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Feasibility of Implementing City Development Strategy (CDS) in Ramsar, Iran: A Participatory SWOT-QSPM Approach

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Abstract

Traditional comprehensive planning has largely failed to address the complex, dynamic challenges of urban development in Iran, particularly due to its top-down nature and lack of citizen participation. The City Development Strategy (CDS), introduced by the Cities Alliance in 1999, offers a participatory, strategic alternative focused on sustainable urban development, poverty reduction, and good governance. This study assesses the feasibility of preparing and implementing a CDS in Ramsar, a major tourist city in northern Iran, by analyzing the participatory capacity of citizens and urban managers. Using a descriptive-analytical method, data were collected through semi-structured questionnaires and library studies, then analyzed using Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), Internal-External Analysis (IEA), and Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM). Results show that Ramsar possesses key strengths strong citizen inclination to participate, active NGOs and cooperatives, and rich socio-cultural relations but faces major barriers, including undefined participation levels, short-term unstable management, low citizen trust in municipal management, and weak municipal financial sustainability. The most effective strategies are: 1) leveraging Ramsar's rich socio-cultural heritage to raise awareness and participation (total attractiveness score = 21.01), and 2) engaging NGOs and cooperatives in CDS preparation and implementation (score = 19.95). This research provides actionable strategic priorities for municipal managers and contributes to the limited literature on CDS feasibility in middle-sized Iranian cities.

Keywords: City development strategy, Feasibility study, Participatory planning, SWOT, Quantitative strategic planning matrix, Ramsar, Iran.

1 | Introduction

Rapid urbanization has placed immense pressure on cities in developing countries, leading to widespread urban poverty, inadequate infrastructure, and environmental degradation [1]. In Iran, the urban population

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grew from 31.7% in 1956 to 68.5% in 2006, and is projected to reach 80.7% by 2021. Traditional master and detailed plans, imported from Western models, have largely failed due to their rigid, top-down, non-participatory nature, lack of regional integration, and disconnection from local socio-economic realities.

In response, the Cities Alliance and the World Bank introduced the City Development Strategy (CDS) in 1999 a long-term, participatory, action-oriented framework to promote sustainable urban development, poverty reduction, and good governance [1]. CDS emphasizes stakeholder engagement, strategic visioning, and flexibility, making it particularly suitable for cities in developing countries [2].

Ramsar, a coastal tourist city in Mazandaran province, northern Iran, faces paradox: despite unique natural assets (hot springs, forests, Caspian Sea coastline) and designation as a national tourism hub, it suffers from traffic congestion, fragmented urban management, declining citizen trust, deteriorated urban fabrics, and persistent unemployment. The city's comprehensive and detailed plans have failed to achieve their goals, largely due to lack of public participation.

This study addresses the following research questions:

I. Does Ramsar's urban management system have the capacity (managerial knowledge and public trust) to prepare and implement a CDS?

II. What are the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) for preparing and implementing a successful CDS in Ramsar?

III. How can Ramsar leverage its strengths and opportunities to overcome weaknesses and threats in CDS implementation [3].

2|Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1|From Comprehensive Planning to Strategic Planning

Comprehensive planning, based on rationalism and physical determinism, dominated 20th-century urban planning. However, its limitations inability to handle complexity, lack of flexibility, exclusion of public participation, and disconnection from implementation led to widespread failure [4], [5]. In Iran, evaluations of seven master plans (Rasht, Bandar Abbas, Yazd, Shiraz, Arak, Maragheh, Zahedan) found that nearly 70% of population forecasts were incorrect, economic projections failed completely, and proposed road networks were not realized [6].

