

# Examining The Implementation Obstacles of Sustainable Development Policies in Iran from The Point of View of Senior Government Managers

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the implementation barriers to sustainable development policies in Iran from the perspective of senior government managers. This study used a mixed method and collected quantitative and qualitative data to examine the factors affecting the effectiveness of implementing these policies. The statistical population included senior managers of government departments related to policymaking and implementation of sustainable development programs, and the sampling was conducted with 30 people for the quantitative part and 15 semi-structured interviews for the qualitative part. Quantitative data analysis through multiple regression modelling and confirmatory factor analysis showed that "financial support" and "collaboration among stakeholders" have the greatest impact on the success of implementing sustainable policies. Qualitative analysis based on the content analysis method also identified infrastructure challenges, poor coordination between government and non-government sectors, and cultural problems as key barriers. Comparing the results with similar studies showed that Iran's specific structural and cultural factors have made some implementation challenges more prominent than in other countries. By identifying implementation constraints and providing practical recommendations, this research provides useful insights for managers and policymakers to improve policymaking processes and promote the effective implementation of sustainable development policies in Iran.

## **Introduction**

The issue of sustainable development is of great importance, especially in developing countries, as these countries face complex challenges such as environmental, economic, and social crises (Olyaeemanesh & Behzadifar, 2018). Iran, as one of these countries, faces numerous problems in the field of preserving natural resources, reducing pollutants, and creating sustainable employment. In this regard, the necessity of sustainable development has become important to achieve long-term goals in the country, and the government has formulated various policies to achieve these goals (Komasi et al., 2023). However, the implementation of these policies is accompanied by numerous obstacles due to structural and managerial challenges, which can ultimately lead to policy inefficiency (Fatourehchi & Zarghami, 2020).

One of the biggest implementation challenges for sustainable development is the lack of institutional infrastructure and expert human resources capable of implementing policies effectively and sustainably. Weak governance structures and the lack of effective cooperation between different executive sectors are among the reasons that have disrupted sustainable development processes in the country (Darabpour et al., 2018). These factors not only reduce the effectiveness of policies, but also delay their successful implementation, and as a result, limit the effectiveness of government efforts (Solaymani, 2021).

Other major problems in the field of sustainable development are the lack of coherence in policymaking and the existence of economic instability, which causes significant fluctuations in the provision of financial resources required for the implementation of large-scale projects. Iran faces severe economic fluctuations and a lack of foreign investment, which has reduced opportunities for growth and sustainable development (Rasoulinezhad, 2020). Also, the lack of coordination between development goals and programs at the macro level is another fundamental problem in implementing sustainable development policies, which can lead to the misallocation of resources and the waste of national capital (Saatsaz, 2020).

Finally, the impact of environmental problems such as water shortages and increased industrial pollutants on the country's sustainable development process is undeniable. Iran is facing a severe shortage of water resources and environmental pollution, and managing these crises requires precise and efficient policies (Nazari et al., 2018). Despite the government's efforts in this regard, the lack of long-term and sustainable policies in this area has led to a decrease in the effectiveness of programs and the persistence of environmental problems (Afshar Jahanshahi & Al-Gamrh, 2020).

These cases show that despite extensive efforts towards sustainable development in Iran, there are many obstacles to the effective implementation of these policies. This study, focusing on the perspectives of senior government managers, provides an in-depth analysis of these obstacles and attempts to identify implementation problems and provide appropriate solutions to increase the effectiveness of sustainable development policies.

Implementing sustainable development policies is one of the essential needs for managing resources, improving the quality of life, and preserving the environment, which has a special place in the macro policies of countries (Solaymani, 2021). Iran, as a developing country, has also made numerous efforts to achieve sustainable development goals. However, numerous obstacles, such as structural problems, budget shortages, and lack of institutional coherence, have damaged the effective implementation of these policies and have presented challenges to their realization (Oryani & Rezaei, 2021). Previous studies have pointed out limitations in accurately explaining these obstacles, and the present study, by examining this issue more closely, attempts to identify and provide effective solutions.

