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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Identification and Formulation of the Components of the Evaluation System for the Development Programs of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

For more than seven decades, consecutive economic, social, and cultural development plans have functioned as the principal macro-policy instruments in the Islamic Republic of Iran. These five-year strategic documents are designed to operationalize higher-level national visions and allocate substantial financial, human, and natural resources toward achieving progress, social justice, and cultural advancement. Despite these sustained efforts, empirical evidence consistently indicates a significant and troubling performance gap: the rate of implementation failures has considerably outweighed successes. A growing body of domestic research confirms that most development plans have failed to achieve their predetermined goals, leaving Iran's developmental trajectory far behind both international benchmarks and national aspirations. One of the most critical, yet systematically under addressed, factors contributing to this persistent shortfall is the absence of an integrated, evidence-based, and learning-oriented evaluation system. Existing evaluation practices remain fragmented, episodic, and largely disconnected from the policy design and revision cycle. In the absence of a transparent, participatory, and technology-enabled evaluation mechanism, policymakers lack reliable evidence on what works, what does not, and why. Consequently, past failures are neither documented nor systematically utilized for institutional learning and policy correction. This study directly addresses this lacuna by posing two central research questions: (1) what are the key components and indicators of an effective evaluation system for Iran's economic, social, and cultural development programs? And (2) how can these components inform evidence-based decision-making and improve policy coherence?

Methodology

This research adopts an applied, descriptive-analytical design and employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative bibliometric analysis with qualitative text mining techniques. The study was conducted in three sequential phases.

Phase 1: Comprehensive Bibliometric Analysis. A systematic search was performed in Web of Science and Scopus databases covering the period from 1976 to early 2025. Keywords included "Development Program," "Development Plan Evaluation," "Evaluating Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Programs," and "Evaluation of National Development Programs." After screening, relevant documents were exported in CSV format. Using VOS Viewer software, co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence networks were constructed. Normalized total link strength and field-weighted citation impact indicators (e.g., Field Citation Ratio, Relative Citation Ratio) were calculated to map the conceptual structure and intellectual contours of the field.

Phase 2: Text Mining and Natural Language Processing. The textual corpus was subjected to rigorous preprocessing, including data cleaning, normalization, tokenization, stop-word removal, and stemming. Then, Voyant Tools—a digital humanities web-based platform—was employed for automated text analysis. A Word Cloud (term frequency visualization) was generated to identify the most frequent and semantically significant terms. Relative frequency distributions were computed to reveal dominant thematic patterns. These methods enabled the extraction of latent knowledge from large-scale unstructured textual data without manual reading of thousands of documents.

Phase 3: Clustering and Policy Interpretation. Based on co-occurrence matrices and thematic grouping derived from bibliometric and text-mining outputs, four principal clusters were identified, labeled, and theoretically interpreted. Each cluster was further decomposed into its constituent dimensions, and the policy relevance of each dimension was articulated

Findings

The bibliometric analysis revealed that the highest number of publications concerning development program evaluation occurred in 2022 ($n=5$), while peak citation frequency was recorded in 2021 ($n=36$). The highest Field Citation Ratio (21.87) was observed in 2009, and the highest Relative Citation Ratio (1.23) in 2011. Co-authorship analysis for 100,000 authors identified six research clusters and fifteen strong collaborative links, indicating a gradually consolidating scholarly community. Notably, authors such as ROMANAZZI, GIULIANO ROCCA, PALMISANO, and others have made significant contributions to this domain. The most consequential finding is the extraction of four interconnected policy-oriented clusters that collectively constitute a comprehensive evaluation system:

Cluster 1: Transparency and Good Governance.

This cluster encompasses four dimensions: impact transparency (public disclosure of program outcomes), independent oversight (external monitoring bodies), government accountability (responsiveness of public officials), and anti-corruption mechanisms (prevention of inefficiency and malfeasance). The term "transparency" appeared with exceptionally high frequency in the text corpus. The findings firmly establish that without open access to performance data and independent scrutiny, any evaluation system will inevitably lack credibility and effectiveness. In the economic dimension, financial transparency leads to optimal resource allocation; in the cultural dimension, it facilitates equitable distribution of cultural support; in the social dimension, it enhances trust in public institutions.

