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Policy Analysis of National Interventions to Reduce Food Insecurity in Iran

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Food supply and food security are among the sovereign responsibilities of any governance system. In Iran, numerous support institutions exist to address the deprived and reduce food insecurity. This study was conducted to identify the types of national interventions to reduce food insecurity and the challenges hindering their implementation.

Methods: This was a review and qualitative study conducted in two parts: interviews with experts and specialists in the field of support and rehabilitation services (20 people) and a library study. To collect information, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts and specialists in the field of support and rehabilitation services in the country, and content and thematic analysis methods were used to analyze the data.

Findings: Various programs have been implemented by numerous support institutions to empower and reduce food insecurity among vulnerable groups in the country. The most important challenges related to the policies implemented by support institutions for self-reliance and reducing food insecurity include difficulty in identifying food-insecure households, the quality of intervention implementation, the type of interventions implemented, and their instability.

Conclusion: Food insecurity is a multidimensional challenge that requires a comprehensive understanding of the issue in order to formulate effective policies. Failure to fully understand the complexities related to food insecurity carries the risk of implementing unsustainable interventions. Support institutions must converge their efforts by understanding these complexities so that they can achieve maximum effectiveness.

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Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) defines food insecurity as a situation in which people lack adequate access to sufficient quantities of healthy and nutritious food for normal growth, development, and an active and healthy life. More than 820 million people in the world are still hungry, which underscores the enormous challenge of achieving the goal of eradicating hunger by 2030 [1]. In the last two decades, civil war, violence, and unrest, especially in the Middle East, have led to the displacement of millions of people to neighboring countries and the spread of food insecurity in countries that previously did not have a serious problem in this regard [3 ,2]. In addition, economic shocks contribute to the prolongation and severity of food crises, which are mainly caused by conflict and climate shocks, such as the situation that occurred in Venezuela [4]. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis, which began in late 2019, led to the spread of food insecurity in many regions of the world [6 ,5], even in developed countries [7]. In Iran, different figures have been presented for the prevalence of food insecurity, estimated at between 36% and 57% in various studies [8-10]. Studies also show that the prevalence of food insecurity in rural areas of Iran is higher than in urban areas [11].

Food insecurity threatens the development of societies, and combating it is among the goals of every country, because food insecurity has irreparable effects on individuals' physical and mental health [12-14]. Interventions related to reducing food insecurity require macro-policies in the agricultural sector, especially the import and export of agricultural products, self-sufficiency, and sustainability in food supply [15]. In addition, countries use various mechanisms to reduce household food insecurity, such as support programs for low-income groups[16], cash transfers and food aid for affordability, and school feeding [17], as well as empowerment and self-reliance programs [18]. Moreover, supportive interventions are also needed for vulnerable groups in society, such as people living in highly food-insecure and deprived areas[16], women and children [20 ,19], older adults [21] and patients [22]. In different countries around the world, numerous institutions work to reduce food insecurity. In some countries, ministries are directly involved in this issue, while some countries have participatory mechanisms and approaches, and non-governmental actors (such as civil society and the private sector) are active in this regard. Overall, every country tries to adopt various approaches appropriate to its own conditions and context [23], In Iran, numerous executive bodies and institutions are involved in providing support services to vulnerable groups, such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, the State Welfare Organization, the Mostazafan Foundation, the Ministry of Health, NGOs, charities, and others. These organizations sometimes provide parallel services for supporting vulnerable and deprived groups in society [24]. This study was conducted to identify the types of national interventions carried out by these institutions to reduce food insecurity and to examine the challenges faced by support institutions.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study, and two methods were used: literature review and interviews with experts. The collected data were analyzed using content analysis and summarized in three main domains: organizations and interventions, and challenges.

