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Pathological Analysis of Developing Iran's Overseas Agriculture

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Abstract

Given that Iran's overseas agricultural initiatives have not been successful so far, and comprehensive information on the subject is lacking, the present study aimed to investigate the challenges and development of Iranian overseas agriculture. Overseas agriculture refers to the production of raw agricultural materials and inputs abroad by a country and their transfer into its geographical boundaries to meet domestic demand. It is essentially a form of foreign investment in the agricultural sector of countries that possess adequate capacity and production potential. In this study, relevant data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 experts, relevant authorities, and overseas agricultural investors, selected using the snowball sampling approach. The interviews were analyzed using the conventional coding process in grounded theory, and the results were compiled in a matrix structure (including open and axial codes). According to the classified axial codes, several major problems hinder the development of Iran's overseas agriculture. The most significant issue, receiving the highest weighted score, was the lack of technical knowledge, experience, and efficient management among some investors. Another key weakness was the insufficient understanding by investors of the host country's characteristics and potential. The main conclusions also highlighted the absence of a comprehensive information system for overseas agriculture and the lack of executive support for implementing the overseas agricultural statute. Several underlying factors contribute to these problems, such as the exclusion of private sector perspectives in drafting the statute and government policies, political tensions and interactions between host and investor countries, and international sanctions against Iran. Overall, the most notable potential benefit of Iran's overseas agriculture lies in its capacity to support agricultural development and ensure food security, particularly under drought conditions. However, more evidence from countries with a long history of overseas agriculture is necessary to make a sound judgment about its advantages and disadvantages.

Keywords:
Agricultural outsourcing; foreign investment; grounded theory

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the cornerstone of food security and economic growth for countries (Wheeler & Kay, 2011). Studies have shown that the livelihood of human communities depends on a sustainable and healthy food system (Azadi et al., 2012). In 2008, following the rise of food and financial crises and the outbreak of riots across the globe, an international conference was held to address the issue. Two key solutions were proposed: the first was to increase crop production through investment in agriculture and rural development (Daniel, 2011). In recent years, the issues of food demand and water availability for agriculture have emerged as major global constraints to food security (Hanjra & Qureshi, 2020). Consequently, countries anticipating a decline in available land for food production—due to rapid population and economic growth—have perceived this crisis as a threat to their future food supply. To prevent future food shortages and the high prices experienced during the food crisis, these countries have revised their food supply strategies. The new approach involves investing in food production abroad and importing the products to their own countries, which face limitations in land and water resources (Azadi et al., 2016; Sindayigaya, 2013). Overseas agriculture is defined as the purchase or long-term lease of high-quality agricultural land by private-sector investors and even governments in other countries, independent of geopolitical and political alignments and without reliance on bilateral military or political alliances. This approach has also been adopted by countries with no political affiliations (Ansari, 2014). A common pattern in recent cooperation involves "resource-poor, finance-rich" countries (such as China, South Korea, Japan, and Saudi Arabia) investing in "resource-rich, finance-poor" countries (such as those in sub-Saharan Africa) (Roman & Okada, 2015; Ji et al., 2017; Obeng-Odoom, 2013). According to several studies (Khaledi et al., 2014; Nasr Esfahani, 2014; Ministry of Agriculture, 2017), agricultural production has become increasingly difficult in Iran, a developing country with a growing population of 78 million, due to its dry and semi-arid climate and limited water resources. As a result, cultivating water-intensive crops is no longer economically feasible. Iran is expected to face a severe water crisis by 2025 (Arab et al., 2016). Currently, 70 percent of the world's freshwater is used for agricultural irrigation, while in developing countries this figure rises to 95 percent (Singh et al., 2013; Mbengue et al., 2016). In Iran, the rate is between 90 and 93 percent (Yazdanpanah et al., 2014). Additionally, Iran is dealing with the depletion and degradation of agricultural resources, declining soil quality, and prolonged droughts. The country has been identified as a high-risk area in the 2008 World Food Security Plan (Seyedhamzeh & Damari, 2017). Iran also faces numerous external challenges, such as foreign exchange limitations and restrictions from suppliers (Khaledi et al., 2014). These challenges have led to numerous decisions and initiatives regarding overseas agriculture, culminating in the approval of an eight-article statute by the Cabinet of Ministers on April 17, 2016 (Jahangiri, 2016).

