



ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Elite Participation in Shaping the Sustainable Development of the Urban Physical Structure (Case Study: Sisakht City)

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 2025/12/17 Revised: 2025/12/31 Accepted: 2026/01/18 Keywords: Elite Participation Urban Sustainable Development Physical Sustainable Development Sisakht City	BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: Elites with special knowledge and experience can improve processes and provide new solutions for the development of cities. The research was conducted in Sisakht City, which is located in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province, 35 kilometers northwest of Yasuj (the provincial capital). METHODS: The research is descriptive-analytical in nature and applied-developmental in type, utilizing library and survey methods for data collection. The statistical population comprised 300 elites, with a sample of 169 determined by the Krejcie and Morgan table, using Simple Random Sampling and questionnaires. Validity was confirmed by experts, and reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha. The statistical analysis employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), conducted using the SMART PLS and SPSS software programs. FINDINGS: The results of this research definitively and significantly indicate that elite participation is a determining factor in achieving the goals of sustainable physical development in Sisakht City. The relationship between elite participation and the city's sustainable physical development is established at a 99% confidence level, making it statistically robust, reliable, and leading to the outright rejection of the null hypothesis. CONCLUSION: The research hypothesis is therefore accepted: the variable of elite participation has a positive and direct relationship with structuring the city's sustainable physical development.
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of participation and participatory development emerged in development literature in the late 1950s, following the failure of traditional planning approaches to achieve development objectives. Scholars argued that the central reason for the ineffectiveness of conventional development programs was the absence of public involvement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of these programs. Consequently, the notion of citizen participation in public and collective affairs gained attention among planners, and processes that strengthened public engagement came to be recognized as the essential foundation of development and urban planning (Petesch et al., 2005). This shift aligns with influential international literature such as Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Participation," which evaluates the authenticity of participatory processes, and Chambers' (1994) emphasis on the necessity of meaningful community engagement.

The primary objective of sustainable development is to meet basic human needs, improve the quality of life for all, protect and manage ecosystems, and promote security and well-being for future generations (Sharafi et al., 2019). These principles are similarly reflected in major global sustainability frameworks and reports.

Today, achieving the goals of urban sustainable development is impossible without citizen participation. Informed and responsible public engagement particularly that of community elites is highly significant and regarded as a crucial asset in urban management as well as a long-standing aspiration of urban experts and practitioners. The role of participation is so essential that some scholars equate development itself with participation (Zhao et al., 2017). Elites are among the most influential stakeholders in shaping societal policies (Ramezanpour et al., 2019: 41). Their involvement enhances the overall quality of participation and facilitates more precise and accelerated progress toward

collective goals. Among these groups, local elites those rooted in the cultural fabric of their communities often play an even more decisive role.

Sustained citizen participation across different urban sectors is a key characteristic of meaningful engagement. For participation to be authentic, it must be reflected in social and economic spheres, as well as in the everyday behaviors and activities of urban residents (Berry & Portney, 2013).

Elite participation, in addition to sharing the advantages of broad public engagement, is largely free from common limitations of general participation—such as lack of updated knowledge or insufficient technical competence among participants. Urban elites represent a substantial reservoir of expertise, experience, social trust, and intellectual capital. If effectively mobilized and integrated into structured development processes, this potential can significantly enhance both the quality and pace of sustainable urban physical development.

Participatory development planning defines the significant role of citizens as actors who contribute to public reasoning and hold governments accountable to the demands of the people (Alamoudi et al., 2022). Consequently, it improves efficiency, directs expenditure toward priority infrastructure projects, and ultimately contributes to enhanced human development, equality, and the realization of social and political justice (Tehran Urban Planning and Research Center, 2020: 39–50). Genuine participation entails three essential components: (a) the cognitive and emotional engagement of participants in the subject of participation, (b) their motivation to participate, and (c) a sense of belonging and responsibility (Malekshahi et al., 2019). In this sense, participation includes all individual or collective activities aimed at influencing the decision-making processes and policies of public institutions, ranging from lower levels (municipalities, educational systems, etc.) to higher levels (legislative, executive, and judicial bodies). People's

involvement in groups and social programs—especially voluntary associations and NGOs—reflects their social participation, which broadly encompasses various individual and collective actions undertaken to influence public affairs and their own destiny (Alizadeh Aghdam *et al.*, 2013). In participatory associations, members become acquainted with social skills, civic duties, and virtues such as active engagement in public affairs (Michels, & de Graaf, 2010).