The data collection tool was a semi-structured questionnaire whose questions were derived from a review of the literature. The interview questions covered three main areas: support institutions, interventions, and challenges. These were sent to key experts, who were asked to allocate time for an interview if willing. Before each interview, verbal consent was obtained from the interviewees. All interviews were recorded, and whenever the interviewee wished, the interview was stopped and notes were taken. All interviewees were assured that the interview files and their names would remain confidential with the researchers and would not be provided to anyone, and would be used solely for the purposes of the study. The interview files would also be destroyed after the project was completed. Microsoft Excel 2013 was used for coding and analysis.

The sampling method was purposive snowball sampling. In total, 20 interviews were conducted with experts in food insecurity, support institutions, and related institutions.

All interviews were listened to twice and transcribed verbatim. At the end of each interview, the experts were asked to introduce other knowledgeable individuals if they knew any. The interviews continued until data saturation. Information about the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

The interviews were transcribed and then coded. Finally, the data were categorized into appropriate themes and sub-themes based on thematic similarity.

During the interviews, the agencies implementing the country's support programs were identified. The organizational mission of some of these agencies and institutions was to support the needy and vulnerable groups in society, such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the State Welfare Organization, and the Nomad and Rural Insurance. However, there were also institutions whose services were partly supportive, or that, in interaction with support agencies, helped empower vulnerable groups, such as the Barakat Foundation, the Ministry of Health, Tehran Municipality, and the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad (General Directorate of Natural Resources.

After identifying these institutions, their websites were studied, and the laws, regulations, and functions listed on the websites were examined. The most important information examined from these agencies and institutions included: the mission of the institution's, the target group of support programs, the major implemented programs, and so on. Information related to main policies on supporting the deprived and vulnerable groups, and the laws and regulations of support institutions, was also obtained from websites and scientific sources. On the websites of the country's support institutions, there were mainly news reports about implemented projects and interventions for self-reliance and empowerment, and documented and scientific reports were less addressed. Therefore, the titles of implemented projects for self-reliance, empowerment, and reducing food insecurity were taken from the websites, and then studies related to the implemented projects were searched on scientific websites. Finally, the scientific evidence and documents published in electronic sources worldwide and in Iran regarding

interventions related to food insecurity and the sources of related articles were reviewed. The support institutions whose websites were reviewed included: Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, State Welfare Organization, Mostazafan Foundation, Alavi Foundation, Executive Headquarters of Imam's Order (Barakat Foundation), Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare, Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution, Basij Mostazafan Organization, Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs, Rural and Nomad Social Insurance Fund, Endowments and Charity Affairs Organization, Construction Basij, Agricultural Jihad, 15 Khordad Foundation, Astan Quds Razavi (Razavi Dignity Foundation), and the Red Crescent.

Finally, by combining the initial interviews, document analysis, and a scoping review of articles and reports, a list of support institutions was compiled, along with a summary of their organizational mission, parallel activities, and how the target groups under coverage were organized. Thematic analysis was used for the textual data obtained from the interviews. To understand and correctly categorize the content of the participants' statements, the interviews and writings were reviewed several times.

Findings and Discussion

The implementation challenges and problems of self-reliance and empowerment programs aimed at reducing household food insecurity can be divided into four main domains: macro support policies; the multiplicity of support institutions; implementation challenges and problems related to the policies implemented by support institutions for empowerment, self-reliance, and reducing food insecurity; the limited success and failure of previous empowerment programs; and neglect of the drivers of empowerment programs.

1. **Macro Support Policies:** In various governments, macro policies have been implemented with the aim of strengthening people's livelihoods, such as cash subsidies and food baskets (for all households), and support and livelihood programs for malnourished children. Although these policies had positive effects in the short term, in the medium and long term they led to an increase in food prices and a decrease in the real income of households. For example, targeted subsidies increased living costs and reduced the share of household food expenditure [25]. A report published by the Parliament Research Center regarding changes in the consumption behavior of urban and rural households during 2007–2014 also indicated a decline in household welfare after targeted subsidies[26]. On the other hand, the adoption of inappropriate support policies over the past years has led to an increase in the number of clients, organizational bloat, and the inefficiency of support institutions, especially the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the State Welfare Organization [27].