Cluster 2: Analytics and Technology.

This cluster highlights the transformative role of modern technological tools, including data-driven assessment, data mining, simulation modeling, and online platforms. Technology is not merely a data collection instrument but an enabler of predictive analytics, real-time monitoring, and agile decision-making. The findings indicate that advanced analytics can uncover hidden inefficiency patterns, reduce human error, and significantly improve the precision of evaluation reports. This cluster aligns closely with international studies by Shin et al. (2023) and Williams et al. (2024), confirming that intelligent technologies strengthen the bridge between data science and development policy.

Cluster 3: Participation and Civil Society.

This cluster comprises public engagement (citizen involvement in assessment), social consensus (collective agreement on development priorities), civic advocacy (demand-driven monitoring), and participatory oversight (community-based supervision). The findings unambiguously demonstrate that an evaluation system devoid of active civil society and citizen participation lacks legitimacy, comprehensiveness, and practical effectiveness. Mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, citizen reporting systems, and public surveys can significantly enhance executive accountability. In the economic realm, public participation contributes to fairer budget allocation; in the cultural realm, it raises collective awareness; in the social realm, it strengthens social capital and trust.

Cluster 4: Evaluation and Policymaking.

This cluster emphasizes the organic linkage between evaluation and the policy cycle. Its dimensions include rigorous planning (well-structured evaluation design), alignment with

higher-level policies (consistency with national vision documents), systematic evaluation processes (institutionalized procedures), and integrated reporting (synthesized performance reports). The key finding is that evaluation must function as an institutional learning mechanism and a continuous policy correction tool, not as a terminal reporting exercise. In the economic dimension, iterative evaluation of business support policies improves the investment climate; in the cultural dimension, impact analysis of artistic programs enhances their quality; in the social dimension, ongoing assessment of health and education services elevates human development indicators.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study make several theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, the research advances the literature by empirically demonstrating that effective development evaluation is not a unidimensional technical exercise but a multidimensional governance function deeply embedded in transparency, technology, participation, and iterative policymaking. The four identified clusters are not mutually exclusive but rather synergistic: transparency provides the raw material for analysis; technology enables that analysis at scale; participation ensures that analysis reflects societal values; and systematic policymaking closes the feedback loop, enabling learning and adaptation. This integrated model moves beyond reductionist approaches that treat evaluation solely as a compliance activity.

Practically, the study offers a concrete roadmap for reforming Iran's development evaluation architecture. The absence of such a systemic framework has historically led to repeated cycles of underperformance, resource waste, and missed developmental opportunities. Institutionalizing the proposed four-pillar system can significantly enhance policy coherence, strengthen vertical and horizontal accountability, and improve the overall responsiveness and effectiveness of development planning.

Policy Recommendations: (1) Establish an independent national development evaluation agency with a cross-sectoral mandate, legal authority, and a statutory requirement for public disclosure of all evaluation reports; (2) Develop intelligent monitoring and data analytics platforms incorporating data mining, simulation, and early-warning dashboards to enable predictive performance management; (3) Strengthen the formal role of civil society organizations, universities, and independent media in the evaluation process through legally mandated participatory mechanisms; (4) Mandate that all executive bodies publish periodic, standardized performance reports using a harmonized indicator framework; (5) Design continuous, adaptive, and comparative evaluation processes that allow for mid-course corrections rather than post-hoc assessments; (6) Systematically benchmark and adapt successful international evaluation practices from OECD countries to the Iranian institutional context.

Limitations and Future Research: While the mixed-methods approach employed here offers robustness, the study relies primarily on publicly available international databases, which may underrepresent Persian-language domestic reports and grey literature. Future research should integrate qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews with senior policymakers and evaluation practitioners to deepen contextual understanding. Additionally, the proposed framework's validity could be tested through empirical case studies of specific development programs.

In conclusion, only through the establishment of such an integrated, evidence-based, and learning-oriented evaluation system can Iran ensure that its economic, social, and cultural development programs are implemented effectively, resources are allocated efficiently, and national developmental goals are progressively realized.

KEYWORDS

Development Program Evaluation, Economic Development, Social Development, Cultural Development, Bibliometric Analysis, Text Mining, Evidence-Based Policy, Good Governance, Islamic Republic of Iran.