In his 1986 study *Community Participation, Social Development, and the State*, James Midgley categorized government behavior toward citizen participation into four types: anti-participation, directed participation, increasing participation, and genuine participation (Frisa, 2019). Daniel Lerner's modernization theory is based on the development of indicators such as urbanization, literacy, media use, and participation. Lerner examined the interrelationship among urbanization, literacy, media, participation, and modernization, arguing that these three factors mutually reinforce each other, such that participation in them reflects participation in the broader societal system (Azunre, 2024). The central concept of this model is the "transitional personality," which Lerner proposed for understanding development processes. According to him, the key attribute of this personality type is a high capacity for empathy an individual's ability to put themselves in others' place. Lerner believed that empathy is shaped by the city, schools, and mass media, facilitating broader social participation (Müller, M., & Grieshaber).

In recent years, with technological advancements, participatory governance based on decision-making involvement and transparency through e-government has been expanding. E-participation functions at three levels: e-decision-making, e-consultation, and e-information (Lim & Yigitcanlar, 2022). Participation strengthens civic capacities (Ank,

2010) and requires institutional and organizational capacity-building within urban spaces for the effective management of cities (Zare *et al.*, 2020). In every society, the greatest and most important resource is its human capital (Caves & Cullingworth, 2003), and at the top of the human resource hierarchy are the elites (Romariz Peixoto *et al.*, 2022).

As participation is a fundamental need of human societies, elite participation is naturally essential for achieving sustainable community development. Elites represent a society's intellectual and human capital and are key drivers of collective progress (Safaipour, 2016). Elite participation is defined as the involvement and engagement of elites in social, cultural, economic, and political processes that influence the destiny of society. Participation requires that indifference and avoidance of responsibility be replaced by a sense of belonging, shared fate, and responsibility (Jihane & Mostafa, 2024). Accordingly, the primary condition for achieving sustainable urban development is effective participation in decision-making, a condition that is largely fulfilled through the engagement of elites (Næss, 2023). Elites possess superior status within a society due to certain personal attributes such as discernment and distinction.

Elite participation entails involving and activating elite individuals in decision-making and in addressing societal challenges. In addition to reducing decision-making errors, elite participation enhances social capital one of the key drivers of societal development.

Sustainable development is a deliberate process of change and improvement (Olawumi & Chan, 2018). Sustainability refers to "the stability of balance over time," a balance achieved when destabilizing forces are mitigated or counteracting forces neutralize them. Alongside attention to detail, holistic thinking must also be present. The contemporary concept of sustainable development was first introduced in the 1987

UN report *Our Common Future*, defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Wang, 2025). Sustainable development is an ethical and equitable approach to balancing social, economic, and environmental domains. In sustainable development, creating a safe environment for all through awareness and transparency is considered an individual responsibility. Sustainable development addresses all dimensions of human life and seeks continuity of economic, social, and environmental progress through the planning and design of policies related to economics, commerce, technology, natural resources, education, health, and industry (Makhtari Malekabadi *et al.*, 2014). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute the most comprehensive global framework addressing social and environmental challenges and reflect a shared vision for a future characterized by justice, security, and sustainability (Ordonez *et al.*, 2021). Achieving the SDGs faces barriers such as social constraints; thus, no single sustainable development model can apply universally. Each country must define its own policies and standards (Olawumi & Chan, 2018).