2. **Multiplicity of Support Institutions:** In our country, numerous governmental and non-governmental institutions (NGOs) [29 ,28] are active in self-reliance and empowerment

of households to reduce poverty and food insecurity. Overall, three executive institutions—the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the State Welfare Organization, and the Mostazafan Foundation—provide the most support to 19 groups of the needy in the country [30] and, as in other regions of the world, their main focus is on women and children. The multiplicity of support institutions has led to numerous duplications in their executive programs and support services. These duplications have increased the personnel, administrative, and support costs of these institutions and have also reduced the efficiency of their intervention programs. On the other hand, budget shortages have caused the agencies responsible for social support to lack the capacity to respond to the needs of their covered population [24]. While feasibility studies indicate that the numerous support institutions can be merged [31], despite this issue being raised several times, for various reasons including conflicts of interest, lack of trust-building, challenges related to change management [32], and so on, this has not yet been achieved. Despite the existence of a numerous network of actors in the field of supporting vulnerable groups in society, supervision and coordination among them are weak. The multiplicity of actors in formal support areas has meant that there is no unity of command, and sovereign oversight over them has become weak. In the study by Etemadi et.al, who analyzed the power structure and actors in this field as a network, they also identified the most important weakness of this network as the absence of legal and supervisory institutions such as the Parliament, especially the Health Commission, and the Health Economics Committee of the Expediency Discernment Council [33]. The most important governmental support institutions in Iran are:

- **Imam Khomeini Relief Committee**

  The Relief Committee is one of the institutions that plays an important role in social entrepreneurship in the country. This public institution began its activities in 1979 with the aim of assisting the deprived and the oppressed, and making them self-sufficient, and it is not merely a social service enterprise. Its mission, alongside supporting the deprived groups of society, is to create self-employment and provide the basis for their livelihood, and in the next stage, to provide various trainings and skills with the aim of empowering the deprived groups, achieving self-sufficiency, and ultimately exiting from the support umbrella of this institution [34].

- **Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare (State Welfare Organization):**
  The Ministry of Welfare and its subordinate organizations, such as the State Welfare Organization, the Rural and Nomads Social Insurance Fund, banks and financial funds, have for years provided their assistance and support to the weak groups of society in the form of insurance coverage, empowerment programs, micro-loans, and support packages (mainly food).

  The State Welfare Organization is one of the most important support bodies in the country in empowering the deprived and vulnerable groups of society (the disabled, female heads of households, children, etc.), and it implements numerous programs to empower, promote self-reliance, and achieve self-

sufficiency among its target group [35] . Some of the strategies used by the State Welfare Organization for economic and social empowerment programs include: life skills and technical and vocational training, insurance, permanent job placement, self-employment schemes, grants and low-interest loans, and so on [36]. Numerous studies conducted on the effectiveness of the Welfare Organization's empowerment programs indicate the relative success of these interventions in the economic, psychological, and social empowerment, self-esteem, self-efficacy, effectiveness, and so on of its target groups [37 ,36].

- **Islamic Revolution Mostazafan Foundation (Alavi Foundation):** The Mostazafan Foundation focuses more on economic activities and attracting economic resources to eliminate deprivation. One of the institutions affiliated with the Mostazafan Foundation is the Alavi Foundation. Apart from its measures for deprivation elimination and empowerment of the deprived in the country, this foundation, in interaction with the Ministry of Health, provided food support packages for a limited period to malnourished pregnant and lactating mothers [38].
- **Executive Headquarters of Imam's Order (Barakat Foundation):** The Barakat Foundation, as the representative of the Executive Headquarters of Imam Khomeini's Order, is one of the institutions involved in empowerment, job creation, and providing support services to deprived areas of the country, especially with a focus on less-developed regions, and it operates specifically in the following four areas:
    - Participation in economic empowerment, entrepreneurship development, and job creation
    - Assistance in the development and construction of educational and cultural-religious spaces
    - Assistance in improving health levels and developing health facilities.
    - Providing support, insurance, and financial services to the deprived [39].
- **Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs:**

