Community, inclusivity and context: Exploring the factors that shape cultural policy in Iran

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Background: Cultural policy are highly context dependent and shaped by local communities and cultural values. Although existing studies focus on cultural policy in Western contexts, there is a need for more research on regions, countries, cities and communities within the Global South, such as Africa and the Middle East.

Objectives: The article explores the co-production of cultural policy in Iran at different scales highlighting processes of inclusivity and community involvement at the stages of planning and implementation.

Method: This research draws on qualitative data from multiple qualitative sources, informed by the positionality and experience of the first author who has lived, studied and worked in Iran for over 30 years. The experience involved four projects: (1) exploring culture-led regeneration in Rasht city, Iran; (2) reviewing a 10-step bottom-up community-led regeneration scheme; (3) surveys with 128 users of cultural places and creative activities in Rasht city, Iran and (4) 20 semi-structured interviews with key informants in public institutions.

Results: The top-down policies and practices of the Iranian government undermine participatory processes, democratic values and cultural citizenship. Yet, there is also evidence that the cultural identities and practices of local communities remain visible and vibrant.

Conclusion: The article demonstrates how policies in the post-revolutionary period limit Iran's adoption of cultural models while suppressing forms of community participation and democratic values.

Contribution: The article nuances our understanding of the gap between the universal model of cultural policy and what happens in practice. The understudied case of Iran, the article also highlights how cultural policy, in non-Western contexts, is shaped by a range of factors including cultural values and political imperatives.

Keywords: culture; Iran; cultural policy; inclusivity; urban regeneration; local communities.

Introduction

Just as the meaning of culture is difficult to pin down (Oni, Onyekaba & Husseini 2020), cultural policy is a fuzzy concept with different definitions depending on time period, location, scale and context. Understandings and applications of such policy vary across countries and regions in the Global North, such as Europe, and the Global South, including Africa and the Middle East (Comunian, Hracs & England 2021). Garcia (2004) frames cultural policy as governmental activities related to promoting the production of arts and cultural industries, heritage and humanities. Others include a wider range of actors including public bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community organisations who endeavour to position people's satisfaction in line with their cultural needs and consent for social transformation (Bordat-Chauvin 2022). Cultural policy is also framed as a tool to promote a specific idea of community (Gray 2010). In Barcelona, for example, cultural policy encourages the creation of cultural value to attract the attention of local and international communities, including tourists, to the city's cultural identity and outputs (Patricio Mulero & Rius-Ulldemolins 2017). Here, scale matters and cultural policies, which often conflict, can be articulated at the national or local level.

Cultural policy, on the other hand, is naturally collaborative and community dependent, with diversity and inclusion serving as key attributes of both culture and policy. While scholarship on the concept of collaborative cultural policies is growing, there is a need for cities to be more transparent and develop policies that inform the public of what aims, individuals and kinds of culture are supported (Bennett & Silva 2011). The term *inclusive* is commonly associated with

cities and cultural policies, but this concept is also contested by scholars debating which individuals and social groups should be included in planning processes and policies and what spaces, activities and cultural content should be included (Alsayel, De Jong & Fransen 2022). While some focus on including certain groups within wider populations, such as low-income households or individuals with disabilities (Rebernik et al. 2019), others consider collaborative and inclusive governance as a form of decision-making based on the consent of a wide range of stakeholders comprising public and private actors from diverse backgrounds and various interests (Ansell & Gash 2018).

Therefore, more conceptual work related to cultural policy and in particular greater attention to inclusivity and community engagement at the planning and action stages is required. By extension, there is a need to consider the role of local specificity and context with respect to culture, cultural policies and community. As most studies and debates focus on Western contexts such as the United Kingdom, the United States (US), Europe and Australia, more research is needed on regions, countries, cities and communities within the Global South such as Africa, South America and the Middle East (Bayliss 2007; Borén & Young 2013; Van Hek & Kraaykamp 2013).

Iran is a particularly unique case in the Global South because of its large size, geography and demographic diversity of ethnicities and cultures, which constitutes an extreme and understudied case in cultural policy. A nation with a rich history of art, culture and liberal values that have informed and aligned with Western culture for many decades. Since the 1979 Revolution, the transformation of the state from liberal to conservatism led to a parallel transformation of its national and cultural identity from outward looking to inward looking and protectionist (Aghaeimehr & Gharehbaglou 2020). Before the 1979 cultural policy, a centralised priority and much of the cultural practices, architecture and built environments in Iran followed European Modernism in art, architecture and cultural venues (Mehan 2017). By contrast, the current state of top-down policy planning and economic dependence on oil revenue has resulted in urban development and civic engagement issues. Indeed, Iranian citizens believe that they only need to maintain their private spaces and that the maintenance of public properties is the duty of the government. Unlike Europeans, Iranians see themselves as separate from the state (Pakzad 2017), which increases the conflict. In recent years, processes of globalisation and the rise of digital technologies and social media, in particular, have brought Iranians into direct contact with Western cultures, practices and values, limiting the impact of the state's control and undermining its authority over policies and practices (Mashhadi Moghaddam & Rafieian 2020). This had a similar impact on the application of cultural policy. As it becomes more difficult to control urban societies through national policies, local authorities and structures are enabling greater levels of community participation (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2021).

This article sheds light on the Iranian context as the country grapples with modern approaches to cultural policy that contrast with its restrictive, centralised and highly controlled national-level approach. It investigates the notion of cultural policy, its evolution and the dichotomy of control versus liberty through the lens of community participation in Iran. Our research pays particular attention to the structure of policymaking and the missing role of local communities in decision-making in Iran at different levels (national and local). Drawing on 20 interviews with national and local public organisations and observation of policy planning processes at different levels, it demonstrates the unique context of post-revolutionary Iran, whose cultural values have shaped the aims, planning process and delivery of its cultural policy over time. The article attempts to understand planning structures in Iran and their obstacles by exploring the theoretical background of inclusive cultural policy in different contexts. This is followed by a consideration of the challenges associated with a centralised policy planning process and possible recommendations for inclusive cultural policy planning in Iran. In so doing, the article contributes to our collective understanding of cultural policy, diverse local cultures, processes of inclusivity, community engagement and the important role of context.

