

Strategies for Organization and Development of Tourism Function in Rural Areas

Case Study: Villages of Qom Province, Iran

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Abstract

Regarding its appeals and capacities, tourism function of rural areas in Qom province has not adequately played an effective role in advancing rural sustainable development. Therefore, the current research attempts at identifying and preparing organization and development strategies for tourism function in rural areas of Qom province. Research method is descriptive-analytical and it is applied in terms of its content. The present study aims at searching for organization and development strategies and approaches for tourism function in rural areas of Qom province with special emphasis on existent potentials and restrictions. For so doing, using SWOT technique, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to tourism function of rural areas in Qom province have been investigated. Findings indicate that 12 internal strengths and 12 internal weaknesses as well as 10 external opportunities and 9 external threats influence greatly on tourism function of rural areas. In the research presented here, research sample consists of 145 managers and experts of Qom province. Then, their ideas are received and recorded. After that, using one sample t-test, the influence of those two environments on organization and development of rural regions' tourism function is analyzed. Results obtained from findings analysis reveal that both components of external environment and internal environment do greatly influence on organization and development of tourism function. Compatible with analysis content, efficient strategies are derived and ranked. Ultimately, WO strategies are considered as first priority for planning and SO strategies as second one.

Keywords: tourism function, organization, development, rural areas, SWOT, Qom Province

1. Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Fundamental functions of rural housings are life centers for satisfying life basic needs including settlement, employment and working activities, communication, collective life, training and comfort and rest (Shafer, 1980). Therefore, one of the most important human fundamental functions is to rest, spend leisure time and in this study's framework is tourism. Although continuous, this activity has existed in human communities. However, in recent decades, it has got special and diverse form and become one of the main socio-economical activities. So, enjoying various tourism facilities and providing necessary infrastructures, governmental and non-governmental sections have attempted at boosting this activity and as a result, gaining income (Saidi et al., 2013; Marsusi et al., 2013; Ghadiri Masum et al., 2013). Tourism function depends greatly on sustainable and suitable environmental conditions (Gossling & Hall, 2006). Furthermore, other considerations such as regions and tourism target centers' historical background, economical features, socio-cultural characteristics influence paving the way for tourism expansion or restriction (Arlt, 2006). Most theorists and planners consider tourism as the lost ring of rural development and the way to revive and reconstruct rural areas (Dickinson, 2008; Reid, 2001) who, in one of the most important viewpoints, consider rural tourism as a means of sustainable development.

Many development planners and policy makers consider tourism as on the main pillars of sustainable development. Identifying rural benefits and shortcomings and performing feasibility study of tourism in these kinds of environments as well as planning appropriately in this regard, they try to play a seminal role in

diversifying rural economy and national development. In spite of this fact, rural tourism is a complex activity related to other parts of society and economy. Hence, different tourism effects and outcomes should be meticulously studied in planning process so that negative factors may be avoided and its relevant positive effects of social, economical and environmental factors may be enhanced (Annabestani et al., 2013; Eftekhari & Mahdavi, 2007; Marsusi et al., 2013; Saidi et al., 2013; Ghaderi, 2004). However, although tourism has been in many rural regions and it has been one of the main sources of income and employment for more than a century, lack of efficient strategies and plans has been tangible in rural development policies for offering and integrating tourism functions with rural development (Monshizadeh & Nasiri, 2002).

On the other hand, in many developing countries, potential tourism facilities including cultural, historical, natural-biological and recreational appeals are abundantly found, but lack of appropriate facilities and infrastructures hinders promised prosperity of the activity in an ongoing manner. In Iran, tourism is often performed spontaneously. Therefore, researches carried out in this regard reveal problems resulted from lack of planning for this activity in rural environments (Aligholizadeh et al., 2008; Eftekhari & Mahdavi, 2007; Rezwani, 2008; Rezwani, 2003; Asadi & Daryayi, 2012). Accordingly, in order to achieve sustainable rural development and protect ecological and spatial landscapes as well as the social-cultural structure of Qom province's rural areas, it is necessary to deploy appropriate strategies of rural tourism development by considering environmental conditions and characteristics and ecological (human and natural) attractions in this areas. According to issues discussed and considering research topic, the current study aims at finding appropriate answers for research questions:

- 1) To which extent does internal environment (strengths and weaknesses) influence on development and organization of tourism function of rural areas in Qom province?
- 2) To which extent does external environment (opportunities and threats) influence on tourism function of rural areas in Qom province?
- 3) Which strategies are in priority for developing and organizing tourism function of rural areas in Qom province?

