

**THE PATTERNS AND MOTIVATIONS OF
COUNTERURBANIZATION IN URMIA DURING
COVID-19**

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ABSTRACT

THE PATTERNS AND MOTIVATIONS OF COUNTERURBANIZATION IN URMIA DURING COVID-19

This thesis investigates the phenomenon of counterurbanisation in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing research in English tends to focus on counterurbanisation as driven by a combination of factors like a preference for rural life, class aspirations, and demographics. However, the global economic downturn caused by the pandemic offers a new lens through which to understand counterurbanisation, particularly in developing countries. This study utilizes both secondary data analysis and in-depth interviews with counter-urban migrants in Urmia County, Iran. The interviews reveal a shift in the primary driver of migration. Unlike existing literature that emphasizes pro-rural motivations, the findings suggest that the pandemic triggered the initial move for many migrants. However, the experience of a better lifestyle in rural areas during the pandemic ultimately influenced them to stay.

ÖZET

COVID-19 SIRASINDA URMİYE'DE TERS KENTLEŞMENİN ARKASINDAKİ MOTİVASYON VE ÖRÜNTÜLER

Bu çalışma, COVID-19 pandemisi sırasında İran'da karşıt kentleşme olgusunu araştırıyor. İngilizce alanda var olan araştırmalar, karşıt kentleşmeyi kırsal yaşamı tercih etme, sınıf hedefleri ve demografik faktörler gibi bir dizi unsurun birleşimiyle tetiklenen bir olgu olarak ele alma eğilimindedir. Ancak, pandemi nedeniyle yaşanan küresel ekonomik durgunluk, özellikle gelişmekte olan ülkelerde karşıt kentleşmeyi anlamak için yeni bir bakış açısı sunuyor. Bu çalışma, hem ikincil veri analizini hem de İran'ın Urmiye ilçesindeki karşıt kentleşme göçmenleriyle derinlemesine mülakatları kullanıyor. Mülakatlar, göçün temel nedenindeki değişimi ortaya koyuyor. Var olan literatürün kırsal yaşamı tercih etme motivasyonlarını vurgulamasının aksine, bulgular pandeminin birçok göçmeni ilk etapta harekete geçirdiğini ancak pandemi sırasında kırsal alanlarda daha iyi bir yaşam deneyimi elde etmelerinin nihayetinde kalmalarına karar vermelerinde etkili olduğunu gösteriyor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Counterurbanisation is a phenomenon introduced to the world during the 1960s when Western countries experienced population deconcentration in large cities (Anthony G Champion 1989). This change involved major cities showing net migration loss while rural areas showed net migration gain. This trend was seen primarily in developed countries, so most research on this phenomenon referred to them. The literature indicates that counterurbanization is mainly studied in the EU and West Asia. This research investigates counterurbanization in Iran, which can add its own story to the literature.

Iran's urban system is undergoing a transition from fully fledged urbanization, which occurs when the rate of migration to large cities exceeds that to intermediate-sized cities, to polarization reversal, which is characterized by a proportionate slowing of primate city migration and an increase in migration in intermediate or middle tier cities within the urban hierarchy (R. Sadeghi, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Shahbazin 2020). This process is similar to some advanced economies in the past and many advanced developing nations today. Nonetheless, the census data indicates that the country also sees a minor but noteworthy amount of counterurbanization (Saeid Amanpour 2021). The fact that counterurban flows are usually not spatially even contradicts the conventional wisdom that counterurbanization as a substream phenomenon is minor because of the mainstream flows' counterbalancing effect. Despite their relatively low quantities, they significantly impact destinations due to their high selectiveness and unevenness (Halfacree 2001; Gottlieb 2006). As a result, specific locations see faster growth rates than other communities of a similar size. This increases their capacity to move up the urban hierarchy and boost peripheral regional economies.

The phenomenon known as commercial counterurbanization (Bosworth and Bat Finke 2020) and proportional impact (Akgün et al. 2011) both have the potential to amplify the outcome. In the former case, the migrant population's primary characteristics—such as being older, wealthier, more entrepreneurial, and better

educated—provide even stronger economic stimuli in proportion to the number of migrants. Economic and demographic dispersal benefits to peripheral areas for a nation's overall well-being have long been recognized (Richardson 1975). The migration of human capital from smaller (primarily rural) population centers to larger cities, particularly in developing nations, has long been an issue associated with urbanization (Geyer and Geyer 2017).

According to recent research, counterurbanization can stop this "rural brain drain" by giving rural residents more access to vital services, skills, and economic opportunities while promoting peripheral development (Bosworth and Atterton 2012). This is especially relevant given that developing nations typically exhibit much higher levels of regional inequality. For these reasons, even in national contexts where mainstream concentration persists, substream counterurbanization may still be essential for expanding minor cities and peripheral regional development. This may affect how policies are implemented, where investments are made spatially in these outlying areas and long-term adjustments to national urban systems. In addition to the aforementioned positive effects, counterurbanization may also have some negative ones. Some of these adverse effects include housing shortages, unequal and exclusive development, and overburdened public services, to mention a few (Löffler and Steinicke 2006). However, the majority of these are just byproducts of counterurbanization; they also result from poorly prepared planning authorities and their consequent inability to address the consequences of their actions. This highlights how critical it is to comprehend counterurbanization more deeply.

While recently conducted research on counterurbanization has concentrated chiefly on developed nations (Dilley, Gkartzios, and Odagiri 2022; Adamiak, Pitkänen, and Lehtonen 2017; Remoundou, Gkartzios, and Garrod 2016), there is no reason to assume that similar developments are not also taking place (albeit on a smaller scale) in developing nations. Due to its smaller scale and lack of data, the study of counterurbanization in underdeveloped countries has received less attention than in industrialized countries (Milbourne and Kitchen 2014). Still, the impact might be much more significant for the poor human capital in developing countries' periphery, regardless of the extent. Still, several academics have expressed interest in studying counterurbanization in developing nations in the past few years (Rojo-Mendoza 2023; Geyer and Geyer 2017; Jain and Korzhenevych 2019).

According to ISNA (news agency), in 2017, most of the rural areas in Iran showed net migration gain, and 432 rural areas, which had less than 20 households in 2012 in the

new statistical report, had more than 30 households. Also, KHABARE MEHR (news agency) indicates that in some of the rural areas on the eastern side of Iran, which were decaying, people started to move there and revive the region's agriculture, which had been dead recently. Although recent news shows the changes in net migration distribution between major cities and rural areas, this phenomenon is neglected in international research. Most of the research on migration between rural areas and cities is related to urbanization—almost no research has been done concerning counterurbanisation in international literature or local.

This study explores the significance of counterurbanisation in Iran within the wider context of counterurbanisation during COVID-19. The study starts with an in-depth secondary analysis of counterurbanisation in Iran. Internal migration analysis was used to identify the regions where counterurbanization occurs. The selected province will be analyzed using an electricity usage map. The results will give us speculation about where the counterurbanization is happening and a suitable case study for our third step, where the interviews happened and used to capture the story behind the immigrants' migration to rural areas and the influence of the pandemic on their decision. The Counter-urban stories will be explored under the typology of (Mitchell 2004), in which counterurbanisation is categorized under three groups: 1. ex-urbanization, 2. displaced-urbanization, and 3. anti-urbanization. For this purpose, I will use the purposeful and snowball method to interview the counter-urbans in the selected area.

This research attempts to answer these questions:

1. How did the pandemic affect the counterurbanization processes and residential preferences of the counter-urbans?
2. What are the immigrant's motivations for moving to the rural areas?
3. How is the migrant's relationship with Locals?

The next chapter focused on the literature on residential preferences and mainly talked about counterurbanization and its different forums. Chapter three discussed the methodological aspect of this study and introduced the methods used for analyzing the data and data gathering. In addition, the introduction of the case study and upper-hand plans concerning the case study are discussed in this chapter. In Chapter Four, the results of this study are presented and discussed. In Chapter Five, the study concluded the patterns and motivation of counterurbanization in Iran compared with other studies in developing and developed countries.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Numerous facets of human existence have changed globally due to the exceptional COVID-19 pandemic, with notable effects on urban and rural dynamics. As the epidemic has brought attention to the vulnerabilities and challenges of densely populated urban centers, there has been a renewed focus on counterurbanization, the demographic and sociological process by which individuals move from urban regions to rural areas. Rural and urban structures keep changing. It can be seen throughout history that each era has its neighborhood structure and residential preferences. However, the factor of these changes depends on our perspective of the environment and how we understand it.

This chapter thoroughly summarizes the body of research on counterurbanization, emphasizing the identification of significant trends and underlying causes behind this phenomenon. The theoretical underpinnings and historical background of counterurbanization are covered first, then pandemic tendencies are examined. After that, I explored the particular effects of COVID-19, highlighting how the pandemic has affected migratory preferences and behaviors by reviewing previous studies. Finally, the evidence of counterurbanization in Iran is examined.

2.2 Counterurbanization

For almost 50 years, counterurbanization has been a significant subject in rural studies (Mitchell 2004). Despite efforts to summarize this substantial body of research, "counterurbanization" is hard to define. The phenomena of counterurbanization were first identified in the setting of the global north. As it became more prevalent in more industrialized nations, numerous studies were conducted to study the crucial role of the "rural area" in promoting counterurbanization (Berg 2020; Elshof et al. 2017).

Different motivations and variables are responsible for this occurrence. Some people may opt for counterurbanization to avoid the traffic, pollution, and hectic pace of life frequently associated with cities (Halfacree 2012; Lehtonen 2015; Marjavaara and Lundholm 2016). They want a quieter, more peaceful neighborhood with more open spaces, a sense of community, and a deeper connection to nature.

The desire for a better quality of life, a slower pace, and greater proximity to outdoor attractions like woods, lakes, or mountains can all impact residential counterurbanization. Engaging in agricultural operations, leisure activities, or a more sustainable and independent lifestyle may also draw people to rural locations. Furthermore, economic considerations like lower housing costs, the availability of affordable land, or the possibility of entrepreneurship and business prospects in rural areas might promote counterurbanization (Gkartzios 2013).

Counterurbanization can have a variety of effects. The demographic makeup of rural places may alter due to urban migrants who bring their viewpoints, expertise, and skills to the area. Through increasing consumer demand and employment development, this population rise can help rural regions economically, but it can also put a strain on the community's infrastructure, services, and natural resources (Rojo-Mendoza 2023). The effects of residential counterurbanization on rural areas can be both favorable and detrimental. Additionally, it can support the diversification of regional economies, revitalize rural communities, and preserve cultural heritage. However, it can also present issues with infrastructural growth, land-use alterations, and the social integration of natives and immigrants (Adamiak, Pitkänen, and Lehtonen 2017).

Urban populations in Zambia increased between 1990 and 2010 due to natural population expansion rather than migration. The extent of natural population growth did

not significantly contribute to urbanization and counterurbanization, however, because the natural growth of the urban population was about equal to that of the rural population. Therefore, between 1990 and 2010, migration made a greater counter-urbanization contribution than did urban population growth naturally (Crankshaw and Borel-Saladin 2019).

In recent years, counterurbanization has been explored globally (Geyer and Geyer 2017; Crankshaw and Borel-Saladin 2019) studied African countries (Jain and Korzhenevych 2019; Jain, Korzhenevych, and Sridharan 2019; Dilley, Gkartzios, and Odagiri 2022) worked on Asian countries. In recent years, researchers have shown their interest in studying counterurbanization not only in the Global North and developed countries but also in Asia and Africa, mostly developing countries.

In South Africa, smaller urban centers' increasing growth rates relative to those of bigger urban centers strongly imply that counterurbanization is becoming more critical in many, if not all, emerging nations. In addition, despite the size of migration streams at the national level, there are indications of differentiated migration patterns that follow the Differential Urbanization framework, where counterurbanization may compete with or even surpass urbanization within certain regional and demographic subsections. There is evidence that counterurbanization in the developing world may differ dramatically from that in the industrialized world. There are significant distinctions and many fundamental familiar characteristics of counterurbanization in the industrialized world for South African countries. Despite its growing significance, counterurbanization still seems to be a substream. There appears to be much more evidence of this than in the developed world, which is expected for economies still heavily dependent on industrialization (Geyer and Geyer 2017).

Studies in Brazil (Baeninger 2002), Venezuela (Brown and Lawson 1989), Mexico (Aguilar and Graizbord 2002), Colombia (Sik Lee 1985), Botswana (Gwebu 2006), Turkey (Öztürk, Hilton, and Jongerden 2014) they all show strong evidence of decentralization and polarization trends. These studies imply that counterurbanization has been the predominant migration mode at some moments in history, and there are signs of considerable counterurbanization. Studies on rural development in emerging nations imply that substream counterurbanization is common (Geyer and Geyer 2017).

It is essential to know what counterurbanization is and the motivations for this movement. First, I will talk about counterurbanization; next, I will examine the effect of

COVID-19 on counterurbanization in literature; then, I will explore the literature about Iran.

Mitchell notes that counterurbanization has been viewed as either a migrant movement or a settlement system change process, resulting in a deconcentrated settlement pattern in her expert evaluation of this extensive literature (Mitchell 2004). In the early stages of counterurbanization phenomena, the focus was on what could be called statistical counterurbanization, or a rural turnaround, using quantitative analysis of national demographic statistics to describe counterurbanization movements (A.G. Champion 1992). Later on, some researchers study counterurbanization with specific case studies (Escribano 2007). However, five decades of counterurbanization surveys show that it is hard to define the word counterurbanization, and this phenomenon changes from case to case. Here, I will examine some types of counterurbanization, but it is impossible to include all the literature because of the vast amount of research it involves. Middle-class perceptions of the countryside can be found in the typology produced by (Mitchell 2004), who suggested the following forms of counterurbanisation:

- Ex-urbanization, which refers to the decision by middle-class households to relocate to peri-urban rural areas in response to pro-rural lifestyle beliefs, but who are frequently still connected to urban areas through employment and daily commute;
- Displaced urbanization, or the migration from urban areas to rural ones in search of work, cheaper living expenses, and more affordable housing, and
- Anti-urbanization is a more radical departure of households opposed to urban lifestyles to rural (and perhaps remote) locations.

Since the publication of Mitchell's paper, researchers have looked into counterurbanization alternatives outside of her suggested taxonomy, such as "commercial counterurbanization" (Bosworth and Bat Finke 2020), "crisis-led counterurbanization" (Remoundou, Gkartzios, and Garrod 2016; Gkartzios 2013), "lifestyle migration" (Benson and O'reilly 2009), and "micro urbanization" (Bjarnason et al. 2021).

Counterurbanization is a phenomenon that mainly depends on how we define rural areas, and there are wide varieties of it in literature besides the previously mentioned ones. "Amenty led counterurbanization" (Dahms and McComb 1999; Argent et al. 2010; Usui, Funck, and Adewumi 2021), "Creative counterurbanization" (Feihan et al. 2021), "Residential counterurbanization" (Rojo-Mendoza 2023), "Telecommuting counterurbanization" (Denham 2021) and, "Cultural counterurbanization" (Halfacree 2006).

2.2.1 Commercial Counterurbanization

The first type of counterurbanization I will discuss is commercial counterurbanization, examined by (Bosworth and Bat Finke 2020). Bosworth and Bat Fink contend that shifting commercial and business operations from urban to rural locations can catalyze economic growth in non-urban areas. They stress the significance of cost factors that entice enterprises to relocate to rural areas, such as lower land prices, labor costs, and tax benefits. In addition, the availability of niche markets and the opportunity for specialty goods and services are major factors in the commercial counterurbanization process.

The beneficial economic effects of commercial counterurbanization are covered by (Bosworth and Bat Finke 2020). They contend that the influx of firms into rural areas produces tax money, boosts local economies, and offers employment prospects. Additionally, this strategy can help rural economies become more diversified and less dependent on established industries like agriculture. They highlighted the requirement for appropriate infrastructure development, including utilities, facilities, and transportation networks, to facilitate the expansion of enterprises in rural areas. The potential social and geographic ramifications are also discussed, including the demands on housing and commuting and any potential disputes between current rural villages and future commercial projects (Bosworth and Bat Finke 2020). Commercial counterurbanization is a key factor in rural economic growth. It can produce job opportunities, boost local economies, and aid economic diversification by luring enterprises to non-urban areas. However, suitable infrastructure development and careful planning are necessary to solve the associated issues and guarantee sustainable and equitable growth in rural areas.

