

The Contribution of Rural Cooperatives in Building Empowerment in Rural District of Bakhtegan, Fars, Iran

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to determine the role of rural cooperatives in building rural empowerment in rural district of Bakhtegan, Fars, Iran. Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Capacity building for rural development requires a range of empowerment. Hence, it is expected that the rural cooperatives contribute to building rural empowerment. The paper is based on the survey questionnaire carried out among 185 rural cooperatives members in rural district of Bakhtegan in Fars, Iran. The findings revealed that rural cooperatives have a little contribution in building empowerment for rural development in rural district of Bakhtegan.

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1. Introduction

Empowerment is a construct shared by many disciplines and arenas: social work, community development, psychology, education, economics, and studies of social movements and organizations, among others. In recent empowerment literature, the meaning of the term empowerment is often assumed rather than explained or defined. Rappoport (1987) has noted that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define in action as it takes on different forms in different people and contexts.

Empowerment is the increased control of rural people as a collective over outcomes important to their lives. Empowerment is a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one's life, destiny, and environment. This transition can manifest itself in an improvement in the perceived ability to control, as well as in an improvement in the actual ability to control (Sadan, 1997). Empowerment also is a necessary condition for rural development. A key term used in rural development and rural capacity building is "empowerment". It is often unequally distributed across groups within local communities (Aref, 2009). Empowerment can be defined as the process by which individuals, groups or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals, thereby being able to work towards maximizing the quality of their lives (Rappoport, 1987). Empowerment is considered as an important factor for successful and prosperity of capacity building. The concept of empowerment is an attempt to break the circle of vicious social problems which are difficult to resolve. People suffer and are

harmed not only because of neglect and apathy, but also because of the attention of bad social services (Sadan, 1997). Empowerment is first and foremost an ideology and a world-view, and only someone who accepts its values can attain a deeper understanding of the details of its processes and the methods of its practical implementation (Sadan, 1997). We therefore, attempt to study the contribution of rural cooperatives for building empowerment in rural communities.

2. Empowerment

Conceptually, rural empowerment is closely allied with citizen participation, and shares with that literature the diversity of perspectives that range from normative and prescriptive to empirical, and from a focus on community empowerment as a process or an outcome (Brinkerhoff & Azfar, 2006). Rural empowerment concerns how members of a group are able to act collectively in ways that enhance their influence on, or control over, decisions that affect their interests (Brinkerhoff & Azfar, 2006).

Rural empowerment creates a change in human behavior and in the social structure. The potential for rural empowerment exists in every environment, just as the potential for individual empowerment exists in every person. In every process of individual empowerment there also exists a potential for community empowerment, and every process of community empowerment creates an environment that facilitates individual empowerment and at the same time also shapes and determines its form (Maton & Rappoport, 1984; Sadan, 1997). Empowerment is often explained as the delegation of

authority and decentralization of decision-making. However, when empowerment is more broadly defined, it speaks to the ability of management to create a working environment that shapes an individual's perceptions of his or her work role in a way that motivates positive work behavior (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Rural empowerment can be seen as the capacity of the local people to participate in development activities (Aref, 2011; Cupples, 2005). According to Smyth (2009) empowerment is helping residents act together to strategically acquire resources necessary to improve community development. Empowerment has become an umbrella for supposedly a new genre of development intervention (Aref, 2011; Tosun, 2000). It can be seen as a process whereby the community residents are given a voice and a choice to participate in issues affecting their lives (Theron, 2005). Ashley & Roe (1998) described empowerment as a spectrum from passive to active involvement to full participation.

In this study, it is debated that building rural empowerment is an important factor for successful building community capacity for rural development (Ashley & Roe, 1998). Figure 1 outlines the ladder of empowerment as developed by Aref (2009; 2011).

3. Rural cooperatives

Rural cooperatives are the groups of people who work together voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs (Tanzanian Federation of Cooperatives, 2006). Rural cooperatives are generally considered as a tool for building empowerment and rural development. Many developed countries such as England, France, German and United States largely depend on incomes earned through rural cooperatives (Aref A, 2011). The International Cooperative (ICA) (1995) defines a cooperative as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (ICA, 1995).

Rural cooperatives have played an important role in the development of agriculture in industrialized countries as suppliers of farming requisites, marketers of agricultural commodities, and providing services such as grain storage and transport. It appears that many of these agricultural cooperatives are adapting their operations to the rapidly changing economic environment characterized by technological change, industrialization of agriculture and growing individualism (Ortmann & King, 2007). Rural cooperatives and people participation in local areas reinforce each other and also contribute towards

promoting the rural development through building rural empowerment.