So far, few studies have focused on the development of Iran's overseas agriculture, while existing literature in other countries has primarily examined the implications of overseas agricultural development in host countries within the framework of land grabbing. Therefore, this study aimed to identify, categorize, and describe both domestic and international constraints and challenges to Iran's involvement in overseas agriculture, and to explore how Iran, as an investor or guest country, can address these challenges. Moreover, researchers found that there is a lack of empirical research on overseas agriculture in Iran, making this the first study to investigate its pathology. The distinct novelty of this research lies in its focus on the pathology of Iran's overseas

agriculture—a field previously unexplored. Comprehensive information on Iran's overseas agriculture is lacking. Even at the international level, reliable data on overseas agriculture remains scarce and requires further research, systematic data collection, and evaluation (Havnevik, 2009; Oya, 2013; Davis et al., 2014). This is due to two main reasons. First, countries tend to withhold information on such investments because of their sensitivity, opting for confidentiality to avoid potential social, political, and economic conflicts (Sindayigaya, 2013; Hallam, 2019). Second, there is no standardized Latin term for this type of agriculture, and various keywords are used in international literature to describe farming conducted beyond national borders (Figure 1).

From 2006 to mid-2009, during the global financial and food crises, this phenomenon was referred to as land grabbing or land acquisition by critics. According to them, food-insecure but wealthy countries purchased or leased large tracts of land in poor and developing countries to produce food for export. The expansion of this trend raised concerns among social activists, researchers, and environmentalists, who argued that such private land investments promote monoculture-based and export-oriented agriculture, potentially threatening international food security (Daniel, 2011; Zolin & Braggion, 2013; Araya, 2013). As previously noted, critics have labeled the issue as land grabbing and demanded its cessation, while others have optimistically viewed it as a development opportunity that should be improved. The first group sees it as a win-lose deal, whereas the second group interprets it as a win-win arrangement. Supporters, including the head of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, argue that overseas agriculture can enhance development by creating jobs, increasing exports, and improving farm productivity through technology in developing countries (Azadi et al., 2012). The FAO's former Director-General, Jacques Diouf, also supported this perspective (Gobien & Nolte, 2016). In host countries, governments

