

THE IMPACT OF CHANGING AGRARIAN POLICIES ON VILLAGE LIFE IN SOUTHWESTERN IRAN NEED TO MAKE PEASANT SOCIETY SUSTAINABLE

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Abstract: This paper which is based on a long term(1972-2009) field observations and studies in rural Dezful, Southwestern Iran, maintains that prior to the nation-wide Land Reform Program of the 1960s, around 65 percent of the total population of 25 million lived in some 60000 villages. Rural inhabitants were mostly engaged in family farming. This peasant agricultural system was not always economically efficient, but it was more ecologically sustainable, as compared to the current situation.

The fast growing population (70 million in 2009 with 70 percent urban) and increasing food demand, led to the policies favoring large-scale and non-peasant farming systems. Furthermore, lack of adequate supporting services for small-scale semi-subsistence farming, coupled with continuous draught in recent years damaged the village life and peasant family livelihood. Subsequently, these meant more village evacuation, marginalization and additional national economical and social problems and increased the need for food import. Thus there is a need for new policies to overcome the situation to prevent village disintegration, rural poverty and able men to leave agricultural sector. The researcher believes that capability of the peasant farmers could be materialized by provision of genuine village family oriented financial, technical and Extension services in line with sustainable development. The new policies should stress introduction of draught resistance farming pattern, restricted water use management, establishment of suitable food processing industries in rural areas, encouraging non-farm occupations (handicraft), on farm selling of agricultural products, and promoting rural eco-tourism. All these should receive priorities in planning the national economic

and social policies. It is vital to support and encourage those endogenous elements which could stimulate the peasantry to adopt improve farming ideas and practices, leading to a more productive farming which could co-exist and even compete with other agricultural systems.

Keywords: peasant family farming system, Southwestern Iran, sustainable rural and agricultural development, village life

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Iran's agricultural sector and peasant society have witnessed execution of number of agrarian policies concerning the land use in various rural areas. The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the impact of changing agrarian policies on village life and peasant farming system in rural Dezful, Southwestern Iran. As a background, the paper first presents the rural and urban population changes in the past 50 years and then outlines the major features of the agrarian policies introduced into the area since the 1960s and the outcomes and problems associated with the implementation of these policies. It further proposes means to stabilize the situation to achieve a sustainable peasant farming society in the area.

The study area is a part of fertile plain, some 300 kilometers north of the head of Persian Gulf (Map No. 1). It includes some 180 villages with an area of 167000 hectares, covered by the Dez Irrigation Project (DIP) (Map No. 2). The Project was mainly

designed for effective utilization of the Dez Dam, constructed in 1958-62.

The article is based on the long term (1972-2009) field studies which involved collecting information and document from local sources, holding informal interviews and recording observations.