2. Research Area

Qom Province is one of the 31 provinces of Iran with 11,526 km², covering 0.7% of the total area in Iran. It is approximately in the center of the country, and West of Salt Lake. According to 2011 national consensus, this province had one city, five counties, six townships, nine rural districts, and 926 villages, among which 330 villages were main ones and 203 had settlers. It has population of approximately 1151672 out of which 1095871, that is, 95.15% resided in urban areas and 55801, that is, 4.8% in rural vicinities. Its urbanization rate has reached from 91.2% in 1997 to 93.9% in 2007 and 95% in 2011. Its rural population has reduced from 8.6% in 1997 to 6.1% in 2007 and 4.8% in 2011. The trend of changes in its rural population shows -3.31% fall in 1947-1957 time period and maximum fall (4.73%) happened in 1967-1977 time period. After this period and till 2011, it had decreasing growth and its growth was negative in 1987-2011 time period (Qom province statistical calendar, 2013).

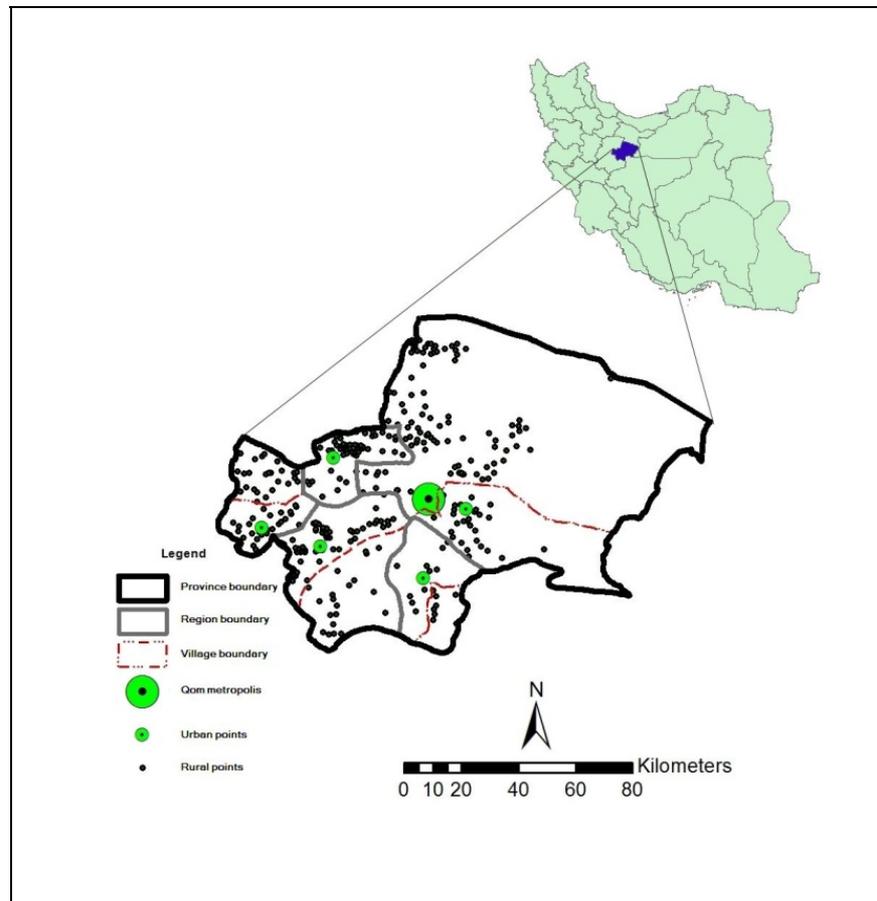


Figure 1. The Location of the Region under Study

Investigating economical structures and characteristics of Qom's rural regions in terms of townships and rural districts indicate that many rural regions, in line with traditional activities of agriculture and husbandry, have the opportunity for being developed as touristic, pilgrimage, communicational and hospitable villages due to some special potentials and capacities. According to this, such Factors and attractions such as Qom province as the second pilgrimage center of Iran (Note 1), communicational provincial and national passages within villages, religious and pilgrimage locations, natural appeals including Salt Lake, desert regions with attractive ecology, old forts and inns, and summer quarters with nice climate, all and all, make Qom's villages have capacities appropriate for developing special spaces (residential-communicational) for tourism function. With respect to tourism attractions and facilities in rural areas, of about 330 of the historical monuments of the province recorded in the list of the national monuments, a major proportion are located in the rural areas such that about 60 Imamzadeh tombs, 47 historical hills, 14 old caravansaries, 12 historical castles, and 2 rural and roadside catering units are located by the interurban roads ending in Qom province, in the villages of Qom province, or in the roads leading to the villages (Shargh Ayand Consultant Engineers Co, 2013). Also, field studies and observations show the expansion in tourism function in form of second recreational leisure time model in Kahak and Khalajestan townships. In Kahak Township, due to nearness and access to Fam city, second houses tourism model has had eye-catching development in recent years.

Iranian Statistics Center's public housing and people census data on the state of employees with the age over 10 in rural regions of the province indicates reduction of agricultural sector's workers from 70.4% in 1947 to 48.7% in 2011, increase in service sector's workers from 8.3% in 1947 to 21.5% in 2011, showing boom in service and tourism functions in the area studied (Iranian Statistics Center, 2013).

2.1 The Position of Rural Tourism in Iran

Iran's tourist attractions and potentials have great variety and quality. This has put Iran among the leading countries in terms of enjoyment of tourist attractions. These attractions could be classified into natural attractions (natural face and geographical view, vegetation, mountainous and desert areas, etc.) and human attractions. In