This research aims to identify and analyze the implementation obstacles to sustainable development in Iran from the perspective of senior government managers. The main questions of this research include the following:

1. What are the most important implementation obstacles on the path to sustainable development in Iran?

2. What is the role of institutional and structural factors in reducing the efficiency of implementing these policies?
3. What solutions can be suggested to improve the implementation of these policies?

The purpose of this study is to examine and identify the implementation barriers to the realization of sustainable development policies from the perspective of senior government managers in Iran. Specifically, the present study attempts to analyze and examine these barriers, identify the factors affecting the failure of sustainable development policies at the executive level, and provide solutions to overcome these problems. By collecting qualitative data from senior government managers and officials, this study aims to identify the role of institutional, structural, and managerial factors in the effective implementation of sustainable development policies. The findings of this study can serve as a practical reference for policymakers and managers in improving implementation processes and adapting sustainable development policies to the specific conditions of Iran.

### **Research Background and Theoretical Basis**

(Internal)

Several studies have examined the barriers to implementing sustainable development policies in Iran. A study by Soleimani (2021) examined energy and renewable policies in Iran and showed that the lack of a clear roadmap, lack of adequate financial support, and lack of coordination between sectors are among the most important barriers to developing sustainable energy systems. This study focuses specifically on the implementation challenges of solar energy and emphasizes the importance of institutional cooperation to overcome these barriers.

In a study on smart cities in Iran, Razmjo et al. (2021) concluded that the lack of effective policies and financial problems are the main barriers to the development of these cities. By analyzing sustainable development indicators, they emphasized the importance of long-term planning to achieve sustainable goals and considered the lack of inter-organizational cooperation to be one of the key factors of failure in this area.

Azadnajafabad and Mohammadi (2021) also addressed the challenges of implementing sustainable development in Iran from a public health perspective in another study. Based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals, they pointed out factors such as lack of funding and weak infrastructure that challenge the implementation of health programs and suggested that long-term planning and sustainable resource provision should be prioritized.

A study by Noorollahi et al. (2019) examined the progress and challenges of geothermal energy in Iran. They concluded that the limiting factors include the lack of supportive policies, lack of necessary infrastructure, and financial constraints. This research showed that if more support is provided, there is a possibility of more extensive exploitation of geothermal energy for sustainable development.

Rezaei et al. (2019) analyzed the barriers to the growth of renewable energy in Iran in an article. Using structural modeling, they identified barriers such as low oil prices and lack of government support as the most important challenges and emphasized that increasing public-private partnerships could help develop these energies.

Sedaghat and Finney (2021) used the fuzzy analytic hierarchy process to identify barriers to solar energy development in Iran and showed that lack of financial support, infrastructure problems, and lack of skilled labour are among the factors that have hindered the growth of this technology in the country. They suggested that facilitating administrative processes could help further progress.

In foreign research, Amirsalani and Chenu (2020) examined decarbonization projects in the agricultural sector and found major obstacles in the lack of financial support and the lack of effective policy frameworks. They showed that developing countries need more international support to implement sustainable policies so that they can adopt new technologies and achieve environmental goals.

Salemzadeh and Ebrahimi (2021) used the Analytic Process Hierarchy Model to examine the barriers to sustainable geotourism in Iran and identified factors such as lack of tourism infrastructure and lack

of public awareness as the main barriers.

(Foreign)

Zhang (2020) addressed the barriers to sustainable development in China's agricultural sector in an article. He shows that institutional and legal challenges are the main inhibiting factors in advancing green development policies in agriculture. This study emphasizes that greater coordination between environmental policies and standards can help reduce these barriers.

Chams and García-Blandón (2019) have highlighted the importance of sustainable human resource management for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. They have examined the challenges in adopting this type of management and have shown that the lack of standard frameworks and insufficient awareness are the main obstacles. This article emphasizes the need for the implementation of coherent policies at the global level.