2.2|City Development Strategy

CDS is defined as "a process by which cities prepare a long-term vision and short-term action plans for equitable growth through participatory engagement of stakeholders" [1]. Its core principles are:

I. Livability: ensuring high living standards and health for citizens.

II. Competitiveness: enabling cities to compete in national/global economies.

III. Bankability: ensuring financial sustainability and public-private partnerships.

IV. Good governance: transparency, accountability, participation, rule of law.

CDS differs fundamentally from master plans: CDS is short-term strategic, participatory, flexible, and action-oriented, while master plans are long-term, rigid, technocratic, and often unimplemented (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. Differences between CDS and master plan.

Master Plan/Detailed Plan	City Development Strategy
Long preparation process due to its comprehensiveness	Short preparation time due to its strategic nature
Rarely leads to practical guides or executive instructions	Due to focusing on limited strategic issues, it provides guidance for each stage up to the final executive steps

Table 1. Continued.

Master Plan/Detailed Plan	City Development Strategy
Emphasizes the financial and budgetary aspects of project implementation and determining financial resources	Principally does not end with financial aspects and budget analysis
Participation is largely ignored	Emphasizes the participatory nature of the planning and implementation process
Due to its long-term and comprehensive nature, revision is generally not possible	Emphasizes continuous monitoring and revision
There is a separation between the prepared plan and what is actually implemented	By preparing an action plan, it brings the vision closer to implementation
The prepared plan faces difficulties within a non-integrated government structure	Due to involving all stakeholders in the implementation process, it encounters fewer problems
The plan lacks flexibility in the face of unforeseen events	Due to its strategic nature, it is flexible in the face of changes
Emphasizes land use as the final output	Emphasizes vision, strategy, and action plan up to the implementation stage
Has a false perception of the future, assuming it is completely knowable and predictable	Accepts uncertainty and provides various solutions to deal with it
Has an insular view limited to the city boundaries	Views the city as a part of the region
Has a limited economic view with a dominant focus on physical aspects	Focuses on economic strategies and economic development as a driver of urban growth
Uses physical and land-use planning studies	Uses qualitative analyses and critical success factors
Places the responsibility for design solely with the government	Stages are based on consensus and participation
Determines land use in general terms and precisely locates public systems and development actions	Prioritizes projects and locates them in space
An agreement and commitment plan among stakeholders for immediate or short-term actions	A regulatory plan to organize the potential future actions of the private sector
An operational plan	A plan for regulating actions

2.3 | Participation as a Core Element of CDS

Participation is not merely a tool but a goal of CDS. It enables democratic decision-making, builds trust, reduces bureaucracy, and increases implementation success. In Iran, however, participation levels are often undefined, and municipal managers lack training in participatory approaches [7].

3 | Study Area: Ramsar City

Ramsar (36°54'N, 50°40'E) is the westernmost city of Mazandaran province, northern Iran, with an area of approximately 19 km² and a population of 33,500 (2016 census). It is known for its mild climate, mineral hot springs, dense forests, and Caspian Sea coastline. Ramsar has been a tourism destination since the Pahlavi era (1930s–1970s), with landmarks including the Ramsar Hotel, Casino, and the internationally recognized Ramsar Wetland Convention (1971).

Fig. 1. Map of mazandaran province with ramsar highlighted.

Despite its potential, Ramsar faces:

I. Traffic congestion from uncoordinated urban expansion.
II. Fragmented, unstable municipal management.
III. Low citizen trust in municipality.
IV. Dilapidated urban fabrics (203.7 hectares, ~11% of city area).
V. High youth unemployment.
VI. Weak agriculture and industry sectors.

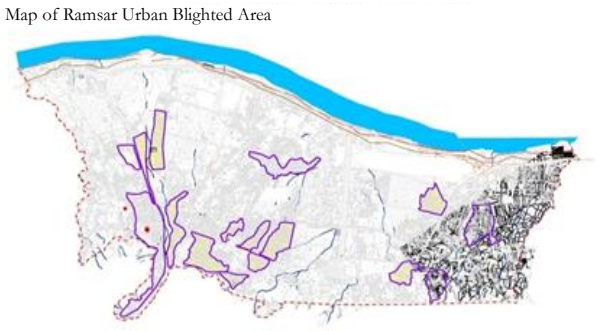

Fig. 2. Map of deteriorated urban fabric in Ramsar.