  In line with supporting vulnerable groups, the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs also approved the bylaws of the National Taskforce for the Comprehensive Empowerment Plan for Female Heads of Households in August 2019. According to these bylaws, the preparation and full implementation of the Comprehensive Empowerment Plan for Female Heads of Households, in accordance with the laws and approvals of the Social Council until the end of the implementation of the development plan law, was approved by the Presidency (Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs) with the cooperation of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare and other relevant institutions, and with the approval of the said program in the Council of Ministers and ratification in the Islamic Consultative Assembly, as well as supervision over its implementation. The members of the coordination council of the taskforce, in addition to the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs and the Plan and Budget Organization, consist of four ministries—Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare; Health; Interior; and Agricultural Jihad—and two main support institutions (Imam Khomeini Relief

Committee and State Welfare Organization), as well as two commissions—Social and Cultural Affairs and the Family Fraction of the Islamic Consultative Assembly. These members operate within six specialized committees: employment and entrepreneurship, legal, health, statistics and technology, assistance, social security and housing, and social/cultural [40].

- **Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):**

  NGOs play an important role worldwide in implementing empowerment programs and combating food insecurity, and they implement important projects at the international level [41] . In our country, NGOs have entered support programs extensively in the past two decades. The most important entry of NGOs into support programs has been in the area of harm reduction and service provision to socially vulnerable individuals and addicts [43 ,42].

  Studies show that the most central challenge facing NGOs is carrying out "small-scale and individualistic actions." The empowerment process for vulnerable groups in support NGOs, like support institutions, is often short-term and one-dimensional, and the participation and capacity of local people are not used well [44]. Despite the valuable actions that NGOs carry out to reduce the problems of the needy, there are also criticisms of their working methods, such as the failure to use scientific approaches in their activities, lack of a strategic plan, and insufficient communication with the government body [45]. Therefore, it is necessary for relevant organizations to address these shortcomings by implementing necessary interventions and applying necessary oversight over their performance, and to make optimal use of this capacity.

In addition to the main institutions mentioned above, other institutions and executive agencies also operate in the field of poverty and food insecurity reduction or empowerment. Table 2 lists the agencies involved in support services.

Except for the State Welfare Organization and the Relief Committee, the services and support of the above agencies generally lack order and routine and are based on the conditions and budget of the organization. Some of these services have been transferred to other executive agencies such as the Relief Committee (the Alavi Foundation's participatory-supportive program), or have been discontinued (the Tehran Municipality's Women's Empowerment Headquarters). Municipalities are also among the governmental bodies that work to support women's employment, but their support mechanisms are unstable, largely person-dependent, and especially in large cities are strongly influenced by the political currents dominating municipal management [46].

3. Implementation Challenges and Problems Related to Policies Implemented by Support Institutions for Empowerment, Self-Reliance, and Reducing Food Insecurity

The phenomenon of poverty and food insecurity is a multidimensional issue, and to eliminate it, all its dimensions must be properly understood. Failure to understand the

dimensions of this issue leads to unsustainable policymaking in this area. These dimensions and challenges related to eliminating food insecurity can be examined from several perspectives:

I. **Identifying food-insecure households:** Currently, households that have certain conditions—such as female-headed households, clients covered by the State Welfare Organization, IV drug users, and homeless individuals—are covered by the support programs of the relevant bodies if they apply. However, cases that do not apply for services themselves or do not fall into these categories are largely neglected, and apart from surveys and cross-sectional studies in the field of food and nutrition security, there is no other solution for identifying and monitoring the situation of these households. While some individuals are covered by several support institutions [27], a significant number of people are also on the waiting list to enter support programs [24]. Some support institutions in the country do not support households whose head is addicted, and there is concern that these households may experience more food insecurity than households without a head [27]. In some provinces, systems have been designed and implemented to identify food-insecure areas and monitor interventions [47], such as the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SAMAT) at Golestan University of Medical Sciences [48].