general, Iran currently has 14 types of climates, 1600 mammal species, 1000 species of aquatic creatures, 12000 types of trees and plants, and 500 species of birds which, considering Iran's environmental attractions, are in total divided into 12 areas in which about 18 main and subsidiary potentials for tourist attractions based on nature and ecotourism have been identified. These attractions are either located in rural areas or easily accessible from rural paths. Besides natural attractions, Iran's rural areas also enjoy various and numerous cultural and historical attractions which could attract the attention of domestic and foreign tourists. According to the statistics, about 60 percent of the historical monuments and a major proportion of the number of the country's mosques, Hussainias, and shrines are located in rural areas. In terms of historical and cultural heritage, Iran is among the 10 leading countries and most villages in this country are tourist attractions because of their old age and historical texture. Therefore, in addition to the fact that villages with all their social, economic, and cultural characteristics are precious historical works and could serve as tourist attractions, they also have historical monuments in the specific sense of the word (Rezvani, 2008).

Iran is one of the important centers of the formation of human civilization in the world and the initial signs of civilization in this country date back to the fifth century B.C. Therefore, in different historical periods, Iran has been in the focus of attention of many people who travelled to this county for the purpose of trade, scientific and research issues, and recreation. With regard to natural tourism, considering various customs and traditions in Iran such as going to natural landscapes in groups in different periods of the year, the primary potentials for leisure and recreation in nature and rural areas have always existed. Over time, greater and newer opportunities have been created to develop and prolong leisure and recreation in this country. Taking into account tourism potentials and tourist attractions in rural areas, as well as existing services in these areas and the position of tourism and recreational activities in people's life, there are currently different tourism models in the country's rural areas. The most important of these models are second-house tourism, religious tourism, ecotourism and nature-based tourism, and social and cultural tourism. In sum, considering the history and the trend of the development of rural tourism in Iran, it could be stated that this kind of tourism is still in its early stages and has not been developed yet. Compared to other types of tourism, this type is in more basic stages. In fact, rural tourism could be said to be in the extraction stage, so to speak. However, in some rural and mountainous areas, tourism has proportionally entered development, cooperation, and even stagnation stages. What is evident is that attractions and potentials for rural tourism in Iran are vast and various. However, these attractions have not been introduced yet. Therefore, it is essential to develop appropriate strategies in this connection (Pourtaheri et al., 2012; Rezvani, 2008).

3. Theoretical Framework

There are three main views toward rural tourism development:

- 1). Rural tourism as a strategy for rural development: in this view, considering the increasing process of destruction of villages and degradation of agriculture, attempts are made to develop new strategies to revive rural areas by creating complementary activities or by transforming these areas by considering their human and natural resources (Holland, 2003). These strategies usually follow two approaches: A. rural tourism as a development strategy, B. transformation of underdeveloped rural areas.
- 2). Rural tourism as the policy of reconstruction of rural residences: In this strategy, tourism is used as a main part for reconstructing rural residences. In this view, it is believed that we should reduce the extreme dependency on agricultural products and use them in new economic opportunities (Albaladejo, 2009). In this strategy, the following three approaches are usually followed: A. rural tourism as reconstruction policy, B. reconstruction as opposed to degradation of agriculture, C. development and improvement of tourism products.
- 3). Rural tourism as a means of sustainable development and protection of natural resources: In today's world, the policy of sustainable tourism is a comprehensive strategy demanding long-term growth without degrading natural ecosystems. It also stresses the fact that, within the framework of tourism development, man will be able to manipulate or adjust some certain aspects of the environment in the positive or negative direction (Dickinson, 2008). Therefore, during the past few years, the concept of sustainable tourism has experienced some growth to be able to respond to the threats of disorganized tourism. This strategy usually follows two approaches: A. Rural tourism as a means of sustainable development by obtaining employment, increasing income level, adding variety to economic activities, optimizing land use, etc. results in sustainable development in rural economic, ecological, cultural, and social aspects (Aronsson, 2004). B. variance of distribution in order to protect tourism capital and resources.

Considering the presented views and theories, it could be stated that, on the one hand, by providing new opportunities for many villages, rural tourism serves as a means which revives rural communities, causes these

areas to develop, and helps these residences persist. On the other hand, development without management and planning causes social and environmental damages in rural residences. Therefore, considering the environmental characteristics and the space-place structures, we must seek specific management strategies and planning suitable for the conditions of the area.

Various experiences in the world show that wherever tourism has developed without management and planning, environmental and social problems have appeared and the problems of tourism have outnumbered its benefits in the long terms. The purpose of rural planning and management is to establish a balance between its demand and capabilities so that villages and their capabilities are fully used without any decrease in rural resources. Besides, planning to manage rural tourism must be in harmony with the goals of rural development. It is only thus that sustainable rural tourism could be achieved (Ghaderi, 2004; Marsouusi et al., 2013; Rezvani, 2008; Saidi et al., 2013).

4. Methodology

The current research is applied-developmental in terms of its aim and its research method is descriptive-analytical. To collect needed data, library research as well as field studies including interview, observation and visit from villages of Qom province are carried out. According to the obtained information, ultimate questionnaire is prepared with closed questions in the form of Lickert scale (from 1 to 5 for each factor).

In the study presented here, research sample consists of 145 managers and experts practicing in executive bodies related to rural development. Because of limited research population, research sample is selected through all-counting method and in terms of technical and specialized sampling where only samples having sufficient information on the topic of the research are chosen. Research validity is achieved through receiving the opinions of specialists and theoreticians as well as experts in the province's rural development planning. After completing 30 questionnaires as a pretest, Cronbach Alpha is used in order to calculate reliability of the measuring tool. As a result, meaningless items are corrected and reliability reaches 75%, indicating high internal consistency among items for measuring considered concepts. To investigate research questions, single sample t-test and SWOT technique are employed.

4.1 SWOT Model and Its Analysis

One of the most appropriate models for strategic planning and analysis is SWOT (analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) used as a new tool for analyzing functions and conditions employed by strategic planners and evaluators. Therefore, in the present research, this technique is used. SWOT use area is broad and diverse and it is in fact considered as a conceptual framework for systemic analyses allowing investigation of variables and comparison of problems, threats, damaging aspects, opportunities, requests and system's external environment together with strengths, weaknesses and system's internal environment as well as arrangement of strategies proper for the system (Ebrahimzadeh, 2011, p. 73). Of course, integration of those factors, in fact, is a basis for compiling four types of strategy as below (Table 1):

Table 1. SWOT Quadruplet strategies and the manner of its specification

SWOT Matrix	Strengths (S) Topics(Strengths are listed)	Weaknesses (W) Topics(Weaknesses are listed)
Opportunities (O) Topics(Opportunities are listed)	SO strategies (max-max) Using Strengths, opportunities are used	WO strategies (min-max) Using opportunities, weaknesses are removed
Threats (T) Topics(Threats are listed)	ST strategies (max-min) Avoiding threats, strengths are used	WT strategies (min-min) Weaknesses are reduced and threats are avoided

Therefore, in strategic planning, to compile ultimate strategy, it is necessary to consider all factors as a part of strategic planning procedure in the framework of SWOT analysis method. Furthermore, strategic plans are considered as one of the supportive ways for decision-making and common usages in the analysis of internal and external factors, which through defining strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for organizations, one can build strategies based on using opportunities, removing weaknesses and opposing threats (Yuksel et al.,

2007).