2.2.2 Crisis-led Counterurbanization

The crisis-led counterurbanization, which (Remoundou, Gkartzios, and Garrod 2016) worked on, is more related to urbanites' behavior and their choices in a crisis. According to Remoundou and Gkartzios, people or households may shift from urban to rural or peri-urban areas in response to economic crises. This tendency is known as crisis-led counterurbanization. It is a type of migration motivated by unfavorable circumstances in metropolitan areas and the perceived chances or advantages provided by rural areas during times of crisis.

Financial instability, austerity policies, and unfavorable conditions in urban areas, like job losses, diminished economic prospects, and higher living expenses, can all catalyze migration to rural areas. According to Remoundou and Gkartzios, rural places may develop into desirable alternate locations because of cheaper living expenses, land availability, the possibility of becoming self-sufficient, a higher standard of living, and the impression that there are chances for both economic and social well-being. In brief, crisis-led counterurbanization is motivated by unfavorable urban conditions and the perceived benefits or opportunities rural communities provide during crises. The idea emphasizes the intricate relationships between economic crises, movement patterns, and the pursuit of alternative living arrangements.

2.2.3 Lifestyle Migration

Sometimes, counterurbanization can occur from the need for a lifestyle change. Benson and O'Reilly investigate the idea of "lifestyle migration," which is connected to "counterurbanization." They explore the causes, circumstances, and effects of people or groups moving to rural or non-urban areas for a higher quality of life driven by desires for nature, community, leisure, and cultural amenities (Benson and O'reilly 2009). They

stress how traditional ideas of migration, which are frequently connected to economic concerns, are challenged by lifestyle migration. Instead, the pursuit of personal well-being and the desire to avoid the perceived drawbacks of urban living, such as stress, pollution, and overpopulation, motivate lifestyle migration. Lifestyle migrants sometimes experience certain effects, such as difficulties in integrating, limited access to resources, and potential confrontations with already-existing rural communities. The lifestyle movement may have a broader impact on rural areas, affecting property markets, local social dynamics, and land usage patterns.

2.2.4 Micro Urbanization

In some cases, counterurbanization happens as urbanization in rural areas, which was investigated by (Bjarnason et al. 2021). They investigate the intersections and manifestations of urbanization and counterurbanization in rural areas, illuminating the intricate dynamics of rural development and urban-rural interactions. They contend that micro-urbanization, which blurs the lines between urban and rural settings, is a distinct type of rural development in which little urban-like clusters appear in rural areas. They emphasize that a mix of urbanization processes and counterurbanization tendencies impact this occurrence.

Some challenges micro urbanization faces are its effects on rural landscapes, land use patterns, and community social structures. There is also a need for infrastructure, housing, and service delivery in these developing micro-urban areas.

Effective planning and governance solutions are essential to handle the challenges of microubanization. Bjarnason contends that to direct sustainable development and ensure the welfare of both rural and urban populations, a detailed understanding of the interplay between urbanization and counterurbanization is essential. In Northern Iceland, Bjarnason emphasizes micro-urbanization and offers insights into the intersections of urbanization and counterurbanization in rural areas (Bjarnason et al. 2021).

2.2.5 Amenity-led Counterurbanization

Amenity-led counterurbanization is the movement of people or households from urban to rural areas, primarily motivated by a desire for a better quality of life and access to natural resources, cultural attractions, and recreational possibilities, just like lifestyle counterurbanization (Dahms and McComb 1999). Scenic landscapes, outdoor recreation opportunities (like hiking, fishing, or skiing), proximity to national parks or protected areas, cultural heritage sites, vibrant local communities, and a sense of calm and escape from urban stressors are some of the amenities that draw people or households to rural areas (Usui, Funck, and Adewumi 2021). These facilities frequently contrast the smog, traffic, and fast-paced lifestyle typical of urban regions.

Both the places of origin (urban regions) and the areas of destination (rural areas) may be significantly impacted by this kind of counterurbanization. Urban migrants frequently bring different skills, information, and viewpoints to the rural villages they relocate into, which might shift the population composition. The local economy may also be impacted by it since newcomers may support existing establishments and services or open up new business opportunities (Dahms and McComb 1999). Amenity-led counterurbanization may also present difficulties and potential disputes. It may strain the community's housing stock, natural resources, and infrastructure. In rural areas that might not be well prepared to accommodate rapid population growth, it may result in changes to land use patterns and a rise in the demand for services like healthcare, education, and transportation (Argent and Plummer 2022).

2.2.6 Creative Counterurbanization

People who moved to rural areas sometimes changed the whole concept. For example, Feihan's work, which investigates the migration of the creative class to rural areas, mentions creative counterurbanization, which significantly impacts the socioeconomic of the site's residents. Rural locations are frequently transformed into centers of the creative and cultural industries as Part of creative-led counterurbanization.

It may lead to the construction of art studios, galleries, theaters, music venues, and other creative places and the revival of nearby communities (Feihan et al. 2021). These advancements can potentially boost economic growth through tourism, creative industries, and entrepreneurship, in addition to enhancing the cultural vibrancy of rural communities. Furthermore, creative-led counterurbanization can aid in preserving regional culture, customs, and natural landscapes. The infusion of creative workers could promote ecological practices, the adaptive reuse of old structures, and the promotion of regional crafts and traditions (Wang, Zhu, and Yu 2022).

2.2.7 Cultural Counterurbanization

Cultural counterurbanization, or back to the land movement discussed by Halfacree, explores the phenomenon of British counter-cultural movements and their engagement with rural areas (Halfacree 2006). He looks at the evolution of the British back-to-the-land movement and its historical context. It focuses on the change from a "dropping out" perspective, characterized by a rejection of mainstream society, to a "leading on" philosophy, where people aim to develop alternative models of sustainable living and support rural development. He mentioned that they are mainly driven by motivations like yearning for a more straightforward and genuine way of life, a desire to escape from mainstream society, and a rejection of commercialization and industrialization. It explores the political, social, and cultural ideas that support these movements and their effect on rural areas.

2.2.8 Telecommuting Counterurbanization

The epidemic has spurred interest in counterurbanization. People and families are looking to relocate from urban to rural areas to avoid the dangers and difficulties of highly populated metropolitan areas. This migration has been greatly facilitated by telecommuting, or remote work, which enables people to work from anywhere, including

remote regions. By using technology tools like video conferencing, email, and cloud-based collaboration platforms, people with the potential to telecommute can keep their jobs while working from home. This freedom allows people to live outside urban centers and work simultaneously (Denham 2021). Economic advantages may also result from it, as people may be able to locate more affordable housing options and lower their overall living costs.

2.3 Internal Migration During Covid-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out, news sources from around the globe described people fleeing big cities to avoid spreading the disease to smaller towns. More recently, many academic publications have also demonstrated shifts in migratory patterns caused by pandemics. People who fled city centers tended to settle in suburban and peri-urban areas, a common tendency in many nations.

The 2020 pandemic brings a new aspect to the counterurbanization. People in cities worldwide move to rural areas to decrease the risk of infection. It opens a new door in the world of research on counterurbanization. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, strict government regulations caused a significant shock to the world's human mobility systems, restricting international travel and local everyday mobility patterns (Guadagno 2020). Less is known about how these initiatives have affected internal migration and counterurbanization trends (González-Leonardo et al. 2022).

Anecdotal indications of an 'urban exodus' from large cities appeared in several Western nations as COVID-19 spread over the planet in February and March of 2020 (González-Leonardo et al. 2022). The 'urban exodus' story was influenced by several causes, with COVID-19 highlighting some of the major drawbacks of urban living. Big cities formed early worldwide epicenters of COVID-19 infections during the early phases of the pandemic thanks to favorable factors such as high air travel connection, job density, and spatial concentration of jobs requiring public interaction (Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2021; Rodríguez-Pose and Burlina 2021).

Housing affordability before the pandemic and poor housing conditions have been ongoing urban issues in major cities. In addition to these difficulties, lockdowns, social isolation, remote employment, and homeschooling have reportedly increased pressure on

families living in cramped quarters to leave cities, searching for more room and reasonably priced property (Guadagno 2020). There is less of a need for commuting and for people to live close to their places of employment and shopping thanks to teleworking, improved familiarity, and internet shopping. Urban entertainment, leisure, and social areas lost their vibrancy due to business closures, which also caused a sharp increase in unemployment in several nations in 2020 as non-essential, public-facing jobs ceased to exist (Smith, Edwards, and Duong 2021). It is alleged that COVID-19 encouraged people to move from large cities to rural areas, suburbs, and smaller cities.

Internal migration patterns, though, appear to have only covered a few short miles during the pandemic. According to preliminary data from Sweden and the United States, most people who left large cities during the epidemic moved to their suburbs rather than farther-flung, smaller cities and villages (Ramani and Bloom 2021; Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022b, 2022a), but city dwellers have also relocated to nearby neighborhoods, second homes, vacation spots, and other cities.

Major metropolitan core counties in the United States were already losing population before 2020, but the pandemic worsened this tendency even more. Large metropolitan areas, like New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Boston, saw increased emigration, mainly to towns and suburbs close to the urban cores (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022a). Rents declined in the central Part of New York City while rising in the suburbs, which is evidence of this (Gupta et al. 2022). Counties with access to outdoor recreation facilities saw net population growth during the epidemic. However, there is little evidence of a widespread departure from American cities (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022a).

According to a study analyzing internal migration patterns in Japan before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Tokyo prefecture's migration trend changed from positive to negative in 2020. According to an investigation of where the out-migrants from Tokyo ended up, some moved to nearby regions in the Greater Tokyo Metropolitan Area. Others relocated afield, for instance, to Nagano, a popular tourist destination with mountains, where Tokiotes have long held second houses (Fielding and Ishikawa 2021).

In Australia, regional areas saw net population growth in 2020, largely because of a decline in out-migration. However, a prediction indicates that after 2022, net migration trends in these areas will likely recover to pre-pandemic levels (Borsellino et al. 2022). Furthermore, before and throughout the pandemic, the socio-demographic factors influencing migration have generally stayed steady (Perales and Bernard 2023).

Between March 2020 and February 2021, in Britain, a study employing mobile phone location data from Facebook users discovered higher levels of human migration from densely populated places to sparsely inhabited areas with non-pharmaceutical interventions, particularly lockdowns (Rowe et al. 2023). However, the authors noticed higher-than-average patterns of human travel in the opposite direction, from sparsely populated to denser areas, as COVID-19 restrictions started to be lifted.

Larger cities in Germany saw net migration losses to their surrounding areas, including Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, and Cologne. Suburbanization was a tendency before 2020, but it appears to have worsened during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic due to a decline in the number of young individuals moving in and a persistent outflow of families (Stawarz et al. 2022).

The epidemic in the Netherlands also caused a migration out of the so-called Randstad. This sizable metropolitan area includes the nation's four largest cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, and Utrecht. More people moved away from Randstad to other Dutch regions between April and December 2020 than moved back in. Most emigrants from the Randstad settled in outlying municipalities; however, some also went to farther-flung rural areas (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022b).

Spain's core city migration rose in 2020, particularly from Madrid and Barcelona, compared to the four years before the pandemic. Additionally, urban out-migration increased while urban immigration dropped in rural areas. The summer and fall of 2020 saw the most significant net losses in core urban regions and tremendous net gains in rural areas. However, by the end of the year, these net losses and gains reached pre-pandemic levels, indicating that changes in internal migratory patterns brought on by the pandemic may have only been transient (González-Leonardo et al. 2022).

These results imply that internal migration movements to less populated areas during the pandemic have been supported by proximity to urban centers, the availability of second residences, and rich households. Similarly, it appears that life courses also significantly impacted anti-urbanization movements. Given that they frequently work in low-paying face-to-face jobs, studies may indicate that communities of immigrants were less likely to move to rural areas. However, most previous studies have concentrated on out-migration patterns from significant cities. Less focus has been placed on the rural regions that draw these flows. Recognizing and comprehending the important migration destinations in rural areas is essential to choosing and organizing the best policy interventions to provide the necessary services and infrastructure. We are attempting to

ascertain the characteristics of the leading rural destinations of migratory flows and the composition of migrant flows concerning age, gender, and country of birth.

However, in the literature related to internal migration during COVID-19, there is a gap in studies about developing countries such as Iran, which has been facing a significant increase in net migration toward rural areas in recent years. Investigating this issue in Iran is essential because it may bring a new aspect to counterurbanization literature, in which there are almost no case studies in local or international journals. Most of the studies concerning this topic are on the country scale and are mere analyses of census data, and all of them are in local journals.

2.4 Evidence of Counterurbanization in Iran

Early research in Iran mainly concentrated on rural-to-urban migration, which peaked in the 1960s and 1970s at about 250,000 per year (Abrishami 1996; R. Sadeghi, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Shahbazin 2020). This massive movement is thought to have been sparked by several land reforms (Vosughi 1988) as well as the industrialization and modernization of big cities (Hesamian 2006), particularly in Tehran, which was brought on by a series of oil booms and the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Azkiea 2004). Around 2.5 million Iranians were internally displaced due to the subsequent 1980–1988 conflict with Iraq (Rostamalizadeh 2012), notably from the war-affected districts along the Iraqi border. Following the war, initiatives for rural social development that improved access to media, power, and education, as well as concentrated social services and employment possibilities; with an estimated 180,000 internal migrants per year, metropolitan regions helped drive rural-to-urban migration in the 1990s (Azkiea 2004).

Since 2000, increasing regional socioeconomic disparities have primarily been used to analyze internal migration (R. Sadeghi, & Shokriani, M. 2016; R. Sadeghi, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Shahbazin 2020). The idea of uneven development has frequently appeared in Iranian literature, with particular attention paid to how unemployment and low income drive people out of rural areas (Ghavidel 2007) and how social networks play a significant role in influencing people's choice of destinations (Mahmoudian and Ghasemi Ardahaee 2012). In light of increased levels of educational attainment, the

significance of education in drawing young migrants to cities, particularly Tehran, has also attracted more attention (Ghasemi-Ardehaee 2017).

According to ISNA, in 2017, most of the rural areas in Iran showed net migration gain, and 432 rural areas, which had less than 20 households in 2012 in the new statistical report, had more than 30 households. Also, KHABARE MEHR (news agency) indicates that in some of the rural areas on the eastern side of Iran, which were decaying, people started to move there and revive the region's agriculture, which had been dead recently. Although recent news shows the changes in net migration distribution between major cities and rural areas, this phenomenon is neglected in international research. Most of the research on migration between rural areas and cities is related to urbanization—almost no research has been done concerning counterurbanisation in international literature or local.

A study by (Ghaffari 2013) on Tehran shows a significant difference between the migrants from the village to the city and from the city to the village in the combination of age and sex, causes of migration and economic and demographic characteristics. Job and education completion are more critical in counterurbanization than urbanization, and the percentages of rural-to-city migrants are higher. It shows the inequality of access to minimum welfare and basic facilities such as education, employment and public services between the city and the village. In this study, the economic variables affecting the reverse migration from the metropolis of Tehran have been identified and evaluated. They have shown that in Tehran, two factors, administrative infrastructure and welfare facilities, affect reverse migration.

An article by (Afarakhte 2015) was about the Spatial Effects of Return Migration in Miandoab. Social, psychological, and civil factors are other influencing factors in counterurbanization. The effect of the return of immigrants to rural areas includes the reconstruction of rural housing, the restoration of agricultural lands, the conversion of arable lands into gardens, the mechanization of agriculture, the development of animal husbandry, and the construction of production workshops, which shows a kind of spatial reconstruction in these villages.