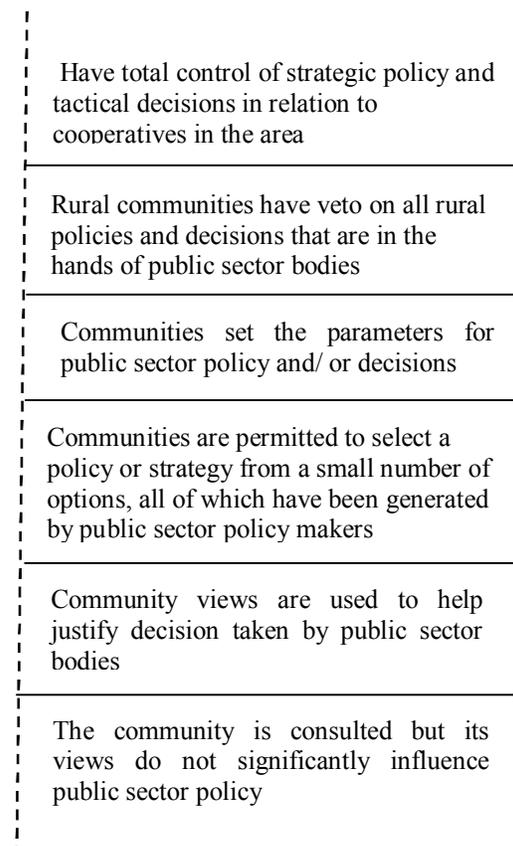


Figure 1: The ladder of empowerment *Source:* (Aref, 2009; 2011).

4. Research Methods

This study is based on quantitative method to investigate the impacts of rural cooperatives on rural empowerment. This study was carried out in rural district of Bakhtegan In Fars province, Iran during the June & July 2011. Bakhtegan is one of the rural district of Fars; Iran. It's located around Bakhtegan lake. Agriculture is the major development sector in Bakhtegan.

The study used survey design, where a questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was structured around a Likert scale. The respondents answered each statement based on five scales. Each statement was situated on a 5-point scale as recommended by Dong-Wan and William (2002), and Aref (2010) with 1 representing a response of "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." The respondents were 185 rural cooperatives member where each respondent was chosen based on cluster sampling. The respondents were asked to answer these questions which were

constructed to gauge their level of empowerment by rural cooperatives.

The questionnaire was piloted tested to have its contents validated. Statements for level of participation were tested for their validity using Cronbach's alpha. Descriptive analysis was employed to determine the level of empowerment by rural cooperatives.

5. Results

This study determines the level of empowerment through rural cooperatives. The result showed in Table 1 the differences in the levels of empowerment through rural cooperatives. Generally, the findings reveal that the level of empowerment in rural areas by the cooperatives is low (Mean= 0.98). This means that rural cooperatives are not involved in the building rural empowerment. However, the role of rural cooperatives in influence on rural productions marketing was outstanding (M=2.10).

Table 1: Mean of indicators of empowerment through rural cooperatives

Indicators	Mean
1. Rural cooperatives are able to effectively preserve rural resource	0.96
2. Rural cooperatives can effect on agricultural development policy	1.00.
3. Rural cooperatives control the management of rural resources	0.90
4. Rural cooperatives are able to influence on agricultural productions market	2.10
5. Rural cooperatives have autonomy in decision-making about rural development	0.40
6. Rural cooperatives involve the farmers in finding solutions to root causes of agricultural barriers	0.50
Total Mean	0.98

Based on the mean scores of empowerment, it could be concluded that rural cooperatives do not have significant contribution towards building empowerment. For rural residence to be effective in rural development, they should come together and interact with governing bodies collectively. Local residence should be more involved in rural activities and influence decision-making processes that affect their communities. They need to interact with the rural cooperatives and foster active relationship with local organizations. However based on descriptive results, it was revealed that the contribution of rural cooperatives in building rural empowerment was

low; except for influence on agricultural productions market.

6. Conclusion

Rural empowerment is an important dimension of rural capacity building for rural development. In this study, the contribution of rural cooperatives for building empowerment was examined. The basic argument was that impacts of rural cooperatives for building empowerment. Rural empowerment is considered as an instrument for rural cooperatives and a foundation for building capacity of local people. In addition, empowerment in rural cooperatives is essential for rural development activities, as, it strengthens the relationship between rural areas and local organizations and provides the space for their partnership. From the findings of this study, it is noted that the level of empowerment by rural cooperatives is low.

In other words, rural cooperatives do not participate at the building rural empowerment. Hence, it could be concluded that they have limited contribution towards rural development. The findings of this study imply that lack of building empowerment might be a factor for underdevelopment of rural development in rural district of Bakhtegan. It is expected that the findings of this study could be utilized by the cooperatives leaders and stakeholders for future follow-up and reassessments of building empowerment for rural development in their cooperatives.

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