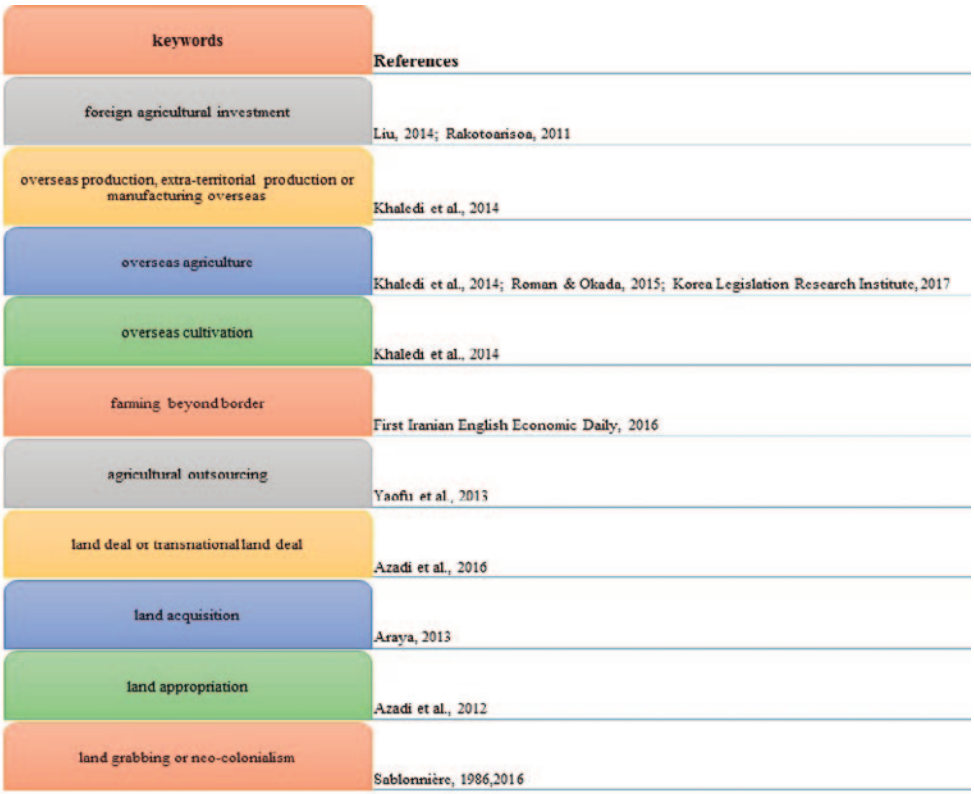

Figure 1. Keywords for Doing Agriculture Outside the Borders

are often involved in investment negotiations (Hallam, 2009), making it their responsibility to assess the consequences of such deals (Azadi et al., 2012). However, some studies note that overseas agricultural transactions can occur without the consent or awareness of local people and communities (Stein & Cunningham, 2015). Some scholars argue that because host governments freely grant concessions and are not obligated to conclude specific contracts, using negative terminology for such activities is inappropriate. Instead, they suggest that "overseas agriculture" is a more accurate and comprehensive term (Khaledi et al., 2014). Therefore, this study adopts the term "overseas agriculture" as it aligns with the research objectives and is the most semantically and conceptually appropriate term in the context of Iran. There are different perspectives on overseas agriculture. For example, some note that while the Global Hunger Index (GHI) remains high in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, most of the world's arable land is located in these regions. Despite their favorable climate, abundant water resources, and fertile soil, many sub-Saharan African countries continue to experience food insecurity (Azadi et al., 2012). A key reason is the lack of agricultural investment, which has led to low productivity and stagnant production in many developing countries. This investment gap has been identified as a major cause of recent food crises in these regions (Stein & Cunningham, 2015). Capital shortages have weakened the agricultural sectors of developing countries (Sindayigaya, 2013), and these countries require significant assistance to produce sufficient food for both themselves and land-scarce nations. From an economic viewpoint, many economists see such land deals as opportunities to improve local economic development. Foreign investors are assumed to be more capable of utilizing idle arable land efficiently than local populations (Krieger & Leroch, 2016). Investor countries pursue overseas agriculture for various reasons, including securing food supply, meeting energy and industrial demands (especially for biofuels like ethanol and biodiesel), seeking private investment opportunities (since 2008, many Western investors such as Wall Street banks and wealthy individuals have acquired agricultural land abroad—for example, Morgan Stanley's purchase of 40,000 hectares in Ukraine), and engaging in soft commodities markets (Sindayigaya, 2013; Daniel, 2011). Each of these motives can have political, social, economic, and environmental consequences—both positive and negative—for host countries (Hallam, 2009; Davis et al., 2014; Azadi et al., 2012; Sindayigaya, 2013; Krieger & Leroch, 2016). While agricultural investments can deliver developmental benefits, such benefits are not automatic, and some forms of large-scale investment carry significant risks for host nations (Liu, 2014). Azadi et al. (2016) investigated the (un)sustainability of transnational land deals (TLDs) for investor countries, host governments, and local communities. Using the three dimensions of sustainability—social acceptability, economic viability, and environmental conservation—they found that while investor countries benefit across all three dimensions, local communities do not experience absolute sustainability. Negative impacts of large-scale land acquisitions include the loss of livelihoods and unjust land allocation (Davis et al., 2014), especially in countries with high corruption levels (Krieger & Leroch, 2016) and weak land governance frameworks (Cotula, 2014; Grajales, 2015). Investors often target non-democratic countries with weak legal systems to ensure quick negotiations, easy land transfers, and minimal public resistance (Bastiaens, 2016). A key issue is that governments and international investors frequently disregard local capital interests and informal land rights (Krieger & Leroch, 2016). At the international level, two major regulatory approaches have emerged. The first is the "Principles for Responsible

Agricultural Investment" developed by the World Bank, IFAD, FAO, and UNCTAD, which emphasize respect for rights, livelihoods, and resources. The second involves the development of guidelines for good land governance and responsible agricultural investment by intergovernmental organizations (Azadi et al., 2016). The topic of responsible investment was also addressed at the G8 Summit in L'Aquila, where Japan advocated for responsible investment and proposed international cooperation to promote it (Hallam, 2009). Additionally, the second LDPI conference on land grabbing, held in Cornell in October 2012, showcased the potential for respectful and informed dialogue among scholars, activists, and policymakers, encouraging deeper reflection on the politics of knowledge in this contested field (Oya, 2013). In fact, research institutes such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), the International Institute for Environmental Development (IIED), in cooperation with the FAO, IFAD, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, have provided recommendations to guide the land acquisition and lease process. Although the recommendations vary in nature and number, they show consensus on the following aspects related to large-scale land acquisitions and leases:

There should be transparency in negotiations,

The rights of local communities, including customary land rights, should be protected,

There should be a sharing of benefits between local communities and investors,

Environmental sustainability should be ensured, and

Food security in African countries and communities should not be compromised (Havnevik, 2009).