(Saeid Amanpour 2021), in his research about counterurbanization in Dezfol, he showed that from the point of view of counterurbans, the economic and social index is the most crucial factor affecting their migration. In his research, Kendall's correlation coefficient results show a direct relationship between the availability of services in villages and counterurbans. Also, the linear regression test shows that age, gender, native

affiliation, and distance of residence affect them. According to Friedman's test, access to infrastructural, communication, welfare and administrative services, having land and housing in the village,

Research done in the north of Iran in Rasht (Maleki 2018) showed that rural migrations have intensified in recent years, and families strongly desire to return to their villages. This trend in coastal villages has more physical than social and cultural effects. Studies have shown rapid changes and transformations in cities and villages and the formation of counterurbanization in recent decades. One of the aggravating factors of this type of migration is the mutual spatial effects and the close connection between cities and villages, especially around the big cities.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the literature review around counterurbanization was examined. First, different types of counterurbanization were introduced. Figure 1 briefly summarizes the types discussed in the first part. Then, it is followed by the literature on internal migration during COVID-19, which is one of the key elements of this research. Studies from Sweden (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022b), the United States (Ramani and Bloom 2021), Japan (Fielding and Ishikawa 2021), Australia (Borsellino et al. 2022), Britain (Rowe et al. 2023), Germany (Stawarz et al. 2022), and Spain (González-Leonardo et al. 2022) were examined. These studies suggest that accessibility to urban centers, the availability of second homes, and wealthy households have all contributed to internal migratory movements during the pandemic to less populated areas. It also seems that life courses had a significant influence on anti-urbanization groups.

Finally, the evidence of the counterurbanization in Iran was introduced. Studies have shown that counterurbanization occurs mostly in northern and northwest Iran. Dezfol (Saeid Amanpour 2021), Rasht (Maleki 2018), Miandoab (Afarakhte 2015), and Theran (Ghaffari 2013) were cities in which studies showed an increase in urban-to-rural migration. In local literature, there is evidence that counterurbanization is happening in some regions of Iran. However, there are almost no studies concerning counterurbanization in international literature.

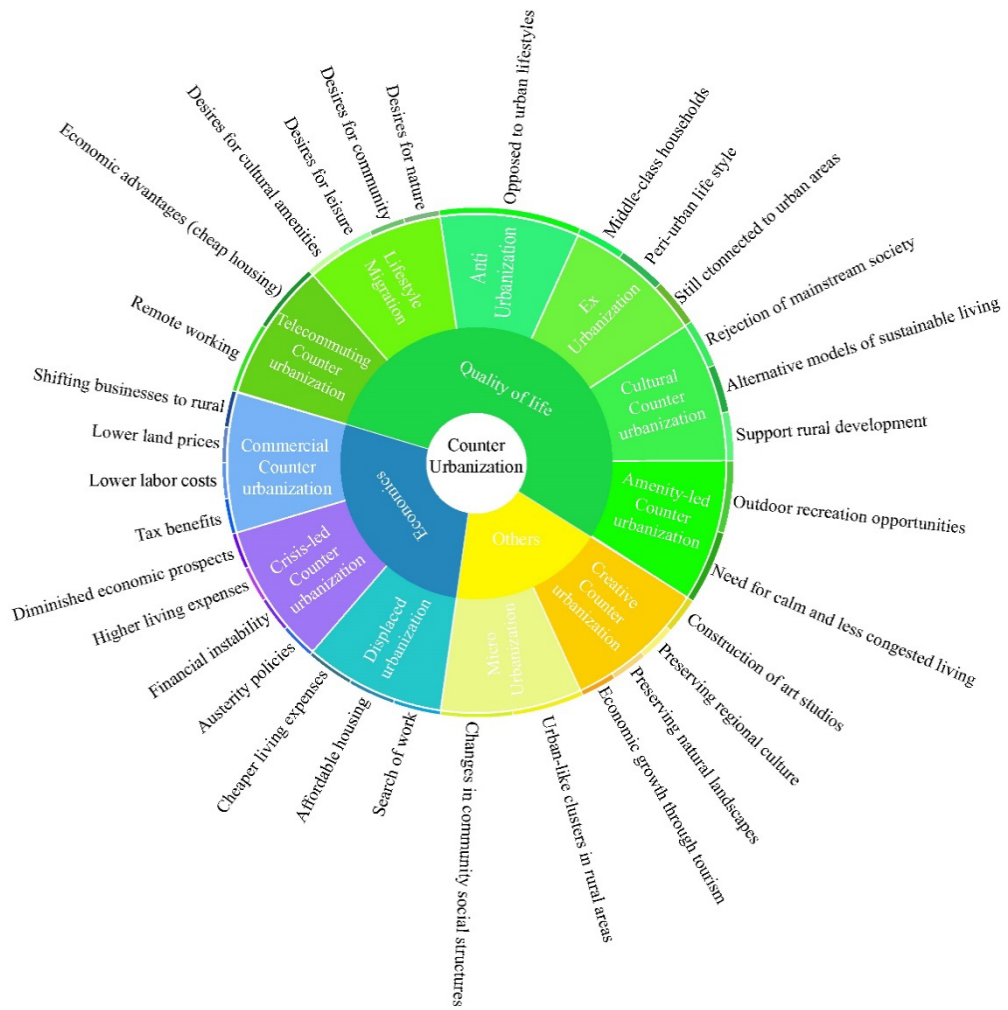


Figure 1 Types of counterurbanization (Created by author)

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section will discuss the methods used to analyze the Counterurbanization in Urmia. Our methodology is composed of three stages:

- Stage 1: quantitative secondary analysis of census data (national level)
- Stage 2: selection of case study
- Stage 3: qualitative interviews (case study)

The first stage is a quantitative secondary analysis containing the counterurbanization analysis in different provinces of Iran. For this purpose, I used migration census data. It is vital to remember that this data has some limitations, which will be discussed further. The overall trend of counterurbanization will be analyzed using available migration census data (between 1997 and 2017). Although the census data will not tell us the whole story behind the counterurbanization, it will give us some speculations about it. The goal of this step is to see whether counterurbanization is happening in Iran or not. According to ISNA (news agency), in 2017, most of the rural areas in Iran showed net migration gain, and 432 rural areas, which had less than 20 households in 2012 in the new statistical report, had more than 30 households.

Based on the results of the first stage, I will select the target province as the case study and focus on counterurbanization. Second, I will use Electricity Usage to find the villages where counterurbanization might happen. Based on the results of this stage, I will select the villages with the highest increase in electricity usage between 2012 and 2022. Third, to capture the full story behind counterurbanization, I will interview the residents of the villages and investigate whether the pandemic influenced them to move to rural areas.

3.2 First Stage: Secondary Analysis

In this step, I analyze the migration to rural areas using census data I collected from Iran's statistical database. The main purpose of this step is to choose a suitable case study in Iran by analyzing the migration trend. Their municipality of residence determined the residential location of each individual in our data set on March 18–20 of each year. Our dataset covers 1997-2017. Data availability is one of the limitations I face while collecting the data. The most recent data (2023) set was not published at the time of analysis. I did not include those for whom the year's registration contained lacking information on the origin or destination municipality. This effectively means I did not include foreigners traveling to Iran or emigrants relocating overseas.

Iranian municipalities were categorized in the study according to where they fell on the urban-rural spectrum. This led to the creation of the following six categories: inner cities, suburbs, other metropolitan regions, medium-sized cities, minor cities, and rural areas. Inner cities are the central municipalities of the provinces. Therefore, capturing the suburban communities where people typically commute to the inner cities for employment within their bounds makes sense. The municipalities overseeing the entire province are included in the list of other metropolitan regions. The 2017 municipal classification by the Iranian Ministry of Roads and City Planning was the foundation for constructing the three categories: medium-sized cities, small cities, and rural areas.

First, I provide descriptive information on internal migration trends, including out-migration rates and the frequencies of in-, out-, and net migration for every province. Equation 1 is used to calculate the migration ratio (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022b). Cp_t is the city's population in year $t - 1$, and Mp_t is the total number of people leaving cities in years $t - 1$ and t .

Equation 1 Internal Migration Index (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022b)

$$Ratio = \frac{Mp_t}{Cp_t} \times 100$$

I used this to analyze the trend of counterurbanization in Iran before COVID-19 and find the most suitable case study for this research, leading to the selection of West Azerbaijan Province and Urmia County. The next stage will provide insight into the

counterurbanization of Urmia County and the possibility of where this phenomenon is occurring or has occurred.

3.3 Second Stage: Selection of Case Studies

In this stage, I used Electricity Usage to find the villages where counterurbanization may happen. Electricity usage is one of the tools used to see the economic growth in cities (Panzer and Postiglione 2014). I used this tool to determine where counterurbanization occurred within the selected Province (Urmia), assuming that the increase in electricity usage is due to potential counterurbanisation trends. This stage covers the pre-pandemic period (2012-2019), the pandemic period (2020-2021), and post-pandemic (2022).

The data I will use in this stage will be collected from the Power Department of the respected Province. The Power Department of each Province keeps records of the electricity usage of each rural area in that province. This data is collected monthly and published annually. After the data collection, ArcGis-Pro was used to create the heat map of the Electricity Usage using a following equation. E_t is the Electricity usage of the respected area in year t, and E_{t-1} electricity usage of the respected area in year t – 1.

Equation 2 Electricity Usage (Created by author)

$$E_u = E_t - E_{t-1}$$

This stage resulted in the selection of 2 case study areas in Urmia County: Cadde Darya and Darre Ghasemloo Regions. In total, four villages were selected from these regions according to the results of stage two. Emamzade and Khajepasha villages from Cadde Darya region, Balanij and Tumatar villages from Darre Ghasemloo Regions. The third stage represents this study's qualitative work and focuses on the stories behind counterurbanization in the selected rural areas at stage two.

3.4 Third stage: Interviews

This step is based on the qualitative portion of our research, which consists of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 48 migrants (aged 28 to 87) who departed Urmia for rural areas in West Azerbaijan territory when the pandemic began in 2020. The interviews took place in Emamzade and Khajepasha villages from the Cadde Darya region, Balanij and Tumatar villages from the Darre Ghasemloo Regions

Interviewees were recruited by utilizing personal networks and connections in the area (i.e., purposeful sampling). In some cases, some respondents recommended other migrants with comparable counter-urban experiences, and a snowball sampling technique was utilized to locate migrants (e.g., Gkartzios 2013). In the summer of 2023, the interviews were conducted. They lasted anywhere from twenty to forty minutes.

The interviewees were asked to briefly discuss the impact of the pandemic on their lives, their experiences with counterurbanization, and their quality of life before and following the relocation.

The primary topics discussed in the interviews are listed below:

1. Migrants' living conditions
2. The reasons behind their migration
3. The challenges they face
4. Their living conditions during Covid-19
5. Their relations with locals
6. How long do they stay in rural areas during a year
7. If they are new to the area or if they have some origins/existing links

The interviews were not limited to just these topics because of the nature of the purposeful and snowball sampling method and open-ended questions. Every interview was recorded, transcribed, and translated from Turkish or Farsi into English. An examination of the transcripts led to the identification of the recurring themes that are discussed in the next chapter.

3.5 Methodological Reflections

Most studies on counterurbanisation follow a centripetal model where counterurbanisation is studied in the rural context or at the destination (Gkartzios 2013; Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022b, 2022a). This study also focuses on the destinations of the migrants. The interviews were placed in the rural context selected from stage two and primarily focused on why migrants moved to rural areas and the impact of COVID-19 on their decisions. The interviews took place in 4 different rural regions outside Urmia City, with ten interviews from each region and two discussion groups with four people containing the stakeholders.

In addition, when examining counterurbanization, the researchers refrained from concentrating on specific rural areas—defined as such by Iranian municipalities. While several interviewees stated that they now reside in a rural area, commonly referred to as a hamlet, this was not the case for all of them. All of the interviewees did, however, concur that they had moved to broadly defined rural areas, which proved to be a more useful contrast in simple terms between the Urmia and the villages in the Iranian context. The interviewees primarily focused on the distinctions between the city and the rural and their desire to increase their quality of life.

3.6 The Case Studies (Iran)

Iran is divided into provinces or *ostans*, further divided into *shahrestans*, referred to hereafter as counties. Since 2006, the number of provinces has not changed significantly between censuses, while county boundaries have been subject to significant modifications. Migration measurements are sensitive to the number of geographical units. Therefore, comparisons between censuses must be made cautiously, even though these revisions are intended to reflect changes in settlement patterns and population increase.

According to Figure 1, 31 provinces of Iran were divided into five major regions by the Ministry of Interior in 2014 according to their physical proximity and sociocultural similarities. These regions are currently used in Iran for administrative purposes, although

not being recognized by the constitution. Although the western border regions of Iran generally have better levels of development than the eastern region, both the eastern and western border regions are generally less privileged and have worse socioeconomic situations than the rest of the country. The socioeconomic development in the north and center is higher, particularly in Tehran, Isfahan, and Semnan.

Diverse degrees of urbanization coexist with these socioeconomic disparities. The provinces with the most immense proportions of rural residents are Sistan and Baluchistan, Golestan, Hormozgan, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, West Azerbaijan, and North Khorasan (AMAR 2016). On the other hand, the provinces with the lowest percentage of rural residents include Qom, Tehran, Alborz, Isfahan, Yazd, and Semnan (AMAR 2016). A high concentration of people in Tehran and other provincial cities typifies Iran's population settlement. In decreasing order, the provinces with the highest population densities are Tehran, Alborz, Gilan, Mazandaran, and Qom.

In contrast, the provinces in the east of the nation with the lowest densities are Semnan, South Khorasan, Yazd, Sistan Baluchistan, and Kerman. Furthermore, in 2016, the eight biggest cities in Iran were home to over one-third of the country's population, which had increased by more than ten times since 1956 (AMAR 2016). With almost three million residents, Mashhad, the capital of the Razavi Khorasan province, located close to the Afghan border, is the second most populous city. Isfahan, the provincial capital of the same name, is home to around two million people. Alborz province, which borders Tehran, has 1.6 million people living in its capital city of Karaj, the fourth largest and a satellite of Tehran. The capital city of the province of Qom, located south of Tehran, bears the same name. The city has grown into an industrial hub because of its proximity to the Iranian capital and longstanding reputation as a premier hub for Shia learning. With 1.2 million residents, it is currently the seventh-biggest city in the nation.