Conceptualising inclusive cultural policy

There is no single theory that can explain the history of planning in Iran from the perspective of power, rationality, politics, civic engagement or urban planning. Therefore, this article brings together a range of relevant and useful theories, including inclusivity and empowerment (Mashhadi Moghaddam & Rafieian 2020).

A socially inclusive cultural policy could be defined as a programme that promotes distinctive development in arts and culture alongside innovation by employing cultural and creative activities of artists, entrepreneurs and other groups of people (Sasaki 2010). The moral obligation to endorse social inclusion and resist exclusion from mainstream culture appeared in the 20th century as a result of democratisation and growing support for multiple identities (Alsayel et al. 2022). It started by promoting the ability of disadvantaged people to engage with socio-economic and cultural aspects of life. In recent years, decision-makers have incorporated inclusion into urban policy schemes with the idea that it can advance creativity and economic progress (Lindberg 2018). Aspects of inclusivity can involve a range of factors including age, disability, location, income, race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality. For example, social inclusion policies in Scotland were developed with the aim of promoting opportunities and removing barriers to inclusion to strengthen the full participation of different groups and generations in community life (McCall 2009). These groups can include but are not limited to elites and educated people, less-advantaged groups, those living in the capital and small cities and residents of neighbourhoods with significant historical or cultural heritage values. Therefore, an inclusive

city can be described as a healthy and flourishing city that has eliminated all preventable obstacles to liberty and value creation (Anttiroiko & De Jong 2020).

Based on its sub-dimensions, 'capabilities', 'participation' and 'access', cultural policies can be evaluated through the discourse of empowerment. Inclusive cultural empowerment is a shared capability to stimulate personal and social development through access to cultural facilities, recognising cultural actions in the community and participation in inclusive cultural policy planning processes (Campagna 2017). Participation in cultural life intends to encompass the right to act freely in choosing one's own identity, engage in cultural practices and creative activities and develop self-expression with a focus on minority and indigenous groups. In the Nordic context, for example, the principal idea of democratising culture was to make the greatest artworks accessible to every person in a democratic society including the working class as well as those living in slums or peripheral areas (Mangset 2020). Citizen-centred access to cultural life involves the right of individuals and communities to understand their own and others' culture as well as cultural heritage through education, training and information (Odello 2011).

In this respect, Comunian, Hracs and England (2021) highlighted the role of creative intermediaries in the African context in supporting Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs). They assert that cultural intermediaries are particularly able to support creative individuals, groups and projects by providing access to networks, skills and information (soft infrastructure) alongside physical or organisational resources (hard infrastructure) (Comunian et al. 2021). Another example of community participation comes from Argentina where after 2015, the state established the Points of Culture (PdC) programme to stimulate cultural engagement between underprivileged and marginalised people through funding projects of community-based cultural organisations (Bordat-Chauvin 2022). The programme directs cultural policies towards 'community culture', which is described as every culture and the means to develop the world embedded in each community, neighbourhood, region, etc. This can be regarded as a very different orientation from the paradigm of cultural policy or culture as a vehicle for economic development.

Within the context of inclusivity, an important debate surrounds whose cultural heritage and values are celebrated, supported and represented. Indeed, the inclusivity of local communities is reliant on the extent to which a group or an individual's cultural values, heritage and traditions are represented to share beliefs and knowledge with others within the mainstream culture (Olivares & Piatak 2022). While race refers to the physical characteristics of people, ethnicity expresses the national and local cultural features of a group or community. This can be reflected in how significant ethnicity is to experience social practices, events and artistic activities as well as food and crafts through strengthening a sense of belonging and enriching mutual understanding (UNESCO 2016). Engagement with cultural values contributes to people's level of education, skill development, health and social cohesion in societies because education and

culture are fundamentally interconnected (Bourdieu 2008). Thus, inclusive policies aiming at reducing unequal access to cultural activities and social assets can help to decrease inequalities in knowledge, education, capacities and well-being (Dorpalen & Gallou 2023). To enhance cultural and social opportunities for different ethnicities, different measures need to be taken into account. The cultural policies must enable the engagement of different social groups with cultural heritage and provide equal opportunities for diverse ethnicities to access cultural and social assets through the support of investment in urban regeneration projects.

There are some examples in Western cities such as Amsterdam and Toronto, which have adopted goals, for instance, a democratic city and a collective sense of belonging by focussing on diversity, equal opportunities, income level and ideological and geographical discrimination (Alsayel et al. 2022). These include but are not limited to religion, age, race and ethnicity, sexuality, disability and so on. Likewise, many US cities have moved towards inclusion and racial identity initiatives to address polarised environments (Anttiroiko & De Jong 2020). Indeed, trying to display or promote culture without real social inclusion or representation is problematic (Burke 2019; Gray 2009). There are ongoing debates about promoting and displaying high culture, which may not appeal to or resonate with most citizens or importing works by talented outsiders, especially from Western to non-Western contexts, rather than celebrating local creatives and culture (Grodach 2017; Vestheim 2012). For example, cultural plans in Dubai mainly focus on developing policies to safeguard the rights of vulnerable groups such as children and individuals with disabilities while also empowering senior citizens (Zakzak, Willis & Pineda 2019). However, less is known about relevant programmes and initiatives in non-western cities, especially in the Middle East.