5. Research Findings

5.1 Analysis of Factors Effective on Organization and Development of Tourism Function in Rural Areas

According to Table 2, from the viewpoint of respondents (managers and experts related to rural development), the components of strengths factors are ranks 1–12 from 3.81–3.02 according to their weight average(mean).

Table 2. Results of analysis of strengths effective on organization and development of tourism function in rural areas of Qom province

Strengths	Sum of Weights	Mean of Weights	Relative Weight	Rank
Strong relations and affiliations of rural areas in goods exchange and... with metropolitan Qom	553	3.81	0.318	1
Appropriate climate of mountain villages in Summer	552	3.8	0.317	2
Existence of roads linking rural areas to the population centers of the province and country	550	3.79	0.315	3
Natural appeals and beautiful landscapes in villages	542	3.74	0.312	4
Proper infrastructure facilities in most villages	538	3.73	0.310	5
Approved guide plans for most villages	520	3.59	0.229	6
Quality hand crafts in villages in spite of their stagnancy in recent years	515	3.55	0.296	7
Cultural, historical and religious appeals in villages	512	3.53	0.294	8
Provision of leisure spaces in the form of second houses in summer quarters of Qom province	511	3.52	0.293	9
Local management in the form of Islamic assemblies and local authorities	484	3.34	0.278	10
Propagation of service activities as a result of villas in some rural regions	470	3.24	0.270	11
Relative readiness of socio-economic structures of rural regions for welcoming innovations and new activities	438	3.02	0.252	12

According to Table 3, the components of weaknesses effective factors on tourism function in the rural regions of Qom province are ranks 1–12 from 4.52–3.26 according to their weight average(mean).

Table 3. Results of analysis of weaknesses effective on organization and development of tourism function in rural areas of Qom province

Weaknesses	Sum of Weights	Mean of Weights	Relative Weight	Rank
Limited water resources in the province	655	4.52	0.377	1
Lack of employment and business development in tourism sector	621	4.28	0.357	2
Lack of definition for proper model of tourism for rural regions of the province	611	4.21	0.351	3
Seasonal nature of tourism and lack of proper usage of all capacities	585	4.03	0.336	4
Lack of organization in plans and measures of responsible bodies in rural development in terms of tourism	581	4.01	0.334	5
Lack of balance in links and relations between rural and urban regions (immigration, resources, products)	575	3.97	0.331	6
Deficit in internalization and lack of internalized participation of rural residents	550	3.79	0.316	7
Lack of planning and consensus among rural responsible bodies with respect to rural tourism	544	3.75	0.312	8
Lack of proper income and economic benefit from second house tourism plans for rural regions	535	3.69	0.307	9
Lack of belief among people and authorities in employment out of rural tourism	531	3.66	0.305	10
Unknown natural and economic appeals in some rural regions	495	3.41	0.284	11
Negative consequences of cultural conflicts among tourists and villagers in summer quarters	472	3.26	0.272	12

According to Table 4, the components of opportunities factors are ranks 1-10 from 4.06-3.66 according to their weight average(mean).

Table 4. Results of analysis of opportunities effective on organization and development of tourism function in rural areas of Qom province

Opportunities	Sum of Weights	Mean of Weights	Relative Weight	Rank
Release of water resources from main branches of Dez in order to use them in tourism plans respecting limited water resources and tourism plans' limited water consumption	588	4.06	0.406	1
Government care for investments in rural areas	585	4.03	0.403	2
Villagers' access to better services offered in Tehran and Qom	578	3.99	0.399	3
Population poles and macro consuming markets like Tehran and Qom in the vicinity of rural regions	577	3.98	0.398	4
High ecological capacity for ecotourism in the province (location of villages beside beautiful natural landscapes including Salt Lake, Hoz-e-Soltan, desserts and biodiversity)	563	3.88	0.388	5
National and transit communicational passage in the province and location of some of villages on their passage to Central and Southern Iran.	558	3.84	0.384	6
Lack of proper green, recreational and leisure spaces in Qom	550	3.79	0.379	7
Qom's religious and touristic centrality and continuous presence of foreign and domestic pilgrims in Qom	546	3.77	0.377	8
Inappropriate weather in Qom	532	3.67	0.367	9
Higher motivation of urban dwellers for traveling and spending leisure times than villagers	531	3.66	0.366	10

According to Table 5, the components of threats effective factors on tourism function in the rural regions of Qom province are ranks 1-9 from 4.23-3.25 according to their weight average.