In the physical dimension of urban development, sustainability refers to changes in land use and density to meet needs such as housing, transportation, and leisure, ensuring that cities are environmentally livable, economically viable, and socially cohesive (Cecilia *et al.*, 2012). The physical dimension includes dynamism, vitality, legibility,

accessibility, and service diversity (Darvishi *et al.*, 2022: 34). The physical form of a sustainable city is uplifting, memorable, inspiring, and evokes a sense of solidarity and belonging to urban heritage (Sobhani *et al.*, 2016: 65). Indicators of physical sustainability include balance and dynamism in urban spaces over time. Thus, physical sustainability is a continuous process of change aimed at improving the quantitative and qualitative structure of the urban fabric. Urban change is inevitable, influenced by social, cultural, economic, demographic, technological, and environmental forces that shape the form, size, and physical structure of cities (Frisa, 2019). Physical sustainability seeks to enhance the quality of human settlements, especially for vulnerable groups, and emphasizes the preservation, renovation, and maintenance of the built environment, historic structures, open spaces, sustainable transportation, sustainable energy, ecological patterns, and urban form (Barzegar *et al.*, 2017). Contemporary Iranian cities, influenced by modernity, exhibit dispersed and polycentric structures, with many urban elements functioning in isolation from one another. Such issues indicate physical unsustainability (Li *et al.*, 2024). Elite participation in sustainable physical development is therefore the key to achieving urban spatial sustainability. This participation occurs through the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and experiences among elites and stakeholders—including government officials, residents, and the private sector (Brinkerhoff, 2014).

Table 1: Operational Definition of Elite Participation in Sustainable Urban Physical Development

Dimension	Attribute	Source
Elite Participation in Sustainable Urban Physical Development	Active engagement of elites in planning, implementing, and monitoring physical development programs with the aim of enhancing the quality of urban spaces, preserving the city's cultural identity and heritage, and improving physical sustainability.	Campbell, 1996

There are numerous case studies around the world demonstrating that elite participation can effectively contribute to enhancing urban sustainability. For example, in Copenhagen,

Denmark, elites have played a crucial role in planning and implementing the city's comprehensive strategy to become a fully sustainable city by 2025. This strategy

encompasses actions across various domains, including energy, transportation, food

A review of the existing domestic and international literature shows that most studies have focused on the role of public participation and community engagement in achieving sustainable urban development. International research highlights that social participation, constructive interaction between citizens and urban institutions, policy coherence, democratic governance, and urban innovation are critical elements in advancing sustainability. Studies such as Glass and Næss (2023), emphasize that active community involvement can enhance urban quality of life, promote urban resilience and innovation, and support the co-creation of smart and sustainable cities. Collectively, these findings reflect a broad scholarly consensus that sustainable urban development cannot be achieved without structured and meaningful engagement of stakeholders.

In contrast, the domestic literature in Iran indicates that research has predominantly addressed general citizen participation and the institutional, legal, and educational barriers that hinder effective involvement in urban development processes. Findings from studies by Razavi and Abedi (2024), suggest that weak local institutions, inadequate public education, limited transparency, and low citizen motivation are among the major obstacles to achieving sustainable urban development in Iranian cities. Importantly, the review reveals that neither domestic nor international sources have specifically examined the role of elite participation in sustainable urban physical development, indicating a theoretical and

systems, and water and wastewater management (ICLEI, 2018).

empirical gap in the literature. Therefore, the present study contributes novel insights by addressing a topic that has not yet been independently explored and can enrich the scientific discourse on sustainable urban development and the strategic role of elites.

Sisakht City, the center of Dena County in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province, is located at 30 degrees and 48 minutes north latitude and 51 degrees and 27 minutes east longitude of the Greenwich Meridian. It is situated 34 kilometers northwest of Yasuj City (the provincial capital). The city is surrounded by agricultural lands, orchards, and low-density forests. This environmental setting limits the horizontal expansion (sprawl) of the city (Akbarian ronizi, 2018).

This study examines the role of elite participation in shaping the sustainable physical development of the city of Sisakht. One of the city's most fundamental challenges is the presence of widespread physical problems, which indicate a failure to achieve sustainable physical development goals. As a result, the city suffers from the consequences of these shortcomings. The primary reason for these issues lies in centralized policymaking and the dependence of all stages of urban development including in Sisakht on government authorities. Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the following question:

What is the relationship between elite participation and the structuring of sustainable physical development in the city of Sisakht?