II. DISCUSSION

1. Rural and Urban Population Changes

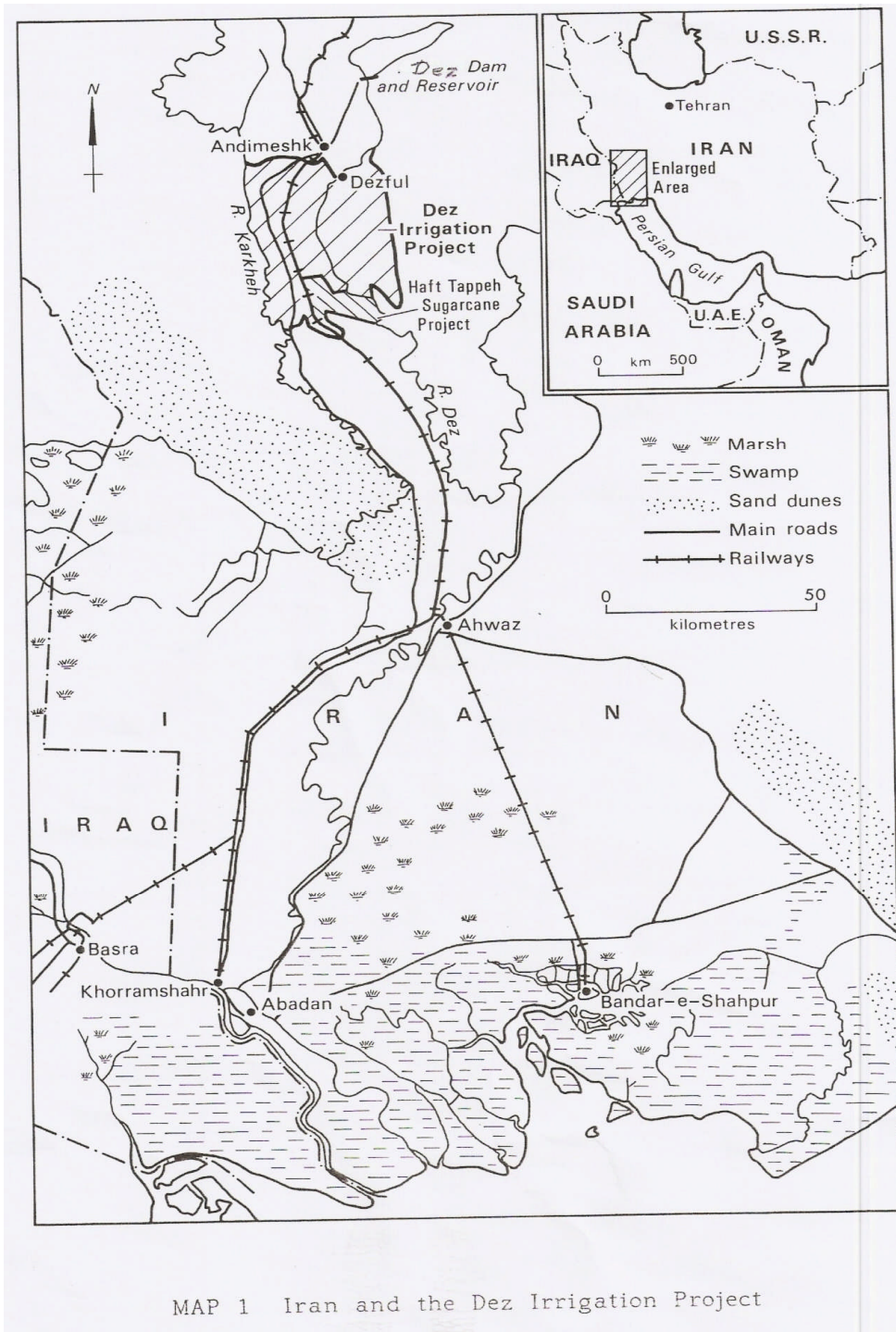
Iran, an ancient country in the Middle East, was until 50 years ago, predominately a rural farming nation. In 1956, about 70 percent of total populations of less than 19 million were rural. The population grew rapidly in the direction of urban sector. By 2006, the total population was about 70 million with only around 30 percent rural [13]. Table No. 1 shows the rural and urban population changes in Iran in 1956-2006. This trend of population changes was reflected in more cities and towns to appear on the map.

Zanjani, a recognized Iranian demographer, indicated that in 1986, there were 496 cities and towns in the country. These by 1996 were increased to 612 [13]. Among urban places, the capital city Tehran now has an estimated population around 8-10 million. This population is nearly half of the total rural of the country. Zanjani also mentioned that the percentage of inhabited *abadis**, (consisted of villages, hamlets and other rural settlements and centers), was decreasing considerably. In 1966, about 20 percent of recorded 82362 *abadis* were without any population. In 1996, around 45 percent of the total 125827 *abadis* had no population [13]. It is not clear what percentage of *abadis* were villages and hamlets. Probably these in 2006 were not more than 60000 with total population of around 20 million. The "unbalanced" rural-urban population distribution had been the result of a number of complex interplaying physical, social and economical factors which effectively prevented the isolation of the impact of one element from that of other concurrent ones.

However, the field observations and studies in rural Dezful, reveal that changing agrarian policies, particularly since the 1960s and recent continuous draughts have acted as "accelerating factors" in the radical rural-urban population changes, leading to a decline in the percentage of populated rural settlements and centers, and "erosion" of village life and peasant society in the study area. In general, food production in Iran has not kept pace with the population growth and its needs, as a result a number of agricultural products (especially wheat) are usually imported.