Table 5. Results of analysis of threats effective on organization and development of tourism function in rural areas of Qom province

Threats	Sum of Weights	Mean of Weights	Relative Weight	Rank
Lack of long term plans for production of hand crafts and occurrence of stagnancy in sales of hand crafts in rural areas	614	4.23	0.470	1
lack of areal attitude in urban and rural planning on the basis of complementarity of rural spaces	612	4.22	0.469	2
the weakening of agriculture due to the replacement of activities by non-productive activities	598	4.12	0.458	3
lack of reciprocal and organic relations between rural and urban areas	590	4.07	0.452	4
Destruction of and change in uses of garden and agricultural lands in villages of summer quarters with nice weather	588	4.06	0.451	5
Destruction of environment and lack of drinkable water as a result of unplanned constructions in rural regions	574	3.96	0.440	6
Emphasis on civil and physical development of plans in rural regions	572	3.94	0.438	7
High number of requests for building second houses in villages and increase in brokerage and land price	544	3.75	0.417	8
Cultural transformation and looseness of youth's cultural attachment as a result of entrance of second house plan tourists	471	3.25	0.361	9

To investigate the degree of the influence of SWOT external and internal environments on tourism function of Qom rural areas, research questions will be investigated and evaluated.

Table 6. Single sample t-test of managers and experts opinions on the influence of external and internal environments on organization of tourism function of rural areas

Variable	Mean	Freedom Degree	t- Statistics	Significance Level	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Internal Environment	3.7181	144	91.272	0.000	3.6118	3.8244
External Environment	3.9103	144	93.891	0.000	3.8016	4.0191

According to the data resulted from t-test to investigate opinions of managers and experts, shown in Table 6, it is found that calculated T for those opinions are respectively 91.272 and 93.891, with 144 degree of freedom for the effect of both external and internal environments in 99% level is lower than 0.01 ($p < 0.01$). Therefore, with 99% confidence, both internal and external environments affect greatly on organization and development of tourism function in rural regions from the viewpoints of managers and experts although external environment affects greater in their viewpoints. Furthermore, due to positivity of lower and upper bounds for internal and external environments, opinions are evaluated in high level.

5.2 Presentation of Strategies Based on Results of SWOT Model

5.2.1 Aggressive-Competitive Strategies (SO)

SO 1 – Reinforcing organic links and relationships and developing credit and financial affiliations in order to

enhance investment of private sector in rural tourism.

SO 2 – Constructing markets for hand crafts in rural regions and leading tourists of religious metropolitan Qom to those markets in order to create employment and improve villagers' incomes.

SO 3 – Emphasizing on developing natural tourism and ecotourism respecting province's high ecological potential.

SO 4 – Paving way for optimal exploitation of Qom's touristic and religious centrality in order to flourish natural tourism and religious tourism in rural regions.

SO 5 – Organizing and planning second house tourism program purposefully and systematically in order to control ever-increasing request and desire of city dwellers for second houses for trips and leisure times.

SO 6 – Paving the way and investing for expansion and development of religious and historical-cultural tourism in rural regions with respect to religious, cultural and historical appeals in most villages.

SO 7 – Taking optimal advantage of strategic locations of some villages on the way of national communicational and transit passages in order to develop recreational tourism and create employment.

5.2.2 Diversity Strategies (ST)

ST 1 – Compiling short term and long term plans in order to flourish and develop hand crafts through customization of rural hand crafts according to the requests of consumption centers for guaranteeing sales and improving and developing hand craft production cooperatives with emphasis on hand-made carpets.

ST 2 – Diversifying organic relationships of cities and villages in order to complete organic relationships of cities and villages.

ST 3 – Planning and developing sustainable tourism through diversification of activities, facilities and services of tourism in rural areas of the province.

ST 4 – Preparing and compiling developmental programs and plans in all developmental dimensions not exclusively physical and civil development.

ST 5 – Making capacity and determining appropriate density of second houses in summer quarters of rural regions.

ST 6 – Paving the way for and making aware villages' youths in rural identities, values and positive aspects of rural identity and culture.

5.2.3 Conservative Strategies (WO)

WO 1 – Doing researches and carrying out feasibility studies on releasing water resources as a result of replacement of water resources from transition of them in Dez main branches and using them for usages of tourism plans and reinforcement of underground water resources.