4 | Methodology

4.1 | Research Design

This study uses a descriptive-analytical method combining:

I. Library and document analysis (theoretical foundations, national/regional plans, Ramsar detailed plan)
II. Field survey using semi-structured questionnaires
III. Strategic analysis models: SWOT, Internal-External Analysis (IEA), Quantitative Strategic Planning Matrix (QSPM) [8].

4.2 | Sampling and Data Collection

Two sets of questionnaires were administered:

I. Closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaire (1=very low to 5=very high) distributed to 30 experts, including municipal managers, urban consultants, and city council members.

II. Open-ended questionnaire to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats specific to Ramsar.

Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and weighted scoring to calculate relative weights and priorities of SWOT factors.

5 | Results

5.1 | SWOT Analysis of Ramsar for CDS Implementation

Based on expert responses and document analysis, key SWOT factors were identified (*Tables 2–5*).

Table 2. Strengths of ramsar city.

Code	Strength Factor	Description
s1	Tourism potential	Due to possessing a unique landscape because of the short distance between the mountains in the south and the sea in the north of the city, temperate climate, lush nature, hot springs, numerous rivers, historical attractions, the ramsar international convention (the ramsar wetlands convention of 1970 named after ramsar), development of ramsar airport, cable car, and the start of the coastal bypass construction.
s2	Existence of ngos and cooperative institutions	Due to the presence of eleven non-governmental organizations (ngos) and 586 cooperative companies.
s3	Rich cultural-social background and relations	Due to numerous interactions with tourists over the past half-century and also due to strong social relations and interactions among citizens in this city.
s4	Strong willingness of citizens to participate	According to the opinions expressed by a significant percentage of citizens regarding participation in the urban development strategy.
s5	Citizens' perceived need for new plans	According to the opinions expressed by a significant percentage of citizens in this regard.
s6	Cooperation in providing required information	According to the opinions expressed by a significant percentage of citizens in this regard.
s7	Existence of a high percentage of educated class	High literacy rate among the urban population

Strengths (S):

I. S1: tourism potential (hot springs, sea, forests, Ramsar Convention).

II. S2: active NGOs (11 organizations) and cooperatives (586 companies).

III. S3: rich socio-cultural relations and history.

IV. S4: strong citizen inclination to participate.

V. S5: citizens' perceived need for new development plans.

VI. S6: high literacy rate (~90% of population aged 6+).

Table 3. Weaknesses of Ramsar City

Code	Weakness Factor	Description
W1	Poor familiarity of Ramsar's urban management with the concept of participation	(Lack of knowledge and understanding among municipal managers and city council members regarding participatory approaches)
W2	Low level of citizen trust in urban management	(Due to the lack of appropriate communication bridges between citizens and municipal managers)
W3	Failure of the comprehensive and detailed plans	(The detailed plan of Ramsar has not achieved its predetermined goals)
W4	Weak agricultural sector	Due to small plot sizes, high costs of agriculture, and low profitability
W5	Lack of stable revenues for the municipality	(Leading to density selling and ignoring unauthorized constructions, and inability to finance urban projects)
W6	One-dimensionality of the city's economy	Due to its reliance on the tourism sector, which also leads to youth unemployment
W7	Environmental sensitivities	Due to improper disposal of municipal waste and sewage, causing environmental and visual pollution
W8	Deteriorated and disordered urban fabrics	Especially in the central part of the city, requiring serious attention for renovation and rehabilitation

Weaknesses (W):

I. W1: poor municipal management familiarity with participation concepts.
II. W2: low citizen trust in municipal management.
III. W3: failure of comprehensive/detailed plans.
IV. W4: weak agricultural sector.
V. W5: lack of stable municipal revenue (leading to density selling).
VI. W6: monodimensional economy (tourism-dependent).
VII. W7: environmental issues (wastewater, solid waste).
VIII. W8: dilapidated urban fabrics.

