

FARMERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE ADMINISTRATION OF RURAL SERVICE CENTERS PROGRAM IN IRAN¹

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ABSTRACT

Lack of popular participation has increasingly been believed to be the cause of failure of rural development programs in developing countries. The degree of farmers' participation in decision making and implementation of projects was studied in Rural Service Centers of Marvdasht region in the Fars Province of Iran. The findings of the study indicate that government commitment to increase rural people participation has not worked to the extent that was expected. This illustrates that government intention is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to make popular participation feasible and effective. Popular participation requires more human, technical and financial resources to increase local administration's abilities.

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مشاورت کشاورزان در اداره مراکز خدمات روستایی در ایران

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خلاصه

بگونه‌ای فزاینده اعتقاد بر آنست که عدم مشارکت عمومی در طرحهای توسعه روستایی از عوامل عدم موفقیت اینگونه برنامه‌ها می‌باشد. میزان مشارکت کشاورزان در تصمیم‌گیری و اجرای طرحهای کشاورزی در مراکز خدمات شهرستان مرودشت مورد مطالعه قرار گرفت. نتایج بررسی نشان می‌دهد که تعهد دولت جهت افزایش مشارکت کشاورزان به میزان مورد انتظار موثر نبوده است. این امر نشان می‌دهد که قصد دولت جهت افزایش مشارکت شرط لازم بوده ولی شرط کافی نمی‌باشد. افزایش مشارکت عمومی به منابع انسانی، فنی و مالی جهت افزایش توانایی اداره کنندگان محلی نیاز دارد.

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INTRODUCTION

Many developing countries during the past several decades have followed development paths in which growth objectives were given priority over equity. As a result, the poor of the society and rural people, in particular, have been neglected.

During the last three decades, several approaches have been used to encourage rural development with rural participation. The record shows that, initially, each new program is hailed as a break-through and generates much enthusiasm. However, on implementation, there is a wide gap between results and expectations (13). Rural development approaches, mostly, have attempted to create some forms of peasant organizations that are not integrated with national development strategy. These organizations, generally, lack access to technology, credit and training, do not possess appropriate legislation, and are subject to pressures from sectors interested in blocking their participation (7).

The problems associated with known approaches to encourage rural development such as Community Development, Cooperatives and Integrated Rural Development Programs call for a serious re-examination of the whole process to determine the failure elements and suggest corrective measures (5, 6).

In Iran, after the nationwide Land Redistribution Program of 1962, attempts were made to develop agriculture through credit cooperatives. According to the Land Reform Law, membership of cooperatives was compulsory and was considered as a precondition for receiving land (10). On the whole, the performance of cooperatives was poor mainly due to insufficient financial and technical support for agricultural development. After the failure of the agricultural sector in increasing food production to keep pace with the increasing demand, the government policy changed from support of the mass of small farmers to that of large and modernized farms such as agrobusiness and meat and dairy complexes (8).

In the small farm sector, a policy was pursued to form the smaller units into large mechanized farms, largely as Farm Corporations and Farm Production Cooperatives. These attempts were not successful in bringing about a change in the rural areas and as a consequence of neglecting small farmers and pursuing "push industrialization policy", the gap between rural and urban incomes was increased substantially (9, 11).

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the government policy has undergone change and shifted away from the support of large and mechanized farms to the protection of small farmers. Attempts were made to strengthen farmer incentives through increasing producer prices, input subsidies, and rural development programs.

On the whole, the increase in prices of agricultural products created an incentive to increase production. As a result of increased prices, the agricultural production index rose from 109 in 1979 to 129 in 1981, and to 132 in 1982. However, the trend did not continue and the index of agricultural production dropped to 123 in 1983 and later to 120 in 1984 (1974-76=100) (3). It was apparent that an increase in agricultural prices was required, but was not, in itself, a sufficient motive for an increase in agricultural production. Notable among the factors which contributed to the sluggish growth of the agricultural sector in the mid-1980's was the uncertainty about the land-tenure system which was mainly due to delay in preparing a land reform law which could clarify the extent of private ownership. This caused instability in rural areas and, in turn, had a negative effect on investment. Furthermore, the outbreak of war with Iraq caused a shortage of farm inputs which were needed to increase agricultural production.

As a consequence of these problems, domestic production could not keep pace with the increase in demand and the government undertook a strong import program to meet the country's food needs.

This caused a sharp increase in both the value and volume of food imports. The value of agricultural imports increased from 3,128 million dollars in 1979 to 4,930 million dollars in 1983 (4). In spite of the increase in the import of food products, the per capita food consumption index dropped from 99 in 1979 to 91 in 1984 (1974-76=100) indicating that an increase in food imports relieves a food shortage temporarily but cannot solve the problem in the long run (3). A longer term solution must involve an increase in domestic agricultural production.

