

HRM and HRD in agricultural extension organisations in Iran A Literature Review

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Abstract

Numerous organizations have increasingly realized that their most important resources are human. Furthermore, two important domains in the field of human resources have been distinguished: Human Resource Management (HRM), and Human Resource Development (HRD). These two fields are interrelated and have a significant influence on organizational performance. This is especially true in extension services, of which the major commitments are education, training, and development. Therefore, this research has focused upon to the situation of HRM and HRD in the agricultural extension system of Iran. Formal agricultural extension services began more than 50 years ago in Iran, and endeavors have been particularly accomplished in this field after the revolution of 1979. Nevertheless, there still are a number of barriers and restrictions which hampering extension procedures, and as a result extension, has not been appropriately successful or satisfactory for farmers throughout the years. In order to explore what could be done to support extension systems and facilitate its evolution, several studies have been conducted in Iran. These studies indicate that no sufficient efforts are being made towards HRD and HRM in agricultural extension in Iran. Therefore, this research pays specific attention to the obstacles in the field of HRM/HRD in agricultural extension organizations in Iran. Finally, recommendations will be presented to overcome the barriers observed.

1. Introduction

One of the basic principles taught to managers is that an organization functions most efficiently when there is an appropriate use of its physical, financial, and human resources. The smart use of financial, physical, and information resources, and the productivity of the organization as a whole, highly depends upon the effective and efficient functioning of human resources within an organization. Nevertheless, human resources have been neglected to a large extent by many agricultural extension and education services throughout the world (Chizari, Linder & Mohsanie, 2001). This study aims to clearly depict the current HRM/HRD in extension services in Iran. According to various studies, agricultural development in Iran has yet to have any convincing evolution. Tahmasebi (1998), who stated this point, also indicated that consequently more than 50% of total available land, water and natural resources have still not been cultivated. Since extension has a critical and noticeable role in agricultural development, one of the basic reasons for this problem could be perceived as the inappropriateness of agricultural extension services in Iran. Similarly, Karshenas (1994) concluded that the difficulties within Iranian agriculture have resulted from inefficient resource use by human resources within the sector, rather than a resource squeeze from agriculture.

Amirani (2001) contended that agricultural extension system in Iran, with a history of more than 50 years, has still not been able to reach and support all potential clientele. Therefore, he stressed that these services need to be reconstructed or revitalized, particularly with regards to HRM. There are also direct implications for agricultural extension in the area of capacity building, since by definition the concept and process of HRD has both formal and informal education at its core.

However, tight budgets, hiring freezes, and layoffs are the reality for present extension and education Service worldwide, not just Iran. These problems can be linked to weak HRM. Therefore, researchers within this field must look to answer the question of "How do we survive times of limited resources?" The solution may be found in a careful study of our human resources (Crowder, 1996). Several studies have indicated that low effort is being made towards HRD and HRM in agricultural extension in Iran (karami, 1982, 1993, 1995 & 2001; Tahmasebi, 1998; ISNAR, 1999; Chizari, Karbasioun & Linder, 1998; Chizari, Linder & Lashkarara, 2001; Chizari, Linder & Mohseni, 2001; Hejazi, 1989; Pezeshki-Raad & Aghaei, 2002, Pezeshki-Raad, Aghaei & Ukaga 2001; Pezeshki-Raad, Yoder & Diamond, 1994; Ministry of Jihad-e-Keshavarzi, 2002; Najafi, 1991; Zarafshani, 2002). In this contribution, attention is being paid to the obstacles in the field of HRM/HRD in agricultural extension organizations. Finally, recommendations will be presented to overcome the barriers observed.

2. Purposes and Objectives

In comparison with the last decade, agricultural extension services in Iran have been going forward with a noticeable rate in all enclosure tasks. Nevertheless, there is unanimity among researchers that HRM and HRD have not been able to play a satisfactory role in extension organizations in Iran. There are obviously many factors, which are synchronously intervene in the process of HRD. It is also expected that imperfect HRM strategies and practices have had direct negative affects on HRD. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to explore the most important obstacles influencing HRM and HRD work in the field of agricultural extension in Iran. An additional purpose is to explore the solutions that will

empower extensionists and decision-makers to diminish and alleviate these barriers. Henceforth, the following two questions will be answered in this study:

- 1) What are the main barriers and inhibitors in the HRM and HRD domain of agricultural extension system in Iran from last decade till the present?
- 2) What approaches and solutions can be utilized to dispel or reduce these negative interfering factors, and consequently let HRM and HRD flourish?