Since overseas agriculture does not necessarily lead to increased access to domestic food, especially if all food production is exported to the investor country (Hallam, 2009), investors should contribute positively to the food security of local communities (Azadi et al., 2012). According to Sablonnière (1986, 2016), the amount of land involved in a deal should not exceed the average size of local plots. Other features of a good overseas agricultural deal include coordination between governments, transparency of policies from both sides (Zhaoxin, 2016), and bilateral agreements, which may include counter-trade provisions (Hallam, 2009). Furthermore, an essential first step toward developing deeper agricultural outsourcing and other economic relationships is improved connectivity between the two countries (Kumar, 2010). Many sources highlight the importance of transparency in transactions, as most contracts and negotiations are typically non-public and rarely disclosed. This lack of transparency leads to transactional corruption and the spread of inaccurate news and information, which can ultimately damage both the investor and the host country (Anooshepour & Nasiri, 2014). It may also lead to internal conflicts, protests against governmental policies, and even political conflicts at the international level (Azadi et al., 2012), although investors may not achieve a decisive win due to their lack of political influence in the host country (Azadi et al., 2012; Hallam, 2009). However, since information and details of all overseas agricultural projects globally are not available, it remains unclear whether the negative or positive aspects prevail (Gobien & Nolte, 2016). Grounded theory is a method used to gain knowledge about topics that have not been comprehensively studied, where our understanding is still limited (Glaser, 1992). As mentioned, this research is the first study on the pathology of overseas agriculture in Iran, and very little experimental research has been conducted on this topic. Therefore, the research method aligns well with the research topic.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative in terms of

its paradigm, conducted with a pathological approach to explore the constraints of Iran's overseas agricultural development based on the grounded theory approach. It is an applied study because it develops practical knowledge and aims to achieve a practical goal, with results that can provide policymakers and planners with guidelines and strategies to improve Iran's overseas agriculture. The participants consisted of 16 experts, relevant authorities, and applicants and investors in overseas agriculture, who were sampled for data collection. The sampling and data collection process continued until data saturation was reached, or the point at which the available information became less useful. Ultimately, 16 individuals were interviewed. The interviews lasted a total of two months, with each interview averaging 60 minutes. To collect the required data and determine key internal and external factors, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by phone or internet calls with experts, officials, and investors in overseas agriculture. The conventional coding method used in grounded theory (open and axial coding) was applied to analyze the data. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and re-read, with each sentence of the raw text being examined and coded. This process resulted in 114 raw phrases, which formed the interview text. In the first level of coding, open coding, an effort was made to achieve a higher level of abstraction based on similar features between the codes. Comparisons led to the identification of 61 main concepts. Subsequently, at the second level of coding, axial coding, 20 major categories were identified. The axial coding process was carried out using a paradigm that included causal conditions, phenomena, contexts, intervening conditions, action or interaction strategies, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 2006), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Therefore, to determine the factors affecting the development of Iran's overseas agriculture, as well as its current situation and consequences, the axial codes were rearranged in the paradigm model. To assess the accuracy and robustness of the data, which is analogous to the validity and reliability of quantitative research, the following methods were used:

- Allocating sufficient time for participants to provide information;
- Creating rapport during the interviews;
- Reviewing data continuously;
- Analyzing data after individual interviews as soon as possible and using its feedbacks in the subsequent interviews and also in determining the adequacy of data;
- Minimum intervention in describing the quotes;
- Using triangulation technique (by soliciting evidence from various sources including different theories, people, information resources, and ways);
- Revising by experts and returning the results to the interviewees to provide their corrective comments;
- Reviewing the extracted codes with some participants.

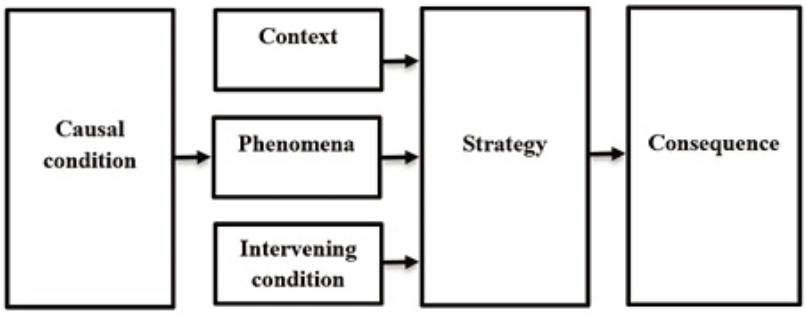

Figure 2. Grounded Theory Paradigm Model (Hajbagheri et al., 2007).

RESULTS

In accordance with the methodological process already described, during the two coding steps, we first derived a list of related codes from the initial interviews. These codes were then constantly compared to extract a concept from several codes. Similarly, other codes were grouped to form concepts until 65 concepts were eventually obtained. An example is presented in Table 1. During the open coding process, the concepts were carefully examined and compared in terms of their similarities and differences. As a result, concepts of the same nature or semantically related concepts were grouped under common themes, referred to as "categories" (Table 1).

