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Management of rural development projects in Iran (with emphasis on people's participation)

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Abstract

This article considers management of rural development projects and analyses the role of different groups of rural people in these projects in Iran. Three co-operative projects were selected as case studies including one case of women (ball-making development projects) and two cases of men on natural resource management projects. In addition to gender issues, geographical and socio-cultural variations were also considered while choosing these case studies.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data. A reasonable progress regarding people's participation has been achieved during the life of the development projects, especially implementation stage in all three cases. However, the involvement of board of project directors and government staff is perceived to be high in all stages of the project cycle. Higher involvement of government staff in problem identification and planning stages in the women's project indicates women's low involvement.

In conclusion, participation have given some opportunity to rural people especially marginalized and minorities to decide who should be involved in the project, and provided shared influence in making ongoing decisions about what activities should be implemented; and what each individual had to contribute. However, decision-making power is still concentrated on the directors, especially in the women's project.

Keywords: *Management, rural development, prject, participation, people's participation.*

1 Introduction

Participation is an important prerequisite for successful and sustainable rural development (RD) projects. As a result of the re-thinking in RD policies and strategies, participation is seen as a strategy for the creation of opportunities to explore new directions with those who were traditionally the objects of development. While the idea of participation has long been part of development thinking, today it has become mandatory in planning development projects (Agrawal, 2001). There is now a broad consensus on the importance of participation, both for the success of RD projects and programmes and for the establishment of open societies oriented to the same opportunities and social equity, with related economic, social and political orders.

This study involves case studies dealing with the issue of PP and managing these projects. In such studies, case study data comprises all the available information about each case. The study aims to consider the process of local people's participation in the RD projects.

2 The state of PP in rural development projects in Iran

A short glance at the history of Iran especially its rural communities reveals wide and multi-faceted participation and co-operation among people in different social, economic, and political areas. Iranian traditional culture includes many instances of various aspects of PP in the affairs related to them and the spirit of participation and co-operation has always had considerable presence in the fields of different activities. Inside this culture, participation in all affairs of rural communities has appeared in different forms due to the variety and multiplicity of environmental conditions of the country. Building shared, subterranean canals for water, caravanserais, mosques, participatory methods of irrigation, participatory methods of animal husbandry and the processing of animal products, and co-operation in wedding and mourning ceremonies are examples of the rich participatory culture of rural communities (Azkia, 1993).

Besides, methods of production and social life interrelated with the environmental variety of Iran have also put into practice different forms of socio-economic participation which are the result of people's co-operation and collaboration. Traditional types of PP in their own affairs have been subject to change and transformation in proportion to the changes in science and technology and the improvement of society. This change in the traditional participation of people can be the main point and the basis to proceed to the discussion and analysis of the issue of participation in the present conditions of Iran. One main question which may arise, in this regard, is why people do not participate actively in the RD process despite people's interest and the tendency towards co-operation, assistance and rich cultural and religious backgrounds for social participation which are existed in Iran.

Possibly the intervention of those techniques and methods which are alien to people's culture and tradition in socio-economic life has led to some changes in traditional socio-economic relations. As a result, the trend of the traditional participation has been disrupted and weakened. The crucial point is how can we strive to re-organize PP in social and economic context against such existing historical and cultural background. This can lead to the elimination of a great part of confusion and problems and obstacles to the way development of PP. Although it is often believed that traditional forms of PP in agricultural production may not be useful for today's rural development projects, this does not mean that we should not try to re-organize and improve it on the basis of past experience. Probably the mystery of success in making use of PP in their own affairs is to organize participation in a new way based on its traditional forms e.g. in new cooperatives.

3 Research Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of the study is to identify the role of PP in managing rural development projects in Iran. The process of PP was explained by identifying how much local people were involved in co-operative activities. The study group were the members of selected cooperatives. In this study, the forms and levels of PP within the selected development projects and the type of management was investigated through four stages of "project cycle": problem identification, planning, implementation and evaluation. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to collect data. The data were analysed using SPSS programme.

4 The study area and selected case studies

Paveh district which is located in the west of Kermanshah province in Iran was selected as the area of the study. The district comprises 3 sub districts, 4 cities, and 107 villages. Figure 1 shows the position of Kermashah province in Iran and also the position of Paveh district in the province. According to the latest Census figures, the total population of the district is 61,918, which includes 31,117 men and 30,801 women. 58.71 percent of the total population are resident in rural areas and the remaining 41.29 percent live in the urban areas. In other words, 36,352 residents live in rural areas and they include 18158 men and 18194 women. For the purpose of this study, from several development projects in the district, three projects were selected as case studies. The selected projects were: Paveh ball-making development projects, Mazidi range management development projects, and Seryace watershed management development projects.