Data and research method

The article draws on qualitative data from multiple sources, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, observation and document analysis. It is also informed by the positionality and experience of the first author who has lived, studied and worked in Iran for over 30 years. During this time, they explored and evaluated related policies and actors in place as well as the relationship between urban and regional organisations and central hubs in the country's capital city. The main issue was the existence of an uncooperative environment between different organisations when it came to implementing urban regeneration projects. Moreover, only one organisation was responsible for learning about the needs and preferences of local communities' and including them in their projects. All of this led to neglect of local demands and meeting basic facilities requirements. The first author also observed the conditions of public spaces before and after the implementation of urban regeneration projects. Through experiencing cultural policies and branding schemes as a citizen, they understood different perspectives of users and whether diverse groups within the community react positively or negatively to specific cultural activities in the city.

For this article, in particular, the authors conducted a literature review that focussed on theoretical aspects of cultural policy as well as some examples from non-western cases. For instance, they examined how cultural policy is perceived in different contexts or how it would affect the participation of local communities in decision-making processes. To evaluate the cultural policy and decision-making structure in the context of Iran, a further data set was created based on documents, such as online national reports and national development plans published before and after the Iranian revolution and regional and urban policy documents. These were analysed by investigating the notions of 'culture', 'cultural policy', 'cultural strategies', 'cultural activities', 'cultural heritage', 'historic cities', 'urban revitalisation' and 'urban regeneration'. We also evaluated the cultural policy planning structure at different levels through ethnographic fieldwork, including observation of the implementation of urban regeneration projects in cities. Key questions included: who are the main actors behind cultural policy planning in Iran? Which individuals or groups directly or indirectly affect the decisions? And what is the participation level of local communities in these processes? The results were semiotically analysed (Attarzadeh & Seyfodini 2023) and thematically grouped together (Yi, Throsby & Gao 2021) to narrow down and articulate different levels and approaches.

The first author also conducted related projects in Iran. The first project explored the development of a cultural and creative quarter in Rasht's central square and the impacts of cultural and creative activities on inclusive placemaking. In this project, several rows of Rasht Great Bazaar were visited by the first author to collect survey responses from 116 marketers to assess their needs and preferences regarding the regeneration of derelict buildings and the socio-economic values of the city (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2019). The second project included a 10-step bottom-up community-led regeneration scheme in the Gilan region, which aimed to communicate directly with residents. Through facilitators, they were able to represent their needs and goals for the neighbourhood leading to the establishment of a Neighbourhood Development Centre and a multi-functional park (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2021).

The third project, which is in progress, involves conducting surveys with 128 users of cultural places and creative activities in the city of Rasht to understand their level of engagement, demands and desires to improve urban public spaces. It also builds on the fourth project that involves the analysis of government documents and 20 semi-structured interviews with key informants in public institutions (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2023). The interviewees comprised 11 workers at the General Directorate of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (MRUD), including the deputy of Urban Regeneration and Housing, head of the Urban Regeneration department, head of the Housing department, urban regeneration coordinators and architecture and urban planning specialists. Further, five included the deputy of Urban Regeneration and urban planning specialists in

municipalities and four participants from environmental NGOs to examine the decision-making process at different levels. The questions addressed their vision and the structure of current projects regarding cultural policies and urban regeneration, communications with relevant public and private stakeholders, the level of community participation and how they approach citizens and the means they adopt to raise awareness among communities. The interviews were analysed qualitatively searching for the goals of public and private organisations for cultural policies, community involvement and cultural citizenship. The findings were then modelled and structured to understand the different actors and their roles in the decision-making process and how these can be improved. Ultimately, a model was developed to highlight the top-down policy planning process, the organisations and companies involved, budget controls and the role of local communities (Figure 1 and Table 1).

Cultural structure and cultural policy in Iran

The ways in which developing countries approach cultural policies are often different from developed countries because they are mostly related to tourism, local crafts-making and food with little connection to intellectual property (Fahmi, Koster & Van Dijk 2016). Like Europe, the geographical and climate conditions of Iran have shaped the social behaviour of individuals as part of a natural society throughout history (Pakzad 2017). By contrast, the agricultural difficulties and economic circumstances in most parts of Iran have forced people to adopt a nomadic life in the past, leading to the creation of diverse societies. Therefore, with the expansion of cities and technologies, different social classes have emerged although much later in Eastern societies compared to Europe. Another difference is that in Iran, social classes are dependent on the government and the level of the class directly depends on the level of the dependency on the state. A content analysis of relevant documents and policies reveals a dramatic transformation in cultural policy directions over time.