II. **Quality of intervention implementation:** In many interventions related to self-reliance and empowerment, it has been sufficient to provide training and services only within a limited time frame. However, the self-reliance process requires changing a person's beliefs and views regarding their capabilities. A person who enters an empowerment program needs assessment, counseling, and follow-up before, during, and after the program [50 ,49]. A review of some projects implemented by the Relief Committee shows that such projects will have the necessary sustainability if they are properly managed and continuously supervised [51], but what is observed in practice is the return of a large proportion of individuals to the cycle of support services.

"Even if a job can be created, afterward there are so many variables that one cannot be sure of its sustainability." (Relief Committee)

"Addicted individuals are released back into society after the camp ends, and this does not lead to a return to the family; rather, it leads to a return to the cycle of addiction." (Rehabilitation)

III. **Duplication among governmental support institutions:** There is duplication between the duties and activities of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the State Welfare Organization in the following areas:

- Support for families without a guardian
- Recurring payments, employment allowance, housing and education allowances for the needy
- Support for needy students and university students
- Attracting public donations and participation in social services

- Providing social services and relief to socially vulnerable individuals

Likewise, there is overlap between the duties and activities of the Red Crescent Society and the State Welfare Organization, the Relief Committee, the Ministry of Interior, and municipalities in the following areas:

- Providing social services in areas of support for clients, care and custody of children, payment of marriage loans and allowances, housing, employment, and training
- Prevention and relief for victims (natural disasters)

The Islamic Revolution Mostazafan Foundation also has duplications with the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the State Welfare Organization in the area of support and provision of in-kind and cash assistance and medical services to the deprived. In the housing sector, the Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution also has duplication with the National Land and Housing Organization, the Mostazafan Foundation, and the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee regarding planning, construction, and granting low-cost housing to the needy. Regarding the issue of granting employment facilities, in addition to the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare and its affiliated fund (the Job Opportunities Support Fund), other agencies such as the Rural Employment Fund and the Relief Committee have parallel duties and activities [27].

"We have duplication. The State Welfare Organization does its own work, the Relief Committee does its own work. Thirteen executive agencies are providing support services. Thirteen support agencies work under the umbrella of the Ministry of Welfare. But in the provinces, none of these executive agencies communicate with each other. They neither obey nor consider themselves under the supervision of the Ministry of Welfare. Social Security and Pension operate independently." (Relief Committee)

4. Limited Success and Failure of Previous Empowerment Programs

A significant portion of interventions consists of short-term and low-yield programs that ultimately lack the necessary sustainability [27]. For this reason, after a while they are abandoned, and another program with the same style and framework replaces the previous one. Some implemented programs have had relative success, and a few of the most important ones are discussed below:

I. Microfinance and Empowerment of the Poor

Microfinance refers to credits paid to low-income or no-income individuals. Fundamentally, this type of microfinance is tied to programs aimed at supporting people who are struggling with livelihood problems. Such programs are generally designed and implemented in developing countries [52]. Poor people mainly make