5 Research Findings and Results

The findings related to the process of PP in each co-operative are separately presented as follows. This includes a short description about each project and a summary of different actors' involvement in management of the projects at four stages of the project cycle.

5.1 Case study (1): Paveh ball-making development projects

Paveh ball-making development projects was the first of its kind in the region and represents the first step of rural women's involvement in the development projects. This project is located in Paveh city covering the majority of the district. The project was registered in 1989 and the recruitment from local people in the city was initially started with 60 primary members in late 1990 (Aazami, undated). According to the mean age of respondents as a sample of the members, all the respondents belong to the economically active age group (15-65. About 75 percent of these women are housekeepers and the majority (84 percent) of them are literate. The organisational structure of the project consists of a general assembly, a board of directors, a managing director, and executive staff (Figure 2).

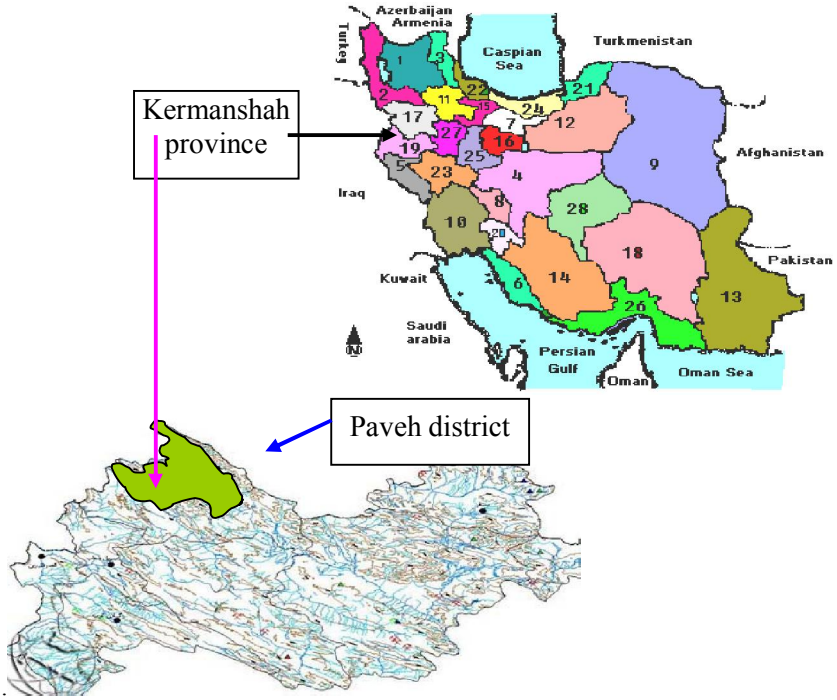

Figure 1- The location of Kermanshah province in Iran

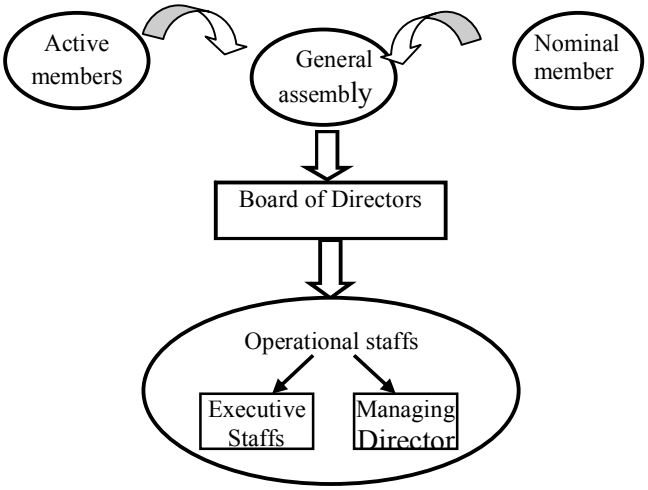

Figure 2- The organisational structure of ball-making projects

5.1.1 Different actors' involvement at four stages of the project cycle

A summary of respondents' viewpoint about different actors' involvement at four stages is shown in Table 1. From the table it is perceived that the involvement of respondents in the project's activities has increased such that the percentage of people who felt involved actively (from medium up to very strong) has increased from only 1 percent in the problem identification stage to 39.6 percent in the decision-making process, 56.2 percent in the implementation, and 38.5 percent in the evaluation stage.

