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Farmers' participation in agricultural development: The case of Fars province, Iran

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Abstract

Farmers' participation in agricultural planning is regarded as an important tool for successful sustainable agricultural development. This study examines the issue of farmers' participation in the context of agricultural development. Data for this article were obtained through focus group discussion (FGD) from rural farmers in 9 villages in Fars Province, Iran. The findings showed that FGD discussion was more emphasis on involving farmers in implementing programs than on providing for their participation in planning and evaluating the processes or outcomes of agricultural programs. It is expected that the findings of this study could be utilized by the agriculture developers for reassessments of agricultural industry programs in rural communities.

Keywords: Rural development, focus group discussion, agriculture, farmers' participation

Introduction

Agriculture is an important sector in the economic development and poverty alleviation drive of many countries. The role agriculture has played in the industrial growth and development of most of the industrialized countries in the world cannot be over emphasized. The importance of this sector is more pronounced in the developing countries including Iran where it is the main thrust of national survival, employment and food (Muhammad-Lawal *et al.,* 2009). Agriculture in Iran is the way of life of the rural people. Despite its declining importance as a contributor to the gross domestic product (GDP), agriculture still represents an important input to the national economy and to rural livelihoods in Iran (Stads *et al.,* 2008). Farmers' participation is an important factor for sustainable agriculture in rural area. Farmers' participation issues are the areas of concern at national and local level (Subedi, 2008). Without participation, there are obviously no partnerships, no developments, and no program (Aref *et al.,* 2010). Therefore, a lack of participation in the decision to implement an agricultural policy can lead to failure in the agricultural development. In this study participation is used with the involvement of farmers in decision making with the collaboration and interaction with agricultural organizations. Since there is a little research has been done on farmers' participation in Iran, this study can be important for further research in this important area. The word participation has been widely used and promoted in development programs. Participation could be defined as a direct involvement of marginalized groups in a development process, which aims to build people's capabilities to have access to and control of resources, benefits and opportunities towards self-reliance and an improved quality of life. Participation in extension is the process of communication among men, women farmers and extension workers during which the farmers take the leading role to analyze their situation, to plan, implement and evaluate development activities. It is a way helping the disadvantaged people and women to gain access to and control over resources or services such as training, farmers' tour, inputs, information etc. needed to sustain and improve their livelihood (Subedi, 2008). Farmers' participation is considered necessary to get community support for agricultural development projects (Cole, 2007). Farmers' participation refers to peoples' engagement in activities within the rural. It plays an essential and long-standing role in promoting quality of life (Putnam, 2000).

The World Bank recognized the lack of participation as a reason for failure of many development attempts in developing countries (World Bank, 1993). Without community participation, there is obviously no partnership, no development and no program. Meanwhile, some scholars provided a typology of participation (Leksakundilok, 2006), but they do not directly deal with agricultural development. Therefore, this study attempts to establish a typology of farmers' participation in agricultural development based on those models. Arnstein (1969) examined the various participation programs operated during the 1960s and found that most of them were insufficient to actually increase the power of average citizens to change community plans and programs. In Arnstein's model, programmatic intent could range from low "manipulation" of participants, to "high", full control of decision-making mechanisms by community residents and service consumers (Hardina, 2004). Table 1 showed six broad categories or levels of participation, which had been formulated. The 6 rungs are categorized into 3 categories. The top of the ladder represents genuine participation. The next grouping encompasses 3 degrees of tokenism, which allow the participants to be heard, to have a voice. At the level of symbolic participation, citizens gain some degree of influence though it is still a form of tokenism as traditional power-holders continue to have the right to decide (Arnstein, 1969). It is the illusion of a voice without the voice itself. The two bottom rungs

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Table 1. Types of farmers' participation in agricultural development policy.

