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Letter to Editor

Rural Development for Healthy Communities: Nurturing Vital Connections

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, migration of rural populations to urban centers has become more prevalent due to the industrialization of countries and social inequities. Rural areas are an essential component of health for the community through four key dimensions: ensuring food security, environmental protection, preventing slum formation, and addressing population aging. This article provides a brief overview of each dimension, emphasizing the need for policymakers and managers to prioritize preserving rural areas and improving the livelihood of rural residents, demonstrating a strong commitment.

Keywords: Social Equity, Rural Development, Rural Health, Healthy Communities

Dear Editor

Rural areas or villages, as significant human settlements, are geographical areas that have developed away from urban and suburban regions. They typically have a low population density and high social cohesion. The majority of rural residents are engaged in family occupations such as agriculture, gardening, livestock farming, beekeeping, handicrafts, and cultivation of medicinal plants. Over time, with the industrialization of societies and insufficient attention from higher-level policymakers to these regions, a significant inequity has emerged between rural and urban areas regarding income, access to various facilities, and living standards. As a result, rural households have gradually migrated to urban areas (provincial centers, industrial cities) to improve their livelihoods, leading to a change in the country's population composition (1). For example, in the past, most Iranians lived in rural areas. Today, only about 26% (close to 21 million people) of Iran's population are rural residents, and this percentage is expected to decrease in the coming years (2). In this article, the writers aim to explore the role of rural areas regarding community's health through four core dimensions, including ensuring food security, environmental protection, preventing slum formation, and addressing population aging:

1. Ensuring Food Security

Food security is defined as the provision of adequate, safe, and nutritious food to all individuals, ensuring their physical, social, and economic access to meet their dietary needs and preferences for a healthy and active life (3). The production of various food items, including fruits, vegetables, citrus fruits, meat, dairy products, and crops, primarily occurs in rural areas where rural residents are actively engaged in related activities. Failure to prioritize these areas can result in declining food production, leading to significant challenges in food security and supporting healthy

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nutrition. It may even force a country with comparative and absolute advantages in food production to rely on imports, depleting foreign exchange resources. Consequently, the country shifts from a major food producer to an importer and consumer.

2. Environmental Protection

Human beings have always been dependent on the environment. With the advancement of urbanization, biodiversity–which encompasses various species of trees, plants, and animals–gradually declines (4). A reduction in agricultural activities leads to fewer trees, contributing to reduced oxygen production and thereby exacerbating air pollution in urban centers. Furthermore, the expansion of industrial activities contributes to water and soil contamination. It is crucial to emphasize that rural residents should receive modern education on environmental protection principles to prevent their activities from causing environmental degradation. Such education should cover practices like appropriate waste separation and disposal, as well as responsible utilization of pesticides and chemicals.

3. Preventing Slum Formation

The rise of slum settlements is becoming increasingly prevalent in countries with low and middle incomes including Iran. This phenomenon carries short-term, medium-term, and long-term negative repercussions for society. Slums are breeding grounds for social abnormalities such as addiction, crime, unemployment, fraudulent employment, domestic violence, child abuse, and high dropout rates from schools and universities (1). A comprehensive approach that prioritizes rural areas in the fields of education, health, employment, and welfare initiatives, combined with empowering the rural economy through evidence-based infrastructure development, can be the most cost-effective strategy in combating slum formation. Achieving this goal necessitates collaborative efforts among multiple organizations at various levels, with the initial step taken by politicians.

4. Addressing Population Aging

Population is a key factor in a society's strength and resilience. The rapid decline in fertility rates and the increase in life expectancy over the past three decades are causing Iran's population to age rapidly. Data on the speed of population aging show that Iran is the second fastest aging country in the world in terms of the percentage point increase in the population aged 60 and over between 2015 and 2050 (5). In this context, investing in rural areas offers a valuable advantage for policymakers to empower these regions, allowing them to play a significant role in shaping the youth of the country. This potential is due to the characteristics of lifestyle, culture, higher fertility rates, and the availability of more affordable housing in rural settings. These measures are crucial to be implemented before Iran's demographic window closes, potentially depriving the country of this golden opportunity.

In conclusion, rural areas, in addition to preserving the local traditions, cultures, and diverse array of local foods in each country, can be one of the key factors in promoting community health. A critical portion of sustainable growth and development in countries relies on the rural economy and its related activities. Moreover, rural areas offer unique tourism opportunities, particularly in the realm of health tourism, with the establishment of health villages. In line with promoting social equity, government officials (local level, central level) need to have a clear understanding of significant advantages linked to the preservation of rural areas. Furthermore, they should demonstrate a strong commitment to address this issue. With good investments in rural areas, reverse migration from slums and city centers to rural areas can occur. There are probably other dimensions related to the role of rural areas in community health that are recommended for investigation in future studies.

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