The role of project managers in the project's activities (according to the respondents' viewpoint) has increased dramatically from 6.2 percent in the problem identification stage to 69.8 percent in the decision-making process, to 100 percent in the implementation stage, and to 97.9 percent in the evaluation process (Table 1).

Table 1- A summary of different actors' involvement at four stages of the project cycle

	Levels	Respondents		Board of dire.		Govern. Staff	
		F	P	F	P	F	P
Problem identification	Very weak to weak	95	99.0	90	93.8	0	0
	Medium	0	0	5	5.2	3	3.1
	Strong to very strong	1	1.0	1	1.0	93	96.9
	Total	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**
Decision-making (Planning)	Very weak to weak	58	60.5	29	30.2	0	0
	Medium	28	29.2	34	35.4	2	2.1
	Strong to very strong	10	10.4	33	34.4	94	97.9
	Total	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**
Implementation	Very weak to weak	42	43.8	0	0	11	11.5
	Medium	39	40.6	20	20.8	44	45.8
	Strong to very strong	15	15.6	76	79.2	41	42.7
	Total	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**
Evaluation	Very weak to weak	59	61.5	2	2.1	29	30.2
	Medium	31	32.3	13	13.5	39	40.6
	Strong to very strong	6	6.2	81	84.4	28	29.2
	Total	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**	**96**	**100**

F= frequency P= percentage

Based on the respondents' opinion, the involvement of governmental staff in the project went from 100 percent active participation in the first two stages, to 88.5 percent in the implementation stage, and to 69.8 percent active involvement in the evaluation stage. It is obvious that implementation might have been largely carried out by the members. From Table 1 it is clear that participation at the implementation stage came mainly from 'paid employment' and with the least contribution from unpaid resources. Although a few of the respondents had become project managers and the project is currently directed by the members, about 30 percent clearly felt that government staffs were involved

actively in the evaluation stage. It may be inferred that involvement of the staff was withdrawn at the implementation and re-introduced for the evaluation stage.

Thus a reasonable progress was achieved regarding PP during the implementation and operation stage. However, their participation in the project identification and planning has not reached an appropriate level, even though this has turned out to be a decisive factor in the success of the project. The role and status of women often made it hard for them to be publicly involved when meetings have been held. The form of their participation needs to be developed based on the respective culture. Difficulties also arise when it comes to the participation of the poor and marginalized groups of rural people like women in this area. Since they often lack the experience and training needed to make use of resources, cooperation with them generally requires special support measures, and as a result, higher transaction costs and longer period of time.

5.2 Case study (2): Mazidi range management project

This project is situated in 'Mazidi' village which is located 10 km north west of Paveh city. The project was registered in 1992 as a participatory natural resources (NR) management project. It comprises 90 local people (men), users of the natural resources.

The project's organisational structure consists of "general assembly", "board of directors", and "a managing director". The general assembly comprises all the members of the project. The board of directors are chosen by general assembly through formal meetings for a specified period and they make main decisions and direct all the activities of the project. They appoint the managing director for a limited period. The organisational structure of the project is shown in Figure 3. However, the decision-making process of this project is, generally, similar to the previous project (Aazami, undated).

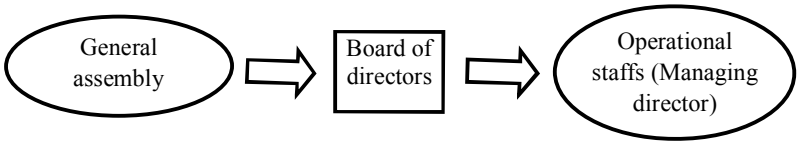

Figure 3-The organisational structure of the project

5.2.1 Different actors' involvement at the four stages of the project cycle

From table 2 it is perceived that the involvement of respondents, as a sample of the members of the project, in the project's activities has increased such that the percentage of people who felt involved from medium up to high has increased dramatically from 51.8 percent in the problem identification stage to 85.2 percent in the decision-making process, 92.5 percent in the implementation, and 85.2 percent in the monitoring and evaluation of the project. The role of project managers in the project's activities (according to the respondents' viewpoint) has not changed considerably i.e. from 100

percent in the problem identification stage to 96.3 percent in the decision-making process, the same percentage for the implementation stage, and 100 percent for the evaluation stage. This shows that they have played a major role in all activities.