Levels	Types	Characteristics
Genuine participation	Empowerment	Farmers may directly contact explorer and develop agriculture by themselves (Choguill, 1996; Dewar, 1999; Pretty, 1995).
Symbolic participation	Partnership	There are some degrees of farmers influence in agriculture development (Arnstein, 1969).
	Interaction	Farmers have greater involvement in this level. The rights of farmers are recognized and accepted in practice at local level (Pretty, 1995).
	Consultation	Planners may accept some contribution from the farmers that benefits their project (Arnstein, 1969).
Non-participation	Informing	The developers run the projects without listening to framers' opinions (Arnstein, 1969).
	Manipulation	Agriculture is generally developed by some powerful landowners or government without any discussion with the farmers (Arnstein, 1969).

Source: Adapted from Aref (2010).

of the ladder represent non-participation. In this level, farmers are allowed to participate, but is does not give them any opportunity to change programs to their own needs and a result maintain the status quo in power relations (Aref *et al.,* 2010; Arnstein, 1969).

There are a number of barriers that make fuller participation difficult for the villagers. Farmers' participation in agricultural development is faced with some barriers. There are a number of reasons why active participation is hard to achieve in practice. In rural area in the west, participation is constrained by a number of factors, including residents' lack of knowledge, confidence, time and interest (Cole, 2006). Frequently a lack of ownership, capital, skills, knowledge and resources all constrain the ability of communities to fully control their participation in agriculture development (Scheyvens, 2003). In remote areas of less developed countries, a number of further barriers exist, the concept is new, decisions are taken by bureaucrats in a highly centralized system; planners believe that local people are uneducated and too ignorant to be involved and importantly the local people do not have the knowledge to participate. Kadir (1997) considers ignorance as the greatest barrier to farmers' participation but that the ignorance is not restricted to residents but also affects the planning machinery and bureaucracy vested with implementation. Active participation is then frequently constrained by a lack of information and knowledge. Knowledge of the decision-making processes is essential if farmers are to take an active part in agriculture planning (Cole, 2006).

Aref (2010) also indicated some of barriers of participation in communities. These barriers include lack of knowledge, lack of ability of individuals to participate, lack of effective and strong government institutions, inadequate focus on human resource development and dependency on government and lack of authority in communities. Hence, this study showed the obstacles of farmers' participation in agricultural development planning and policy in Fars, Iran.

Methods

The study was carried out among farmers of 9 rural communities in Fars province. Fars is located in the south of Iran. It has an area of 122,400 km. In 2006, this province had a population of 4.34 million people, of which 61.2% were registered as urban dwellers, 38.1% villagers and 0.7% nomad tribes. Agriculture is of great importance in Fars. The major products include cereal (wheat & barley), citrus fruits, dates, sugar beets and cotton (Wikipedia, 2010). Iranian agriculture is 1000s of years old and this reflects the length of time during which soil and water resources of the country have been utilized for crop production (Aref, 2010). The major products include cereal citrus fruits, dates, sugar beets and cotton.

This study is based on qualitative research approach to examine the farmers' participation in the context of agricultural development. Information for this study was gathered from farmers through FGD in July 2010. The research study use focus groups discussion (FGD) and secondary data. According to Rafipoor (2005), because of Iranian society culture, FGD is a special important technique for data collection. FGD also is probably the most widely used technique of gathering qualitative data (Grover & Vriens, 2006). To achieve the objectives, 9 FGD were held at convenient place in 9 villages in district of Abadeh Tashk include, Jahan Abad, Koushkak, Deh Moord, Chah Gaz, Chah Sorkh, Tome Sholi, Hassan Abad, Dehzir and Khaje Jamali. According to the collected baseline data farming is the most common occupation in 9 villages. FGD participants were selected from rural farmers that they were involved in agricultural activities. All respondents were male. They were chosen because of their involvement in agricultural activities. They ranged in age from 29 to 79. This study was mostly based on the perception of the farmers.

Results and discussion

A qualitative analysis was undertaken to view the current level of farmers' participation in agricultural development and planning. There were overall 63 participants with an average of 59 years old. The questions were asked about to constraints of farmers' participation in agricultural planning and level of their participation in agricultural planning and policy and evolution.