Therefore, the most crucial and important variables preventing HRM and HRD in agricultural extension in Iran will be pinpointed. Finally, commensurate and feasible solutions will also be discussed.

3. Methods and Data Sources

This paper is based on a review of several qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in the field of agriculture and human resource development in Iran. The method used in this study is a literature review. Academic papers, articles, administrative and official reports were analyzed. Moreover, a few experts from the Ministry of Agriculture (Jahad-e-Keshavarzi) in Iran were requested to help in data collection, and providing up-to-date information.

As this research is a review of literature, comprehensive Internet search was firstly conducted to explore a general perspective of research background inside and outside Iran. In this stage, the most reliable and trustworthy published papers and articles in well-known journals, and convention proceedings were collected. In the second stage, official reports, regulations, and specific studies carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture (Jahad-e-keshavarzi) were analyzed. A number of extensionists and researchers who have conducted the majority of relevant projects in the last years were selected as the focal source of information for this research. In order to increase the validity of this research, personal contacts and consultations with some of these researchers were also established.

4. Results

In general, HRD is faced with a number of different barriers. The majority of these obstacles are related to HRM strategies and practices. The main intervening elements that have been distinguished could be stated as the following:

4.1. Organizational Issues

4.1.1. Structural changes in the Ministry of Agriculture over the last decade

One of the important factors that have significantly influenced extension in Iran is the structural change of the Ministry of Agriculture over the last decade. The decentralization of duties of the two Ministries responsible for agriculture (The Ministry of Agriculture and The Ministry of Jihad-e-Sazandegi (reconstruction mobilization) and their recent merger (now known as the Jihad-e-Keshavarzi or agriculture mobilization), has resulted in many visible and invisible bilateral (negative and positive) consequences that should be assessed and appraised (Jihad-e-Keshavarzi Ministry, 2002). This issue has had significant effects on the way that HRM/HRD has been organized and handled as the constant changes in organizational strategies, duties, expectations and concerns has inevitably influenced all human resources in the ministry.

To clarify this, Hosseinejad (2001) analyzed organizational culture of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Jihad-e-Sazandgy (two former Ministries). He compared these cultures and explored that there are a number of cultural differences between these two organizations. He stated that adapting their activities together in a coherent structure is a time-consuming and difficult task, which requires patience. In order to alleviate internal conflicts in the new Ministry, he proposed that it would be necessary to redesign and reconstruct another sustainable organizational culture with regards to long-term program planning. He proposed more studies to exposure all different perspectives of the new Ministry.

4.1.2. Lack of adequate linkage between extension and other institutions

Lacking the sufficient linkage between extension and other organisations also has influenced HRD in extension systems in Iran and has been an obstacle of extension services (Pezeshki-Raad, Aghahi & Ukaga, 2001). In this relation, a descriptive research was conducted to assess the perception of faculty members at the agricultural college of Shiraz University, in the Farse province of Iran. The results revealed that there are insufficient linkages between local agricultural affairs and researchers who are working in universities or other research centres. The researcher therefore offered recommendations to strengthen the interactions between extension and research institutions (Zamani, 2000).

Furthermore, a relative research carried out amongst agricultural researchers in the three Iranian provinces Isfahan, Khozestan and Cheharmohal-o-Bakhtiari, uncovered the general contact between extension employees and researchers is not at a high level. The findings also showed that there is weak communication between researchers and farmers. Therefore, the majority of implemented agricultural researches have low applicability for farmers' real situations (Karami-Dehkordi & Pezeshki-Raad, 1997).

This fact was similarly confirmed by Pezshki-Raad (1993), in his study of the necessity of establishing relationships between universities and agricultural extension centers. He concluded one of the major difficulties in developing extension services in Iran from its conception in 1952 till the present, is the sector's low mobility and dynamism.

4.2. Inadequate Farmers' Participation in Extension Organizations' Programs

Despite the apparent cooperation of farmers, many extension programs do not appropriately fulfil their original expectations. To ensure genuine cooperation in extension programs in developing countries such as Iran, farmers should be actively involved in the initial planning procedures as well as in the execution (Moczarski, 1978).

MacLagan (1983,1989,1996, 2000) who has introduced "models for HRD practices," also propounded this fact in her new article as a general context for HRD work. She believes that HRD people in both formal and informal organizations can be the architects of change. They can act work with their leaders to establish a participative, high performance philosophy for the people part of their businesses, by automating as much routine HRD work as possible.