2. Village Life and Farming System in Dezful

Until some 50 years ago, village was the dominate pattern of settlement in Iran. Village farmers and tribal nomads were the main suppliers of food and fiber for the country. Rural inhabitants and farming activities were politically and economically important for the country. Direct and indirect farm taxations were the main source of revenue for the government. Villagers were recruited into army to fight in the battles and they resisted aggressions as far as they could.[9] Iranian villages were not only the lands of peasant farmers, but they were also the homes of a number of prominent Persians scholars and literary men. Internationally recognized poets Ferdowsi and Raddaki had their roots in village [14]. As for the main features of agricultural sector, it should be noted that Iranian farming structure created over many centuries of a complex set of interrelating physical and cultural factors, was predominantly characterized by landlordism and peasant sharecropping. Rural Dezful was no exception to this national pattern. Heidemy estimated that in 1950 about 100 villages (56 percent of the total 180 villages of DIP area) were owned by 10 families [6]. Peasant free holdings were very limited. Traditional village social structure in rural Dezful was rigidly structured and controlled by the power of the authority held by landlords. Furthermore, the peasants fear to change, coupled with limited alternatives acted as complementary forces in maintaining village social equilibrium and in prohibiting the possibility of any radical change in village structure [11]. The prevailing traditional cropping pattern in the area was chiefly characterized by wheat and barley in winter, with (**abadi*, is a Persian term used by the Iranian Statistics Center. It refers to all villages, hamlets, independent and dependent farms and places, situated outside the recognized boundaries of cities and towns) rice and sesame in summer. In the dry farming zones only winter crops were grown. This cropping pattern seemed to be compatible with ecological possibilities of the area. Prior to the 1950s, farmers used little or no chemical fertilizers or pesticides in growing crops. Some peasant informants mentioned that chemical fertilizers were first introduced into the area around 1958; but apparently this introduction was not accompanied with adequate educational programs as to how and why to use the chemical fertilizers with environmental considerations. Currently there are some indications that some of the local farming practices are not in line with a sustainable agricultural system (e.g. field observations in 2007, showed that a crop of celery was sprayed more than 10 times with chemical pesticides).



MAP 1 Iran and the Dez Irrigation Project

3. The Land Reform of the 1960s and Subsequent Agrarian Policies

Under the traditional sharecropping system in rural Iran, the peasant often received a relatively small share of harvest and had little inducement to improve productivity or efficiency. The structure formed a serious economical and social handicap to agricultural and rural development.

Furthermore, concentration of land in the hands of a few landlords threatened the government's control of agricultural sector and rural areas. To remedy this situation, the government introduced a series of reform measures in the early 1960s, the most significant of these concerned with the system of rural landholding. The nation-wide three-phase land reform program, which came into effect in January 1962 and took about 10 years to complete, was to destroy the power of influential landlords through the division of large landholdings among their tenant sharecroppers [12].

When the land reform program of the 1960s came into effect, the publicity surrounding the issue seemed to promise the prospect of small-scale peasant family farming system. However, within only five years of starting the program, a new policy of land concentration set the stage for the formation of large-scale, capital-intensive agriculture in rural Dezful. This was a clear contradiction to the promised aims of support for peasant farming system. Officials defending this change of policy, often stressed that peasant farming system was not capable to meet the fast growing demand for food and agricultural products as a result of rapid population increase. Thus, from the national planners' point of view, the alternatives to the peasant farming, were the establishment of two different agricultural systems in selected rural areas of Iran: the consolidation of small-holdings into farm corporations and the purchase of private holdings for release to agri-business companies [11].

Between 1968 and 1978, both approaches were tried in the DIP area of rural Dezful. Four farm corporations, covering 33 villages and independent farms and six joint ventures foreign and domestic agribusinesses, covering about 100 villages were established in the DIP area. The recorded observations and enquiries showed that neither system proved to be economically and socially successful. Both systems were incompatible with the traditional agrarian structure of rural Dezful. In fact, the notion and basic plans for these large-scale farming systems had been "transplanted from the technologically advanced industrial countries into a culture with a predominant semi-subsistence labor-intensive peasant farming system with little demand for such large-scale complex units [5]. Other factors