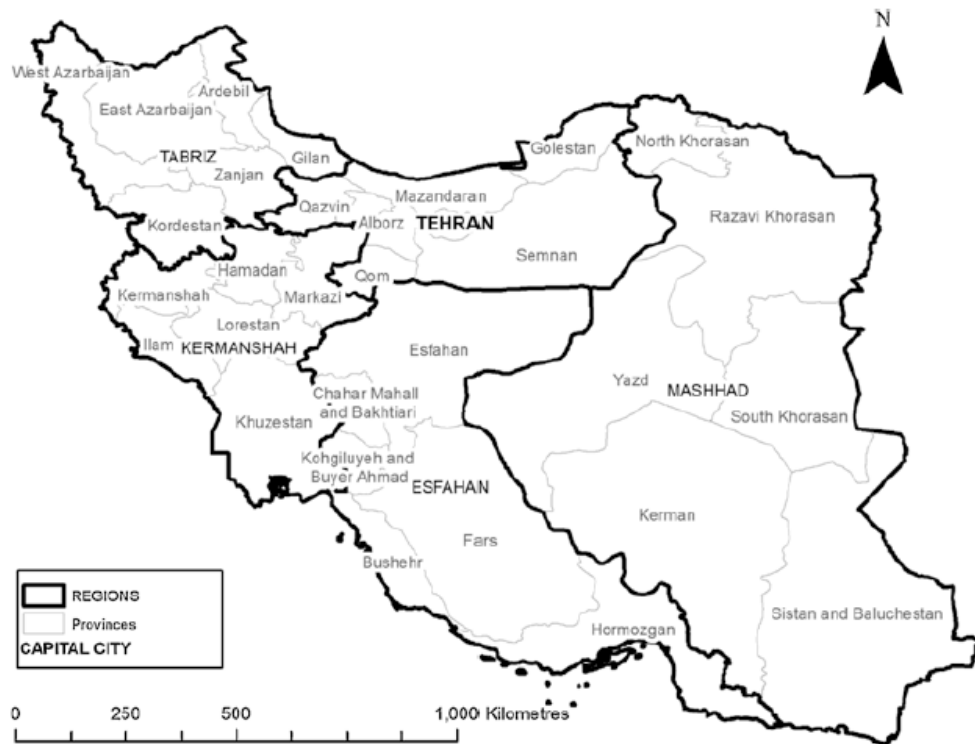


Figure 2 Provinces Administrative Division in Iran (R. Sadeghi, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Shahbazin 2020)

3.7 West Azerbaijan Province (WAP)

With 3,265,219 people living in West Azerbaijan Province (WAP) as of 2016 (AMAR 2016), it has a total size of about 4,705/316 km² (including the area around Urmia Lake). West Azerbaijan Province is one of the most significant areas in Iran in terms of natural, cultural, and historical features, and it has long been a popular travel destination (Omarzadeh et al. 2022). Figure 3 shows the topography of WAP; this province has an average altitude of roughly 2,097 meters; its southwest and southeast districts have the lowest at 609 meters and the highest at 3,600 meters. This province's natural features provide opportunities for mountaineering and other related activities, as well as views of a hilly region with diverse landforms (mountains, plains, valleys, lakes, etc.). The humid air currents of the Atlantic and Mediterranean Seas impact this province's climatic features. In certain winters, the temperature is downward due to the entrance of

cold air masses from the northern regions (www.irimo.ir). This province is also impacted by a variety of climates, with the majority of its areas falling under the humid, dry, and Mediterranean climatic categories. 976 km of the province is located along the political borders of the Islamic Republic of Iraq, which makes sense given its proximity to Iraq, Turkey, and the Republic of Azerbaijan. In the meantime, its northern border with the Republic of Azerbaijan stretches for approximately 149 kilometers along the Aras River. Its western border with Iraq is around 252 km, and its northern border with Turkey is approximately 566 km. According to the national divisions 2015, West Azerbaijan Province has 17 inner cities, 40 suburbs, 42 medium-sized cities, 113 rural areas, 3669 villages, 3040 inhabited, and 629 uninhabited.

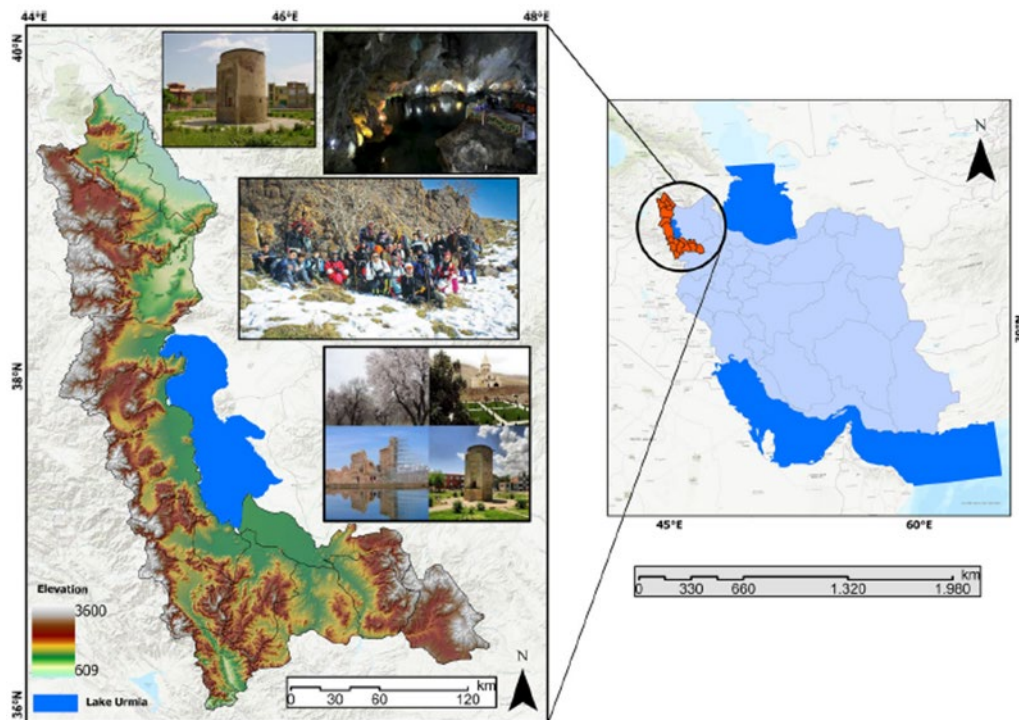


Figure 3 Topography of WAP (Omarzadeh et al. 2022)

3.7.1 History

Based on excavations at sites like Tepe Hasanlu, WAP had permanent settlements as early as the sixth millennium B.C. In 1958, a renowned Golden Vase was discovered in Hasanlu. Tepe Hajji Firuz, the site of some of the oldest indications of wine production in history, is located in the province. Another important location is Gooy Tepe, where an 800 BC metal plaque depicting a scene from the Epic of Gilgamesh was discovered (Voigt 1983).

Such remnants and the UNESCO World Heritage site at the Sasanian compound of Takht-i-Suleiman demonstrate the province's strategic significance and turbulent millennium-long past. With 169 locations listed by the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation, the province is home to many historical attractions—most of these sites are located in different rural areas.

Regarding demography, there are no official statistics on the ethnic or linguistic makeup of WAP. Most of the province's population consists of Azerbaijanis and Kurds, with smaller populations of Armenians, Assyrians, and Jews.

3.7.2 Population

According to the 2016 census data, 65% of the WAP residents live in inner and suburban areas, 18% in other metropolitan regions and medium-sized cities, and 17% in minor and rural areas. Table (2) shows the population of inner cities in 2016.

Table 1 Inner Cities Population

Cities	Population (2016)
Urmia	736,224
Khoy	198,845
Bukan	193,501
Mahabad	168,393
Miandoab	134,425

Cities	Population (2016)
Salmas	92,811
Piranshahr	91,515
Naqadeh	81,598
Takab	49,677
Maku	46,581
Sardasht	46,412
Shahin Dezh	43,131
Oshnavieh	39,801
Qarah Zia od Din	26,767
Showt	25,381

Source: (AMAR 2016)

3.8 Urmia

Figure (4) shows the administrative divisions within the WAP. Our case studies are located in Urmia's inner city. Urmia City lies at an altitude of 1,330 meters (4,360 ft) above sea level along the Shahar River on the Urmia Plain. Lake Urmia, one of the world's largest salt lakes, lies to the east of the city, and the border with Turkey lies to the west.

Urmia is the 10th most populous city in Iran. At the 2006 census, its population was 577,307 in 153,570 households (AMAR 2006). The following census 2011 counted 667,499 people in 197,749 households (AMAR 2011). The latest census in 2016 showed a population of 736,224 people in 225,050 households (AMAR 2016). Most of the city's residents are Azerbaijanis, with a large minority of Kurds and fewer Assyrians, Armenians, and Persian speakers.

The city is the trading center for a fertile agricultural region where fruits and tobacco are grown. Even though the majority of the residents of Urmia are Muslims, the Christian history of Urmia is well-preserved and is especially evident in the city's many churches and cathedrals.



Figure 4 Administrative Divisions of Inner Cities within the WAP (Afarakhte 2015)

Figure (5) shows our case studies on the West side of Urmia County. This area is divided into two regions: Cadde Darya, which is close to Urmia Lake, and Ghasemloo. These regions contain 120 villages and are considered the agricultural center of Urmia County. In the next section, I will dive deeper into these regions and talk about the upper-hand plans concerning them.

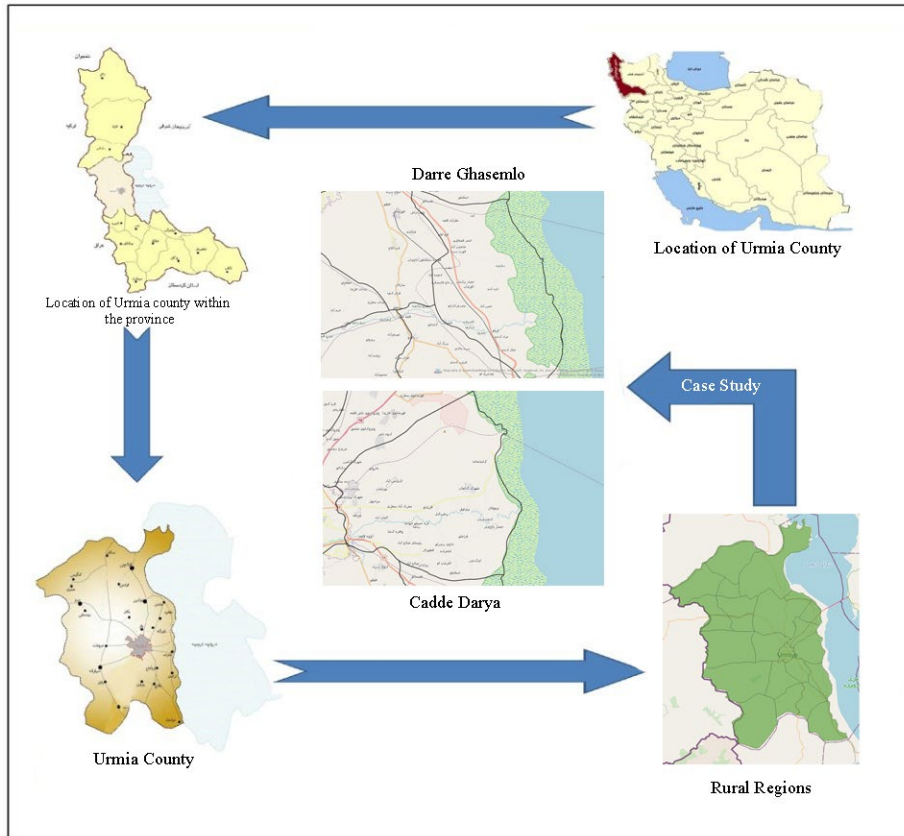


Figure 5 Case Studies (Created by author)

3.8.1 Cadde Darya

This region is located on the east side of Urmia. It is one of the main agricultural regions and the main producer of grapes. In total, it has 43 rural areas. Emamzadeh and Khajepasha villages are the biggest rural areas in the country. Most of the residents in this area are locals or people who have their origin here. One of the vital roads for WAP (Shahid Kalantari) is located in this area, which connects Urmia city with Tabriz. Overall, this region is one of the critical regions for Urmia County in terms of agriculture and rural housing.

The Emamzade villages' growth is organic, unplanned, and irregular. How the blocks are arranged in these areas causes traffic nodes and the complexity of accesses. As indicated in figure 6, the number of blocks in the range is 15, named in the order of Latin

letters. The smallest area of the blocks is block K, with an area of 101.43 square meters; the largest is block L, with an area of 30931.74 square meters. Block L covers 20% of the total area of the range. Block F contains less than 0.1%. The total area of the blocks is 148822.54 square meters. The average area of the blocks is equal to 9921.49.

The total number of plots in the Emamzadeh villages is 436. The number of fine-grained plots with an area of less than 400 square meters is 288, which includes 53% of the total number of plots. The number of coarse-grained plots with an area of more than 1000 square meters is 49, including 9% of the total number of plots. The area of the smallest plot is equal to 150 square meters. The area of the largest plot is 8671.08 square meters. The plots' average area is 71766.27 square meters.

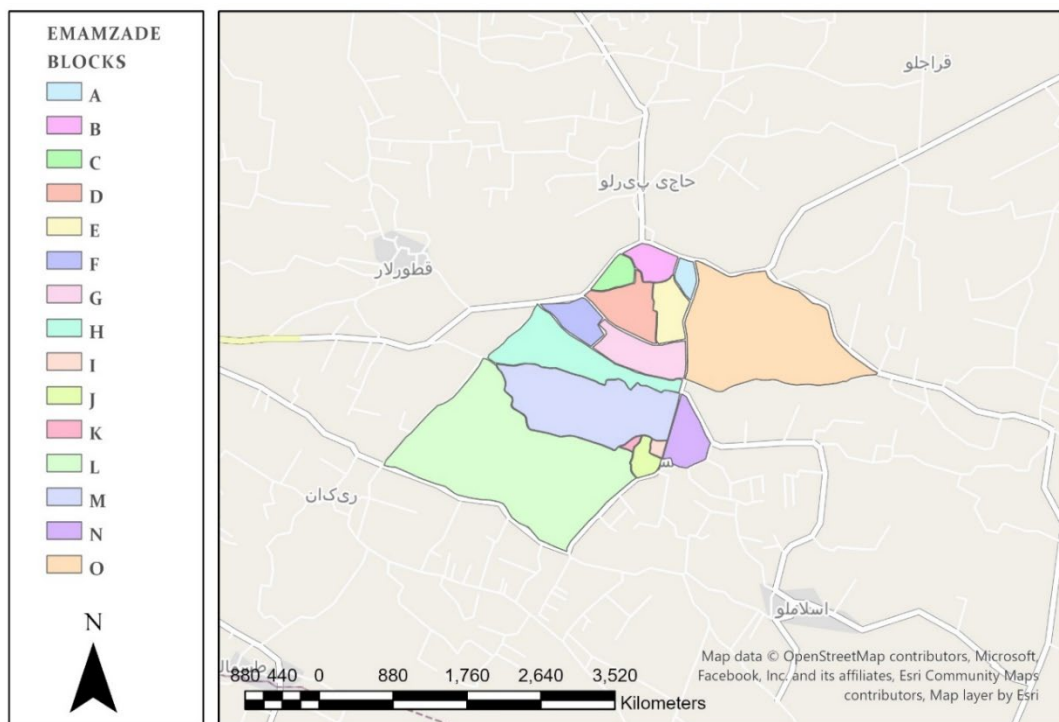


Figure 6 Emamzadeh Villages' Blocks (Created by author)

Emamzadeh village has shown a significant increase in population in the last 15 years. The block population density is calculated using equation (3) using the data available in the Land Preparation Plan (Development 2018) of Urmia County. The results (Figure 7) show that block K, the smallest block in size, is the only block with a

population density of 225. Blocks D and M have an average density of about 98. The average density of the blocks is equal to 113.6. The center of the area has a low population density since it is mainly used for agriculture. In blocks L, O and H, the population density is lower than expected due to villa houses with low occupancy levels.

$$\text{Block Population Density} = \frac{\text{The population of the Block}}{\text{Area of the Block}}$$

Equation 3 Pop Density

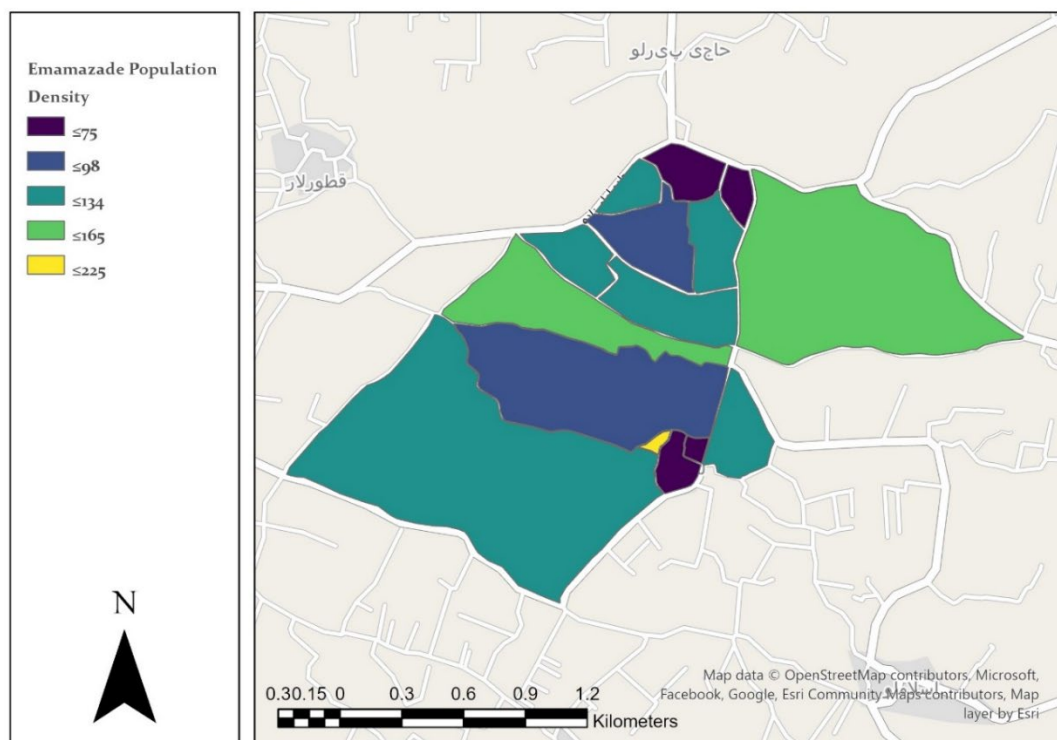


Figure 7 Imamzade villages' Pop Density (Created by the author using data from Amar, 2016)

On the other hand, according to Figure 8, Khajepasha village has ten blocks. The smallest area of the blocks is block E, with an area of 98.03 square meters; the largest is block J, with an area of 40931.74 square meters. Block J covers 52% of the total area of the range. Block E contains less than 0.1%. The total area of the blocks is 78822.54 square meters.