Table 2- A summary of different actors' involvement at four stages of the project cycle

	Levels	Respondents		Board of dir.		Govern. Staff	
		F	P	F	P	F	P
Problem identification	Very weak to weak	13	48.1	0	0	8	29.6
	Medium	8	29.6	7	25.9	11	40.7
	Strong to very strong	6	22.2	20	74.1	8	29.6
	Total	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**
Planning (decision-making)	Very weak to weak	4	14.8	1	3.7	8	29.6
	Medium	14	51.9	5	18.5	12	44.4
	Strong to very strong	9	33.3	21	77.8	7	25.9
	Total	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**
Implementation	Very weak to weak	2	7.4	1	3.7	11	40.7
	Medium	7	25.9	2	7.4	11	40.7
	Strong to very strong	18	66.6	24	88.8	5	18.5
	Total	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**
Monitoring and Evaluation	Very weak to weak	4	14.8	0	0	13	48.1
	Medium	17	63.0	5	18.5	10	37.0
	Strong to very strong	6	22.2	22	81.5	4	14.8
	Total	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**	**27**	**100**

Regarding the involvement of governmental staff in the project, the respondents' opinion fell from 70.3 percent involvement in the first two stages (problem identification and the decision-making process) to 59.2 percent in the implementation stage, and to 51.8 percent involvement in the evaluation stage.

Although local PP in different stages was unequal, there has been a significant improvement in the level and degree of PP from the beginning to the end of the project:

1. Although the above-mentioned results from the survey show a moderate degree of PP in problem identification, according to the results obtained from other methods, the problem was mostly identified by government officials in consultation with local leaders. One reason is that some local leaders had worked at the same time in government departments. This made it difficult for participants to specify the role of local leaders as their representative from their role as officials. People were informally consulted by the leaders and were formally informed by the officials at project initiation.

2. People were consulted by project planners at the project planning stage and preliminary decisions, and their views were considered and taken into account. Local people became partners at the decision-making stage. Although they could have equal influence at this stage, some people such as those who are well-educated, local leaders, and those working in government departments were more powerful than others.

3. There are indications that PP moved to higher levels i.e. self-mobilization and control over project in the later stages (implementation and evaluation). People might have control over project activities and influenced executive decisions of the project.

4. Although PP in evaluation process is important, it rarely happens in rural areas. In this project, as the formal evaluation was not carried out frequently in the past, people might have been indirectly involved in monitoring and evaluation of the project using tangible patterns of outcomes achieved.

5.3 Case study (3): Seryace watershed management project

This project was carried out in 'Taze-Abad' village which is located 8 km from Paveh city. The village includes 149 families with a total population of 788 people. In resemblance with the previous project, this project was established to improve local NR, to empower local people through transferring the ownership of NR to them, and creating opportunities for them to improve their livelihoods. The project activities were started in 1994. Initially it comprised 90 members from Taze-Abad village but the managers of the project spread the project activities and membership to the nearby village, "Seryace" (Aazami, undated).

The decision-making process and organisational structure of the project are fairly similar to the Mazidi project (Figure 4). The project's strategy was based on lessons from experiences derived from the first project. 'Improving control over local NR' and increasing sense of ownership over the project, was seen as the greatest motivating factor for taking part in the project.

5.3.1 Different actors' involvement at the four stages of the project cycle

From Table 3 it is perceived that the involvement of respondents in the project's activities, as a sample of the members of the project, has increased such that the percentage of people who felt involved from medium up to very strong level has increased dramatically, from 40 percent in the problem

identification stage to 67.5 percent in the decision-making process, 92.5 percent in the implementation and 60 percent in the monitoring and evaluation of the project.

From the respondents' viewpoints, the role of the board of directors has also changed, from 97.5 percent in the problem identification stage to 100 percent in the decision-making process, and was rated at 92.5 percent for the implementation stage, and 57.5 percent for evaluation.

Table 3- A summary of different actors' involvement at four stages of the project cycle

	Levels	Respondents		Board of dir.		Govern. Staff	
		F	P	F	P	F	P
Problem identification	Very weak to weak	24	60.0	1	2.5	15	37.5
	Medium	11	27.5	10	25.0	13	32.5
	Strong to very strong	5	12.5	29	72.5	12	30.0
	Total	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**
Planning (Decision-making)	Very weak to weak	13	32.5	0	0.0	11	27.5
	Medium	16	40.0	5	12.5	16	40.0
	Strong to very strong	11	27.5	35	87.5	13	32.5
	Total	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**
Implementation	Very weak to weak	3	7.5	3	7.5	15	37.5
	Medium	15	37.5	5	12.5	21	52.5
	Strong to very strong	22	55.5	32	80.0	4	10.0
	Total	40	100	40	100	40	100
Evaluation	Very weak to weak	16	40	17	42.5	14	35.0
	Medium	17	42.5	5	12.5	20	50.0
	Strong to very strong	7	17.5	18	45.0	6	15.0
	Total	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**	**40**	**100**

From the respondents' viewpoint, the involvement of governmental staff in the project has not changed very much: it has varied from 63.5 percent involvement in the problem identification to 72.5 percent in the decision-making process to 62.5 percent in the implementation stage, and to 65.0 percent active involvement in the evaluation.