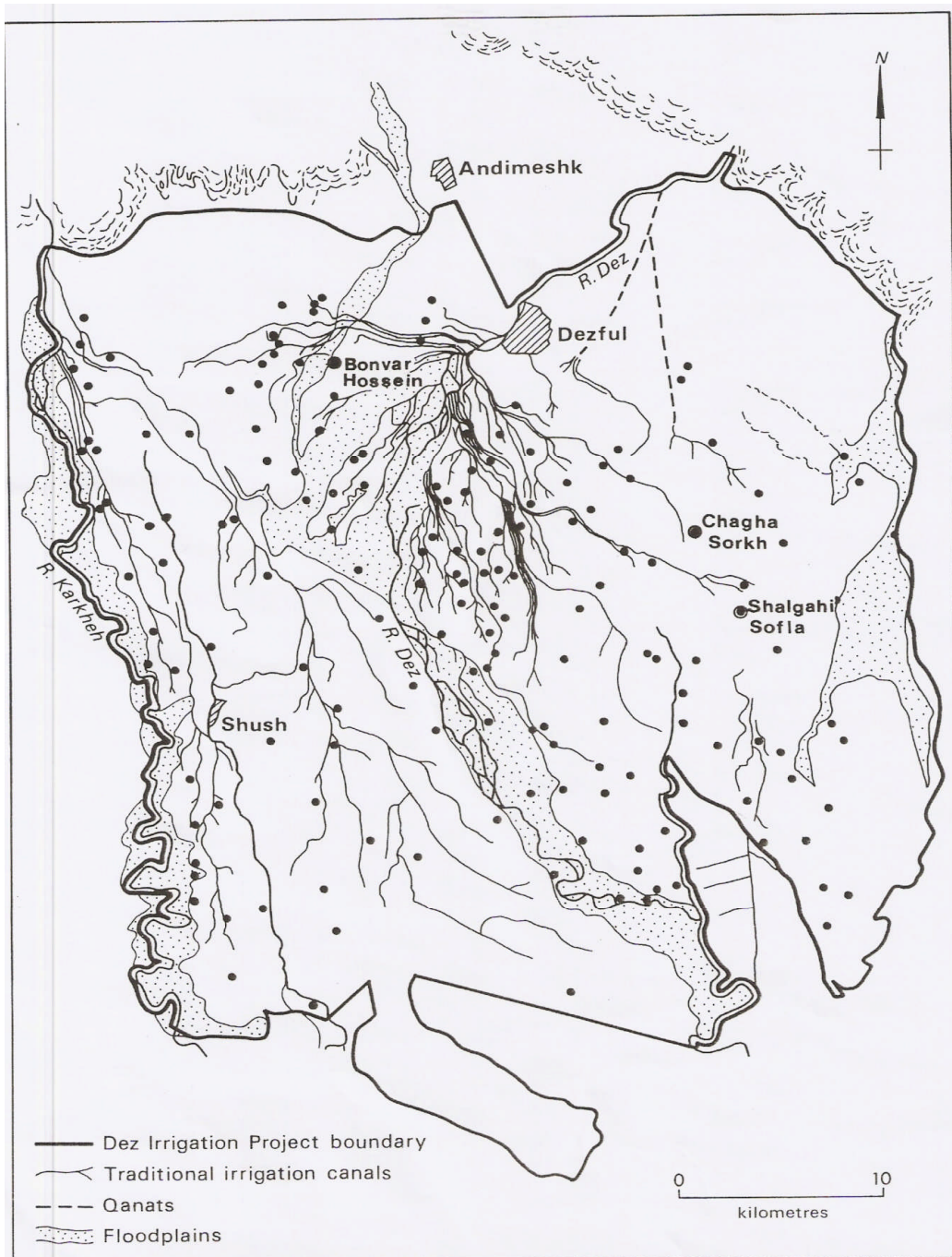
Table Number 1- Population Changes in Iran*
(1956-2006)

Year	Total Population (Thousand)	Rural		Urban	
		Population (Thousand)	% of Total	Population (Thousand)	% of Total
1956	18955	13001	69.6	5954	31.4
1966	25788	15995	62.0	9794	38.0
1976	33708	17853	53.0	15855	47.0
1986	49445	22600	45.7	26845	54.3
1996	60075	23026	38.3	36818	61.7
2006	70000(est.)	21000	30.0	49000	70.0

* Source Figures 1956-1996: Iranian Statistic Center Reports Quoted in M.H. Amadi (2004) Unpublished Report

such a mismanagement of expensive input materials at the field level in the new units and resentments among the peasant farmers moved from their lands which just acquired in the process of the three-phase land reform program, had also handicapped the work of these large-scale farming enterprises. The peasant farmers felt that they were prematurely deprived of the opportunity to exploit their new status as

independent owner-cultivators. The substitute agricultural units offered them no comparable encouragement to self-reliance as village family farmers [11]. After the February 1979 Islamic Revolution, the four farm corporations and the six agribusinesses in rural Dezful were dissolved. The land allocated to the farm corporations were given back to the native landowners who tilled the land. The land leased to agribusiness units were taken back by the government, but not returned to the original cultivators as the land was "officially" purchased by the government. Most of these lands were rented to the groups of local peasants with no land rights and other individuals on the condition that they would work the land collectively, in accordance with the unique supervised farm cooperation procedures. Two of the agribusiness units then existed are still operated by the government agricultural agencies. Apparently plans are being made to sell out these two units. In recent years, the government agricultural policies seemed to be in the direction of promoting cooperative farm production units. Also as a possibility of overcoming some of the current unemployment problems among the agricultural college graduates, the government provide lands and credits to some of these graduates for establishment and operation of greenhouse horticultural units.



