

## The Contribution of Rural Cooperatives in Building Sense of Community in Rural Areas of Marvdasht, Iran

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to determine the role of rural cooperatives in building sense of community in Marvdasht, Iran. Capacity building for rural development requires a range of sense of community. Hence, it is expected that the rural cooperatives contribute to building sense of community. The paper is based on the survey questionnaire carried out among 250 rural cooperatives members in rural areas of Marvdasht, Iran. The findings revealed that rural cooperatives have a little contribution in building sense of community for rural development.

[Fatemeh Allahdadi. **The Contribution of Rural Cooperatives in Building Sense of Community in Rural Areas of Marvdasht, Iran.** Journal of American Science 2011;7(5):926-929]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>

**Keywords:** sense of community, participation, rural cooperatives, rural development

### 1. Introduction

Sense of community is considered as an important factor for successful and prosperity of capacity building. A Sense of community is a necessary condition for rural development. A key term used in rural development and community capacity building is "sense of community". The concept of "sense of community" began with Hiller (1955) identifying various components of a process by which community members work to establish a sense of community. Sense of community is a sense of belonging to a community in which it entails interaction with other members of the community (Buckner, 1988). Without community sense of community, there are obviously no accountability, no development, and no program (F. Aref, Ma'rof, & Zahid, 2009). Sense of community plays a crucial role in developing rural development as well as promoting rural and agricultural cooperatives. This is basically reflected in the attempts of international agencies to enhance people participation. This study attempts to highlight the contribution of rural cooperatives to building sense of community for rural development.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1. Sense of community

Sense of community is a sense of belonging to a community in which it entails interaction with other members of the community (Buckner, 1988). The sense of community plays an important role in fostering support for rural development (Aref et al., 2010). Sarason (1974) defined sense of community as the interdependence between an individual and

community. Sense of community can be seen as the capacity of the local people to participate in development activities (Cupples, 2005). Sense of community is the extent to which any member feels connected to and committed to others in the community, which bears on a sense of security and belonging (Rogers & Sukolatanamete, 2009). The feeling of obligation and commitment of an individual towards other members in the community develops over time through mutual understanding of collective values, beliefs and interests among community members (Bowen et al., 2003).

Bopp et al. (2000, p. 113) defines sense of community in the following way: "sense of community refers to the quality of human relationship that makes it possible for people to live together in a healthy and sustainable way". Sense of community also helps people feel they are a part of something larger than themselves. Developing a sense of community contributes to rural development by enabling people to feel connected and motivated to live in harmony and work together towards common goals. Rural developers often like to encourage a sense of community among rural community residents as a way of contributing to building community capacity. In relation to this, rural leaders, stockholders, and local development practitioners should regard the concept of sense of community as a refinement of community members (F. Aref et al., 2009). While there is a substantial body of literature on the definition and conceptualization of sense of community (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1989; McMillan & Chavis, 1986), only a few literatures discuss the practical application of approaches that

have been successfully used to measure sense of community in different cultural contexts. Rural communities for building capacity in rural cooperatives development requires strengthening of sense of community (Conway & Hachen, 2005). The lack of sense of community has been reported as one of the reasons as to why people do not participate in development activities (DeNeui, 2003).

According to McMillan & Chavis, (1986) there are four different components of sense of community, including; membership, influence, integration, and shared emotional connection (Aref et al., 2010). Table 1 outlines the components of sense of community as developed by McMillan & Chavis, (1986).

**Table 1: The dimensions and elements of sense of community**

Domains	Elements
<b>Membership</b>	Need to belong Shared history Common symbols Family rituals Emotional safety Personal investment Social responsibility Citizenship
<b>Influence</b>	Trusting relationships Freedom of expression Empowerment Collective well-being
<b>Integration</b>	Status Social integration Resilience Shared values Youth subcultures
<b>Shared connections</b>	Participation Shared event and narratives

Source: Adapted from McMillan & Chavis (1986)

### 2.2. Rural cooperatives

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 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 rural development. Many developed countries

such as England, France, Germany and United States largely depend on incomes earned through rural cooperatives (Aref A, 2011). 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.

### 3. Research Methods

This study is based on quantitative method to investigate the level of sense of community through rural cooperatives. This study was carried out in rural areas of Marvdasht, during the March and April 2010. Marvdasht is one of the northern cities and also counties of Fars province. The county has an area of 3687 square kilometers. Marvdasht as a county is divided into four districts: Central, Kamfirouz, Doroudzan and Seydan. Marvdasht has a cold weather in the hilly areas and moderate climate in other regions (Wikipedia, 2011). Agriculture is the major development sector in Marvdasht (Allahdadi, 2011). Marvdasht is among the foremost city which established rural cooperatives in Iran. 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 250 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 sense of community 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 sense of community by rural cooperatives.

### 4. Results

This study determines the level of sense of community through rural cooperatives. The result showed in Table 2 the differences in the levels of sense of community through rural cooperatives.

Generally, the findings reveal that the level of sense of community in rural areas by the cooperatives is low. This means that rural cooperatives are not involved in the building sense of community.

**Table 2: Mean of indicators of sense of community through rural cooperatives**

Indicators	Mean
1. Rural cooperatives generate a sense of pride among the rural residents?	0.90
2. Rural cooperatives are care what happens to farmers in thier rural?	1.20
3. Rural peolpe feel that rural cooperatives can make a significant contribution in rural development?	1.90
4. Rural cooperatives have sense of responsibility for improving community participation?	0.80
5. Rural cooperatives in your community often come for help with problems of rural peolpe?	1.08
6. Rural community created sense of pride between local peolpe with support thier production	0.30
Total of sense of community	1.03

For rural residence to be effective in rural cooperatives, 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 level of local participation in rural cooperatives is low.

In sum, based on the mean scores of sense of community, it could be concluded that rural cooperatives do not have significant contribution towards building sense of community and rural development as well.

## 5. Conclusion

Sense of community is an important dimension of rural capacity building for rural development. In this study, the contribution of rural cooperatives for building sense of community was examined. The basic argument was that impacts of rural cooperatives for building sense of community. Sense of community is considered as an instrument for rural cooperatives and a foundation for empowerment of local people. In addition, sense of community 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 sense of community by rural cooperatives is low.

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

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**14, May 2011**