A national research regarding sustainable extension system in Iran was accomplished. Approximately all of the 350 professionals participated in this survey emphasized participatory approaches and more focused attention on farmers' involvement in hiring key-farmers, innovators, and rural leaders as much as possible (Amirani, 2001). The lack of participation, combined with low agricultural incomes, has made young farmers unhopeful in

continuing the cultivation of their fathers' lands (Agasizadeh, 1995). A subsequent assessment of farmers' information in southeastern Iran (Azarbayejan province) revealed that the majority had low information input scores. In order to explain the factors causing this low level of information input, the researcher explored a significant relationship between all independent variables of the research. These variables were information output, inter-system communication, farmer-researcher communication, family education statues, and availability of input facilities (Rezvanfar & Vaisy, 2003). Although agricultural extension organizations have not been highly successful in reaching all groups of farmers' participation, they have however focused on encouraging farmers to voluntarily take part in most relevant programs. Therefore it is concluded that extension in Iran has no insistence to embrace a more participatory approach towards its programming (Zarafshani, 2002).

Similarly, Karami (1995) showed that the extension organizations mostly concentrate their efforts on villages where farms are larger and more developed, and to some extent are near to the rural service centers. Although the support of farmers who own larger farms, (and therefore have a higher production and income), has had a positive effect on productivity and agricultural progress, the fruits of this innovation are not shared by all. In fact, many farmers continue to live in poverty. Therefore, extension organizations have been a negatively influence in motivating farmers towards sustainable agriculture in the long-term (Karami, 1993, 2001).

4.3. Human Resource Management Issues

4.3.1. Shortage of extension personnel

The shortage of extension employees including extension educators, experts, and agents, is another main reason that extension services have not been able to reach a large number of clientele (Pezeshki-Raad & Agahi, 2002). However, this does not mean that there is a shortage of human resource available. By contrast, as highlighted previously, Iranian organizations are generally facing a large number of people applying for the same job. The dilemma therefore is a shortage of allocated funds and financial support to recruit new personnel. There is also a lack of expected competencies among these available applicants that is discussed later. Although extension organizations are expanding the number of professional staff, fiscal limitations have hindered them from fulfilling their new personnel demands (Pezeshki-Raad, Yoder & Diamond, 1994). A study conducted from the Ferdosi University in Mashad City of Iran illustrated that the majority of graduates have not been able to follow their specialization as a permanent career (Asadollahi & Javan, 1995)!

With the aims of dispelling the shortage of human resources in extension sector, the Ministry of Jihad-e-Keshavarzi has already utilized various new employees including key farmers, rural leaders, and extension assistants. Likewise, a number of graduates and those with higher school certificate during their military services have also been hired (statistical center of Iran, 2001).

4.3.2. Problems in Recruitment

Another barrier in the HRM of extension organizations is that the recruitment and selection of new employees is not appropriately tailored to the current and future job requirements. Thus, there are some parts of organizations that are overcharged, while some

others are faced with shortage suitable and specialized employees (Chizari, Karbasioun, Linder, 1998).

4.3.3. Lack of adequate mobility in extension organisations

The use of inflexible pedagogical approaches in extension system programming has additionally decreased the willingness of farmers to rely upon extension activities. As a result, extension organizations are generally perceived as a secondary source of information for farmers (Chizari, Lindner & Lashkarara, 2001). Although policy makers and program planners in the Ministry of Jihad-e-Keshavarizi have emphasized an increased flexibility extension programs (and have achieved remarkable successes during last years), this low dynamism still exists. Extension practitioners or employees who are not sufficiently familiar with adult learning principles and extension philosophy can also generate these pedagogical approaches.

A study conducted in the southeastern Fars province of Iran supports this idea. This survey discovered that existing technical approaches to research and extension services are an inefficient way of bettering farming systems, particularly for small farmers (who make up the majority of this group in Iran). The researchers suggested that adjustable and flexible extension and research programs would improve the understanding of complex farming systems, and effectiveness of relevant activities (Karami & Torkamani, 1992).

4.3.4. Low level of employees' motivation and accountability

In general, employment in extension centers has a negative physiological and social phenomenon. The low income at all levels has significantly diminished the motivation of extension (Hejazi, 1989; Najafi, 1991). However, in comparison with extension organizations, it can be stated that better conditions exist within agricultural universities and schools. For instance, research has revealed that employers are satisfied with the knowledge and abilities of extension graduates. Nevertheless, agricultural extension students and graduates, as well as the chairperson and faculty members are not commensurately satisfied with the general situation of the agricultural extension departments of their university (Hejazi, Bazargan, Mohammadi & Baraddaran, 2000).

Furthermore, Amiri and Zamani (1999) investigated the factors that influence the commitment of agricultural graduates of Shiraz University in Iran to extension organizations. They discovered that employment failure has a negative affect on organizational commitment and no correlation was observed between academic success and organizational commitment. These findings clearly show that a lack of employee motivation and commitment can be produced by job dissatisfaction, particularly emotional and psychological unhappiness.