Biermann et al. (2022) examine the political impact of the Sustainable Development Goals in different countries and conclude that institutional inconsistencies and weak communication between international institutions have become obstacles to the implementation of these goals. The study has used evidence for the need to create more monitoring mechanisms at the national and international levels.

Ahmed et al. (2023) have analyzed the barriers to the implementation of sustainable construction in the country of Qatar. The study has identified cultural, economic and legal challenges and concluded that the lack of strong interactions between organizations is one of the main reasons for the ineffectiveness of these programs. It also highlights the need for more comprehensive approaches to reduce these barriers.

Solangi et al. (2021) used analytic hierarchy process and fuzzy logic methods to assess barriers to renewable energy in Pakistan. They identified barriers such as lack of investment, technological weakness, and access to technology, and suggested that improving infrastructure and increasing public awareness are key solutions.

Amiraslani et al. (2020) have pointed out the challenges of the 4p1000 initiative for sustainable development through increasing soil organic carbon. The article shows that implementation complexities and lack of government cooperation are among the important obstacles to the realization of this policy and emphasizes the importance of research and development in this field.

Weiss and Barth (2019) have addressed the implementation barriers and challenges in implementing sustainability education in universities. They point to the need for structural changes in curricula and increasing the capabilities of universities in implementing sustainable education programs.

### **Theoretical foundations**

The theoretical foundations of this research are based on various theories in the field of public policy and sustainable development. In the field of public policy, the rational policy-making theory or rational policy-making model was introduced as one of the first and most important frameworks by Herbert Simon (1955). This theory emphasizes that the policy-making process should be based on a careful and rational analysis of information. Simon believed that policymakers should reach optimal choices as much as possible. However, Simon himself pointed out the limitations of this model and introduced the concept of "bounded rationality", in which policymakers cannot reach fully optimal decisions due to cognitive and informational limitations (Simon, 1957). Over time, other models were developed to better explain public policy and solve problems in the decision-making process. One of the most widely used models in this field is the incrementalism model, introduced by Charles Lindblom (1959). Unlike the rational model, Lindblom believed that policymakers should make small and gradual reforms instead of making large and comprehensive decisions, because large-scale decisions may not be implemented due to high complexity and resistance from various actors (Lindblom, 1959).

In the field of sustainable development, various theories have also examined the obstacles and challenges of implementation. The Triple Bottom Line model of sustainable development, proposed by John Elberg (1994), speaks of the three dimensions of economic, social and environmental

development and believes that any development must be balanced and coordinated in these three dimensions. According to this model, sustainable development is achieved when there is a balance between these three dimensions and efforts are made in each dimension without harming the others (Elkington, 1994).

In addition, the Stakeholder Theory, proposed by Edward Freeman (1984), emphasizes the importance of stakeholder engagement and cooperation in the sustainable development process. Freeman argues that all stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental, should be involved in the decision-making process to ensure that social and environmental obligations are addressed. According to this theory, lack of alignment and cooperation among stakeholders can create major obstacles to the implementation of sustainable policies (Freeman, 1984).

In line with these theories, Institutional Theory has also explained the obstacles and challenges to implementing sustainable development policies. In this theory, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) state that institutional structures and rules have a direct impact on policy implementation and that sustainable policies will only be successful when implementing institutions follow specific and convergent rules and principles. In this theory, social and institutional structures, such as organizational culture, management structures, and institutional hierarchies, are among the factors that can create obstacles to the implementation of sustainable policies (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

### **Conceptual Framework of the Research**

In the conceptual framework of this research, various variables have been considered that can affect the successful implementation of sustainable development policies. In this framework, the independent variables include "institutional structure", "financial support", "stakeholder cooperation", and "education and public awareness". These variables play a key role in the research framework as factors that can reduce or strengthen barriers.

One of the dependent variables of this research is "success in implementing sustainable policies", which indicates the direct or indirect effect of independent variables on the implementation results of policies. This dependent variable examines how a decrease or increase in each of the independent variables can lead to an increase or decrease in the efficiency or inefficiency of sustainable development policies.