The total number of plots in the Khajepasha village is 336. The number of fine-grained plots with an area of less than 400 square meters is 188, which includes 53% of the total number of plots. The number of coarse-grained plots with an area of more than 1000 square meters is 30, including 9% of the total number of plots.

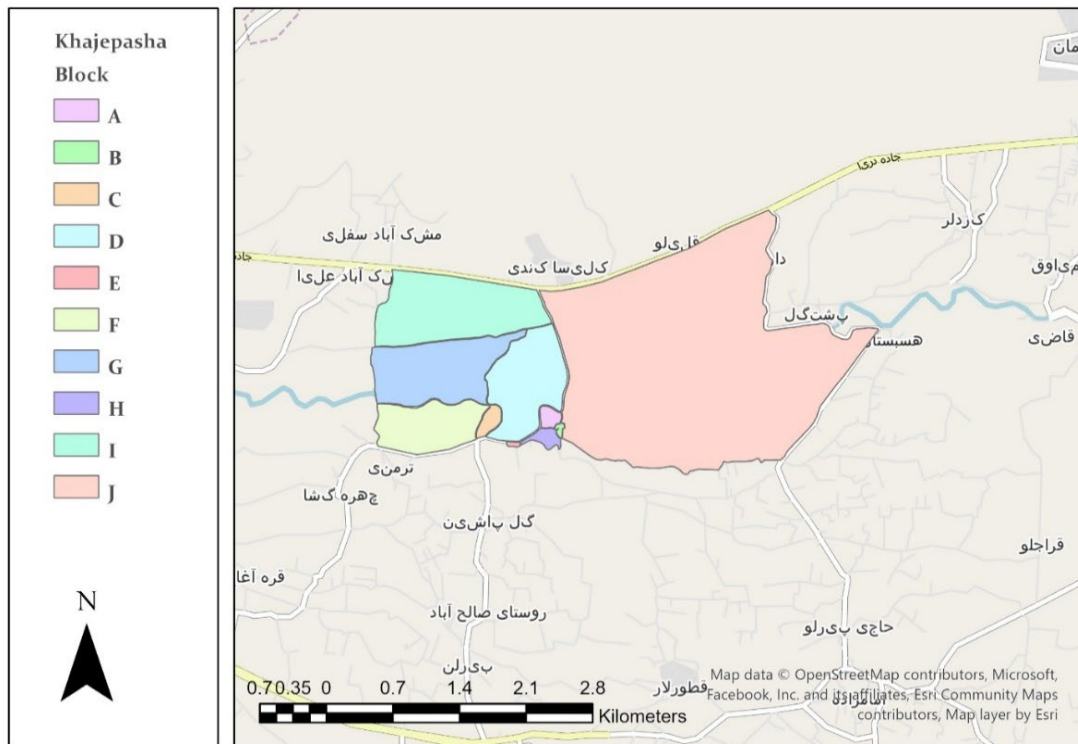


Figure 8 Khajepasha Villages' Blocks (Created by the author)

Regarding population density (Figure 9), Khajepasha village has slightly increased in the last 15 years. This village is categorized as an agricultural zone in the Land preparation plan (Development 2018), so it is unsurprising to see low-density blocks. The results show that block E, the smallest block in size, is the only block with a population density of 180. Block J has an average density of about 98. The average density of the blocks is equal to 125.7. The population density of the other blocks varies between 84 and 168.

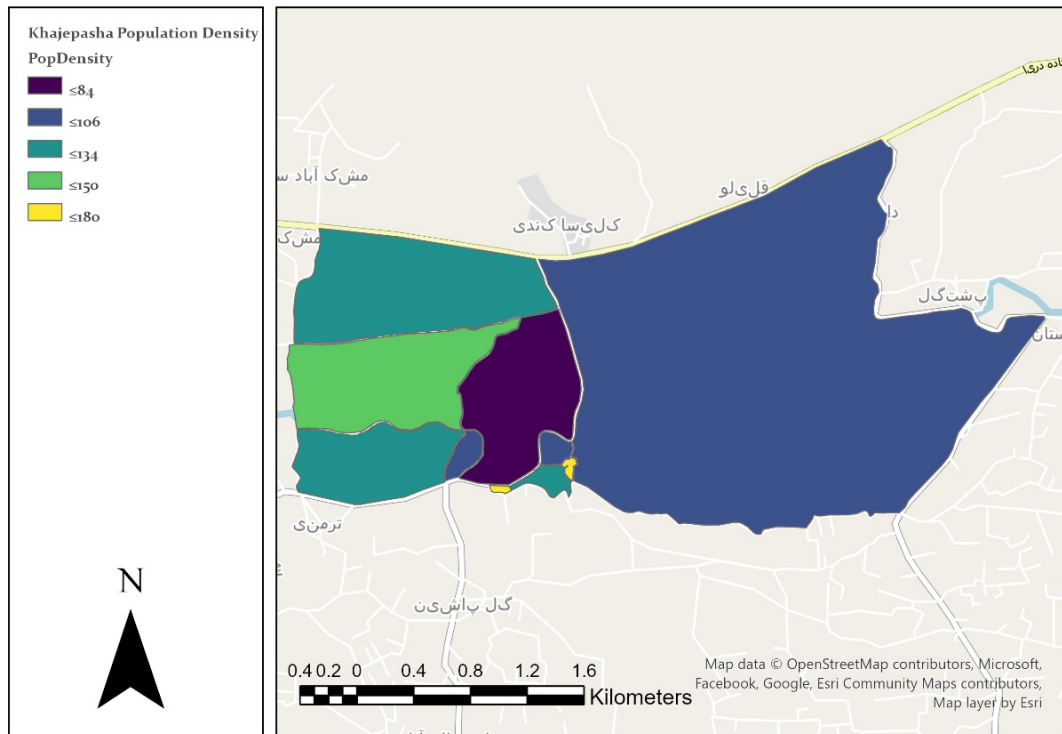


Figure 9 Khajepasha Villages' Pop Density (Created by the author using data from Amar, 2016)

3.8.2 Darre Ghasemlo

This region is located on the southeast side of Urmia. This region is known for its agriculture and is the main producer of apples in Urmia County. In total, it has 32 rural areas. Blanj and Tumatar villages are the biggest rural areas in this region. Most of the residents in this area are locals or people who have their origin here. This region connects Urmia city to Oshnavie, which is one of the biggest cities of the WAP. This section will examine the Blanj and Tumatar villages in terms of land distribution and population density.

At first, the Balanj villages' growth was unplanned and irregular; however, their organic growth recently changed due to its location. The blocks are arranged in this area Alongside the main road. The number of blocks (Figure 10) in the range is 8, named in the order of Latin letters. The smallest area of the blocks is block F, with an area of 201.53 square meters; the largest is block H, with an area of 21531.71 square meters. Block H

covers 28% of the total area of the range. Block F contains less than 2%. The total area of the blocks is 76898.96 square meters. The average area of the blocks is equal to 9612.37 square meters.

The total number of plots in the Balanij villages is 236. The number of fine-grained plots with an area of less than 400 square meters is 88, which includes 37% of the total number of plots. The number of coarse-grained plots with an area of more than 1000 square meters is 19, including 8% of the total number of plots. The area of the smallest plot is equal to 150 square meters. The area of the largest plot is 971.08 square meters. The plots' average area is 325.84 square meters.



Figure 10 Balanij Villages' Blocks (Created by the author)

Balanij village has shown a significant increase in population in the last 15 years. The block population density is calculated using equation (3) using the data available in the Land Preparation Plan (Development 2018) of Urmia County. The results (Figure 11) show that block K, the smallest block in size, is the only block with a population density of 225. Block H has an average density of about 84. The average density of the blocks is

equal to 104.1. Block H has a low population density since it is mainly used for agriculture.

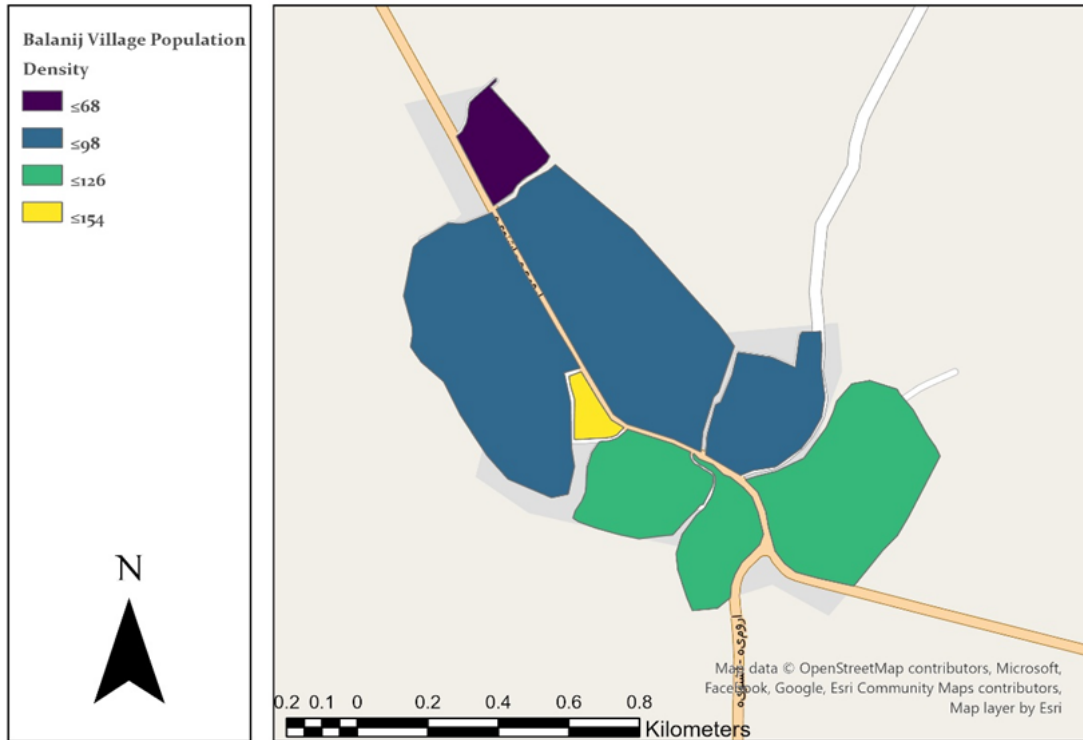


Figure 11 Balanij Villages' Pop Density (Created by the author using data from Amar, 2016)

On the other hand, according to the figure 12, Tumatar village has 6 blocks. The smallest area of the blocks is block A, with an area of 560.03 square meters; the largest is block D, with an area of 15234.74 square meters. Block D covers 42% of the total area of the range. Block E contains less than 1.5%. The total area of the blocks is 36273.19 square meters.

The total number of plots in the Tumatar village is 136. The number of fine-grained plots with an area of less than 400 square meters is 48, which includes 35% of the total number of plots. The number of coarse-grained plots with an area of more than 1000 square meters is 14, including 10% of the total number of plots.

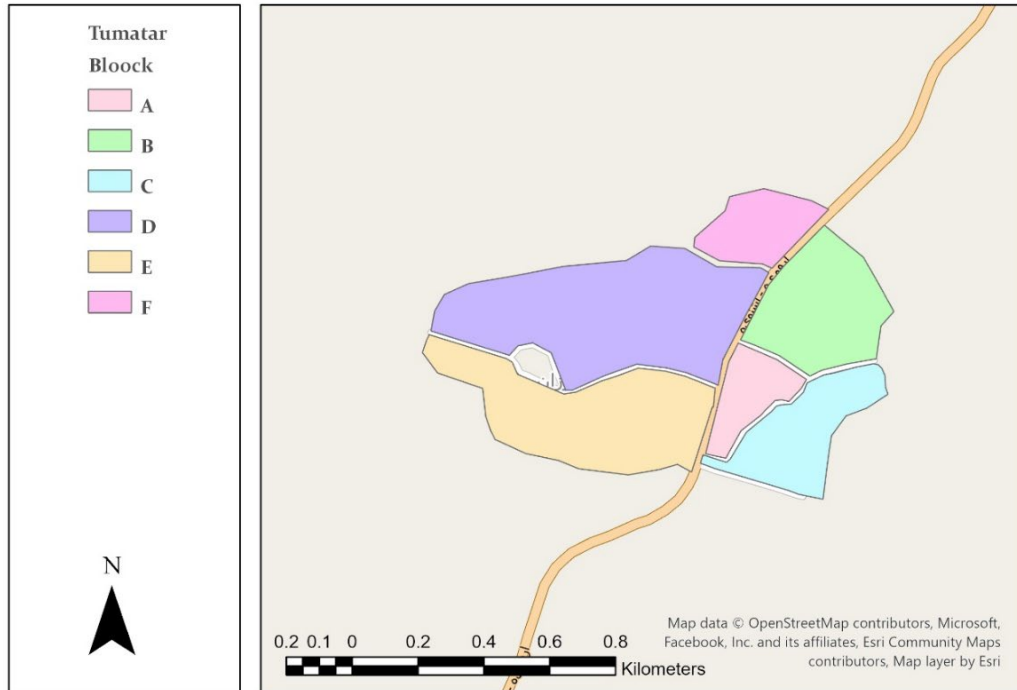


Figure 12 Tumatar Villages' Blocks (Created by the author)

Regarding population density (Figure 13), Tumatar village has increased in the last 15 years. The results show that block A, the smallest block in size, is the only block with a population density of 221. Block D has an average density of about 114. The average density of the blocks is equal to 134.3. The population density of the other blocks varies between 89 and 160.