WO 2 – Paving the way for using natural tourism potentials in developing and expanding employment and income in rural regions.

WO 3 – Reviewing organic and non-organic relationships and linkages of urban and rural and reinforcing reciprocal flows (organic) relationships and linkages in reciprocal interaction with urban arenas, especially metropolitan Qom for paving the way to achieve spatial and functional integration of rural and urban spheres.

WO 4 – Reviewing the way rural areas having natural, cultural and religious is viewed and planned for toward creation of employment and supplementary income and sustainable development of rural areas.

WO 5 – Reviewing the manner of using public participation in order to develop and equip villages and assigning tasks to local people.

WO 6 – Constructing tourism sites and appropriate facilities and offering proper services in capable mountain regions of the province and locating infrastructures, traditional markets, residential and recreational facilities by private sector.

WO 7 – Reviewing the cooperation and coordination among responsible bodies for developing villages.

WO 8 – Reviewing and compiling tourism master plan of rural regions and placing emphasis on researches on organization and development of religious tourism in villages and protecting and reconstructing villages' historical monuments.

5.2.4 Defensive Strategies (WT)

WT 1 – enhancing output and productivity of water resources through development of new irrigation methods and management of water consumption and avoidance of water waste in agricultural sector and transition of that reserved water to tourism services sector.

WT 2 – Caring for and planning toward spatial and functional integration of urban and rural in moving toward rural sustainable and unified management and applying regional view on rural and urban planning according to supplementary nature of human settlements.

WT 3 – Identifying, introducing and paving the way for developing governmental investments and encouraging investments from private sector in constructing necessary infrastructures for systematic development of different types of rural tourism.

WT 4 – managing and planning second homes tourism approach toward protection of environmental landscapes and socio-economical values and growing and expanding second houses in terms of approved guide plans in mountain regions toward supplying leisure spaces for city dwellers and avoiding its unplanned expansion and inappropriate consequences.

WT 5 – developing, expanding and equipping facilities and resources of villages in mountain regions in moving toward organization and development of leisure-time tourism in order to create sustainable employment and income.

WT 6 – Training, preparing and coordinating local bodies and executive systems on the grounds of rural tourism as well as training and informing public on how to treat tourists and training tourists on traditional and local culture, ceremonies and rules and regulations.

5.3 Prioritization of Strategies

Prioritization process of more important strategies for organizational and development of tourism function in Qom rural regions is done in two stages:

5.3.1 Stage 1: Prioritization of SWOT Quadruplet Factors

In this stage, opinions of managers and experts in quadruplet factors are collected. According to this, results indicate that weaknesses are on the first rank with average of 46.58, strengths on the second rank with average of 45.86, opportunities on the third rank with average of 42.47 and threats on the fourth rank with average of 35.60.

5.3.2 Stage 2: Prioritization of Better Strategies

Generally speaking, strategies and prioritizations having executive capabilities determine better strategies for improvement, organization and development of rural functional development in Qom province. Therefore, better and more efficient strategies for organization and development are obtained from combining SWOT quadruplet factors according to Figure 2. With respect to this figure, the averages of factors are added together in pairs. Results indicate that WO strategies are on the first rank with the average of 89.05, SO strategies on the second rank with the average of 88.32, WT strategies on the third rank with the average of 82.18 and ST strategies on the fourth rank with the average of 81.46.