In this respect, research was implemented to assess the factors that intervene in the positive motivation of extension expert in the northern provinces of Iran. The findings supported aforementioned idea and introduced a number of variables that diminish the motivation of extension personnel. These factors include undesirable performance evaluation, low level participation in decision-making processes, lack of positive and constructive competition, and the low position and prestige for their job held by the majority of people in society (Yadavar, Pezeshki-Raad, 1998).

Comparably, Kamalian (1999) carried out a study amongst Iranian managers in relation with values and organizational climates. In this research, he pointed out that a lack of

motivation, and particularly managers' incentives has a significant and direct relationship with organizational climate and circumstances. Kamalian believed that an organizational atmosphere must rigorously support employees' needs, values, and expectations, if they want to retain active employees and their willingness to work independently.

Additionally, the prevalence of top-down authority patterns in extension organizations has caused poor job satisfaction and low motivation amongst its employees. However, it must be noted that policy making has recently changed towards a more active and bottom-up management process (Chizari, Lindner & Mohsanie, 2001). Nonetheless, Sadighi (2003) supported this statement about top-down approaches, in his recent survey of 478 extension professionals in four provinces of Iran. He declared that some of the common shortcomings of conventional extension organizations found in many developing countries (such as Iran), are highly bureaucratic and ineffective organizational structures. He suggested improving existing management systems and shifting towards employee-oriented (knowledge work) from boss-oriented approach (industrial-age) as a solution to enhance the professional satisfaction of extension staff.

Furthermore, the focus of attention on fiscal and physical supplies over human resources also reduces employees' motivation. One of the reasons behind this impression is high rate of unemployment and people's intensive competition for getting jobs (United Nations, 2003).

4.4. Human Resource Development and Competence Issues

4.4.1. Inadequate Extension employees' professional competencies

The lack of necessary professional competence among extension staff as well as extension agents is another important barrier for HRD and HRM in extension systems in Iran. As a result, they have come to be perceived by the public as less effective, and have further become demoralised (Pezeshki-Raad, Yoder & Diamond, 1994).

However, the lack of desired HRD in extension system is not a novel concern. Looney (1977) also underlined the lack of proper competency of extension personnel and its severe restrictions on government efforts for agricultural development before the Islamic revolution in Iran. Accordingly, Karbasioun (1998) iterated that the general low level of competency of agricultural graduates to some extent stems from inefficient teaching methods in higher education in Iran. He proposed to pay more attention to applicable and practical education styles, rather than exclusively delivering various theories are offered by traditional banking methods.

Correspondingly, another researcher assessed the qualification and competency of extension graduates at the BSc. Level in different provinces of Iran. The findings exposed that they are at the moderate level of required theoretical information. They had diversely low capabilities in leadership, management, and establishing effective relationships with other organisations (Azadvary & Pezeshki-Raad, 1997).

The same research was accomplished in Isfahan Province of Iran, with the aims of identifying and prioritizing educational needs, and determining the competencies needed by extension practitioners. Results of this study found the five highly ranked items of educational needs of extension agents to be extension philosophy, instructional technology, innovation and adoption process, adult education, and extension methods. Additionally, respondents of this study expressed that the major support they need is availability of subject

matter specialists to help them with technical and communication methods (Baygi, Zarafshani, & Chizari, 2000).

Furthermore, another survey was implemented amongst instructors who teach farmers in agricultural education centers in Iran. This research found that a group of instructors who participated in *in-service education* were remarkably more self-confident and successful than the control group. As a result, the effectiveness and competency of employees significantly increase by allocating suitable and necessary educational programs for extension personnel (Blader & Naderi, 1998).

4.4.2. Problems in training programs

Both Pre-service and In-service training programs play a critical role in reinforcing staff capability, as well as refreshing their skills (Chizari, Lindner & Karbasioun, 1998). A survey was carried out in agricultural extension organization in the Mazandaran province of Iran, where participants in *In-service* courses were asked to fill out questionnaires. The results showed that they perceived these courses to be at a moderate level, and propounded the following factors as obstacles and difficulties in the courses:

Insufficient welfare facilities; focus on theoretical and not practical aspects of education; unsuitability of locations of courses; and low competency and capability of instructors (Shahani & Sedighi, 1997; Chizari, Karbasioun & Linder, 1998).