a living using simple tools, and if their means of livelihood—such as agricultural tools—are damaged, they lose their ability to generate income. They often lack insurance coverage against various risks, and when they suffer from severe illnesses, they either lack the financial resources to cover treatment costs or spend all their financial resources on treatment and decline to a worse situation than before. In addition, they lack initial resources to start small businesses, and if at least capital is provided for them, they can start small businesses [53]. The foundation of microfinance is based on the assumption that lack of access to financial services, the banking system, and financial institutions is one of the causes of poverty, and if vulnerable groups can somehow gain access to financial services, they will be able to create small businesses, escape the vicious cycle of poverty, and take a step toward their own empowerment [55 ,54]. Grameen Bank even gives loans to beggars and has so far saved thousands of people from the need to beg [56]. They proved that even the poorest of the poor can have "creditworthiness." In some of these financing schemes, the main goal was the social empowerment of the covered individuals, so that those covered could be empowered from within in such a way that, with the training they received on income and expenditure, banking accounting, and saving, they could go on to learn a profession and start their own business [57] . The reason for creating such a mechanism is that the deprived generally do not have access to the banking system and its services for the following reasons:

- The deprived generally lack suitable bank collateral because of the high risk they pose, and they are not considered a suitable option for the banking system; banks are unwilling to provide services to them.
- Because the deprived lack the necessary general literacy, they are generally unable to carry out banking affairs, and providing services to them requires more time and effort on the part of financial institutions, thus increasing transaction costs.
- The banking system and financial institutions are fundamentally established in affluent areas and, in terms of regulations, bureaucracy, employees, and so on, are organized for people with desirable incomes [58 ,56]. Some examples of empowerment interventions based on microfinance in Iran include Qarz al-Hasaneh funds, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Rural Cooperative Fund, and the Agricultural Bank, among others. Table 3 explains some of these cases.

II. Community-Based Initiatives (CBI)

These innovative programs have been developed with the view that health for all cannot be achieved only through interventions and actions in the health sector, and that this requires coherent, comprehensive, and multifaceted multisectoral development actions and perspectives. Community-based interventions have received much attention because of their attention to the target group in their living environment and because of their potentially great impact on the studied populations [59] . Community-based interventions include interventions whose aim is to change the social and physical environment in the community (local policies, availability of facilities, etc.) [60]. Examples include BDN (Basic Development

Needs) studies conducted in the country in the 2000s [61] and other similar studies [62].

III. **Community-Based Empowerment to Reduce Poverty**

This program has been implemented since 2009 with the support of the State Welfare Organization and in cooperation with local non-governmental institutions, including social work clinics, across the country. The implementation of this plan led to the inclusion of the phrase "empowerment and community-based programs" in Article 39 of the Fifth Development Plan Law of the Islamic Republic. The goal of this community-based program has been to empower local communities to reduce capability poverty, so that they are able to fulfill their social responsibility toward the development of their neighborhood and strive to address the issues and needs of their neighborhood [63].

Despite repeated efforts in the country to merge and integrate support institutions, none have succeeded. As a result, instead of being pooled and fairly redistributed to reduce poverty and food insecurity, resources are spent on temporary, low-impact measures that fail to ease society's suffering. Meanwhile, some executive agencies, in addition to their official duties, also venture into support programs and achieve only short-term successes [46], but given the instability of self-reliance and empowerment programs by institutions and executive agencies other than the Relief Committee and the State Welfare Organization, it seems better that these resources be directed toward the country's main support institutions, thereby reaching eligible individuals, and that instead the scope of authority and function of these two institutions be expanded. If support programs are properly designed and resources are pooled in these areas, it can be hoped that budgets will be directed toward sustainable self-reliance programs such as microfinance-based projects. Although numerous programs based on this idea have been implemented in the country so far, their implementation has been incomplete and, contrary to the original model and successful global experiences, has been carried out. The design of these programs as a multidimensional program with innovative mechanisms different from conventional banking has not received the attention of the country's implementers [64].

5. Neglect of the Drivers of Empowerment Programs

Given the factors that led to the failure of previous programs, the experts believed that by understanding and correcting social and psychological factors—such as the existence of counseling programs alongside empowerment measures, attention to the individual, family, and social dimensions of individuals, and investment in employment—it is possible to help improve the quality of empowerment programs.