The following points can be concluded from the results obtained:

1. It was mostly local leaders who identified the need for the project, drawing on their experiences from the Mazidi case. People were informed and persuaded by them and they informed by officials of their willingness to undertake the project. People were consulted by project planners

during the planning stage in the making of preliminary decisions. Local people became partners at the decision-making stage; however, after division of lands and resources this was greatly undermined. Each member worked on his/her land and make decisions individually.

2. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of people's involvement at the implementation stage was the development of a sense of ownership of the activities. Participation has also contributed to people's self-management and self-esteem at this stage, as they pointed out in the discussions.

3. In this project, people might have been indirectly involved in monitoring and evaluation of the project using patterns of tangible outcomes achieved e.g. self-evaluation and control over their own activities.

4. A dynamic can be seen in the process of participation in which local people were involved at a low level from the beginning (by informing) and were consulted later. They then participated in the planning and management of the project in the form of partnership and co-management.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

1. In the case of decision-making (planning stage), people were mainly informed in case 'one' and consulted in case 'two' and 'three'. In these cases, although the role of people has increased notably, the level of their participation needs to be developed. In case study one, the role and status of women often made it hard for them to be publicly involved when meetings and decision-making processes have been held. Some women with more ability and confidence have become active in decision-making processes; however, this study shows that these few successful women are placed in large number in the lower position. However, in cases 'two and 'three', people were involved in decision-making processes, especially secondary decisions of the projects.

2. Thus far, a reasonable progress regarding PP has been achieved during the implementation stage in almost all three cases. Participation had given some opportunity and power to the members, who had deciding who should be involved in the project; shared influence in making ongoing decision i.e. what activities to be implemented; and what each individual had to contribute to the project. However, the main conclusion is that decision-making power is still concentrated in the board of directors, especially in case one.

3. The results from this study clearly show that there are wide disparities between men and women in participating in decision-making processes and in their abilities in take on the leadership position. It is not only the case in Iran as empirical evidence from a number of countries establishes the fact that women have substantial disadvantage over men, both within households and in economic social life (Drpze and Sen, 1995; and Filmer, King and Pritchett, 1998).

4. The evidence from the study area indicates two important reasons, in particular, for low participation of women in addition to many economic and social factors commonly cited in relevant

literature: insufficient understanding by outsiders of the role of women and gender issues; and lack of education for women to improve certain skills such as housekeeping abilities and capacity-building.

5. According to the results obtained, in general, about 40 percent of the respondents' involvement (scored from medium up to very high) seems like a guaranteed norm in all the four stages of the project cycle, the exception being at the problem identification stage in 'case one'. However, according to the respondents' point of views, the involvement of the board of directors is perceived to be high in all three cases.

6. All three cases suffer from some administrative weaknesses and problems which have undermined PP. These cases are also experiencing financial and managerial difficulties so that conducted activities have not been at a high level.

6.2 Recommendations

1. Promoting both co-management and self-management are necessary: adequate attention should be paid to capacity-building and the managerial and technical dimensions of projects. The management of NR to obtain maximum benefit will require more willingness, intensive, and cooperation of all people.

2. Focus on qualitative participation of women: Women have begun to participate in managerial responsibilities but they still remain outside the realms of power and decision making because the majority are neglected or there are not enough educated and experienced women with the appropriate qualifications. The tendency in the ball-making case has been to focus mainly on the quantitative aspects of their participation, irrespective of the quality of their participation or involvement in decision-making processes.

3. Adult education: given the issues in the above paragraphs, adult education and training is a high priority issue which leads to better achievements to real goals of development.

4. Being properly organized and actively involved: participation cannot be effective, sustainable and productive without being properly organised (case study three). Being organised means to define, agree and follow the participation plan from beginning to the end.

5. Move up to higher levels and forms of participation**:** the form and pattern of PP in the selected projects rather varies. In the ball-making case, initiatives and planning have been prompted by government organisations, and in the other two, local leaders have taken the lead.

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