To implement policies for supporting small farmers, it was decided in 1980 to reorganize the Ministry of Agriculture by the establishment of local organizations, namely, "Rural Services Centers" (hereafter called RSC) throughout the rural areas of the country. The objectives of an RSC, as stated in the law approved by the Revolutionary Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, were to develop agricultural and rural activities, provide technical, financial and extension services, and supply farm input and other commercial activities based on the experienced needs by rural people (1, 2). According to the law, the farmers were supposed to obtain all extension services through the RSC.

In the law, and in the associated regulations, popular participation was emphasized and the village was considered as a focal point of development. An RSC was established for a cluster of villages in each district or "Dehestan". The number of centers increased rapidly during 1981-86 reaching 1,600 RSC's covering all villages throughout the country. To ensure popular participation each village has an elected village council. Each village council elects a representative who is in close contact with RSC executives and represents the villagers' requirements. Village representatives elect five persons from among themselves who, with the RSC head and another executive, form the RSC Board. The responsibilities of the Board are to select projects from the

available alternatives in relation to farmers' needs, to assign available funds to various services, and to control proper implementation of projects.

The centers' activities are mostly related to building rural infrastructure such as land leveling, well digging, drainage systems, cleaning and lining irrigation canals, and construction of roads and small bridges.

METHODOLOGY

To study the RSC performance and degree of popular participation in decision making and implementation of projects, a farming zone around the town of "Marvdasht", which is located 60 km north of Shiraz, Fars Province, was selected in 1984. A judgement sample of five out of 11 centers was selected for study. In each center three "more developed" and three "less developed" villages were selected. On the whole, a sample of 10 villages and 54 farmers were selected for interview. In addition, managers of the centers were interviewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The characteristics of the population, as revealed by the study, show that 56% were illiterate and the remaining 44% were literate. In relation to farm size, 72% of respondents owned farms of less than 10 ha, 17% had 10-20 ha and 11% owned over 20 ha.

All centers under study were established between 1980 and 1983 and thus were in the early years of their operation. The number of villages served by each center varied from seven to 47. The average number of villages served per center was 26.

The Farmers' Participation in Decision Making

As it was mentioned earlier, the law has provided for a greater role for farmers' participation through their representatives but, in practice, the RSC Board (largely made up

of farmers' representatives) has played a limited role in decision making due to the low level of farmer-member's attendance in the board sessions. Table 1 shows the reasons for the low level of farmer representative's participation in RSC decision making as noted by RSC managers. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents believed that villages were too far from the centers and this prevented farmers from attending board meetings regularly. The problem became more acute during the peak labor season. Twenty-three percent of the managers interviewed mentioned that since board members did not receive any salary, they did not have any incentive to attend the board sessions. Another 23% of the respondents commented that farmers did not believe that the RSC could play an effective role in community development and this led to a low level of participation. The remaining 16% of respondents mentioned the problem of group interests and conflicts.

Table 1. Reasons for low levels of farmer-representatives' participation in the decision making process.

Reasons	No.	%
Village dispersion and long distance	5	38
Lack of incentives	3	23
Underestimation of RSC's role	3	23
Group interest and conflicts	2	16
Total	12	100

Farmers' Participation in the Implementation of Projects.

To implement the projects approved by each RSC Board, it is required that 30% of the costs be borne by the beneficiaries and the remaining 70% be covered by government. Although this requirement enables centers to provide services for a larger number of villages, the poor ones are in a disadvantageous position. For example, there were villages in need of services (such as cleaning underground canals or ghanats to secure irrigation water) but they were not able to pay their share. As a result, they did not receive such vital services.

For 1983, the total governmental expenditure for the various projects in the area of study was 624 million rials (7.8 million dollars) and the amount paid by rural dwellers was 192 million rials (2.4 million dollars). Bearing in mind that 29,026 families lived in the villages, the average government spending per family and per village was 21,600 rials (\$270) and 210,000 rials (\$2,625), respectively. Comparing the farmers' needs with the amount spent by the government shows the existence of a wide gap between the centers' achievement and farmer needs and expectations. Due to limited funds and lack of personnel, the centers have a long way to go to achieve the stated objectives of the government. The center activities were mostly related to building up rural infrastructure. In these cases, the RSC's are not involved in the implementation of the projects; rather, the work is done through private contractors. After project approval by the RSC Board, a contract is signed between the center and private contractors. Since the farmers pay 30% of the cost of the project, they are very concerned about the way projects are implemented.