There are several issues in defining what cultural policy means or encompasses in Iran. National Iranian culture consists of different elements including: (1) the Persian (Farsi) language, (2) shared historical knowledge of Iranians, (3) the territorial geography of the country throughout history, (4) shared political views among Iranians that cultivate unity in plurality, (5) tolerance that has inspired people's acceptance of diverse religions and local social values in the country and (7) traditions, symbols and heritages (Attarzadeh & Seyfodini 2023). Culture and cultural policy in Iran are heavily influenced by the country's long and rich history. Although it is beyond the scope of the article to chronicle this history, the following sections highlight some key features, which can help explain cultural policy planning in the context of Iran. In Iran, the majority of people believe that culture is a precious creature equal only to history and local traditions, which cannot be criticised (Pakzad 2017). However, they also believe that modern culture, especially elements related to city life and technology, needs to be flexibly developed. With
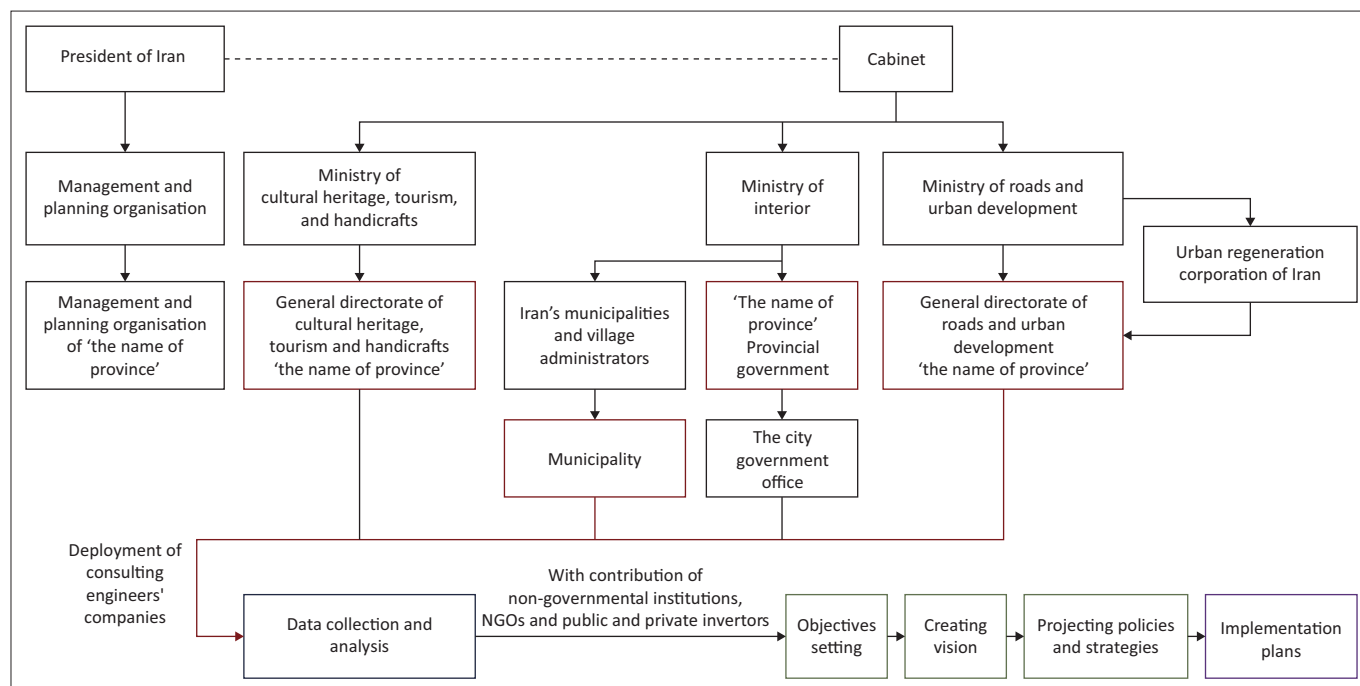
NGO, non-governmental organisation.

FIGURE 1: The structure of urban cultural policy planning in Iran.

TABLE 1: Evaluation of different stakeholders' involvement in the cultural policy planning process in Iran.

Type	Stakeholder	Involvement
Direct Involvement	Municipality	The main organisation for implementing urban projects and related (cultural) policies.
	General Directorate of Roads and Urban Development 'name of province'	Provides funds for and implement some of the urban regeneration projects by following MRUD policies.
	General Directorate of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts 'name of province'	Responsible for renovating and revitalising heritage buildings and urban historic fabrics.
	'Name of province' Provincial Government	Provides official registrations of funds for the urban policy projects.
	Consulting Engineering Companies	Employed by both the public and private organisations, they plan schemas for architectural buildings and urban spaces. The company consists of different specialists including architects, civil engineers, urban planners, mappers, etc.
	Private Organisations	Comprise different cultural facilities such as concert and theatre halls, libraries, etc. as well as investors.
	NGOs	Some societies and small organisation managed by individuals outside the government; contribute to awareness raising, e.g., on environmental activities, among communities through holding workshops and distributing flyers.
	Local communities	Include marketers, practitioners, artists, and residents
Indirect Involvement	Ministry of Roads and Urban Development (MRUD)	Devises (cultural) policies for construction projects and urban neighbourhoods
	Urban Regeneration Corporation of Iran (URCI)	Focuses on budget allocation to urban regeneration projects.
	Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts (MCTH)	Preserves cultural heritage and historic sites including both tangible and intangible heritage.
	The City Government Office	Controls urban projects to ensure that they are corresponding to regional strategies
	Management and Planning Organisation of 'name of province'	Provides funds from national budget based on the statistics received by all other institutions.
	Visitors	Includes any type of cultural or regular tourists

NGO, non-governmental organisation.

reference to the previous nomadic life of people, citizens treat the natural and built environment carelessly regardless of religion and ethnicity. Poor economic conditions have also reduced the willingness of people to care about preserving and maintaining surrounding environments and to forget about long-term plans and sustainable futures.

With a population of around 88 million people, Iran has a diverse society in terms of ethnic groups and cultures. Among the 20 different ethnic groups, the five major clusters of Azeris, Kurds, Baluch, Turkmen and Arabs have received the most political undermining. The political history of ethnic groups in Iran demonstrates how cultural diversity has been observed as a security challenge by the Iranian state. Studies have argued that the Persian-centric nationalist elites' perception of minorities has never been unitary; however, they have adopted a Persian-centric definition of Iranian-ness, which has harmed the role of minorities in society and politics. Thus, to create a clear national identity for Iranians, the elites continued the promotion of the Persian language, especially in the educational system, as a uniting element to connect different ethnic groups in Iran (Elling & Saleh 2016).

Nevertheless, the extent to which the Iranian government has been successful in creating a coherent national identity remains a matter of debate. The findings do suggest that there is a need for Iranian cultural policy to better understand and address the needs of local communities and diverse ethnic groups within society.