After the open codes were extracted directly from the interviewees' words through qualitative content analysis, in the next step, axial coding was selected from open codes and 21 categories were obtained (Table 2).

In order to determine the factors affecting the development of Iran's overseas agriculture, the present status and its consequences, axial codes were rearranged in the paradigm model (causal conditions, phenomena, contexts, intervening conditions, action or interaction strategies, and consequences) (Figure3).

From a pattern perspective, Iran's overseas agricultural development resembles a process that requires the formation and continuation of various factors, which function as a dynamic network. Overseas agriculture is emerging and developing within a specific environment, constantly interacting with its surrounding context. As a result, the current dynamics influence the comprehensiveness and evolution of the process.

DISCUSSION

According to the findings, several factors prevent the development of Iran's overseas agriculture, which may be related to the investor, the government of the investor country, or the host country. In this study, these factors were represented in a paradigmatic pattern with six components: causal conditions, phenomena, contexts, intervening conditions, action or interaction strategies, and consequences (Figure 3). One of the key factors related to the individual and playing an important role in the development of overseas agriculture is "the investor's scientific, technical, management, and communication skills." As one

Table 1

An example of the first stage of processing results: Convert interview text to Code.

Interviewee	Raw phrases	Concepts (extracted codes)
1	Certainly, interaction with the locals is the first problem that may arise. Well, in most cases there is someone who does not get fully acquainted with their customs, and his first encounter causes the locals to oppose him. For example, the potential I have in Iraq is that they show great respect for Shiites and Sayyid and I'm Sayyid myself (They welcomed me very easily and things got rolling)	Lack of acquaintance with the social and cultural conditions and customs and traditions of the host nation
2	It is now five years since the discussion of overseas agriculture has begun, but no statute has yet been implemented because the internal statute have not been fully defined and the government has not done any work, and everyone who worked has been stand alone.	Failure to notify overseas agriculture executive instruction
3	It is true that the government may not spend money on overseas agriculture, but it is important for applicants to know and understand the conditions. Investment is not made by the government, but what it does in terms of support for overseas activities is no less than initial support, but so far no support has been received.	Insufficient government support

Table 2

Open and Axial Coding.

Row	Extracted codes (Open coding)	Categories (Axial codes)
1	Lack of technical knowledge in some investors	Lack of technical knowledge, experience and inefficient management of some investors
2	Requires the ability and experience of the applicant	
3	Inability to organize and manage transnational agriculture	
4	Lack of social relations and high communication skills	
5	Applicant's financial default	Insufficient capital and lack of accurate estimation of the amount of investment required
6	Needs high financial and capital backing	
7	Requires investor knowledge of the living costs in the host country	
8	Not familiar with banking and trading laws of the host country	Insufficient knowledge of the investor in the laws and regulations of the host country
9	Lack of investor knowledge of import and export laws of the host country	
10	Lack of familiarity with the host country's territorial laws	
11	Lack of awareness of the Ministry of Agriculture on the state of the overseas agriculture and lack of proper information to its applicants	Absence of a comprehensive and accurate information system about overseas agriculture
12	Lack of information needed by overseas agricultural support organizations	
13	Lack of overseas agribusiness in Iran	
14	Failure of overseas agriculture because of having a government nature	Disregard for the views of the private sector in Overseas agricultural statute and its government drafting
15	Muting private section sound	
16	Lack of accountability governmental sector to meet the applicant's expectations	
17	Customs problems	Lack of coordination in customs matters regarding entry and exit of inputs and outputs required
18	Lack of coordination in customs matters	
19	Lack of customs and border support for the import of some inputs into the host country	
20	Not facilitating customs and imports to Iran	
21	Intensified international sanctions against Iran	Sanctions against Iran
22	The problem of money transfers inside the country due to sanctions	
23	Lack of investor experience and presence in the overseas area	Lack of investor understanding of the nature of overseas agriculture and its aspects
24	Requires three key factors of capital, experience and expertise in the field of overseas agriculture	
25	Lack of awareness of applicants of the overseas agricultural conditions	
26	Misunderstanding of overseas agriculture among applicants	
27	Needs to spend a lot of time studying the host country	Lack of investor knowledge and understanding of the features and territorial potential of the host country
28	Loss of applicant funds due to lack of accurate information from the host country	
29	Lack of acquaintance with the social and cultural conditions and customs and traditions of the host nation	Problems interacting with the people of the host country
30	Requires acceptance by the host community	
31	Existence of a governmental perspective in the implementation of overseas agriculture	Create a negative view in the private sector on government decisions and actions
32	Inappropriate actions in the field of overseas agriculture	
33	unrealistic government Speaks on overseas Agriculture	
34	Failure to follow up on the ministries involved in the process of overseas agriculture	
35	Release the investor with problems related to overseas agriculture	Decrease the applicant's tendency due to many challenges
36	Create an obstacle by the government and the relevant institutions for investors	
37	Government bureaucracies	
38	Failure to notify overseas agriculture executive instruction	Lack of executive support for the overseas agricultural statute
39	Lack of infrastructure to overseas agriculture implementation	
40	Lack of executive and guarantee topics in the statute	