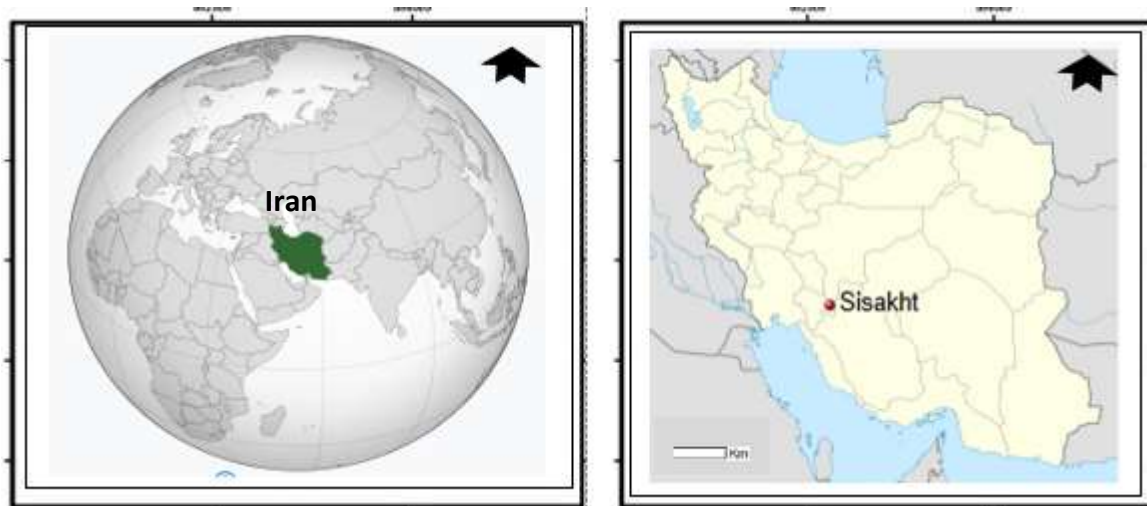


Figure 1: The Location of the Area under Study in the Map of

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current research is applied in terms of its objectives and descriptive-analytical in nature. Data was gathered using a combination of documentary, library, and field (survey) methods, employing a researcher-made questionnaire. The statistical population consisted of 169 local elites including cultural, scientific, academic, and administrative leaders, as well as staff from various sectors in Sisakht City sampled via Simple Random

Sampling to reach theoretical saturation. Data was evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale and analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in the Smart PLS software. The initial validation steps confirmed the measurement tool's quality: both Convergent Validity (AVE and CR) and Cronbach's Alpha were employed, yielding values (all above 0.50, 0.70, and 0.70 respectively) that confirmed the sufficient reliability and validity of the questionnaire for measuring the research's latent variables (Table 2).

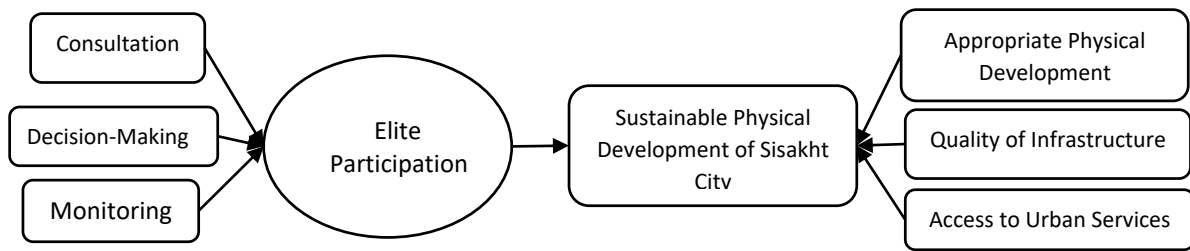
Table 2: Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Physical Development	0.75	0.83	0.51
Elite Participation	0.82	0.87	0.58

Conceptual Model of the Research

The participation of elites leads to sustainable urban development when this participation can meet the needs and affordances of the city, at the required level, for both the present and future generations. Following the hypotheses testing and theoretical studies, the researcher achieved a model that illustrates the realization of sustainable development through the participation of urban elites.

As observed, this model includes one independent variable (Participation of Elites) and five dependent variables (Sustainable Social Development, Sustainable Economic Development, Sustainable Environmental Development, and Sustainable Physical Development – Note: the text listed only four, but typically all five pillars are included). each of these variables has indicators that have been addressed separately. This model provides a practical solution for the sustainable development of Sisakht City (Fig. 2).