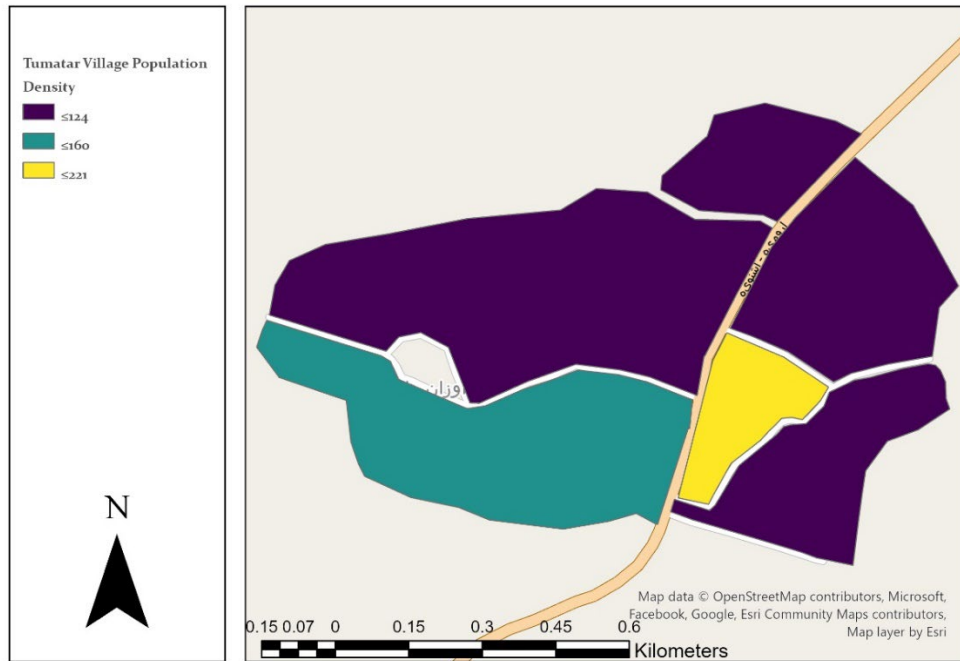


Figure 13 Balanij Villages' Pop Density (Created by the author using data from Amar, 2016)

3.9 Upper-Hand Plans (Land Preparation Plan)

According to the WAP land preparation plan for 2018, to use the larger parts of the region adequately and prevent the texture's fineness, separating the lands resulting from the consolidation of the existing fields is prevented. Also, to preserve the agricultural area, constructing new buildings with an area of more than 35 square meters is prohibited. Complying with all non-residential uses in the comprehensive plan (service spaces and road network) is mandatory. All legal owners or public and private sector builders who want to build 3 floors or more buildings in the agriculture area must apply for a permit (Development 2018).

Urban and rural socioeconomic system changes suggest new interactions, including street constructions, texture compaction and new activities. These streets are aimed at creating a connection between the main entrances of the city and then creating an internal connection within the agricultural context. The construction of this category

of streets usually establishes access to the main urban activities, such as administrative and commercial centers (Development 2018).

3.9.1 Fifth Spatial Development Plan (National Level)

The Fifth Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran started from 2018 to 2026. Although this plan didn't directly talk about supporting the urban-to-rural movement, according to its articles, it indirectly this movement. Some of these articles are as follows:

Article 30 of the mentioned plan states that the government must take the following measures in the urban and rural civil and housing sectors to give identity to the cities and villages, strengthen construction, move towards sustainable development goals and improve the living environment in villages (Majles Shoraye Eslami 2018).

Giving an identity to the body of the villages, preserving and expanding the culture of architecture and urban development, organizing the provision of urban services through reviving worn-out and inappropriate urban tissues and preventing the expansion of the cities based on the comprehensive urban plan and organizing marginal tissues in the cities of the country with the approach of empowering the residents of these textures (Majles Shoraye Eslami 2018).

Securing and strengthening villages and cities to reduce human and economic losses caused by unexpected events, the government is obliged to start the reconstruction and renovation of the old structures of cities and villages and to strengthen the existing buildings against earthquakes by using the internal and external resources mentioned in paragraph "b" of Article (12) of this plan and to adopt arrangements that within ten years at most related to this issue should be terminated in the whole country (Majles Shoraye Eslami 2018).

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development can purchase suitable properties needed in agricultural and unsuitable rural contexts at the current expert price to implement the tenancy law, assign the ownership fee, and implement other construction projects (Majles Shoraye Eslami 2018).

3.9.2 Fourth Economic Development Plan (National Level)

Regarding the provisions of Article (30) of the Fourth Economic Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to revive the rural contexts, encourage the private and cooperative sectors to build durable, inexpensive and earthquake-resistant residential units and provide housing for low-income households (Majlese Shoraye Eslami 2016). The government is required to take the following actions:

1. Preparation and delivery of urban and rural model houses suitable for economic, cultural, demographic and climatic indicators.
2. Subsidizing the interest of bank facilities for non-builders (private, cooperative and public sectors) in the period of civil participation, with priority in rural contexts and for buyers of residential units in rural contexts during the installment sale period of the bank's shares. The credit for this component is provided in the amount of two hundred and fifty billion (250,000,000,000) Rials (100,000,000 US dollars) from plan number 40912001, included in attachment number (1).

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (National Land and Housing Organization) is obliged to implement the plan on encouraging the construction and supply of rental housing units approved in 1997, at least thirty-five percent (35%) of its income sources from the sale of land (the subject of paragraph (f) Article (30) of the Law of the Fourth Economic, Social and Cultural Development Program of the Islamic Republic of Iran) and returned funds in the amount of at least three hundred billion (300,000,000,000) rials to purchase real estate and constructions, prepare and building rental housing units in rural contexts equal to Ministry of Housing and Urban Development's plan (construction and improvement regulations) and approved projects will cost (Majlese Shoraye Eslami 2016).

The Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran is obliged to implement Part (5), Clause (d) of Article (30) of the Fourth Plan of Economics of Iran from the first of 2014.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (Civil and Urban Improvement Organization) permitted the implementation of renovation projects of dilapidated structures in the approved plans, in compliance with the conditions of Part (3) Clause (A) of Note (1): To issue and sell participation bonds in the amount of five hundred billion (500,000,000,000) riyals (200,000,000 US dollars), which will be implemented after the

exchange of the country's management and planning organization. With the approval of the City Council, it will be submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers upon the proposal of the Ministry of Interior. Municipalities can issue bonds for investment in the renovation of worn-out structures in rural areas up to five hundred billion (500,000,000,000) rials (200,000,000 US dollars), with their guarantee for the repayment of principal and interest (Majlese Shoraye Eslami 2016).

The royalties of existing infrastructure services in worn-out structures (water, electricity, gas, telephone) will be reserved after renovation without receiving new royalties. It is allowed to allocate up to three hundred million (300,000,000) dollars from the financial credits of Clause (c) of note (2) exclusively for the renovation of worn-out urban structures (Majlese Shoraye Eslami 2016).

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is obliged to provide twenty percent (20%) of the apartments and residential houses for rent under the condition of ownership to the families of the martyrs, veterans and freedmen based on the introduction of the Martyr Foundation and the Affairs of the Martyrs (Majlese Shoraye Eslami 2016).

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter introduces the methodology and case study. The methodology of this study is divided into three stages. The first stage contains the quantitative secondary analysis of census data at the national level. The second stage was selecting a case study, and stage three was qualitative interviews. I analyze the migration to rural areas using census data collected from Iran's statistics. After that, electricity usage was used to select the best case study in Urmia County. Finally, the snowball method was used to select the interviewees.

First, the population distribution of Iran is examined in the case study. After that, the history, population, topography and demography of Urmia County were discussed. Then, the four case studies selected from stage two were Emamzadeh, Khajepasha, Balanij, and Tumatar villages, and their population density and blocks were analyzed. In the last 15 years, all four villages increased their population density. Regarding blocks, Emamazadeh village has the most, and Tumatar village has the least blocks among the

four villages. Finally, the upper-hand plans concerning rural-to-urban migration are discussed in this chapter. Although none of the plans mentioned counterurbanization or urban-to-rural migration directly, they support this movement indirectly through different regulations or giving credit to renovations in rural areas.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

First, we examined the overall trend of counterurbanization and internal migration patterns using available migration census data (between 1997 and 2017) before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Iran's 31 provinces. Although the census data will not tell us the whole story behind the counterurbanization, it will give us some speculations about it. According to ISNA (news agency), in 2017, most of the rural areas in Iran showed net migration gain, and 432 rural areas, which had less than 20 households in 2012 in the new statistical report (2017), had more than 30 households.

Second, I focus on Urmia County in the west Azerbaijan Province. Urmia County is one of the agricultural cities of Iran and has 698 villages. I used Electricity Usage as a tool to find the villages in which counterurbanization may happen. For the third step, to capture the entire story behind counterurbanization, I will interview the residents of the selected villages as our case study (Khajepasha, Emamzade, Tumatar, and Blani).

4.2 Step 1: Internal Migration in Iran

I examined internal migration patterns before and during the COVID-19 pandemic according to municipality types. Table 3 shows the in-migration, out-migration. Tehran, West Azerbaijan, and South Khorasan Provinces experienced an increase in net migration in the 1997-2007 and 2007-2017 period. This means that more people have relocated to these provinces than people who have relocated from them to the rest of Iran.

Table 2 In-migration and out-migration trends in Iran

Provinces	Migratio n from city to rural areas (2007- 2017)	Migratio n from rural areas to the city (2007- 2017)	Migratio n from city to rural areas (1997- 2007)	Migratio n from rural areas to the city (1997- 2007)	Urban to Rural Migration Ratio (2007- 2017)	Urban to Rural Migration Ratio (1997- 2007)
East Azerbaijan	49844	51291	108567	98198	0.01274896	0.030779354
West Azarbayejan	185566	60233	154132	117901	0.056831104	0.054429389
Ardebil	16157	25450	42743	52815	0.01271784	0.035325728
Esfahan	60935	66579	85605	127073	0.01189939	0.019458658
Alborz	33552	34619	-	-	0.01236986	-
Ilam	12520	9952	19106	19887	0.02158033	0.034089611
Bushehr	43597	23614	52896	33841	0.03747378	0.06104629
Tehran	132781	128691	266631	470376	0.01000789	0.02374565
Chaharmaha l & Bakhtiari	9189	23718	24298	31979	0.00969546	0.028796469
South Khorasan	29854	30742	27385	36292	0.038827	0.0455985
Khorasan-e- Razavi	123037	100394	156236	184143	0.01913037	0.028324251
North Khorasan	24622	29976	33513	34935	0.02852767	0.042318134
Khuzestan	45007	43875	95440	88547	0.00899897	0.022763928
Zanjan	20480	36745	35825	36920	0.01936714	0.03799779
Semnan	18054	13384	23331	24241	0.02570477	0.040871705
Sistan & Baluchestan	22662	20667	37762	45885	0.00816645	0.016075442
Fars	62466	105766	126421	129287	0.01287621	0.029952465
Qazvin	21648	27812	36627	54679	0.01748964	0.032478404
Qom	5729	13456	7803	33908	0.00443324	0.007526666
Kordestan	37024	63768	55780	74829	0.02309654	0.039383366
Kerman	38466	32808	53987	77026	0.01215464	0.020886061
Kermanshah	38946	33211	59805	57835	0.01994741	0.032459356
Kohgiluyeh & Boyerahmad	19911	30100	19844	47253	0.02792363	0.031932903
Golestan	46435	35841	73988	55609	0.02484724	0.046444096
Gilan	72794	42879	115435	80612	0.02876442	0.048480448
Lorestan	22069	19458	44723	42217	0.01253458	0.026468795
Mazandaran	94425	36843	138964	78923	0.02875671	0.048033122
Markazi	25746	30622	40856	61194	0.01801081	0.030792282
Hormozgan	27352	34399	43842	35469	0.0153973	0.032109813
Hamedan	30326	36554	50113	62022	0.01744644	0.029925445
Yazd	24768	19835	32349	36154	0.02175431	0.033755877

Source: Calculated by author using (AMAR 2016) data

Figures 14 and 15 show Iran's provinces' in, out, and net migration. The minus value shows that urban-to-rural migration primarily influences net migration. For all of Iran's provinces except West Azerbaijan, the direction of in and out migration patterns decreased in terms of rural areas. West Azerbaijan, Gilan, and Mazandaran provinces experienced a net migration deficit in 1997–2007. This means that more people moved into those provinces' rural areas from urban areas than people who relocated to rural areas in the rest of Iran's provinces. In contrast, West Azerbaijan, Gilan, and Mazandaran provinces experienced urban-to-rural migration gains in 2007-2017, meaning that more people moved into those provinces' rural areas from the urban areas than people who moved in the opposite direction.

However, some changes in internal migration trends can be distinguished from 2007-2017 compared to 1997 -2007. First, the negative trend in net internal migration in the mentioned provinces was more severe from 2007-2017. This means that these provinces lost more people in urban areas. However, only West Azerbaijan provinces show a significant gain in urban-to-rural migration. Second, other provinces' negative net migration trend was milder in 2007-2017 compared to 1997–2007. This type of province thus lost fewer people due to an internal relocation within the province than before 2007.

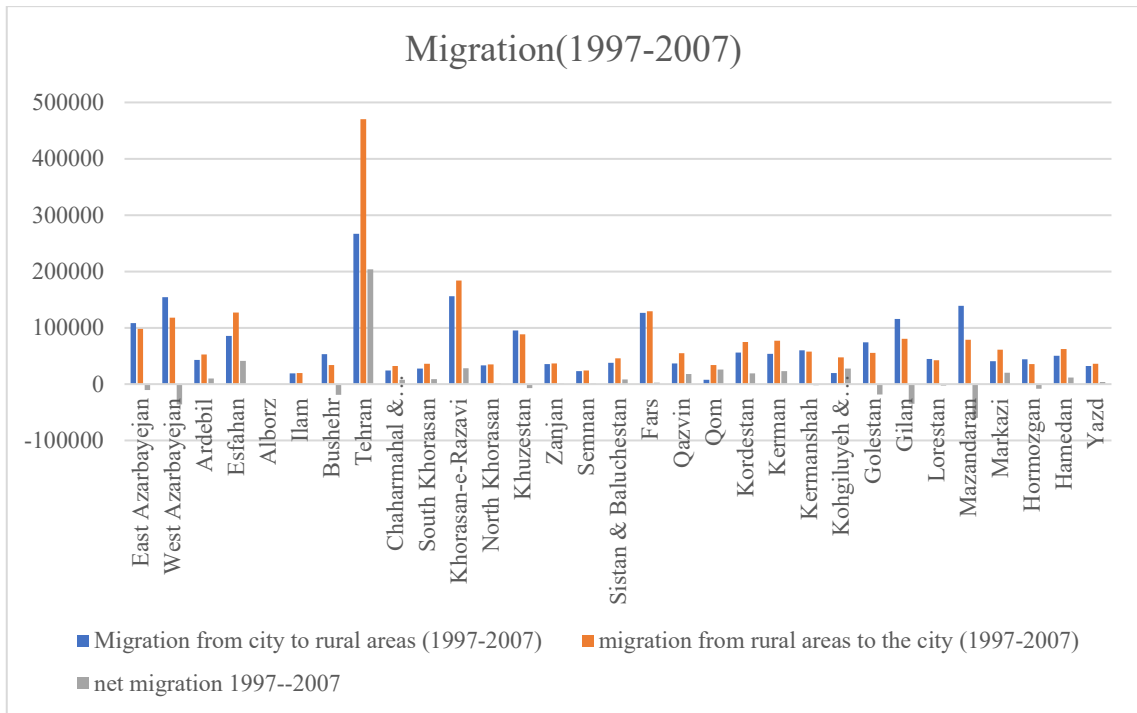


Figure 14 Migration (1997-2007) (Created by the author using data in Table 2)

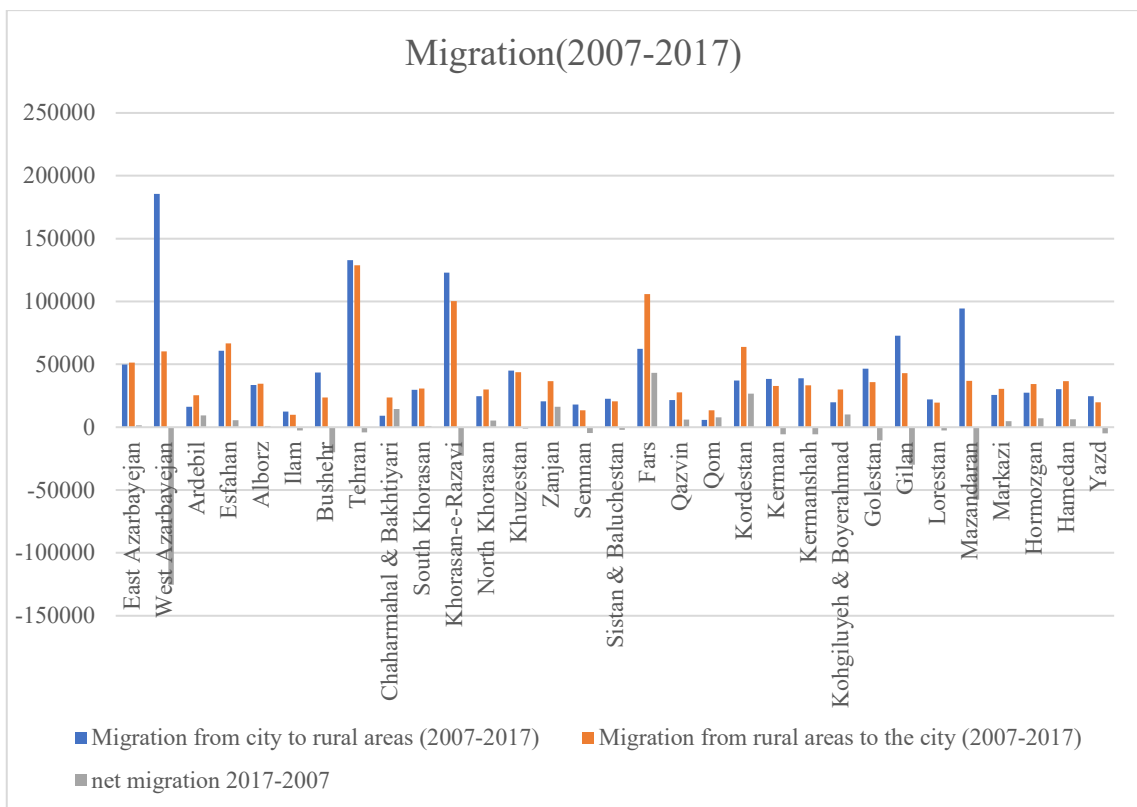


Figure 15 Migration (2007-2017) (Created by the author using data in Table 2)

Figure 16 shows that the West Azerbaijan, Bushehr, Golestan, and Gilan Provinces had the highest Urban to Rural Migration Ratio in 1997-2007 among the 31 Iranian provinces. According to Figure 17, only the West Azerbaijan province's Rural Migration Ratio increased significantly from 2007 to 2017 from the mentioned provinces. All other provinces experienced a significant decrease in terms of Rural Migration Ratio.