Table 2

Continued

Row	Extracted codes (Open coding)	Categories (Axial codes)
41	Production risk and investment insecurity in host countries	Existence the risk of political problems and interactions between the host country and the investor
42	Needs to have the best foreign political relations	
43	Lack of transparency of overseas agricultural information due to political and security issues	Abuse of government support and facilities and bribery
44	The involvement of non-professionals into this field	
45	Instability in the country's political decisions and the possibility of changing attitudes towards the process	
46	Existence of politically influential competitors in host countries	Increasing demand for host lands and rising land prices
47	Sabotage of influential governments	
48	Claims for possession of agricultural land of the host country	
49	Possibility of not entering manufactured products into the country due to economic competitiveness	Investor unwillingness to sell products to the country
50	Lack of mechanisms such as signing agreements with manufacturers for importing manufactured products into the country	
51	Lack of government support buying investor products	
52	Inconsistency of investor perspective with policymaker (paying attention to income from the investor vs. paying attention to food security from policy-makers)	The weakness of social capital
53	Lack of investor confidence in the laws and regulations of the Iranian government	
54	Inappropriate behavior by some officials	
55	The negative view of the private sector	
56	Insufficient government support	Not responding to investors' needs
57	The lack of a comprehensive support program	
58	Failure to clarify the route of assistance to applicants	
59	Host local community's reaction to export manufactured products due to its own needs	Possibility of the host country's opposition to the transfer of water and land
60	Unemployment of local communities in the host country	
61	Environmental threats to the host country	

participant noted, "Any applicant for overseas agriculture should have an advantage in knowledge, technical, and managerial excellence. Overseas agriculture requires creative and capable managers to create a complete chain of wealth through planning in production, transportation, food and processing industries, trading, and marketing of agricultural commodities." Both the investor and host countries must engage in overseas agriculture with full knowledge and specific abilities. Furthermore, each applicant must have comprehensive knowledge of the host country before entering and implementing overseas agriculture, which is also a key causal condition of the research. As discussed in all interviews, this knowledge is fundamental to the success of overseas agriculture. Research indicates that this knowledge includes a range of factors, such as banking and trading laws (import and export regulations), the distance and proximity of the host country, agricultural land and related laws, regional potential, cost estimations for living and working in the host country, climatic conditions, types of vegetation, agricultural status, specific varieties and crops produced, customs of the host country, commercial and legal laws, and a general understanding of the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the host country. While overseas agriculture can bring many benefits to the agricultural sector, it is important to recognize that these benefits