Modern cultural policy in Iran started during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) through several measures. It began with the development of a contemporary national character by promoting ancient Iranian practices (Tajmazinani 2017). This continued through processes of Westernisation, including cultural measures such as a mixed and modern schooling and university system and a new Western-style dress code (Habibi 2020). Western cinema, media and music were also introduced. The second step was secularisation because of conflicts between the Shah (monarch) and religious leaders, which led to the limiting of religious rituals and figures and the promotion of pre-Islamic elements and history (Aghaeimehr & Gharehbaglou 2020). Other steps involved cultural assimilation to preserve national solidarity and to develop an integrated national identity through a strong centralised state (Fazeli 2006). There were also a variety of cultural policy instruments and cultural initiatives, including six 5-year development plans. In the Fifth Development Plan in 1972 and its Revised Plan in 1974, several measures in the field of cultural industries, including the enhancement of technology, creativity and community initiatives, the maintenance of cultural heritage and the establishment of regional development banks were addressed. These plans aimed to attract local small-scale investments and exports of textiles and rural craft industries (Plan and Budget Organisation 1972, 1974).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, during which the imperial state, led by the Shah (monarch), was replaced by the Islamic Republic of Iran and was a crucial turning point in the country's history and influence on cultural policy. Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the cultural landscape of Iran has transformed thoroughly in terms of national structures (Ghabouli, Soltani & Ranjbar 2023). The most significant change with respect to cultural policy development was the establishment of the 'Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution' in 1984 and undertaking a *cultural revolution* in different parts of the society. This was followed by wide-ranging changes in the educational system as well as other domains (Tajmazinani 2017). The primary aim of this council was to mitigate the manifestations of Westernisation in everyday culture while spreading the idea of Islamic cultural independence. In the following years, other adjustments, including structural privatisation, promotion of cultural consumption and more international cultural collaborations, were made. Between 2005 and 2013, a new scheme of '*cultural engineering*' was proposed to highlight the ideological understanding of Islam, the religious characteristics of culture and the development of cultural facilities (Attarzadeh & Seyfodini 2023). Above all, since 2003, changes have taken place to improve the role of NGOs as representatives of public society and to foster open culture and cultural diplomacy.

More recently, Iran has tried to launch different initiatives by establishing cultural institutions. For instance, culture centres have been created inside and outside the country, for example, in Pakistan and Afghanistan to promote the Persian language and literature (Mozaffari & Akbar 2023). Another example is cultural embassies in foreign countries attempting to foster Iranian culture through engaging in specific events and cultural activities such as the Persian New Year. There is also a vision for the year 2025 (Plan and Budget Organisation 2003b), which supports a strategy for the dialogue between civilisations and cultures at national, regional and international levels. This vision accentuates the development of new science and technology as well as creativity and innovation. In this sense, the aim of Iranian cultural policy is to support Iranian culture in the communication and cultural domains by raising awareness of and investment in small and traditional markets (Plan and Budget Organisation 2003a).

Decision-making structures and cultural citizenship in Iranian policies

In Iran, cultural policy planning is approached and implemented through urban regeneration projects in different cities that support national Persian heritage while incorporating further practices from the local values. Our understanding of the decision-making structures comes from projects 2 and 4 and interviews with a range of stakeholders and workers at relevant ministries and institutions (Figure 1 and Table 1). At the top of the policy planning structure in Iran is the president and ministries work under their supervision. In terms of cultural policy and urban planning, three Ministry of Interiors (MI), the MRUD and the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts (MCTH) are involved. The MI is responsible for managing policies and supervising elections of city councils and duties of municipalities. The Ministry of Roads and Urban Development devises leverage policies on the topics of urban regeneration, housing and transportation, and through liaising with the Plan and Budget Organisation of Iran, it provides the annual budget for construction projects and distributes it through various regions. The Ministry of Roads and Urban Development also manages and supervises General Directorates in different regions through meetings and online systems. The Urban Regeneration Corporation of Iran (URCI) is part of the MRUC's arrangements and focusses solely on urban regeneration projects and distributes loans for housing renovation in historic fabrics. The MCTH deals with all the matters related to cultural heritage and historic sites including both tangible and intangible heritage; it also provides funds and supervision and handles national and world heritage registrations.

There are 31 regions in the country, each of which has its own Provincial Government. Because all the cultural policy and urban regeneration schemes need registration with the MI, this institution holds monthly or quarterly meetings to record and confirm proposed schemes by involved organisations. It works closely with all regional institutions including the

General Directorates of MRUD and MCTH and municipalities. The General Directorate of Roads and Urban Development negotiates with MRUD and URCI as the central public institutions to grant budgets and funds for urban projects proposed by the municipality. It also oversees the municipality to ensure that urban projects are implemented to the agreed standard. If urban regeneration projects are executed in a historic part of the city, they need the confirmation of the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts to make sure that the projects do not damage local heritage.

Based on findings from the first project, we know that the municipality is responsible for the majority of urban policy planning projects in Iran and plans regeneration schemes through communication with national (central) institutions, private organisations, NGOs and the local community. Schemes are formulated by an Engineering Advisory Company, employed by the municipality or similar public institutions that possess the funds. It is also in charge of implementing agreed actions in the city including the regeneration projects, events, occasional markets and revitalising urban spaces. This section demonstrates that Iran monitors and incorporates practices related to cultural policies and community engagement from wider international bodies such as the UN. Indeed, based on findings from project 1, the Iranian government, particularly at the local level, attempts to adjust policies adopted from UNESCO's cultural strategies and the UN's cultural sustainable development documents to fit with Iran's specific context and imperatives in the practice of urban regeneration projects (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2023).

As part of projects 1 and 3, different national documents on culture-led regeneration in Iran have been examined. The analysis reveals that culture in Iranian cities was initially addressed in the national regulation of 'Revitalising and Upgrading of Urban Historic Fabrics', adopted in 2014 (MRUD 2014). The document was prepared by MRUD in close collaboration with MCTH and the Supreme Council of Provinces and was approved by the honourable government board based on Article 138 of the Constitution. The policy planning structure in Iran is a centralised system and top-down process at both national and local (regional and urban) levels (Mozaffari & Akbar 2023). It is collaboratively managed by MRUD, MCTH, the MI and Planning and Budget Organisations. Nevertheless, there is an identifiable strategy aimed at promoting and encouraging cultural citizenship with the collaboration of local institutions and public and private organisations in urban regeneration projects. The main objective is to address the demands of residents as well as socio-economic and physical factors in the regeneration of cultural and historical heritage and cultural identities (MRUD 2014). The regeneration strategy can involve different approaches from the promotion of quality of life and community empowerment to the revitalisation or rehabilitation and capacity-building of the local communities in the historic areas (Plan and Budget Organisation 2015).