4.4.3. Insufficient employees' access to new learning and communication technology

Presently, computer and Internet connection are seen to be two important tools for accessing the newest information and providing the means for communication with researchers, scientists, and professionals around the world. More and more organizations believe this fact, and are attempting to provide this valuable technology for their staff. Due to financial restrictions, extension organizations in Iran have not been able to supply this equipment for a large number of their employees. Therefore, this problem is deemed to be another impediment for HRD in extension institutions. Sometimes personnel who possess these tools do not have the skills to use such equipment in the best manner or do not have sufficient time to continually use them (ISNAR country report R6, 1999).

5. Conclusion

With regards to concepts and research focused on in this study, the following issues can be concluded:

- The restructured and merged ministry of Jihad-e-Sazandegi has unique characteristics and specifications, particularly from a cultural point of view. This merged ministry has brought about challenges, issues of complexity and anxiety for human resource management and development amongst all subordinate organizations (including extension institutions.)
- Many shortcomings in extension systems originate from the lack of effective and constructive linkages between extension organizations and other institutions, e.g. universities and research centers. Evidence shows that there is a readiness and enthusiasm in various levels of employees to be more active in creating linkages if they receive more practical support from their organization.
- A number of enthusiastic farmers have been persuaded to participate in extension programs so far. Nevertheless, a comprehensive participation approach for the majority

of farmers is still lacking. As a result, extension systems are not deemed to be a primary source of information by farmers.

- Human resource management in extension organizations is not desirably dynamic and progressive. A review of several research studies has revealed that standing on traditional and industrial-age (boss-oriented) systems have decreased mobility, motivation, and effective recruitment amongst extension personnel.
- Although HRM and HRD are still surrounded by unwanted negative factors, there are nonetheless promising movements towards materialization of human resource development in Iran. Huge changes in workplace environment, applicability of new technology and the introduction of qualified training programs for all employees (to learn how to deal with these ongoing changes), have become more considerable for agricultural extension authorities. Thus, it is expected that extension services in Iran advance and flourish in the future.

6. Recommendations

As expected, this study showed there is a remarkable relationship between HRD and HRM in agricultural extension organizations in Iran. Focused attention on all the aforementioned aspects of HRM must be paid in order to keep HRD efficient and effective. The majority of barriers introduced in this study reflect HRM under-performance. Briefly, bellow recommendations can be elucidated:

- The Ministry of Jihad-e-keshavarzi should establish a continuous assessment of workplace changes and its consequences on human resources in the Ministry, and its clientele. In this respect, the recognition of the organizational culture of the former ministries and new merged ministry is an exigent and reasonable approach.
- Additional contacts and interactions with other agencies and companies should be established by extension organizations. A fair suggestion could be designing tailor-made intensive programs and support amongst all staff to establish more contacts with other organizations. This will help in facilitating HRD inside and outside extension organizations, and will result in more support by other stakeholders.
- Steady communication between extension employees, researchers, and farmers should be emphasized, and more participatory approaches should be assigned. To achieve this, a novel and proper plan or regulation might be designed by the Ministry of Jihad-e-keshavarzi. This plan would be distributed among all dependent organizations in different provinces in Iran, and the plan would have to be carefully supervised by respective authorities.
- Since adequate recruitment is the best and easiest way for retaining qualified employees, more efforts should be made to accomplish this vital step. This could be made possible by hiring experienced and competent experts, scholars, and employees.
- A lack of motivation by personnel has irreparable effects on the body of extension organizations and naturally decreases the quality and quantity of employee's performance. Thus, it is strongly advised to conduct continual needs assessments in the different fields of agricultural extension organizations in Iran, which could help to prioritize their needs, demands and expectations, and work to satisfy their requests.
- To increase the competence of personnel, suitable training programs should be organised. These training programs have to be organised in both pre-service and in-service formats

to empower personnel with the necessary knowledge and skills before and during their tenure. Additionally, endeavors must be paid on keeping the level of courses high, by conducting reliable and impartial evaluation.

- To be successful in their career, extension employees need to be equipped with new information sources and tools such computers, Internet, update journals, books, and instructional technology. Thus, the Ministry of Jihad-e-keshavarzi is expected to allocate more funds for this valuable equipment. All extension organisations throughout the country are thereafter committed to exclusively use these funds for such tools.
- In summary, HRD in extension organizations in Iran could be improved if more attention is paid to developing HRM strategies and practices. The following recommendations are given:
 1. Employment of qualified and competent extension professionals;
 2. Making necessary equipment and instruments available for these professionals;
 3. Providing appropriate education, training and development programs for further competence development of the extension professionals according to new needs, demands and challenges;
 4. Stimulating proper motivation by various kinds of agreements and incentives.

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