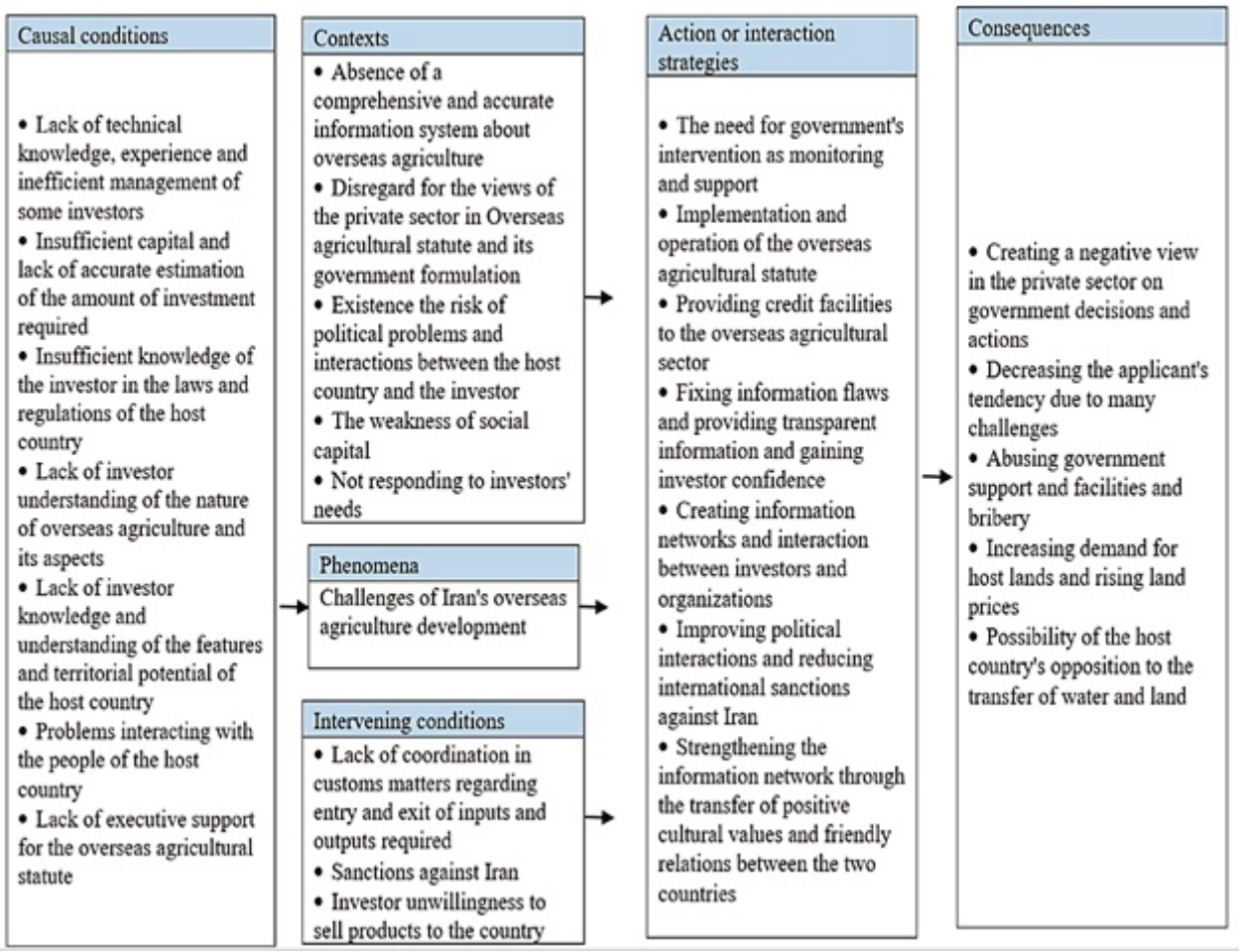

Figure 3. The Paradigmatic Pattern of Iran's Overseas Agricultural Development Pathology

can only be realized when specific rules and regulations are followed. The types of products considered for overseas agriculture, the extent of government intervention or surrender to the private sector, the selection of the host country, and the degree of reliance on those countries are all challenges in the implementation of overseas agriculture. Therefore, overseas agriculture should be conducted in countries with appropriate capacity and potential in terms of production facilities and resources. As a result, identifying target countries for overseas agriculture is one of the preliminary steps that should be carried out with sufficient accuracy (Khaledi et al., 2014; Edelman et al., 2013). Another important requirement for overseas agriculture mentioned by the participants was "having high financial and capital backing," which is one of the causal conditions in the study. In other words, the applicant's financial instability can be a major disadvantage in getting started. According to reports, financing an individual or company is a very important factor. Sindayigaya (2013) and Daniel (2011) have also highlighted this in their studies. Additionally, the availability of affordable access to the selected country for the economical transfer of facilities from the investor country (guest) and the transportation of raw or processed products from the host country to the investor country are important factors to consider (Khaledi et al., 2014). "Lack of information and inadequate information platforms" was another significant problem cited by many participants. In general, countries are reluctant to publicize their activities due to the sensitivity of these investment issues and prefer to keep them confidential, preventing

public participation (Sindayigaya, 2013; Hallam, 2009; Anooshepour & Nasiri, 2014; Gobien & Nolte, 2016). According to Havnevik (2009) and the recommendations he provided for guiding the land acquisition or leasing process, negotiations should be transparent, and accurate information should be published. The intensification of international sanctions against Iran is also one of the intervening conditions and an undeniable threat to the implementation of the overseas agricultural plan. According to Khaledi et al. (2014), although economic sanctions have directly affected the agricultural sector less than other economic sectors in the country, their indirect effects on agriculture cannot be ignored. "Creating obstacles for the development of Iran's overseas agriculture" can be one of these indirect effects. Based on the research findings, problems with money transfers to the country are another issue that may arise. According to the Ministry of Agriculture (2017), one of the executive requirements for the development of overseas agriculture is the alignment of Iran's foreign diplomacy with that of the host countries. Iran's involvement in various regional and international political issues (Khaledi et al., 2014) constitutes a major obstacle to overseas agriculture. However, overseas agriculture has been practiced in countries that are not politically compatible with each other (Ansari, 2014). A good overseas agricultural deal that benefits both parties must be accompanied by coordination between governments, policy transparency on both sides (Zhaoxin, 2016), and bilateral agreements including counter-trade (Hallam, 2009). Entering the overseas agricultural market requires a strong national decision and a coherent organizational structure, along with high maneuverability and effective diplomacy, without which success would be accidental and unsustainable.