These aims can be applied through local governance in a strategic direction and are integrated among all related factors at the national and local levels, including the approach of urban planning standards to Iranian-Islamic architecture.

The necessity of protecting authenticity and integrity in the process of revitalising historical districts was articulated in the instructions on the 'Conservation of Historical and Cultural Fabrics', ratified by the Supreme Council for Urbanism and Architecture of Iran (SCUAI 2017). In this context, historical-cultural areas have distinct public spaces and cultural-social structures that have always been the place of events and the realm of social interactions. Examples of these urban regeneration and pedestrianisation projects can be found across many cities in Iran, including Tehran, Shiraz and Isfahan as well as Rasht, which was examined in the first project (Figure 2). The projects facilitated the exhibition of both Persian cultural events, such as Norouz (Persian New Year) and Yalda (the celebration of the longest night of the year), alongside local cultural heritage, including traditional craft-making techniques, regional cuisines and literature. This process requires the inclusive participation of all relevant and effective institutions and actors, representatives of non-governmental organisations, academics and more importantly local residents. Subsequently, the Sixth Development Plan (2016–2020) emphasised the economy of culture and its growth and development through cultural and artistic products, media and multicultural activities (Ramezani & Partovi 2020) by providing the groundwork for the promotion of creativity in cultural and artistic activities (Plan and Budget Organisation 2015). Additionally, the preservation and introduction of cultural diversity as a factor for the sustainable development of the tourism industry was raised.

The evaluation of relevant documents indicated that Iranian policies have concentrated on cultural activities and related factors that are seen as effective in stimulating urban regeneration (MRUD 2014). However, highlighting the importance of context, the preservation and reinforcement of Iranian culture and identity are only considered prominent if they are compatible with, or at least not in conflict with, Islamic principles (Tajmazinani 2017). This means that cultural activities related to the history of Islam or any Islamic figures receive more funds than other categories. Moreover, there are regulations to promote Iranian cultural landscapes within cities including indigenous features of architecture. In this sense, the less-respected cultural diversity and cultural rights need to be strengthened through cultural policy instruments. With no specific documents with the title of CCIs, the Iranian government supports traditional activities, such as music, handicrafts and gastronomy, in certain regions, where they profit from community creativity (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2023). The general goal is to promote culture for social and economic benefit and to contribute to raising awareness among locals (SCUAI 2017).

The position of Iranian communities

In keeping with the first project, there are different plans and approaches in terms of governance and urban cultural

Source: Photograph taken by Maryam Pourzakarya on 15 May 2024
FIGURE 2: Shah Street in the city of Rasht, northern Iran, after an urban regeneration project in 2013.

policy in Iran. We discuss the role of communities in each plan and more importantly where the societies stand. Introduced in 1998 and implemented in 2005 in Qazvin City, the City Development Strategy (CDS) was considered as an instrument to improve urban management, employment and economic growth (Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar & Badarulzaman 2014). The problem with CDS is that compared to master plans, it has no legal standing, so the definite position of communities is missed. A master plan is a spatial plan that employs social, economic and cultural transformations of the society to improve the spatial and physical structure of cities by responding to people's social comfort (Mashhadi Moghaddam & Rafieian 2020). However, because of the shortcomings of strategic-structural (master) plans, the issue of communities' participation was reassigned to a newly established 'Neighbourhood Council'. As the representatives of the people, the Council is responsible for learning about residents' demands and needs and suggesting remedies to the main city council to solve urban problems. The main issue is that in this approach, people are dependent on the representatives to understand and address their needs and with diverse ethnic groups, classes and minorities, this approach created many new obstacles (Kathi & Cooper 2005). Indeed, the Council's failure to communicate issues

and requests to higher authorities led to a lack of trust from local communities.

In practice, the first example of successful community participation in planning in Iran is the Bandar-Abbas City Informal Settlements Upgrading Project (BACISU) from 2001 to 2004. Besides including all possible public and private organisations in the initial stages of the urban plan, they also created a working group and a coordination office to empower unofficial stakeholders (Mashhadi Moghaddam & Rafieian 2020). The main objectives were to promote the participation of citizens in all stages through financial support and backing volunteer social groups such as women's and youth groups. The method included many interviews with local communities and NGOs through an intermediator – a planner that helped the public interest. Another good example is the community-led regeneration project of Bandar Anzali in northern Iran. Similarly, a facilitator organisation acted as an intermediator to follow a 10-step bottom-up guideline by UDRC (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2021). It starts with social and cultural awareness-raising among residents and identifying skilled individuals for capacity-building through participatory workshops. It

ended with the establishment of a Neighbourhood Development Centre and suggested community-prioritised urban regeneration projects to the regional General Directorates and municipality.

In terms of regional strategies, policies have shifted towards collaboration between public and private sectors through raising private investment in cultural and entrepreneurial projects (Municipality of Rasht 2016). The spatial planning schemes are developed through collaboration between national organisations, regional governance and cities. These plans mainly aim to develop and promote regional commerce, whether it is agriculture or heritage, and its supporting industries, including but not limited to tourism and trade (MPOGL 2016). For instance, regions employed different approaches, including creating or supporting national events, festivals or weekly Bazaars, to emphasise the culture of the region and to pursue cultural policies and urban regeneration approaches. A good example here is the local crafts and food bazaar in the region of Guilan, where locals can sell their cultural products (Figure 3). Another example involves parallel sub-national schemes that have been concentrating on developing national parks and preserving forests. They similarly aim to boost economic conditions through weekly markets. To evaluate cultural citizenship and inclusivity, local vendors were surveyed during the first project (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2019). As they were not directly involved in policy planning processes, they sought to have their demands recognised by urban governance through intermediaries, specifically the board of trustees of the local mosque. This resulted in several positive developments within the urban regeneration project in the city centre, including the redesign of transportation and access routes. From the second project, we also learned that to avoid challenges such as over-tourism, these plans call for the creation of adequate tourism facilities and services, including accommodations, restrooms and garbage collection stations with a decent distance from protected areas and national environments. Within Iran, inflation and economic stagnation are significant problems in many city regions, and these conditions negatively affect culture and social security. There is a need for municipalities to generate new sources of funding such as public and private investments, and these aims are included in policy-making processes (Maxwell & Miller 2017). Alongside the regeneration of urban public spaces, improving economic conditions is linked to enhancing social security and quality of life.