The findings showed that agricultural planning in their villages is without any certain planning. The most barriers include lack of resources in villages. They believe that

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their villages have many potential for development of sustainable agriculture, but they don't have financial resource and new techniques. Focus groups often complained about the lack of local organizational support to provide adequate facilities and agricultural requirements. Lack of capacity of local agricultural organizations was also discussed among participant in FGD. Respondents believed that lack of capacity of local organizations was behind the failure investment for agricultural development. The participants in some FGD groups clearly indicated that extension of agriculture requires capable leaders in such organizations. Participants from all villages are not satisfied regarding the role of agricultural organization leaders in agricultural development. They believed that leaders lack necessary agricultural knowledge. Hence the perception of farmers was not positive about the role of the local agricultural organizations in agricultural development activities.

The findings through FGD groups also showed that majority of rural farmers want to participate and involve in agricultural development planning and policy, but the government support was lacking behind. Hence, farmers' participation in agricultural planning and evaluation decision making is not considered. Decision making in agricultural policy are mostly made by government organizations. However, the result of FGD also showed in general that farmers in some villages were apathetic about their participation in agricultural development activities. In other words the incentives to participation were scarce.

The FGD results showed that farmers in Jahan Abad and Koushkak were more involved in agriculture and consultation than other farmers, but they couldn't influence the government decision making for agricultural planning. The results also showed that agriculture is without any sustainable planning. This is due to 3 organizations with different functions, which have inconsistent activities in terms of agricultural development planning. Hence, farmers emphasized on integrated agricultural organizations for successful agricultural development programs. According to findings lack of farmers' knowledge was the main barrier of farmers' participation in agricultural planning and policy. This barrier was discussed in all FGD groups.

Findings also showed despite the important role of women in agricultural production, their participation in agricultural evaluation and planning is low. In accordance with this finding Chizari *et al.* (1997) believed that most women farmers in Iran have very limited access to extension programs for farm productivity and income. In addition, the statistical center of Iran only counts head of farm households, who are males; the unpaid responsibilities of women farmers are not recorded. As a result the needs of women farmers are not being addressed in extension agricultural programs (Chizari *et al.,* 1997).

The majority of farmers' perceived agriculture as positively effect on their villages especially on their local economy but the FGD results realized that the farmers' family engaged in agricultural activities don't have enough motivation for continuing their activities. They stated that government does not support them in terms of their productions. Hence they were apathy for engaging in this activity. In support of this finding Ivanovic (2009) also showed that the rural area are unable to protect their production and also the government is neglecting to protect these activities. Based on the types of farmers' participation in agricultural development policy (Arnstein, 1969), the results showed that farmers are not participated in agricultural planning.

Overall, regarding to the result in agricultural planning there were 3 types of farmers' participation which has been discussed in literature review and confirmed by farmers participant in FGD groups. Table 2 summarized these 3 types of participation: Consultation, informing and manipulation

Table 2. Types of farmers' participation according to findings of this study.

Types	Characteristics
Consultation	Agriculture planners may accept some contribution from the farmers that benefits their project (Arnstein, 1969).
Informing	The developers run the agricultural projects without listening to framers' opinions (Arnstein, 1969).
Manipulation	Agriculture is generally developed by some powerful landowners or government without any discussion with the farmers (Arnstein, 1969).

Conclusion

This study examines the issue of farmers' participation in the context of agricultural development. Participation is conceptualized as sharing of power in program development decision-making. The major findings are: (1) farmers' participation in agricultural planning and evaluation decision making is not considered. Decisions making in agricultural policy are mostly made by government organizations. (2) Some attention is given to farmers' participation in project implementation. However, incentives to participation are scarce. (3) Various obstacles to participation exist. Findings also showed that lack of capable organizations was an important element contributing to limited farmers' agricultural development. Based on the findings, empowerment can be a tool for development of farmers in agriculture planning and policy. There are limited studies being on farmers' role in agricultural planning particularly their participation in training. Therefore, it is expected that this study help to identify reasons of low participation of rural farmers in agriculture planning and policy by the government.

Research findings can assist the extension service and government officials make decisions about resource allocations, and the education and technology needs of farmers. The results of this study may guide extension agents in Fars, province of Iran in preparing better education programs for farmers. The findings of this study

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is useful for academics, researchers and all stakeholders involved in designing, assessing or promoting agricultural development projects which are in anyway associated with general development goals.

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