods, "development" shifted from improving living conditions to transforming or eliminating the nomadic way of life itself. The issue is not whether nomadic communities should have access to education, healthcare, security, and welfare, but why access to these services has so often been tied to permanent settlement and the abandonment of seasonal mobility.

A security-oriented approach, the failure to recognize nomadic society as a distinct form of social life, the erosion of customary rights over pastures and migration routes, rural-centered development, unsuitable settlement schemes, the weakening of pastoral livelihoods, and the gradual decline of local institutions have all contributed to this process. Standardized education, limited community participation, the neglect of women's roles, distorted cultural representation, and non-community-based tourism have further restricted migration territories, reduced economic independence, and disrupted cultural transmission.

The weakening of nomadic society cannot be attributed to a single policy or historical period. Rather, it has resulted from the cumulative effects of policies that failed to distinguish between change and elimination. Equitable development requires recognizing the right to choose among continued mobility, semi-nomadic life, and permanent settlement, while ensuring that access to public services does not depend on abandoning the nomadic way of life.

Keywords: Nomadic communities, Nomadism, Settlement, Development, Territory, Pastoral economy, State policy

DOI: 10.22034/2.8.71
Email: sakhaei.f.sadat@ut.ac.ir

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[DOI: 10.22034/jcr.2.8.71]

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Why have development and settlement policies for Iran's nomadic communities, despite their stated aim of improving welfare and living conditions, often contributed to the weakening of nomadic society?

Extended Abstract

Iranian nomadic society constitutes a distinct form of social life whose continuity depends on the relationship among mobility, livestock, seasonal rangelands, customary territorial rights, family labor, local knowledge, and community institutions. This article examines why policies introduced in the name of development and settlement have, in many periods, weakened this system instead of improving the conditions in which it operates. The study adopts a qualitative, historical-critical approach and draws on archival documents, historical and ethnographic studies, and research on settlement, housing, livelihoods, education, environmental management, and tourism.

The analysis distinguishes between the stated aims of these policies and their cumulative consequences. During the Pahlavi period, disarmament, military suppression, exile, forced settlement, and the weakening of tribal institutions disrupted pastoral production, collective rangeland management, and local support networks. Later measures, including land reform, the nationalization of rangelands, oil development, road and dam construction, urban expansion, and agricultural projects, further fragmented migration territories and restricted customary access to land and water.

After the Revolution, many nomadic communities gained better access to education, healthcare, veterinary services, roads, and other public services. However, because these services were largely concentrated in permanent settlements, access to welfare often became indirectly tied to sedentarization.

The findings also show that standardized approaches to housing, education, economic planning, environmental governance, and tourism often overlooked the close relationship between mobility, livestock, women's productive roles, indigenous knowledge, and cultural continuity. Although settlement brought benefits to some households, it also reduced economic autonomy, weakened local institutions, and disrupted intergenerational knowledge transmission in many cases.

The article concludes that equitable development should expand people's choices rather than prescribe a single future. Continued mobility, semi-nomadic life, and permanent settlement should all be recognized as legitimate options, while public services and infrastructure should be adapted to mobility rather than made conditional on its abandonment.

Development policies for Iran's nomadic communities have often failed to strengthen the nomadic way of life because they were largely designed to transform nomads into a settled, more easily controlled population resembling rural society. In this process, settlement replaced empowerment, control replaced participation, and standardization replaced the recognition of cultural and territorial differences. In other words, "development was not designed for nomadic communities; it was imposed on them."

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[DOI: 10.22034/jcr.2.8.71]

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