Source: Photograph taken by Maryam Pourzakarya on 15 May 2024.
FIGURE 3: Temporary bazaar of crafts and food in Saadi Street, Rasht, northern Iran.

In Iran, five cities have been registered on UNESCO's Creative City Network (UCCN) to date. This scheme asserts the importance of preserving and celebrating culture and creativity at the local level and stimulating and supporting creative professionals and cultural participation and engagement by local citizens. As outlined in the third project, for Iranian cities, the scheme has been a great incentive to develop their regional cultural policy, tourism and creative landscape. The registration process starts at the local level by the mayors of cities through establishing a memorandum of cooperation with the National Commission of UNESCO in Iran. The procedure also involves launching a cooperation office at the level of urban governance as the Municipal Cooperation Office. The final documents declaring the cultural potential and values of the cities are then sent to the UNESCO headquarters in Paris for evaluation (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2019). Following cities' registration on UCCN, a Creative and Innovation Centre is established at the city level to formulate the pertinent effective functions of a creative city. The mission of these centres is to promote tourism and city branding as well as to encourage the participation of local communities in socio-cultural activities (Pourbehi et al. 2023). Other aims include creating jobs, raising income levels and enhancing economic development and levels of human capital. For instance, creativity rooms were set up in neighbourhood development centres to engage residents in urban decision-making and to improve and change their way of thinking and observing urban issues. Specific projects for the development of cultural and creative activities in the city centre involve (Municipality of Rasht 2016):

- Planning to promote the pedestrian pathways through existing dominant activities based on their historical background.
- Creating spaces appropriate to the climatic conditions for the supply of creative products on the central pedestrian route by prioritising the activities of homeless women and marginalised people.
- Spatial and time planning of public walks, especially on holidays and official occasions on the pedestrian route for the direct display and supply of artworks, handicrafts and other creative products.
- Organising artistic events with an emphasis on the rich indigenous and local culture (in the form of street shows, story writing contests, memory writing, visual arts, painting, music, etc.)

As for the residents of cities, they seem very confused with public spaces as they consider these spaces to be owned by the government. As a result, although a small number of individuals participate in preserving both the natural and built environment through volunteering activities and helping NGOs, the majority of society believes that they have no obligation to preserve or maintain them. The reason is the conflict between impatient residents and urban governance and the unclear articulation of urban rights. Numerous abandoned construction projects have also added to this problem (Pakzad 2017). Therefore, municipalities are attempting to approach citizens by systematic means. They aim to familiarise local communities with the concept of cultural policy through training, meetings and workshops such as mental mapping and brainstorming. These activities are implemented at the neighbourhood level attempting to engage as many people from different groups whose voices and needs want to be heard (Pourzakarya & Fadaei Nezhad Bahramjerdi 2021). Moreover, municipalities try to identify experienced individuals through neighbourhood trustees, cultural centres, foundations and various societies. Ideas are screened for feasibility and often trialled through festivals, exhibitions or meetings before a final evaluation.

Discussion: Challenges and recommendations

The article has focussed on Iranian cultural policies in the context of inclusiveness and cultural citizenship. With respect to cultural citizenship, Iranian cultural policies encompass policies for protecting national identities despite different ethnicities to strengthen national grounds; however, these policies are undermining democratic values. Accordingly, initially, there is a gap between theoretical concepts and what happens in practice. Before the Iranian Revolution, the governor attempted to modernise cities through the physical transformation of routes based on his knowledge of best practices compared to urban communities. This was an example of centralised power where one person manages the whole society towards his desires. To solve this issue, master plans and CDSs were created to enhance living quality. Again, the main problem was the missing consideration of citizen's participation in urban policy planning during the preparation and implementation stages although the vision was there. The positive outcome of these plans seems to be the slow transition away from centralised power to greater inclusivity (Mashhadi Moghaddam & Rafieian 2020). As for neighbourhood councils, people had no connection with urban governance, and they had to go through their representatives. According to findings from the second project, this increased mistrust and communication failure because even when representatives accurately conveyed information to urban governance, the perceived inefficacy of the urban governance led citizens to believe that these representatives were indifferent and unresponsive to their responsibilities. The prioritisation of infrastructure projects over the preservation of cultural heritage by urban governance, driven by budgetary constraints, further worsens this issue.

With the widespread state intervention after the Iranian Revolution, a need for limiting it to only the level of policymaking and decentralising implementation to local public and private organisations was raised. However, even after the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988, which caused massive social, economic and infrastructural hardship, the policy instruments have remained largely state orientated. The centralised system of policy planning is continuing with its approach although there is a need for experts' views and more delegation of authority to local levels of governance in

cities. This lack of decentralisation along with the economy's dependence on oil exports has led to chaotic and unsustainable development. The second major issue in developing an Iranian cultural policy scheme is the existence of multiple and similar cultural institutions in the country. In this sense, forming a united and strategic cultural planning system in Iran could promote the regulations and monitoring of the cultural sector and enhance the interactions between different stakeholders. The third issue is the government's preference to pursue short-term projects instead of long-term programmes. This is because of the short management life of directors, which leads to a focus on policies that are quantifiably measurable and achievable rather than long-term qualitative actions.