CONCLUSION

According to the results, the government plays a key role in the development of Iran's overseas agriculture. The findings show that issues such as the lack of responsiveness to investors' needs, inadequate support from banks, absence of a clear trustee, lack of trade unions, disagreements among various entities due to the multiplicity of decision-making bodies, poor coordination among organizations and institutions, and insufficient public sector support for the private sector are major contextual obstacles to achieving overseas agricultural goals. One investor stated, "So far, no support has been received." However, reports from the Ministry of Agriculture (2017) suggest that the government is expected to play a supportive and facilitating role, welcoming private sector investment in this area. According to the statute, the government is to provide diplomatic and financial support, credit, insurance facilities, and coverage to individuals, farmers, and companies operating in this sector. All field evidence indicates that one of the most pressing issues is the weakness of the existing statute standards, the inadequacy of their drafting by the government, and problems in implementing the approved statutes. Although the statute obliges the Ministry of Agriculture to offer incentives and support for overseas cultivation applicants, the challenges raised by interviewees remain unresolved. Therefore, the government must act promptly to avoid marginal criticisms such as the claim that "overseas agriculture has no economic justification and is more successful in speech than in action, and therefore offers no benefit to the country." An executive statute covering all relevant dimensions—legal, political, economic, social, and territorial—could play a significant role in advancing Iran's overseas agriculture. The government should revise and update existing laws and regulations, clearly defining all statute provisions, the extent of government support, and the criteria for determining applicant eligibility. At present, however, governmental and

parliamentary oversight suggests that overseas agriculture is entangled in bureaucratic inefficiency. The findings and field research indicate that host countries may also contribute to the challenges facing the development of overseas agriculture. These include anticipated opposition from indigenous communities regarding the transfer of land and water, and the difficulties Iranian investors may face in interacting with local populations—issues that are seen as consequences of overseas agriculture. According to Sablonnière (1986–2016), if overseas agriculture is limited to monoculture and non-ecological farming practices without delivering benefits to the local population, resistance from indigenous communities is to be expected. Khaledi et al. (2014) note that host countries such as Kazakhstan and Russia aim to make efficient use of underutilized agricultural resources. In this context, foreign investors are often seen as more capable than local actors in utilizing arable but largely idle land (Krieger & Leroch, 2016).

For instance, up to 90 percent of rural lands in Africa are under customary tenure, often leading to social conflicts over land ownership between investors and local communities (Azadi et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2014; Liu, 2014). To prevent such issues, host governments must carefully assess the potential consequences of land transactions. The political, social, economic, and environmental impacts of each transaction should be continuously studied and monitored (Azadi et al., 2012; Anooshepour & Nasiri, 2014). According to Hallam (2009), this oversight is necessary for both host and investor countries. To achieve a win-win outcome (Azadi et al., 2012), the investor country must respect the host country's rights, livelihoods, and resources (Oya, 2013; Havnevik, 2009). Therefore, one of the initial steps the Iranian government must take to effectively engage in overseas agriculture is to assess the willingness and readiness of different countries to accept such investments (Khaledi et al., 2014). Finally, it should be noted that with the intensification of competition for agricultural resources among investment-seeking countries, host countries may increasingly dictate the terms of future agreements. Based on research by Khaledi et al. (2014) and Nasr Esfahani (2014), it is anticipated that as competition among investor countries for overseas agriculture grows, countries with surplus and unused agricultural resources will set the conditions for host-guest contracts. According to the research findings, one likely consequence is a rise in the price of agricultural land, which may result from delays in initiating overseas agricultural projects. This trend aligns with Araya's (2013) observation that interest in this type of investment is increasing. Given that Iran was classified as a high-risk country on the World Food Security Map published in 2008 (Seyedhamzeh & Damari, 2017), implementing such initiatives—alongside other agricultural support schemes—could be beneficial.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of the present study was the limited number of participants, which only partially captured the range of experiences related to overseas agriculture. To gain a clearer and more accurate understanding of its benefits and challenges, a broader group of participants should be involved. In other words, due to the small sample size, it was not possible to conduct a statistical analysis; therefore, a qualitative method was adopted.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Farzaneh Rezaei: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. Farahnaz Rostami: Writing – review and editing, project administration and Methodology.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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