Figurer 2. Conceptual Model of Research, Reference

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Findings

The demographic characteristics of the 169 respondents indicate a predominance of men (57.4%), a majority of married individuals (68%), concentration in middle age (56.8%),

high educational attainment (78% with higher education), and considerable work experience (58% with more than 15 years). This composition reflects a sample of well-educated and experienced individuals, enhancing the reliability and validity of the collected responses (Table 3).

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Research Sample

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	72	42.6
	Male	97	57.4
Marital Status	Single	93	55
	Married	76	45
Age	20–40 years	96	56.8
	40+ years	73	43.2
Education	Higher Education	132	78.1
	Below Bachelor	37	21.9
Work Experience	Up to 15 years	35	20.7
	15+ years	134	79.3

The independent variable, elite participation, was evaluated across three dimensions: cultural-social, political, and economic. Descriptive statistics indicate that 76.5% of respondents (130 individuals)

acknowledged strong positive effects of elite participation, demonstrating its substantial influence on sustainable urban physical development in Si-Sakht city (Table 4).

Table 4: Central Indices and Dispersion of the Elite Participation Variable

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	N	Mean	SD	Max	Min
Elite Participation	Cultural-Social	Willingness to participate in sustainable development, attending workshops, motivation, social cohesion	169	81.24	13.5	30	6
	Political	Influence on managerial decisions, providing suggestions, administrative accuracy	169	42.24	33.5	30	6
	Economic	Impact on urban quality of life, resource allocation, cost-efficiency	169	42.12	2.74	15	3

The dependent variable, sustainable urban physical development, was assessed across quality, functionality, and amenities dimensions. The analysis shows that 74% of respondents (127 individuals) reported strong positive impacts. The mean value of the

physical sustainable development variable is 77.18 with relatively low standard deviation, indicating high consensus among respondents regarding the importance of sustainable urban physical development (Table 5).

Table 5: Central Indices and Dispersion of Sustainable Urban Physical Development Variable

Variable	Dimension	Indicator	N	Mean	SD	Max	Min
Sustainable Urban Physical Development	Quality of Place	Building block layout, architectural styles, visual sequence, geometric proportions, continuity, diversity, visual balance	169	31.92	7.62	40	8
	Functional	Landmarks, street corner design, pavement continuity, street width proportion	169	16.01	3.73	20	4
	Amenities	Implementation of physical projects, urban furniture	169	8.39	1.82	10	2

Inferential Findings and Structural Model Analysis

The conceptual model was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) via SmartPLS. SEM is a robust multivariate analysis technique that examines the direct and indirect effects of independent variables on dependent variables through path coefficients and significance values (t-values). In this study, the t-value thresholds of 1.64, 1.96, and 2.58 were used to test hypotheses at 90%, 95%, and 99% confidence levels, respectively.

Path coefficients indicate the magnitude and direction of relationships between independent and dependent variables. Positive path coefficients imply that an increase in the independent variable (elite participation) corresponds to an increase in the dependent variable (sustainable urban physical development), while negative

coefficients indicate an inverse relationship. The SEM results demonstrated that elite participation has significant and positive effects on all dimensions of sustainable urban development—social, economic, environmental, physical, and overall sustainability.

These results reinforce the critical role of elites in shaping urban physical sustainability. By actively engaging in decision-making, providing expertise, and facilitating citizen participation, elites enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of urban governance. The findings also suggest that structured elite participation can lead to improved resource allocation, reduced administrative inefficiencies, stronger social cohesion, and higher public trust, ultimately accelerating sustainable urban development outcomes (Fig. 3).