"An individual will not succeed without a family. If we do not consider the concerns of household members, we will not succeed. Interventions for socially vulnerable individuals are mainly at the household level." (State Welfare Organization)

"People who are exposed to social harm must be paid attention to in their family dimension. The intervention program should not be focused only on the individual." (Municipality)

In the design of support programs, social empowerment has received less attention. In support institutions, attitudes based on financial support generally dominate over individual independence, and as a result of this policy, the behavior of some clients has gradually been affected by this system, and due to dependency, indolence, and lack of dynamism, they become people who no longer have any desire for self-reliance and, instead of relying on their own capabilities, expect to receive financial aid from government support systems, and sometimes in this path they also ignore ethical principles and honesty [27]. The lack of systematic evaluation of implemented programs or their non-publication has pushed support institutions in a direction where they display their performance in the form of colorful images on websites. The websites of these institutions are full of illustrated reports of actions taken, but apart from published articles that generally cover limited areas of these institutions' performance, no other structured report is available. Of course, the State Welfare Organization, in line with financial transparency, has made its reports and financial indicators available to the public in the form of a transparency system [65], which is a valuable measure in its own right, but ultimately it is not clear what interventions these institutions have carried out over these years, with how much budget, and what achievements they have had.

Conclusion

The findings show that Iran's self-reliance and food-insecurity programs suffer from fragmented macro policies, institutional multiplicity, duplicated services, weak coordination, and short-term, low-yield interventions. Previous empowerment efforts often lacked sustainability, social and psychological support, family-level intervention, and systematic evaluation. Resources are scattered among many agencies, while the Relief Committee and State Welfare Organization remain the main capable institutions. Therefore, policy should consolidate resources, expand the mandates of these two bodies, and design multidimensional, sustainable microfinance and empowerment programs. Interventions must address individual, family, and social dimensions, provide counseling and follow-up, and publish transparent evaluations to ensure accountability and lasting poverty and food-insecurity reduction.

Study Limitations

Given that part of the information for this study was obtained from the websites of support institutions, the structural weakness and news-oriented nature of these institutions' official websites created limitations in collecting materials. Efforts were made to minimize this problem by reviewing articles related to the interventions mentioned on the websites and some important information sources such as the Majlis Research Center.

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Author contributions

M.Gh was involved in data gathering, analyzing and writing the draft. MR.H was involve in study's conceptualization, data analysis and proofing the manuscript. B.D was the supervisor. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Declarations:

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Tehran University of Medical Sciences (ethics code: IR.TUMS.SPH.REC.1399.151) and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided informed consent before inclusion and participation. Before the interviews began, respondents were informed about the study aims, the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Consent for publication: Participants were informed that the results may be published in academic journals and consent for publication was obtained.

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Table 1 — Organizations/Agencies and Interviewee Positions

Organization/Agency	**Interviewee Position**	**Organization/Agency**	**Interviewee Position**
Imam Khomeini Relief Committee	Director	Natural Resources	Carbon Sequestration Experts

State Welfare Organization (Behzisti)	Empowerment Specialist	Ministry of Health	Head of Group
Nomads and Rural Social Insurance Fund	Senior Manager	Health Center Directorate	County Health Center Director
Natural Resources	Director-General (Member of Health and Food Security Working Group)	Executive Agencies' Managers	Municipality
Entrepreneurship Expert	Entrepreneur	—	—

Table 2 — List of Executive Bodies Involved in Support Services to the Deprived and Needy

No.	**Organization**	**No.**	**Organization**
1	Imam Khomeini Relief Committee	10	Islamic Development Organization
2	State Welfare Organization (Behzisti)	11	Organization of Mobilization of the Oppressed (Basij Mostazafan)
3	Mostazafan Foundation of the Islamic Revolution (Alavi Foundation)	12	Organization for Municipalities and Village Administrations (Tehran Municipality)
4	Social Insurance Fund for Rural People and Nomads	13	Fifteen Khordad Foundation
5	Astan Quds Razavi (Razavi Karamat Foundation)	14	Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution
6	Executive Headquarters of Imam's Order (Barakat Foundation)	15	Basij Construction
7	Red Crescent	16	Agricultural Jihad
8	Endowments and Charity Affairs Organization	17	NGOs
9	Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs	18	Charity Institutions (MAHAK)