While the RSC's are involved in building rural infrastructure, they also act as connecting channels between farmers and other local organizations that provide services or supply inputs to farmers. There are several other institutions in

the rural areas that are involved in such activities. For example, fertilizer is distributed through cooperatives and tractors are delivered through tractor and machinery committees. The Rural Service Centers, which are assumed to have more access to farmers and to possess more accurate information, determine the amount of fertilizer, pesticides or tractors that should be received by farmers at subsidized prices through these other organizations. This was a result of the prevailing rationing system imposed by the government due to the shortage of needed inputs.

Farmers' Evaluation of Rural Service Centers

Since the ultimate objective of establishing the RSC's has been to adjust rural development programs to the farmer's needs and conditions, the farmers' evaluations and attitudes toward the centers are of considerable importance. It was found that, generally, those farmers who have benefited most from the RSC services and projects had the most positive attitudes towards the RSC's. The farmers were asked if they had received the various services listed in Table 2. As indicated, the majority of the respondents (74-83%) received

Table 2. Beneficiary and non-beneficiary farmers of various services provided by RSC.

Services	Yes %	No %
Infrastructure (roads, land leveling, etc.)	50	50
Supply of feed and veterinary services	83	17
Supply of farm inputs (fertilizer, pesticides, etc.)	74	26
Supply of tractors & spare parts	51	49
Extension services	9	91
Establishment of rural industries	0	100

farm inputs such as fertilizer and veterinary services through the RSC's. Seventeen to 26% of the respondents did not receive such inputs and services to the extent needed. The difference between the subsidized input prices distributed through government channels and those of the free market was so great that small farmers could not afford to pay for unsubsidized inputs and, as a result, did not receive the optimal amount of inputs. Fifty percent of the respondents believed that the RSC's provided adequate infrastructure services. With regard to extension services the RSC's did poorly since 91% of farmers did not receive such services. Also, no rural industry had been established to provide employment for newcomers to the rural labor market.

To ascertain attitudes toward the RSC's, farmers were questioned on the extent to which they were satisfied with the RSC programs. None of the respondents were highly satisfied, 23% were satisfied, 36% were relatively satisfied and the remaining 41% either had little satisfaction or were dissatisfied with the RSC programs.

Analysis of data on the farmers' attitudes toward the RSC's suggests that there is a large gap between the farmers' expectations and RSC achievements. The RSC managers mentioned limited funds and personnel as causes of such dissatisfaction. It was observed that, due to lack of planning, even the existing personnel were not utilized efficiently.

CONCLUSIONS

The establishment of Rural Service Centers in Iran demonstrates a shift from urban biased policies toward those favoring agriculture. The Iranian experience shows that when there is a political will it is possible to transfer agricultural officers and technicians from offices located in cities and towns to rural areas. In this regard, the Iranian experience has been successful because the farmers are not obliged to travel to towns to obtain needed services.

Additionally, the agricultural experts and administrators are in close contact with the farmers and are in a position to recognize their problems and try to solve them. The decentralization process has strengthened the power of local administrations in decision making. Now decisions are taken mostly at the local level and, as such, are more compatible with farmers' needs and conditions.

The picture is less clear with regard to the farmers' participation in the decision making process. The experience to date shows that the government commitment in increasing rural people participation has not worked to the extent expected. This illustrates that the government intention is a necessary but not sufficient condition to make popular participation feasible and effective. It was realized that rural people often did not possess adequate resources and education to participate effectively; in some cases the rural elites and leaders were not representative of the people; and communities themselves experienced conflicts among groups and individuals. Moreover, popular participation requires human, technical and financial resources to increase local administration abilities. Under-financed local government can only play a minor role in socio-economic planning and implementation. It is also important to provide education, training and assistance for the rural population. Illiterate, economically weak rural populations can hardly participate in any significant development effort.

The Iranian experience shows that it is possible to increase the number of RSC's rapidly throughout the rural areas but overcoming the problems of fund shortages and employing experienced and devoted personnel is not easy. In order to make the RSC role in the process of rural development more effective, it is necessary for the government to allocate more funds and human resources to these semi-independent local organizations. In addition, a plan should be made for more efficient use of existing personnel. It was observed that

the agricultural officers and technicians were sitting in their offices most of the time and that was one reason why 91% of farmers did not get any extension services. Other factors were lack of planning and well-trained personnel for providing such services.

Rural development involves several dimensions of which greater equity within rural areas is increasingly important. In this case, the requirement for payment of 30% of self-help costs by peasants has put the developed villages in a more advantageous position in regard to services provided compared to poorer villages. For example, there were poor villages that could not pay their share for rather costly irrigation projects. As a consequence, they remained deprived. To prevent a widening of the gap between low and higher income villages, there is a need to bring about greater flexibility regarding self-help payments. Lowering of the self-help payment for poor farmers and villages is recommended so they can receive their fair share from rural development programs.

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