MAP 2 Location of villages and traditional systems

(It could be noted that in 2007, the number of agricultural college graduates in Iran was estimated around 200000 and the rate of unemployment among them was higher than other college graduates.)

III. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Iran, with a fast growing population, was until some 50 years ago predominately a rural farming nation. Majority of inhabitants lived and work in some 60000 villages and hamlets and in about 60000 other rural settlements and centers. Rural areas have been losing their inhabitants at a fast rate, but urban places have been gaining population considerably. There are a number of factors relating to this situation. However, the field studies in rural Dezful revealed that changing agrarian policies and recent continuous draught had accelerated this trend of population change.

Landlordism and peasant sharecropping were the main features of the agrarian structure in rural Dezful and other parts of Iran. The land reform program of the 1960s was originally aimed at dividing the large holdings among their tenant sharecroppers and promoting peasant farming. However, within only five years of initiating the land distribution program, a new policy of land concentration set the stage for the formation of large-scale, capital-intensive agribusinesses and farm corporations in rural Dezful. This was a contradiction to the promised aims of support to peasant farming when the first phase of the land reform program came into effect in 1962. In spite of unlimited support for the establishment and operations of these new large scale farming units, neither system proved to be economically and socially successful in rural Dezful environment. Consequently in 1979, four farm corporations and six agribusinesses then existed in rural Dezful were dissolved and other agricultural policies were adopted.

As a result of introduction of inappropriate agricultural systems of the late 1960s and early 1970s, more than half of the 180 villages in Dezful (DIP area) were either evacuated or left with little population. Many village inhabitants moved to *shahraks*, "dormitory-type" housing centers, created in connection to the agribusinesses program or marginalized outside the nearby towns and engaged in jobs not related to agriculture or industry. Many of them have been fighting unemployment and poverty. (In 2007, the rate of unemployment in the country could be estimated around 15) Rural migration is not limited to Dezful area. It was estimated that in 2005 about eight million (around 13 percent) of Iran's total population were considered as marginalized people with rural background. The prediction is that this

figure may be doubled in 10 years time [2]. Most people that leave rural areas are young men. As a result of this population movement, some rural communities look like "old people homes". Moreover, poor living conditions coupled with the lack of adequate supporting services for small-scale agriculture, left the peasant farmers with very little alternatives than to evacuate the village and moved to nearby town to look for some unskilled employments.

This national rural-urban population dilemma and village evacuation and rural marginalization are becoming of concern for the top officials. It has recently been stated that: "unbalanced rural-urban population distribution showed that the economic structures of the country are defective and injured ...it is not right that 32 percent of population live in rural areas. Tehran with nearly eight million populations cannot offer productive jobs for 2.5 to 3 million of its inhabitants. This trend of rural migrations, ought to be reversed"[3]. The author long observations in a number of rural areas of Iran, indicated that in most cases rural migrations were irreversible. Those peasant farmers who leave the village and found employments elsewhere, most probably will not return to their original homes and if they have farm lands, they would often leased them to other villagers who may still have interest in farming.

The researcher believes that in spite of all the difficulties that peasant farmers in rural Dezful have been facing since the 1960s, there are still chances to adopt some genuine policies to rescue the remaining family farmers and to prevent further village disintegration and to make peasant society to survive in a sustainable manner. This is based on the findings of the author's field studies in the Bonvar Hossein Village in rural Dezful in 2007. This village was affected by the original land reform of the 1960s, but not included in the farm corporation or agribusiness programs. The peasant farmers in this village had adopted several new ideas in their farming operations and were economically more productive as compared to Chagha Sorkh Village (included in farm corporation scheme) and Shalgahi Sofla Village (covered by the agribusiness program). Locations of these three villages are shown on Map No. 2. In the light of the past experiences of peasant society in rural Dezful and the new developments in farming world, formulation of a long term of agrarian policy to include the following issues could help the agricultural sector and the village life to gain rural vitality and also to reduce some of the national economic and social problems relating to the growing rural population exodus.