Table 3 – Programs implemented under micro-financing schemes

Program Title	Implementing Authority	Start Year	Target Group	Key Actions/Achievements	Challenges	Sustainability Status
Rural Employment Development Interest-Free Loan Fund	Cooperation of Ministry of Agriculture-Jihad, Management and Planning Organization of Iran, and Office of Deprived Regions Affairs of the Presidency	1379	Rural and nomadic areas [66]	Facilities were granted mostly to more populous villages, in villages with literate and younger people, with moderate financial capacity, and mostly to men [67] .	Need for an employed guarantor; gender discrimination	Active
Microcredit Fund for Rural and Nomadic Women	Ministry of Agriculture-Jihad	1379	Low-income rural women in groups of 5–7 members [56]	Initial capital provided by the government; no collateral required and group guarantee [68]	Because they are not legally registered, they cannot connect with formal financing sources such as banks. They have remained deprived of the benefits of support plans/projects for women. Lack of connection with formal financial sources [69]	Active
Linked Banking System of the State Welfare Organization and Bank Melli	TAK International Institute (Empowerment, Employment and Entrepreneurship) and Agricultural Bank; Office for Empowerment of Family and Women, Social Affairs, State Welfare Organization	1386	Women (especially female heads of household, young girls under coverage or on waiting lists of support institutions) in underdeveloped urban and rural areas; unemployed job-seeking youth; owners of micro and small businesses; weak and low-income individuals	Group and individual empowerment of covered persons through livelihood improvement (provision of savings facilities). Enhancing social capital (group formation, making bankable without conventional collateral and guarantor). Training in employment and life skills; job creation (establishment and development of small and medium economic units and enterprises). Establishment and expansion of small local self-	—	Active

				governing institutions owned by members under the title “self-help groups”; empowering target groups based on techniques and technologies localized within the country [57]		
Carbon Sequestration Project	Government of Iran and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP); Global Environment Facility (GEF)	1382	Deprived areas in 18 provinces of the country [70]	Implementation of participatory methods as a scientific, practical, successful mechanism aligned with the region’s social structure to build capacity and mobilize local communities; formation of rural development groups and microcredit funds to facilitate villagers’ participation in executive and financial activities for sustainable natural resource management [71] . Increased cultural, social, and economic empowerment of rural women; women’s awareness, income, increased and diversified occupational activities, financial independence, greater participation in decision-making, and changed attitudes improved and followed an upward trend through activity in this project [72].	Severe reduction of the project’s budgets in recent years	It is weakening in some areas and being implemented in others.
Tehran Municipality Empowerment Headquarters	Tehran Municipality	1386	Middle-aged women and women with inappropriate guardians who were not covered by other support institutions such as the State Welfare	—	After political changes in the structure of Tehran Municipality, the organization related to women and the Empowerment Headquarters was	Inactive

			Organization and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee		downgraded from the deputy level to one of the general departments under the Deputy for Social and Cultural Affairs of Tehran Municipality, and all credits and programs of this headquarters were affected by these changes [46]	
Food Security Package Model (Bagh)	Ministries of Health, Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare; Ministry of Interior; and Planning and Budget Organization	1397	Food-insecure households in 7 counties of 7 food-insecure provinces of the country (including Sistan and Baluchestan, Kerman, Bushehr, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Ilam, Khuzestan)	Participation of people and executive agencies, people's participation houses, and NGOs with cooperation of provincial and county executive agencies to facilitate implementation of the model. The credit resources of this program are provided by the Planning and Budget Organization, and environmental measures by the governorate [73].	—	Active