Table 4. Opportunities for Ramsar.

Description	Opportunity Factor	Code
Under construction; will significantly boost tourism and economic activity in Ramsar	Tehran-North freeway project	O1
Due to the advantages of proximity to the national capital	Relative proximity to the capital city (Tehran)	O2
An opportunity to strengthen communication infrastructure (10 km length, 50 m width)	Initiation of the Ramsar coastal bypass project	O3
Strengthening ecotourism attractions at a short distance from the city	Existence of a highland hinterland (summer resort area)	O4
An opportunity for participation in urban development at the national policy level	National-level attention to the concept of participation	O5

Opportunities (O):

I. O1: Tehran–North freeway project (under construction).
II. O2: relative proximity to the capital (Tehran).
III. O3: Ramsar coastal bypass project (10 km, 50 m width).
IV. O4: upland hinterland with ecotourism potential.
V. O5: national-level attention to participatory planning.

Table 5. Threats to Ramsar.

Code	Threat Factor	Description
T1	Short-term and unstable management	(Frequent changes in municipal managers and council members, disrupting long-term strategic planning)
T2	Negligible share of the city from provincial agricultural lands	Due to lack of attention from provincial authorities to investment in this sector
T3	Existence of a strong floating population (human and material)	Due to freeway construction and airport development, unplanned construction because of low land prices, and anticipated future housing demand
T4	Spread of the second-home ownership problem in the city	Socio-economic and cultural gap between owners of these homes (mostly wealthy Tehranis) and native citizens of Ramsar
T5	Undefined levels of participation and, in other words, lack of targeted participation in the country	No clear framework for what level of participation information, consultation, collaboration, empowerment is expected from citizens
T6	Increasing daily living costs	Reduction in economic satisfaction, unemployment, and a negative impact on the future of participation in city affairs

Threats (T):

I. T1: short-term, unstable municipal management.
II. T2: negligible share of provincial agricultural land.
III. T3: strong speculative construction and "build-sell" pressure.
IV. T4: spreading second-home ownership (wealthy Tehranis) → socio-cultural gap.
V. T5: undefined levels of participation nationwide.
VI. T6: rising cost of living vs. slow income growth.

5.2 | Intra-Group Prioritization of SWOT Factors

Using Likert-scale scores, relative weights were calculated for each factor within its group (see *Tables 6–9*).

Table 6. Prioritization of strengths.

Row	Strength Factor	Score	Mean Weight	Relative Weight
1	S1 – Tourism potential	99	3.30	0.114
2	S2 – Existence of NGOs and cooperative institutions	138	4.60	0.159
3	S3 – Rich cultural-social background and relations	129	4.30	0.148

Table 6. Continued.

Row	Strength Factor	Score	Mean Weight	Relative Weight
4	S4 – Strong willingness of citizens to participate	140	4.67	0.161
5	S5 – Citizens' perceived need for new plans (including CDS)	127	4.23	0.146
6	S6 – Cooperation in providing required information	125	4.17	0.144
7	S7 – Existence of a high percentage of educated class	112	3.73	0.129
	Total			1.001

Top-ranked strengths (by relative weight):

I. S4: strong citizen inclination to participate (0.161).

II. S2: active NGOs and cooperatives (0.159).

III. S3: rich socio-cultural relations (0.148).

Top-ranked weaknesses:

I. W2: low citizen trust in municipal management (0.143).

II. W1: poor management familiarity with participation (0.140).

III. W5: lack of stable municipal revenue (0.135).

Top-ranked opportunities:

I. O5: national attention to participation (0.218).

II. O2: proximity to Tehran (0.204).

III. O1: Tehran–North freeway (0.202).

Top-ranked threats:

I. T5: undefined participation levels nationwide (0.224).

II. T1: short-term unstable management (0.218).

III. T6: rising cost of living (0.218).

5.3 | Inter-Group Prioritization (Overall SWOT Ranking)

When comparing all 26 factors across groups, threats dominate the top five positions (see *Table 10*). However, strengths and opportunities together account for ~50% of total weight, indicating significant potential for strategic intervention [9].