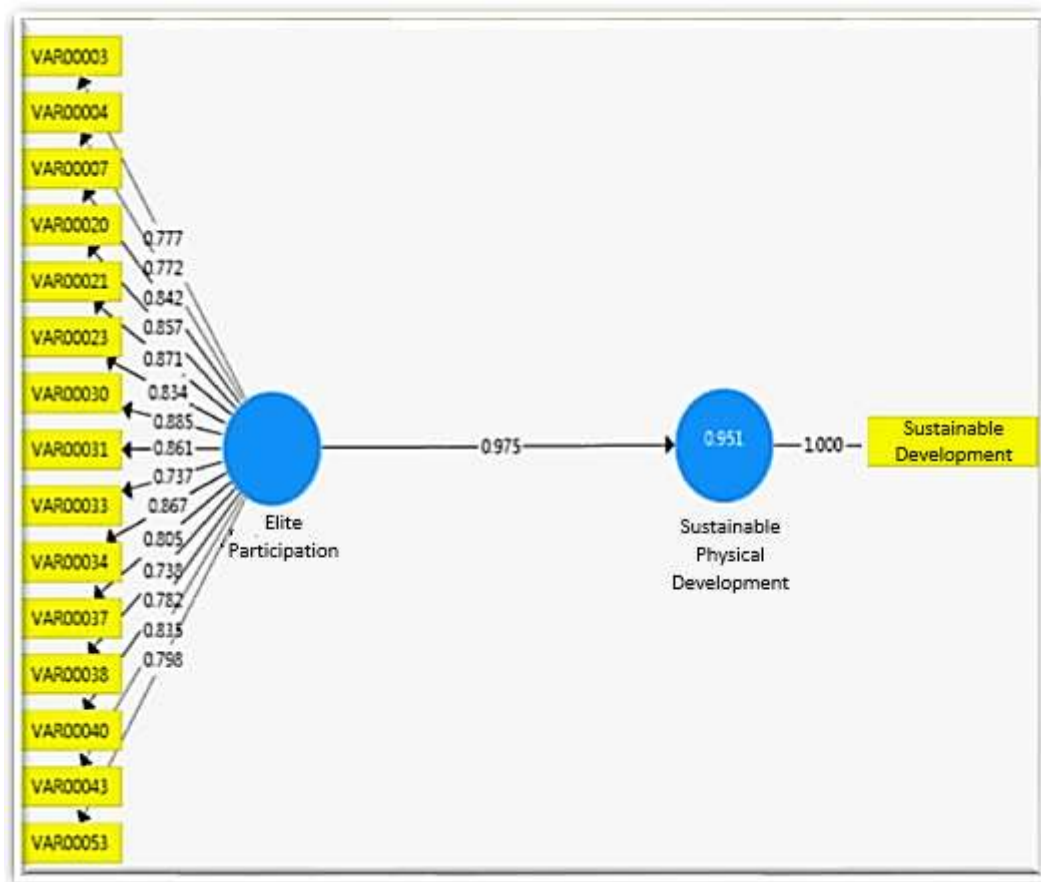


Figure 3: The final model of the research in the estimated estimation of the standard coefficient

Structural Model Fit and Analysis

The structural model analysis demonstrates that all path coefficients are statistically significant (path values < 0.5), indicating a strong and positive relationship between elite participation and the dependent variable, sustainable urban physical development. The model fit indices exceed 0.75, confirming the robustness, reliability, and convergent validity

of the relationship between the latent variable (elite participation) and the observed variable (sustainable urban physical development). Notably, elite participation accounts for 81.7% of the variance in sustainable urban physical development in Si-Sakht city, highlighting its dominant influence in shaping urban sustainability outcomes (Table 6).

Table 6: Construct Convergent Validity Based on R^2 Values

Variable	R^2 Value
Sustainable Urban Physical Development	0.52

The high explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.52$) indicates that elite participation is a key determinant of urban physical development and underscores the substantial role that knowledgeable, experienced, and socially engaged individuals play in guiding sustainable urban transformations. In practical terms, this suggests that cities that actively integrate elite

input into planning, monitoring, and decision-making processes are more likely to achieve coherent and resilient urban development.

Further analysis of the T-statistics confirms the significance of the relationships between elite participation and multiple dimensions of sustainable development—social, economic, environmental, physical, and overall

sustainability. All T-values fall outside the ± 1.96 threshold, confirming that each research hypothesis is supported. The positive and direct path coefficients demonstrate that variations in elite participation correspond

proportionally to changes in each sustainability dimension, reflecting the capacity of elites to influence both the structural and functional aspects of urban development (Table 7).

Table 7: Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	Result
There is a significant relationship between elite participation and the enhancement of Si-Sakht city's physical development	0.72	19.77	Supported

The findings indicate that elite participation is not merely supportive but a critical driver of sustainable urban development. By actively engaging in decision-making and providing expertise, elites contribute to improving urban governance, increasing managerial efficiency, reducing administrative errors and corruption, optimizing resource allocation, and enhancing public trust and civic collaboration. The results also suggest that cities lacking structured elite involvement may experience slower progress in achieving sustainable physical development, highlighting the necessity of formal mechanisms to integrate elite knowledge into urban planning processes.

