

The Role of Traditional Village Elites in Leadership to Providing Context for Public Participation in Community Development Activities

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Article Info	Extended Abstract
<p>Article type: Research Article</p> <p>Article history: Received: 26 February 2026 Received in revised form: 17 April 2026 Accepted: 18 April 2026 Published online: 15 June 2026</p> <p>Keywords: <i>village, community development, development activities, traditional elites, leadership.</i></p>	<p>Objective: The present study aims to identify the mechanisms through which traditional elites lead the process of building public participation in development actions. To this end, drawing on a number of state-led development projects as well as community-based initiatives in the studied villages, a set of questions was formulated to examine the role of clerics and elders—as traditional rural elites—in facilitating the context for people's participation and cooperation with development actions. In other words, the question was raised as to how and through what process they prepare and persuade people to accept and participate in development actions. Rural elites and reference groups are distinguished individuals who possess innovative or indigenous knowledge and ideas in various rural domains, and enjoy the necessary authority and legitimacy to advance rural affairs. In some cases, they also possess other capabilities shaped in accordance with the needs of the village, which constitute a form of superiority for them. These distinguished figures are among the key assets and capacities of the village in driving various development processes. Theoretical approaches to local development—such as participatory development, post-development, indigenous knowledge, and asset-based local development—emphasize the importance of utilizing local capacities to improve the condition of local communities. These capacities include participation, social capital, physical capital, intellectual capital, and particularly the indigenous knowledge of the local community. The research question pursued by this study is: What mechanisms do traditional elites in the rural communities of Kurdistan use to lead the process of building public participation in local development actions?</p> <p>Method: The methodology of the present study is based on a qualitative approach with an ethnographic strategy. In data collection and thematic analysis, efforts were made to describe and analyze the leadership mechanisms of these elites in the rural communities of Sardasht County for building public participation in state-led and community-based development actions, with a focus on water and electricity service projects, civil engineering projects, and environmental protection initiatives. The study area was the villages of Sardasht County in West Azerbaijan Province, as one of the Kurdish</p>



regions of Iran. Since it was not feasible to study all rural communities of the county, the research was conducted in six villages located in the Beryaji Rural District of the Central District. The qualitative methodology employed an ethnographic strategy based on in-depth interviews and field observations for data collection, and thematic analysis for data analysis. To collect data, all individuals and groups within the local community who were consulted for leading and managing public affairs, especially development actions, were identified through purposive snowball sampling. Four main groups held this position: clerics, elders, Islamic village councils, and village administrators. The trustworthiness of the data and findings was ensured through data source triangulation and member checking.

Findings: The thematic analysis of the data in response to the main research question revealed three main mechanisms: (1) interaction with people and executive bodies; (2) identifying and utilizing local capacities; and (3) awareness-raising and presenting ideas. According to the findings, clerics and elders—as traditional elites—have been able to provide the necessary grounds for justifying and persuading people to agree to and participate in development actions through effective interaction with people, other elites, and executive bodies; identifying and utilizing local capacities; and raising awareness and presenting ideas.

Conclusion : The results of this study are largely consistent with the theoretical frameworks of local development that emphasize community-based and indigenous context-building mechanisms. Government policies can, by taking these local and indigenous capacities into account, provide a suitable ground for the realization of people-centered local development.

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