Table 7. Inter-group priorities of SWOT factors in Ramsar.

Factor Code	Inter-Group Relative Weight	Factor Name	Priority
T5	0.224	Undefined levels of participation (lack of targeted participation in the country)	1
T1	0.218	Short-term and unstable management	2
O5	0.218	National-level attention to the concept of participation	3
T6	0.218	Increasing daily living costs	4
T4	0.207	Spread of the second-home ownership problem in the city	5
O2	0.204	Relative proximity to the capital city (Tehran)	6
O1	0.202	Tehran-North Freeway project	7
O3	0.201	Initiation of the Ramsar coastal bypass project	8
O4	0.177	Existence of a highland hinterland (summer resort area)	9
T2	0.176	Negligible share of the city from provincial agricultural lands	10

Table 7. Continued.

Factor Code	Inter-Group Relative Weight	Factor Name	Priority
T3	0.175	Existence of a strong floating population (construction pressure)	11
S4	0.161	Strong willingness of citizens to participate	12
S2	0.159	Existence of NGOs and cooperative institutions	13
S3	0.148	Rich cultural-social background and relations	14
S5	0.146	Citizens' perceived need for new plans	15
S6	0.144	Cooperation in providing required information	16
W2	0.143	Low level of citizen trust in urban management	17
W1	0.140	Poor familiarity of urban management with the concept of participation	18
W5	0.135	Lack of stable revenues for the municipality	19
W7	0.130	Environmental sensitivities	20
S7	0.129	Existence of a high percentage of educated class	21
W8	0.117	Deteriorated and disordered urban fabrics	22
W3	0.115	Failure of the comprehensive and detailed plans	23
S1	0.114	Tourism potential	24
W6	0.111	One-dimensionality of the city's economy	25
W4	0.108	Weak agricultural sector	26

Top 5 overall priorities:

I. T5: undefined participation levels (0.224).

II. T1: short-term unstable management (0.218).

III. O5: national attention to participation (0.218).

IV. T6: rising cost of living (0.218).

V. T4: second-home ownership gap (0.207).

5.4 | Internal-External Analysis

Experts scored each factor on a 1–4 importance scale. Results:

I. Internal environment score: 6.21 (strong strengths relative to weaknesses).

II. External environment score: 7.42 (serious threats outweigh opportunities).

Graphical interpretation (see *Fig. 3*) places Ramsar in the Strengths-Opportunities (SO) quadrant, indicating that competitive/aggressive strategies are most appropriate.

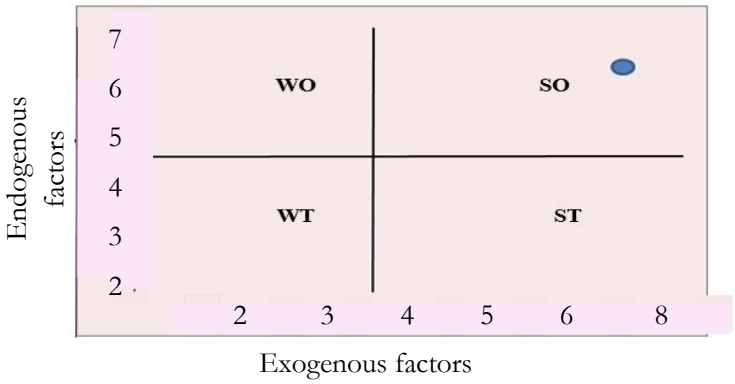

Fig. 3. Graphical interpretation of IEA results.