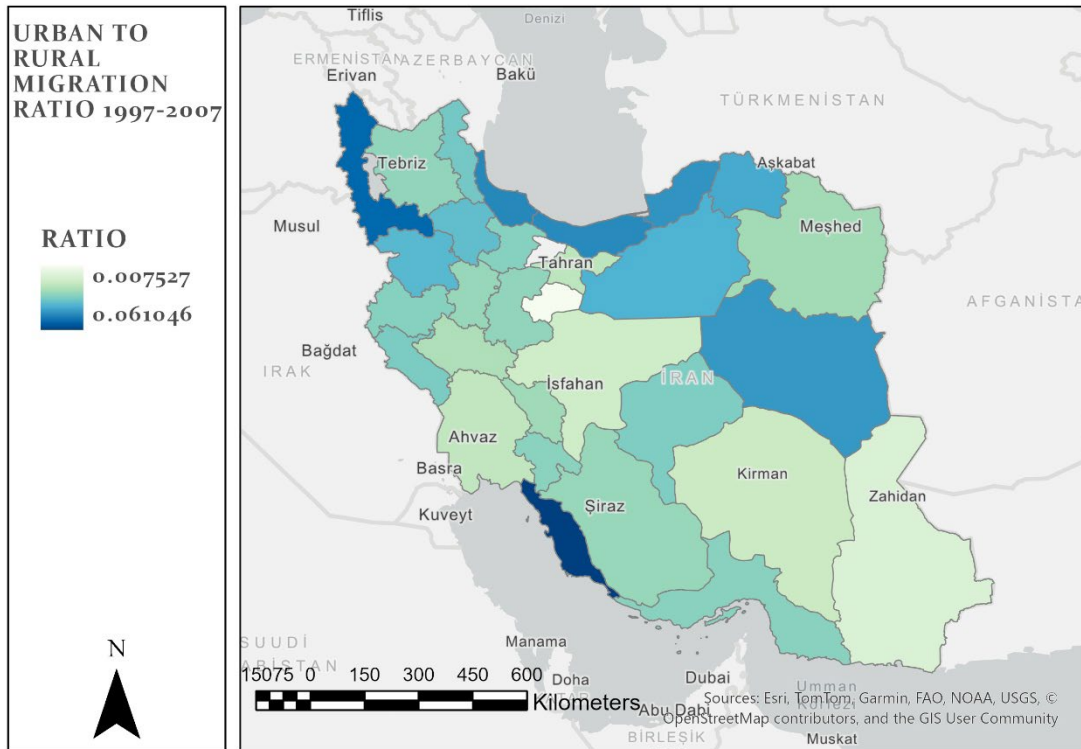


Figure 16 Urban to Rural Migration Ratio (1997-2007) (Created by the author using data in Table 2)

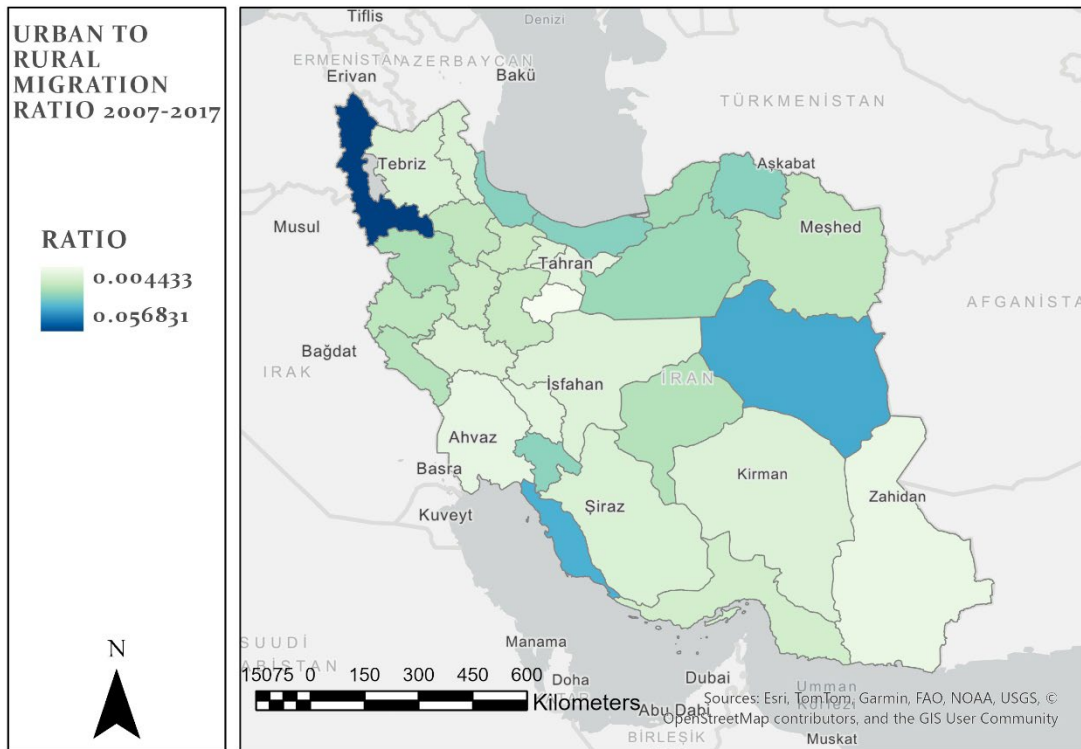


Figure 17 Urban to Rural Migration Ratio (2007-2017) (Created by the author using data in Table 2)

The results of Stage 1 indicate that counterurbanization may be happening in Iran, especially in West Azerbaijan, Bushehr, and South Khorasan provinces. West Azerbaijan province was the only province where the urban-to-rural migration ratio didn't change during the analysis period. West Azerbaijan was selected as our case study for stage 2, in which Electricity Usage is used to find the villages where counterurbanization may happen. Urmia County, the biggest county in this province, is mainly focused on stage 2.

4.3 Stage 2: Selection of suitable villages

At this point, I identified the villages where counterurbanization might occur using electricity usage. One indicator of urban economic growth is the electricity consumed (Panzer and Postiglione 2014). Assuming that possible counterurbanization trends are to blame for the rise in energy consumption, I utilized this technology to

pinpoint the locations of counterurbanization within the chosen Province (West Azerbaijan). This phase encompasses the pre-pandemic (2012–2019), pandemic (2020–2021), and post-pandemic (2022) periods.

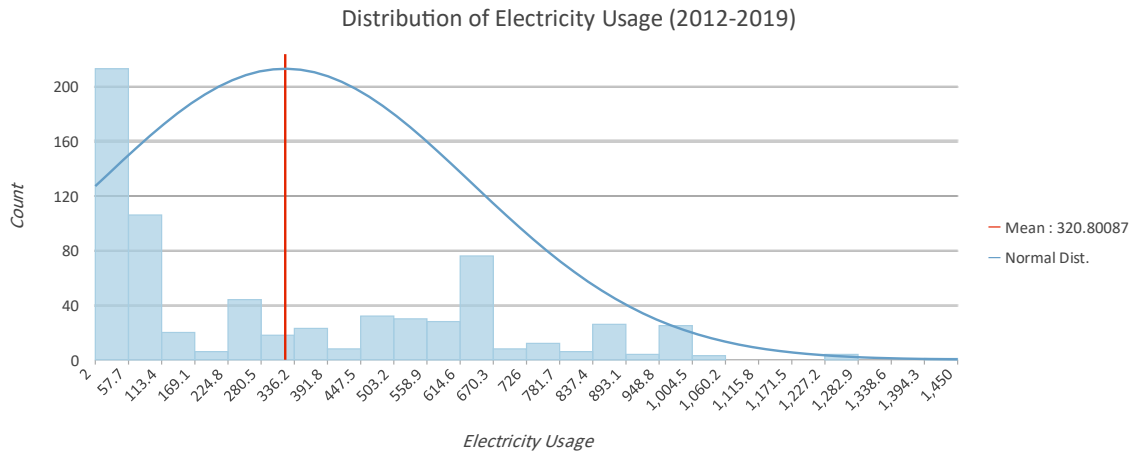


Figure 18 Distribution of Electricity Usage (2012-2019) (Created by the author using data from the energy department)

According to Figure 18, the number of villages that experienced a slight increase (between 2-113.4 KW) in electricity usage between the pre-pandemic 2012–2019 periods is 318 out of 684. However, there was not a significant difference in total electricity usage. The average IEU (increase in electricity usage) in the pre-pandemic period was 320.8 KW. Cadde Daray, Darre Ghasemlo, Sero, and Silvana regions had the most IEU among all regions.

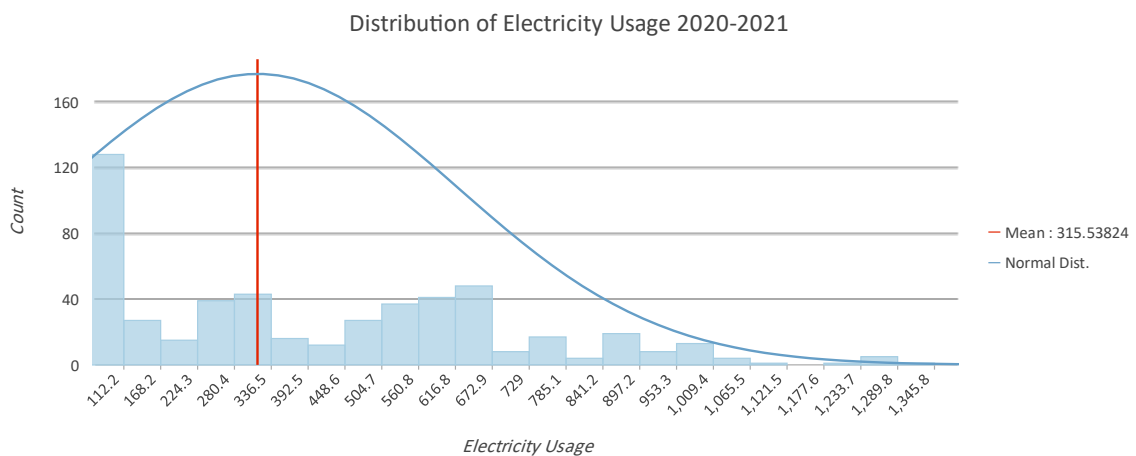


Figure 19 Distribution of Electricity Usage (2020-2021) (Created by the author using data from the energy department)

During the 2020 pandemic (Figure 6), the electricity usage pattern increased in comparison with the pre-pandemic periods, speculating urban to rural migration gain in high-density villages. Core villages such as Emamazade and Khajepasha villages in the Cadde Daray region and Balanij and Tumatar villages in the Darre Ghasemlo region recorded a rise in electricity usage by 18.6% in 2020. It is speculated that these changes resulted in a population gain due to internal migration, representing an increase in annual population loss in Urmia city. However, other rural regions didn't experience a significant increase in electricity usage during the pandemic. The number of villages that experienced a slight increase (between 0-112.2 KW) in electricity usage during the pandemic is 129 KW out of 684 KW. Some regions also experienced decreased electricity usage, suggesting that residents in these areas migrated to the city or other regions, speculating a net migration loss during the pandemic. The average IEU in the pandemic period was 315.5 KW.

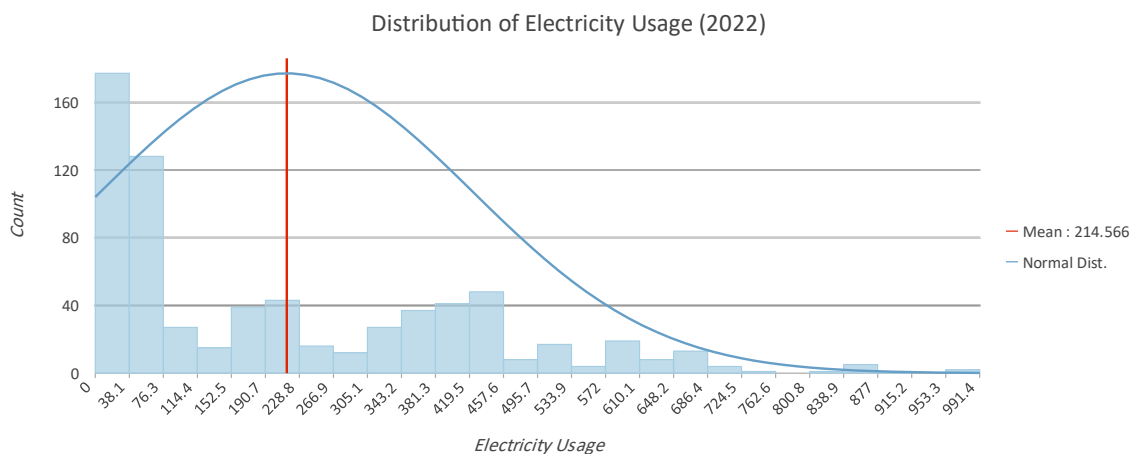


Figure 20 Distribution of Electricity Usage 2022 (Created by the author using data from the energy department)

However, in the post-pandemic period (figure 20), there were three regions in which their electricity usage kept increasing (in comparison with the pandemic): Cadde Darya, Ghasemloo, and Silvana regions; these regions' EUI was positive, suggesting that migrants in these areas preferred to stay in villages rather than returning to the city after the pandemic. The average IEU in the post-pandemic period was 214.5 KW.