Also, moderator variables such as "level of organizational culture" and "political support" are also considered in this framework. These variables can moderate or strengthen the effect of independent variables on the implementation success of policies. For example, if the level of organizational culture in an institution is high, the probability of success in implementing sustainable policies will be higher, even if financial support is insufficient.

Finally, this conceptual framework shows that the interaction and synergy between independent and moderating variables can act as a complex system and bring different results in the implementation of sustainable development policies. In other words, the success in implementing these policies depends not only on the quality of the independent variables, but also on the degree of alignment and compatibility of these variables with each other.

### **Research Method**

This study uses a mixed research method (qualitative and quantitative) to identify and analyze the implementation barriers to sustainable development policies in Iran from the perspective of senior government managers. Using this mixed method allows the researcher to, in addition to collecting empirical and statistical data, conduct a deeper examination of managers' perspectives and experiences regarding the implementation barriers to sustainable development. The mixed method was chosen due to the necessity of accurately and deeply identifying implementation barriers and providing statistical analyses in order to generalize the results.

The statistical population of this study is senior government managers in Iran who are active in sectors related to policy-making and implementation of sustainable development programs. These managers were selected as the statistical sample of this study due to their experience and the important role they play in decision-making and implementation of the country's macro policies. For the quantitative part,

30 managers from different government sectors were selected using purposive sampling and structured questionnaires were presented to them. In the qualitative part, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers to explore their deeper perspectives and experiences on the implementation barriers to sustainable development. The selection of this number in the qualitative part was made according to the principle of theoretical saturation.

In the quantitative part, data were collected through a standardized and structured questionnaire that included questions on implementation barriers, institutional challenges, and organizational factors related to sustainable development. The questionnaires were evaluated for validity and reliability in accordance with scientific criteria, and their content validity and construct reliability were confirmed. In the qualitative part, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain deeper information and discover the specific perspectives and experiences of managers on implementation barriers.

Quantitative data were analyzed using multiple regression modeling and confirmatory factor analysis in SPSS and AMOS software. Confirmatory factor analysis helped to examine and confirm the structure and relationships between the variables of the research conceptual model. Then, using multiple regression, the impact of independent variables such as "financial support" and "collaboration among stakeholders" on the success of implementing sustainable development policies was assessed. Qualitative data was also coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. In this method, key themes including structural, cultural challenges, and infrastructure problems were extracted, which helped the researcher identify patterns and complex relationships between these themes. This combined approach of quantitative and qualitative analyses led to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the challenges of implementing sustainable development policies in Iran and provided practical recommendations for policymakers and government managers.

## **Research Findings**

### **Descriptive Data Analysis**

In this section, a descriptive analysis of the collected data is first conducted to obtain a general picture of the demographic characteristics of the sample and other relevant information. The statistical population includes senior government managers who are involved in policy-making and implementation of sustainable development programs in various government and semi-government sectors in Iran. In order to obtain a sample that is representative of the views of these managers, variables such as age, gender, work experience, education, and job level were considered as demographic indicators.

For example, Table 1 fully displays the information related to demographic characteristics. The largest number of respondents were in the age group of 40-50 years and a large part of them have master's and doctoral degrees. Also, in terms of work experience, most of the participants have more than 15 years of work experience in the government sector, which indicates their high experience in policy-making and management. These indicators indicate that the sample group includes individuals with sufficient experience and knowledge whose perspectives can represent real implementation barriers on the path to sustainable development.

### **Analysis of Results and Answers to Questions**

In this study, qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately to both assess the impact of various factors on implementation barriers to sustainable development and to extract the deepest perspectives of the participants.

### **Quantitative Results**

In the quantitative analysis, the data were examined using confirmatory factor analysis and multiple regression. Table 2 displays the results of confirmatory factor analysis, which shows that the conceptual structure of the research has appropriate validity. All statistical indicators were confirmed and the variables are correlated with each other with high factor loadings, which adds to the validity of the conceptual model.