5.5 | Strategy Formulation and QSPM Prioritization

Six SO strategies were formulated:

I. SO1: continuous education programs for citizens on participation benefits (based on S4 + O5).

II. SO2: engage NGOs/cooperatives in CDS preparation and implementation (S2 + O5).

III. SO3: use citizen participation in CDS through neighborhood meetings, leveraging proximity to Tehran (S5 + O2).

IV. SO4: leverage Ramsar's rich socio-cultural heritage and ongoing freeway/bypass projects to raise participation awareness (S3 + O1, O3, O4).

V. SO5: specialized training for municipal managers on participatory approaches (based on S4 + O5).

VI. SO6: design programs to increase citizen–municipality interaction and mutual trust (S4 + O5).

Final priorities:

I. SO4: (Leverage socio-cultural heritage + infrastructure projects): 21.01.

II. SO2: (Engage NGOs and cooperatives): 19.95.

III. SO5: (Training for municipal managers): 19.65.

IV. SO3: (Neighborhood participation meetings): 18.97.

V. SO6: (Citizen–municipality trust programs): 17.11.

VI. SO1: (Citizen education): 10.24.

6 | Discussion

6.1 | Testing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (confirmed). Ramsar's urban management system does NOT have adequate conditions or preconditions for CDS preparation and implementation. Evidence: low citizen trust (W2), poor management familiarity with participation (W1), and lack of stable municipal revenue (W5).

Hypothesis 2 (confirmed). citizen willingness to participate in participatory urban development programs (like CDS) is high in Ramsar.

Evidence: strong inclination to participate (S4), active NGOs (S2), rich socio-cultural relations (S3), and perceived need for new plans (S5).

Hypothesis 3 (confirmed). Ramsar possesses the economic and social capacities for successful CDS preparation and implementation.

Evidence: high literacy (S6), tourism potential (S1), and multiple opportunities (O1–O5) [10].

6.2 | Key Barriers and Enablers

The most critical barrier is undefined participation levels at the national level (T5), which leads to ad-hoc, non-binding, and often tokenistic participation. This is compounded by short-term, unstable municipal management (T1) a systemic issue in Iranian municipalities where mayors and council members change frequently, disrupting long-term strategic planning.

Conversely, the strong citizen inclination to participate (S4) and active civil society (S2, S3) are remarkable assets. Ramsar's small-to-medium size (~33,500 population) and dense social networks facilitate communication and collective action a finding consistent with CDS successes in other middle-sized cities [11].

6.3 | Implications for Practice

Municipal managers should prioritize:

I. Formalizing participation levels (information, consultation, collaboration, empowerment) in municipal regulations.

II. Institutionalizing NGO engagement in urban planning processes, not as symbolic gestures but as co-decision makers.

III. Training programs for both managers and citizens on participatory planning methods.

IV. Leveraging major infrastructure projects (freeway, coastal bypass) as opportunities to demonstrate tangible benefits of participation.

7 | Conclusion

This study assessed the feasibility of implementing a CDS in Ramsar, Iran, with a focus on participatory capacity. The findings confirm that while significant barriers exist particularly undefined participation levels, unstable management, low trust, and financial constraints Ramsar also possesses strong social capital, citizen willingness, and emerging opportunities that can be mobilized.

The most effective strategies are those that build on existing socio-cultural relations and civil society networks (SO4 and SO2). A CDS for Ramsar should not be a master plan imposed from above but a flexible, adaptive framework co-produced with NGOs, cooperatives, and citizens [12].

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Author Contributions

Conceptualization, E.S.S. and R.K.; Methodology, E.S.S.; Software, E.S.S.; Validation, E.S.S. and R.K.; Formal analysis, E.S.S.; Investigation, E.S.S.; Resources, R.K.; Data curation, E.S.S.; Writing original draft preparation, E.S.S.; Writing review and editing, R.K.; Visualization, E.S.S.; Supervision, R.K.; Project administration, E.S.S. and R.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and research ethics considerations.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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