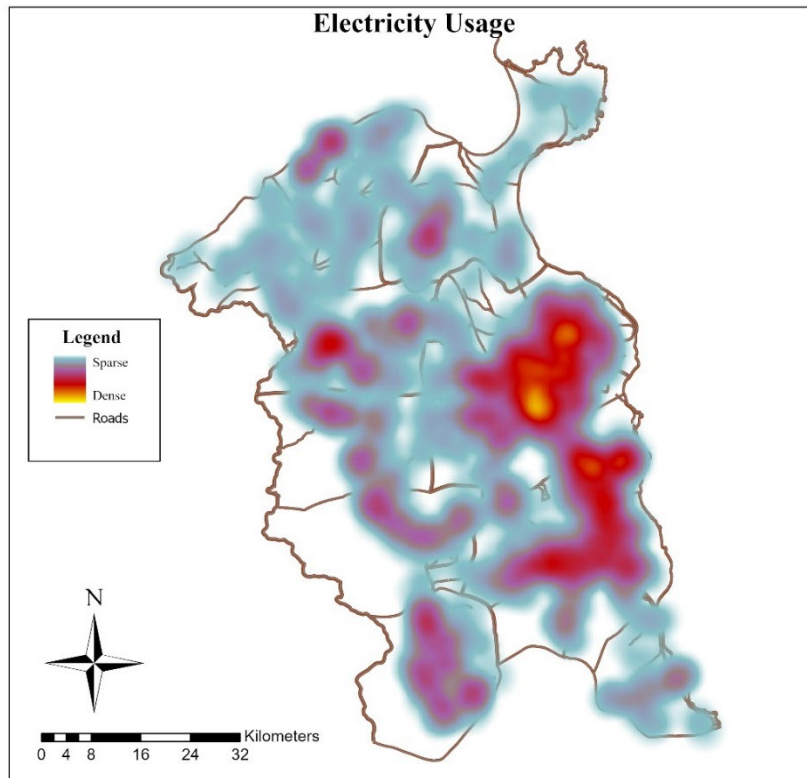


Figure 21 Electricity Usage (Created by the author using data from the energy department)

Figure 21 reveals changes in electricity usage across the urban hierarchy between 2012-2022. Cadde Darya and Ghasemloo regions' electricity usage increased at an average rate of 9%; however, the electricity usage of the Silvana region increased only by 1.5% in this period. As a result of this step to select the best-case study for Step 3, the core villages of Cadde Daray, Emamazade and Khajepasha villages, and Darre Ghasemlo, Balanij and Tumatar villages were selected due to the fact that these regions' electricity usage had increasing pace in pre-pandemic (2012–2019), pandemic (2020–2021), and post-pandemic (2022) periods.

4.4 Stage 3: Interviews

Using the qualitative interviews as a basis, this section investigates a counter-urbanization that occurred in Urmia County during COVID-19. The rationale for these

moves explains the impact of the epidemic on day-to-day activities and, for some respondents, the element of force in their relocation process. Furthermore, the interviews disclose the various ways in which the extended family has assisted in these moves.

This section is divided into three parts: 1) The reason behind their migration to rural areas, 2) The influence of the pandemic on their decision, and 3) Their relations with locals.

4.4.1 Reasons Behind Their Migration

This section explores a counterurbanization in the context of the selected four villages from Step 2, drawing on the qualitative interviews. The motivations behind these relocations include economic problems, the deterioration of urban lifestyles (predominantly associated with environmental issues) and Family relations. Additionally, the interviews reveal that most immigrants have more than one reason for their relocation.

4.4.1.1 Economic Factors

A recurring theme in counterurbanization studies is motivation. Due to the economic collapse during the pandemic, economic concerns dominated the migrants' counterurbanization, according to the interviews:

(Male-37) We had abysmal morale. My employer let me go because of the economic crisis, which resulted in the closure of his business. We understood that our income would not allow us to find another employment. We therefore decided to depart the city due to the extremely high costs there (7)

(Male-29) By the end of 2020, I was out of work. I was about to die from lack of rent. The journey to the city is somewhat tricky. You now understand that finding a new work will not be easy or at a pay that will allow you to lead a normal life if you lose your current one (6)

Some interviewees paired their financial hardships with the possibility of finding work at their destination or launching a new company once the economy improves. A case in point is one of the interviewees who departed the city:

(Male-39) I decided it would be best to return to our roots and begin working on farms, just like my dad did back in the day. I thought my time in the city was running out. I was left with nothing to do and was forced to close our store due to the quarantine. Both work and customers were absent. I would have left, but things transpired more quickly than anticipated (2)

The reasoning espoused by these migrants scarcely reflects counterurbanization movements described as exurbanization or anti-urbanization, whether it be job prospects at the destination or unemployment at the origin (Mitchell 2004). However, according to Gkartzios (2013), it resembles what transpired in Athens during the 2008 financial crisis. The most direct connection between these movements and Mitchell's theory of displaced urbanization is that these migrants relocate to any area that can accommodate their housing and/or employment needs; however, in their own experiences, unemployment or job difficulties are more severe in their place of origin because of the high cost of living there.

4.4.1.2 Environmental problems

Counterurbanization literature frequently discusses reasons for relocating from cities that are anti-urban. Numerous interviewees mentioned the growing traffic issues and pollution in the city; thus, some of these themes were also emphasized in this study. The interviews also demonstrated how quickly these occurrences are changing:

(Female-57) Everyone nowadays has cars. Do you know the problem with traffic congestion in the city? It takes several hours to go from one place to another, and it is indeed quite displeasing out there (3)

(Male- 45)There is incredible air pollution nowadays; almost everybody has an elder in their family who can't go out because of it. Personally, my mother and father are over 70. During the pandemic, we moved to our village. You know how dangerous COVID-19 is for elders. After COVID, we decide to stay here. I

will travel to the city for my work every day and get back here after working hours. We have access to everything we need here (4)

(Female-37) We used to stay in our villa in Emamazade for holidays, but with the pandemic in 2019, we moved there during the quarantine. My husband and I work online from home. Over the last two years, we have consumed organic foods here. After the pandemic, our firm continued the online working model, so we decided to move here permanently (2)

The interviews revealed the frustration some people face sometimes made them move to the countryside permanently after retirement:

(Female-74) Over the last few years, the city has gradually become more painful with everyday traffic and pollution. Sometimes, you need fresh air to breathe a beautiful sunrise you can see when you wake up. To produce your food and consume organic products. When you live in the city for a long time, you forget how peaceful life can be. After we retired in 2014, we moved to the countryside. Also, during the pandemic, we didn't face any difficulties due to the quarantine (6)

The interviewees emphasized that these events are not novel in Iran. Many interviewees mentioned it, but not as a justification for moving.

4.4.1.3 Family Relations

The fact that many migrants either went back to their place of origin or took advantage of the option presented by their partner's extended family living in a rural location highlights the significance of the extended family in these counterurbanization stories:

(Male-39) We came here because my grandparents are here, and we also spend most of our weekends here because we know most of the locals here and have good relations with them. Because of the quarantine, we moved here to live with our grandparents during the pandemic. After spending almost a year here, we decided to buy a house and move here permanently. (5)

The interviewees mentioned a variety of instances of support, ranging from monetary to psychological, from feeding the grandchildren to offering assistance. Some of this support is demonstrated by the quotes that follow:

(Female-32) My husband's family lives here (Tumatar). We both work 8 A.M to 2 P.M (standard working hours for Iranians). We couldn't care for our newborn child; my husband's family now cares for our child while we work in the city. We usually spend three days of the week in the rural area and travel to work from here on the remaining two days in the city. Also, on weekends, we stay here if we don't have any urgent matters in the city. I don't think we could make it out of this situation without my mother in law's help (2)

(Male-34) I lost my job during the quarantine and could not pay my rent in the city, so I moved in with my parents in Blanj and began working on my father's farm. I had a difficult time during the pandemic, and I couldn't have survived without my parents' support (3)

A few interviews also addressed the availability of family housing:

(Male- 48) My origins are the only reason I came here. This is where I'm from. I was raised here, and when my parents died, I felt obligated to look after their possessions (houses, farms, etc.). I didn't move to the province, as they may say, in search of a higher standard of living. I returned to my origins, and I want to make the most of what is rightfully mine (9)

Relocating from other parts of the county as well as from other nations was motivated by family property and extended family relationships:

(Female-67) My parents are a very important factor in returning to Iran. I might have never returned if my family weren't from this area. I would probably not even go to any other place in Iran. I would either stay in Germany. I spend 30 years of my life there. But when I heard that my mother was sick, I had no choice but to come back here (1)

4.4.2 The influence of the pandemic on their decision

The discourses highlight the difficulty in classifying these movements as solely coercive or not. For most migrants interviewed, the urban exodus was presented as a choice, a step to a better life, underpinned by a series of anti-urban motives. For others, the economic difficulties in the city give them no choice but to move. More importantly, perhaps, as the third quote illustrates, these perceptions are dynamic and consequently can change. Most immigrants have more than one motivation to move, but most interviews indicate that the pandemic is vital to their decisions. Some selected quotes are as follows:

(Female- 43) Honestly, no. We were already thinking about moving to our secondary house before the pandemic hit. The reasons were the same: a yard for the kids, a quieter neighborhood, and a better living environment. COVID just made us appreciate our decision more, but it wasn't the main reason(6)

(Male-38) The pandemic made me rethink my priorities. Being stuck in a small apartment in the city with no outdoor space was tough. I wanted a better quality of life, so I moved to a rural area where I could have more room and be closer to nature(9)

(Female-32) The pandemic was a big factor. Remote work allowed us to move to a rural area, and we quickly fell in love with the tranquility and natural beauty. Even now that we can technically return to the city, we prefer the lifestyle here and have decided to stay (7)

Table 2 shows the influence of COVID-19 on immigrants' decisions on whether to stay in the villages after relocation because of COVID-19. From a total of 48 interviews, 15 of them weren't influenced by COVID-19. Thirty-three of them migrated either because of COVID-19 or during the quarantine. Forty interviewees indicated they continued staying in the rural areas after COVID-19.

Although COVID-19 influenced most of the interviewees, in most cases, immigrants who moved to rural areas during the quarantine decided to stay there permanently. It shows the changes that reflect the migrants' feelings about their new living experiences after the relocation, which impacts their overall self-reflection of the counterurbanisation movement (Gkartzios 2013).

Table 3 Influence of the Pandemic on Immigrants' Decision

Motivation	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Environmental</i>	<i>Family</i>
COVID Influence	<i>Factors</i>	<i>problems</i>	<i>Relations</i>
Didn't Influenced by COVID	1	6	8
Migrates Because of the COVID	12	9	12
Stayed After COVID	12	10	18

Source: Interviews conducted in the study areas

4.4.3 Immigrants Relations with Locals

One of the most important aspects of the counterurbanization is the immigrant's relationship with locals. Counterurbanization is a phenomenon that indirectly influences the lives of the locals at the destination of the migration. In most of the interviews, the migrants were familiar with the environment or people of the place they relocated. These two narratives are exemplified in the following quotes:

(Male-42) I was originally from here (one of the 4 case study areas). I was born here and migrated to the city for work after a while. I know most of the people who live here. Most of them were my childhood friends, and I used to play games with them. When I came back here, it was like a reunion with my old friends and neighbor (16)

(Female-32) My grandparents were originally from Khajepasha village. They migrated to the city 60 years ago. We kept our home here and used it as our secondary house. We were familiar with the environment. Our relationship with locals was stable when we relocated here permanently. We used to buy organic products (Milk, vegetables, etc.) from them. In general, we have a good relationship with them (17)

In some cases, the migrants chose their relocation place with the suggestion of a friend or relative.

(Female- 46) We searched for many suitable places when we decided to move to the countryside. Our family friend suggests this place to us. When we moved here, we were initially a bit anxious because the locals kept asking us why we moved here and how long we would be staying here. But after a while, they kept bringing us organic products and asking us if we needed anything. They are very kind and caring despite the people living in the city. We are pleased that we moved here (10)

Overall, all the interviewees mentioned that they have either a good or natural relationship with the locals. However, short talks with locals showed that they mostly try to have good relationships with migrants because of the new market they bring to the rural areas. It can be speculated that the locals keep or try to have good relationships with migrants because they can sell their products or work for them at a higher price than normal.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter contained the results of the study. The first stage (secondary data analysis) concerns the “statistical counterurbanization” in which West Azerbaijan and Bushehr provinces showed that this phenomenon might happen. The result of this stage suggested that West Azerbaijan province is the most suitable case study for counterurbanization in Iran.

The results of the second stage were used to pinpoint the villages in which the interviews took place. The results showed that 4 villages had the most increase in electricity usage between 2012-2022. These villages were selected as the case studies for this research.

The third and final stage is based on qualitative interviews. The motivation of interviewees is categorized into three sections: family relations, Economic factors, and environmental problems. Interviewees shared the reasons why they moved to rural areas, such as the economic crisis during COVID-19, the need for a better lifestyle etc. For many, the stress and confinement of lockdowns in small city apartments

underscored a desire for better living environments. This shift was not merely a temporary response to the pandemic; it became a permanent lifestyle change for many.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not just trigger a short-term migration out of cities; it fundamentally changed perceptions of where and how people could live and work. The experiences shared by those who moved during the pandemic and decided to stay highlight a lasting shift in residential preferences, suggesting that the trend towards counterurbanization will likely continue in the post-pandemic world.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Some have suggested that counterurbanization is a spatially selective phenomenon; yet, because it focuses on Anglo-American and, more broadly, Anglophone contexts, knowledge and study on counterurbanization are also spatially selective. But beyond the "rural idyll" explanations and gentrification repercussions that are frequently emphasized in the literature, the pandemic period necessitates new methods of conceiving mobilities (or immobilities), including counterurbanization. Whether or not these movements are dominant, the Iranian pandemic could provide fresh perspectives on conceptualizing their diversity.

Research on counterurbanization in developed countries suggests that, should this trend persist, counterurbanization will also be crucial in shaping future settlement patterns in such nations, making it a significant developmental problem (Bjarnason et al. 2021). Strong connections have been shown by research conducted in developed nations between the decentralization of human capital and rural development on the one hand, and counterurbanization on the other. Therefore, the increasing importance of counterurbanization in emerging countries presents both a potential opportunity and a key aspect in forecasting future growth (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022; Remoundou, Gkartzios, and Garrod 2016). Should counterurbanization be regarded as a type of deconcentration of human capital, it is crucial to increase rural residents' access to urban skills and economic possibilities that support rural development.

The study provides evidence of counterurbanization in this environment based on exploratory research involving quantitative and qualitative interviews with city dwellers

who moved to smaller communities. This study's methodology is broken down into two sections. First is a secondary analysis investigating Iran's internal migration and rural movement. Similar studies (Vogiazides and Kawalerowicz 2022) investigated counterurbanization using census data and focusing on the destination of the relocations. However, the second part is adapting a centrifugal model for studying counterurbanisation by focusing on the origin of these relocations rather than the destination. Studies like (Gkartzios 2013) used the same approach in analyzing the counterurbanization. This study tried to combine these two approaches to bring a new aspect of counterurbanization in developing countries.

The results suggest that although counterurbanization is a new phenomenon in Iran, it is growing considerably. Despite the other works on developing countries (Geyer and Geyer 2017), in the case of Iran, the reasons behind the relocation are more similar to the immigration reasons in developed countries. The main reasons behind the relocation in Iran are mostly for better living environment. According to the interviews most of the migrants moved to rural areas during the COVID-19 but decided to permanently stay after the pandemic. In this case, the pandemic plays an important role in these relocations, just like (Perales and Bernard 2023; Guadagno 2020).

According to the results, we can speculate that different types of counterurbanization discussed in chapter two are happening in Urmia County. The case studies and interviews show evidence of lifestyle migration, telecommunicating counterurbanization, and crisis-led counterurbanization.

These are all compelling arguments for more research on counterurbanization in developing nations. While the discrepancies highlight the need for more research, the parallels between developed-world counterurbanization and developing-world contexts suggest that much of our current understanding can be applied directly there.

Our understanding of historical processes of economic and urban system growth and population change could be greatly enhanced by counterurbanization. It may also be useful in forecasting future demographic and economic trends, making it a potentially strong tool for developing countries to formulate development policies. It can also help understand the issues the developing world faces.

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