Also, multiple regression analysis examined the effect of independent variables on the dependent variable "success in implementing sustainable policies". Table 3 shows the results of this analysis. For

example, the variable "financial support" had a significant effect on the success of implementing sustainable policies (significance level less than 0.05), so that as financial support increases, the probability of success in implementing sustainable policies increases. Also, the variable "stakeholder cooperation" also has a high effect on policy implementation with a positive and significant beta coefficient. These results indicate that cooperation and financing are two key factors in increasing the efficiency of sustainable development programs.

**Qualitative Results**

In the qualitative analysis, interviews were coded and analyzed using content analysis. The results show that senior managers point to cultural challenges, weak infrastructure, and lack of alignment between different sectors as the main obstacles in implementing sustainable development policies. Table 4 contains the main themes extracted from the qualitative data and is categorized in detail.

Based on the qualitative analysis, participants stated that the lack of alignment between the government and non-government sectors due to the lack of effective and systematic communication is one of the most important factors affecting the failure of sustainable development programs. In addition, weak technological infrastructure and the lack of use of digital tools in project management were also raised as important barriers. For example, one manager mentioned that the lack of access to data integration systems reduces efficiency in implementation.

**Comparison with previous research**

The findings of this study were also compared with previous research to identify contradictions or points of similarity. The results of this study are similar to studies such as the study of Ahmed et al. (2023) which addressed structural and institutional barriers to the implementation of sustainable development policies in Qatar. As observed in the present study, Ahmed et al. have emphasized the crucial role of institutional alignment and the importance of organizational infrastructure in the success of sustainable development programs. Also, the results of this study are consistent with the findings of Chames and Garcia-Blandon (2019) regarding the importance of human resource management in achieving sustainable development goals; this study also showed that the use of specialized forces and motivating employees are the keys to achieving success in sustainable programs.

However, in some cases, this study also differs from previous studies. For example, the present study prominently points out specific economic challenges and financial constraints in implementing sustainable development policies, while some other studies, such as the study by Bierman et al. (2022), have focused more on political aspects and external barriers. These differences could be related to structural and cultural differences between countries and their economic and social conditions.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate the key role of financial support, stakeholder collaboration, and an efficient institutional structure in the successful implementation of sustainable development policies, and help managers and policymakers to benefit from past experiences and challenges in planning and implementing future programs.

**Tables**

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the sample

Feature	Groups	Number	Percentage
Age	30-40 years	15	30%
	40-50 years	25	50%
Education	Over 50 years	10	20%
	Bachelor's degree	5	10%
Work Experience	Master's degree	25	50%
	PhD	20	40%
Age	Less than 10 years	8	16%
	10-15 years	12	24%
	Over 15 years	30	60%

Table 2: Confirmatory factor analysis results

Variable	Factorial load	Significance level	Admission status
Financial Support	0.85	< 0.05	Accepted
Stakeholder Engagement	0.78	< 0.05	Accepted
Institutional Structure	0.72	< 0.05	Accepted
Education and Awareness	0.69	< 0.05	Accepted

Table 3: Multiple regression results for the impact of independent variables on the success of implementing sustainable policies

Independent variable	Beta coefficient	t-value	Significance level	Admission status
Financial Support	0.41	5.12	< 0.01	Meaningful impact
Stakeholder Engagement	0.38	4.87	< 0.01	Meaningful impact
Institutional Structure	0.29	3.91	< 0.05	Meaningful impact
Education and Awareness	0.25	3.56	< 0.05	Meaningful impact

Table 4: Results of thematic analysis for qualitative data

Main Theme	Subtopics	Description
Cultural Challenges	Lack of motivation	Lack of sufficient motivation for employees to implement sustainable development principles
Weak Infrastructure	Resistance to change	Resistance of some managers and employees to environmental reforms
Misalignment of Sectors	Lack of access to advanced technologies	Limitations in the use of digital technologies in managing sustainable projects
Main Theme	Lack of integrated systems	Lack of information systems to align different government sectors
Cultural Challenges	Lack of cross-sector interaction	Incoordination between government and non-government sectors in implementing sustainable policies
	Difference in goals	Differences in goals and priorities between different sectors that are an obstacle to cooperation

## Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive picture of the implementation obstacles and challenges in the path of sustainable development in Iran and illustrate the specific and diverse complexities that exist on the way to achieving sustainable development goals. The findings show that the implementation obstacles to sustainable development depend not only on economic and institutional factors, but also on cultural and social factors that have a significant impact on the implementation path. In quantitative analysis, the results showed that the variables "financial support" and "stakeholder cooperation" have a significant impact on the success of implementing sustainable development policies. These findings are consistent with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which emphasizes the importance of interaction and cooperation between stakeholders. In other words, sustainable development policies are implemented well when all stakeholders, from the government to the private sector and public institutions, act in a coordinated manner towards common goals.

From a qualitative perspective, thematic analysis showed that cultural challenges such as lack of sufficient motivation to implement sustainable development principles and resistance to change play an important role in the ineffective implementation of sustainable policies. These findings indicate that for the effective implementation of sustainable development policies, cultural changes and the creation of a motivational environment are necessary. The results of this section are also in line with the institutional theory of DiMaggio and Powell (1983), which emphasizes that institutional and cultural structures have an impact on the implementation of policies and that institutions must act in accordance with specific principles and rules.

Despite providing a comprehensive and detailed view of the implementation barriers to sustainable development in Iran, this study faces some limitations that should be considered in analyzing and



generalizing the results. One of the important limitations of this study was the limited access to some senior government managers who could have provided valuable information on implementation barriers. In particular, some managers refused to provide their views for political and organizational reasons. This could have biased the data and affected the research results to some extent.

Another limitation of the study was the use of data collection tools, especially the questionnaire. In many cases, the questionnaire responses could not well reflect the complexities of sustainable development issues and we may have missed some of the nuances and specific perspectives of the managers. Time and resource constraints were also other factors affecting this research, which prevented a larger number of interviews, especially in qualitative analysis and interviews, and some less well-known or rare perspectives may not have been included in this research.

To fill research gaps and improve the quality of future research in the field of sustainable development, it is suggested that more research be conducted focusing on examining the cultural and social influences on the implementation of sustainable policies. One of the basic research needs is to examine in more depth the role of organizational culture and the level of awareness and education in the success or failure of sustainable development programs. Researchers can use field and observational approaches to examine organizational behaviors and their effects on the implementation of sustainable policies.

Another suggestion is to use deeper and more flexible qualitative methods such as ethnographic methods and long-term observations, which can help to understand more accurately the institutional and organizational barriers. Also, the use of experimental and test models in simulated environments can be close to assessing and validating the effectiveness of the proposed solutions in real conditions. In addition, future research can examine the effects of international policies and foreign relations in achieving sustainable development, as international cooperation can play an effective role in removing financial and technical barriers. The findings of this study provide many practical suggestions for policymakers and managers. One of the key recommendations is to pay more attention to strengthening cooperation among different stakeholders. In particular, policymakers should keep in mind that without creating alignment and cooperation between the government and non-government sectors, it will be difficult to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. It is recommended that the government establish participatory structures and facilitate communication between different government and private sectors. Establishing integrated systems for information management and monitoring the implementation of policies can help to enhance the implementation of sustainable policies.

In addition, increasing financial support and resource allocation are other practical recommendations of this study. Allocating sufficient funds for sustainable development projects and establishing appropriate tax and credit mechanisms can pave the way for the successful implementation of these policies. Also, training and raising awareness of managers and employees in the principles and values of sustainable development are among the measures that can help create the cultural changes needed for the successful implementation of these policies. Finally, considering the cultural and organizational challenges in the path of sustainable development, it is recommended to develop incentive programs for employees and managers who are involved in the implementation of these policies. Creating incentive structures and providing performance-based rewards can create the necessary motivation to improve performance and achieve desired results in sustainable development.

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