By investigating the cultural policy planning structure at the local level in Iran, it is clear that local governance is pursuing a democratisation of the cultural agenda. For instance, there have been actions to develop public cultural facilities and services in cities and spread cultural knowledge (Tajmazinani 2017). However, in these projects, there has been a lack of consideration of cultural diversity, cultural representation and involvement and democratic mechanisms of cultural life. As a result, young people are nurtured through cultural activities preferred by the Islamic system. Therefore, the Iranian cultural policy model is argued to prioritise and use culture as a tool for political education. Nevertheless, members of Iranian society appear to be keen to practice a mixed identity of ancient and modern elements and values with a few Islamic components, regardless of strict cultural engineering strategies.

The emergence of CCIs and the cultural market has been a double challenge to Iranian cultural policy not only because of the ideology behind it but also because of the ability of commodified culture and cultural practices. Iranian cities mostly adopt strategic shifts through urban branding policies that act as enablers of policy transformation. During these transformations, cities do not always fully accomplish what they initially aimed for. The underperformance of urban governance is typically because of insufficient knowledge and ineffective implementation. Moreover, those responsible for implementing policies tend to support some elements while ignoring others such as elements that do not generate economic returns or those meant to support marginalised groups such as the disabled or elderly. While the selected and supported policies may produce benefits in the short term, over the long term, they tend to increase levels of inequality between different groups within society.

In line with the argument of some scholars such as Pratt (2021), policymakers and people need to be equally involved in both the challenges and opportunities of cultural policy. Cultural policy itself, while being allocated a small budget, is immensely complex, especially in a country like Iran, which features conflicting agendas. Indeed, the sector involves a large mix of individuals, groups and organisations

collaborating on the creation, implementation and preservation of artefacts, heritage and leisure activities. Moreover, Iranian cultural policy is not necessarily an outcome of direct financial support but rather a broad set of interventions, which may not even be communicated through policy intentions. Cultural policymaking in Iran is required to find solutions to the contradictions of these issues and to the complex diversity of socio-economic and political actors.

With respect to the challenges of localising the national policies in Iran that shape cultural policymaking, the first recommendation is to incorporate local knowledge and practices into the design and consultation process. The lack of representation of various ethnic groups is another problem in regions of Iran, which decreases their incentive for participating in the policy-making process. Community participation can be different in distinct case studies. However, in most cases, the local cultural consultants express that attracting communities to participate in cultural and regeneration schemes is difficult because people have conflicting expectations and demands of each project (Kortbek 2019). In this manner, instead of only using quantitative socio-economic indicators, it is better to incorporate qualitative-based factors of local cultures including cultural policy legislation efficiency, for instance, based on core arts or cultural heritage and less on cultural industries.

There are actions that can be taken by the Iranian government at the core of cultural policymaking. Firstly, despite several criticisms, the appropriate participation of the state in the enhancement of cultural and creative activities could increase those cultural areas with marginal interest in CCIs and promote high-valued culture as a major policy goal. Secondly, it is important to find effective means for protecting and supporting public access to cultural facilities in different Iranian regions with respect to their cultural norms. The cultural policy, which is established to promote the public availability of cultural services, could deliver an effective balance in contrast to the marketisation of cultural work that only pursues cultural consumption for profit. Thirdly, another critical action for the Iranian government is to upgrade the country's cultural identity and its soft power internationally instead of the ongoing isolation of its culture and economy. Fourthly, decentralised governmental management of Iranian cultural activity alongside governmental investment in the cultural sectors, especially in regions with large ethnic minorities, can facilitate the development of the cultural life of minority groups. This can lead to the establishment of cultural as well as educational institutions at the regional and local levels. The support can also nurture indigenous cultural practices.

Conclusion and limitations

This article addressed gaps related to cultural policy-making by discussing the concept of cultural policy and exploring its structural evolution and challenges within the non-western context of Iran, which we position as an extreme and

understudied case. It investigated approaches related to inclusivity in cultural policy, democratisation of culture and the role of communities in different contexts. The findings not only shed light on the Iranian case but also contribute broader lessons and examples, which can be applied to comparable cities in the Middle East and Arab world such as Turkey, Iraq and Saudi Arabia where governments also take a top-down policy approach towards cultivating a particular national identity and cultural value.

The article demonstrated that although specific measures have been taken by the Iranian government to alter cultural values, the cultural identity of local communities has been able to be preserved over time. These cultures can have a great impact on the quality of life of people; hence, they must be protected and promoted for community empowerment through measures such as cultural citizenship. Moreover, despite the limited political appetite in Iran to support the inclusivity of different ethnicities in Iranian cultural policy, the local governments have acknowledged that if they want policies and projects to be more effective, they need to understand and respond to people's needs by including them in decision-making processes. On this basis, the Iranian government must focus more on international cultural recognition and particularly the decentralisation of cultural policymaking processes to give more space to local regions. The involvement of urban and local authorities is significant in stimulating cultural identity and the social values of regions and the country as a whole.

In Iran, cultural policy planning is trying to become localised, more flexible and attuned to diverse regions and cultures. As these developments continue to unfold, more local case studies are needed to examine the planning, implementation and outcomes of such specific policies and initiatives. Part of this includes exploring the roles and influence of different stakeholders and local cultures. Finally, in an increasingly global, interconnected and digital world, we should also not forget to consider the role of social media in developing different cultural and creative activities through advertising schemes.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

M.P. conceptualised the idea, conducted the investigation and anlaysis and wrote the first draft and visual figures. B.J.H. edited and rewrote the article alongside providing resources. M.G.A. assisted M.P. in conceptualising the ideas and contributed comments and revisions to the article.

Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was submitted to the Schools of Art and Design, Arts and Humanities and Architecture, Design and the Built Environment Research Ethics Committee (AADH REC) and ethics consent was received on 24th of January 2024. The ethics waiver number is 1757618. The AADH REC issued an ethics waiver for the study because there were no outstanding ethical concerns. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. The study was approved by the AADH REC Officers at Nottingham Trent University: Annabel Cali, Anton Muszanskyj and Sarah Dossor.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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