1. In order to identify the problems of Iran's agricultural sector and peasant communities scientifically, it is necessary to conduct multi-disciplinary comprehensive research studies in all rural areas of the country. The findings and results of such investigations should form the basis for formulation of appropriate agrarian policies that could strengthen village life and peasant family farming activity. The Iranian Minister of Labor and Social Affairs recently recognized this need and mentioned that: "2000 villages will be studied with the aim of solving the villagers' unemployment problems preventing rural migration." [7] This type of work needs to cover all villages and other rural farming and population centers.

2. In drawing agrarian policies for rural Dezful and other rural areas of the country, it is highly recommended to note the application of the concepts of Multifunctional Agriculture in developing village life and peasant family farming. The ideas of Multifunctional Agriculture are gaining ground internationally. The concepts underline that in Multifunctional Agriculture, apart from production of food and fiber, other benefits can come from it. "These benefits typically include contribution to vitality of rural communities (through maintenance of family farming, rural employment and cultural heritage), biological diversity, recreation and tourism, soil and water health, bio energy, landscape, food quality and safety, and animal welfare." [4] In other words, the concepts of Multifunctional Agriculture convey that agriculture apart from production of food, "has other broader social functions and aspects, such as maintaining the population in the country, cultivating the landscape and protecting the environment." [8] Most of these concepts and ideas are usually included in the sustainable agricultural system, and could be appropriate for developing a healthy and environmental compatible farming at the village level in rural Dezful.

3. Rural communities deserve as much assistance and consideration as urban centers. Programs to improve living conditions of rural areas should receive priority in the national development plans. These should include the provision of a comprehensive health care and insurance program for all rural inhabitants accompanied with the establishment of suitable infirmaries and medical clinics at the village level.

4. Peasant farmers do not always have access to needed production inputs and services. Efforts should be made in providing adequate supporting services for small-scale farm producers to be efficient in their work. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive crop insurance program, so that the peasant farmers could survive in case of draughts or other physical or

economical disasters. There is also a need of reorganizing agricultural marketing channels, so that the small-scale producers would be able to sell their farm products without going through numerous middlemen that now exist in the whole sale markets. Allowing on-farm selling could be of a considerable benefit to small-scale producers. Non-farm activities (handicraft), involving all members of farming families should also be encouraged. Such activities could be of economical importance for most villagers of Iran. Establishment of suitable small-scale food processing industries in rural areas, could also offer new job opportunities for villagers to overcome some of their unemployment problems.

5. Currently consumers receive subsidies for a number of farm products. Part of these subsidies should be channeled to farm producers. Amadi [1] indicated that in 1995 at the national level, per capita subsidy allocated to the urban population was four times more than per capita subsidy marked for the rural inhabitants.

6. Many rural and tribal areas of Iran have considerable historical and natural attractions. Rural ecotourism, if properly planned, could attract domestic and foreign tourists and can have potentialities for agricultural and rural development. However, this program could only help the peasant economy and the establishment of sustainable agriculture system, if the tourists would observe the importance of conservation of natural resources and also respect the rural culture and traditions.

7. Iran is relatively a dry country and occurrence of draught is frequent in many farming areas of Iran. Research and Extension work in all aspects of draught resistance farming patterns and restricted water management should be included in planning long-term agrarian policies for rural Dezful as well as in other parts of Iran. Developing and employing suitable technologies for smallscale farming systems, are important factors for increasing efficiency of peasant farmers, whose small land holdings are often scattered.

8. Village farmers and also agricultural administrators urgently need practical education on how to establish and carry on activities in line of a sustainable agriculture system. Excessive use of chemicals in the farming process and lack of consideration for environment and for future generations, could seriously hampered rural and agricultural development of Iran.

9. Peasant farmers' endogenous knowledge and experiences should be respected and their implications for planning a sustainable agricultural

system at the village level, should be viewed and evaluated without any bias. Traditional farming practices in rural Dezful, may have not always been economically efficient, but they were often ecologically harmless.

10. Peasant participation in all stages of developing a sustainable agricultural system is important. Moreover, it is vital to encourage those elements in farming communities that could stimulate the peasantry to adopt improve agricultural ideas and practices, leading to more productive farming which could co-exist and even compete with large-scale agricultural systems.

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