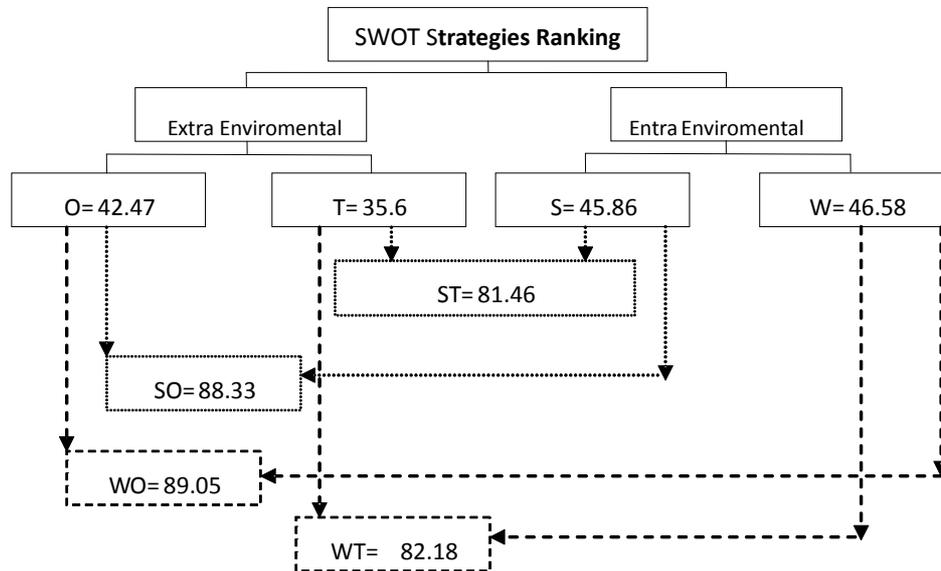


Figure 2. Manner of producing strategies and obtaining averages for strategies

6. Conclusions

Findings indicate that 22 strengths and opportunities may be identified and investigated as positive aspects and 21 weaknesses and threats as negative points in the face of tourism function in rural areas of Qom province. Results obtained from research questions' test and analysis indicate that both internal and external environments greatly affect tourism function of rural regions with significance level lower than 0.01 in 99% level. The most important strong points influencing the function of tourism in rural areas of Qom province from the viewpoint of respondents are the existence of strong relations in rural areas in the exchange of goods, etc. with Qom metropolis, appropriate climate of mountain villages in Summer, existence of roads linking rural areas to the population centers of the province and country, and existence of natural attractions and beautiful landscapes in the villages. The most important weak points influencing the function of tourism in rural areas of this province from the viewpoint of managers and experts were limited water resources in the province, Lack of employment and business development in tourism sector, absence of an appropriate model of tourism for rural areas of Qom province, and Seasonal nature of tourism and lack of proper usage of all capacities. Besides, the most important foreign opportunities for improving the function of tourism in rural areas are related to releasing water supplies by transferring them from the branches of Dez river and using it in tourism plans by considering the shortage of water supplies and the little amount of water in tourism plans compared with other sections, government's attention to investments in tourism in rural areas, and Villagers' access to better services offered in Tehran and Qom. The greatest points of threat addressed to rural tourism of Qom province are lack of long-term plans of crafts and stagnation in the production of crafts in rural areas, lack of areal attitude in urban and rural planning on the basis of complementarity of rural spaces, the weakening of agriculture due to the replacement of activities by non-productive activities, and lack of reciprocal and organic relations between rural and urban areas in the field of tourism.

Among SWOT quadruplet strategies, WO strategies are in executive priority in moving toward reviewing and providing policies appropriate for removing limitations and exploiting available relative advantages. To enhance positive effects and reduce negative effects on tourism function, it is necessary to provide and review sustainable and unified rural management in exchange with urban arenas and in local levels in three environmental-physical, economical and social-institutional dimensions, aiming at developing accountability (resources sustainable management, basic resources protection and environmental unification), economical efficiency (economically sustainable management based on later links through economic and population interactions among rural and urban regions) and social unification (establishment of rural and urban ICT two-way systems) in terms of rural-urban affiliations and rural tourism. Besides, the SO strategies are the second priority in planning. Emphasizing the optimal use of Qom city as the religious and tourism center of the country (the second Iranian religious city) to promote natural and religious tourism in rural areas, these strategies could serve as appropriate strategies to organize and anticipate the future of rural tourism in the province. These results correspond to the

findings by OmranZaveh Consultant Engineers (2002) and SharghAyand Consultant Engineers (2013) which demonstrate that with the shortage of water and soil resources and the small scale of production units for developing agriculture, the rural areas of Qom province could not alone provide the necessary driving force for developing the rural community of the province. Therefore, focused investment with a trans-regional nature must be supported in the rural areas of the province in order to organize and develop the function of tourism so that a portion of the necessary foundation is laid for the development of the rural community of the province. One of the suggestions of this research is to achieve spatial and functional integration of rural and urban areas of the province through reinforcement of rural-urban connections in order to functionally organize villages in general and tourism in particular in order to achieve integrated, sustainable, and harmonious development.

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Notes

Note 1. The presence of 15.9 million domestic tourists as pilgrims and 672 thousand foreign tourists in 2011; existence of 275 tourist areas, 12 example tourism regions, 43 residential units, 38 motels, 41 service, travel, and tourism offices, and 1116 craft workshops are among the characteristics and religious tourism facilities in Qom province, especially Qom metropolis, could serve as a potential for developing rural tourism.

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