CONCLUSION

Physical sustainable development, as one of the essential pillars of overall urban sustainable development, is achieved when citizen participation is regarded as one of the accepted and foundational principles of sustainable development. The reason for this is that only a portion of city-related activities are carried out by formal institutions and governments, while a significant part of urban affairs takes shape through informal relationships and interactions among urban actors. In such a context, the lack of participation and cooperation between citizens and urban management exacerbates the city's physical challenges and problems. Therefore, governments are compelled to place participation as the main axis of urban development policies and programs. Adopting such an approach strengthens trust, cooperation, and synergy between citizens and

In conclusion, this analysis reinforces the theoretical assertion that sustainable urban development, particularly its physical dimension, is heavily contingent on the strategic involvement of elites. Policymakers and urban planners should prioritize structured engagement platforms for experts and knowledgeable citizens, ensuring their input is systematically incorporated into development strategies. This approach can maximize both the efficiency and resilience of urban systems while fostering a participatory governance culture that aligns with the principles of sustainable development.

urban managers, facilitating the resolution of urban issues within a framework of collective participation. the realization of participation and urban sustainable development in any society necessitates attention to that society's cultural, social, economic, political characteristics, and even its natural environmental conditions, as every society requires a pattern of participation and development commensurate with its own structure and needs. Elite participation in urban sustainable development, in addition to all the features and capabilities of general public participation, benefits from advantages such as specialized knowledge, awareness, experience, and structural analysis capability. This very fact transforms it into the most advanced and effective type of social participation. The most important outcomes of this type of participation include increasing public participation in urban affairs, enhancing

the efficiency of urban managers, reducing administrative corruption, saving time and cost, and improving the quality of decision-making.

In this context, the present research aimed to explain the role of elite participation in structuring the physical sustainable development of Sisakht City. The results of the structural analysis model, utilizing the PLS method, showed that the path coefficient for the Elite Participation variable on Sisakht's physical sustainable development is positive and significant. This means that as the level of elite participation increases or decreases, the indices of physical sustainable development change in the same direction. These findings clearly demonstrate that elite participation plays an effective, undeniable, and necessary role in shaping the physical sustainable development of Sisakht City; consequently, the hypothesis asserting the significant relationship between elite participation and structuring physical sustainable development is accepted.

The findings of this research are consistent with studies such as Abtahi and Shiani (2020), where metropolitan management challenges such as managerial inefficiency, conflicts of interest, negative approaches toward participation, politicization, and legal weaknesses were identified as the main obstacles to effective citizen and elite participation. Based on these collective findings, it can be concluded that creating appropriate platforms for participation, alongside increasing the education of urban dwellers and expanding media access, can pave the way for more active involvement of citizens and elites in urban management. Based on the research results, the following **recommendations** are presented to realize the role of elite participation in shaping the physical sustainable development of Sisakht City:

- Holding consultation meetings between Sisakht elites and specialists.

- Establishing public education courses to enhance citizens' utilization of urban services and facilities.
- Identifying the city's physical issues and capacities by elites and providing justice-oriented solutions to urban managers.
- Creating an online system for elites' open access to urban information.
- Designing an online platform for registering specialized opinions and suggestions from elites in interaction with urban management.
- Providing an appropriate space by urban management for holding regular meetings of elites and specialists.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

In this research, A. Rahimizadeh, as the primary researcher and PhD candidate, was responsible for designing the research plan, conducting field studies, collecting data, and preparing the initial draft of the manuscript. H. Saberi, as the corresponding author, supervised the entire research process, led the methodological framework, guided the data analysis, interpreted the findings, and finalized the manuscript for publication. A. Khademolhoseiny contributed to developing the theoretical foundations, refining the conceptual framework, and providing critical revisions to enhance the scientific rigor of the study. Additionally, M. Azani participated in validating the research instruments, reviewing analytical results, and improving the structure and clarity of the manuscript through detailed academic editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy have been completely observed by the authors.

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