Characteristics of Model Wheat Farmers in Lorestan Province, Iran

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In Iran, sustainable agriculture is gaining popularity among Extension agents, farmers, and various organizations and ministries as a means for helping Iran address its goal of self-sufficiency in the production of food and fiber products (Chizari, Lindner, Zoghie, 1999; Chizari, Lindner, Karjoyan, 1999). A recent study by Chizari, Lindner, and Lashkarara (2001, p. 65) found the following major barriers that hampered the adoption of sustainable agriculture practices in Iran: “Limited financial returns for farmers, limited farmer knowledge of sustainable agriculture principles and methods, low levels of farmer education, government rules and regulations, problems with soil erosion and lack of water, and a low level of Extension agent knowledge with respect to sustainable agriculture. Two major recommendations of the study were to increase training and development efforts and use a more participatory approach to the development and delivery of Extension programs.

Purpose
The purpose of this study was to follow-up wheat farmers’ who have engaged in participatory approaches designed to develop and deliver more effective Extension programs in Iran, and who received additional training since participation in the last study. These farmers are referred to as model farmers. Specific objectives include: Describe model wheat farmers in the Lorestan Province by demographic characteristics; measure those farmers’ perceptions with respect to the usefulness of various Extension agricultural courses conducted by subject matter specialists on sustainable agricultural practices; and measure farmers’ perceptions with respect to barriers hampering adoption of sustainable agriculture practices.

Methods
Model wheat farmers (N=110) in the Lorestan Province, Iran were the target population for this study. These farmers play as a role model to other wheat farmers because they have produced more than five tons of wheat in each irrigated land per hectare. The Ministry of Agriculture’s Extension Organization Directory was used to locate the model wheat farmers in each township within the province. The research design for this study was a descriptive survey method.

Results
As compared to our study on regular farmers, these farmers were younger and more educated. More than 40% of model farmers resided in urban areas and all were married. However, we did not find a significant difference in the size of their farms compared to regular wheat farmers in the same Province. Thirty-one percent of model farmers had between 11 to 15 years of farming experience. Sixty-five percent of model farmers used mechanized system of farming. These farmers were in close contact with extension agents and used other contact channels significantly. Seventy-eight percent of model wheat farmers attended Extension-Education courses offered by their local Extension Office. Also these farmers were very knowledgeable technically as well regarding sustainable agriculture. This information was gained through an instrument developed by researchers. Finally, these farmers stated that they got very little financial support in terms of loan and insurance from the Bank of Agriculture.

Educational Importance
Obviously model farmers can be used as resource persons to share their farming experience with other wheat farmers in the classes developed and delivered by the extension agents. They can be used as local leaders, extension volunteers and key farmers by the Extension organization traveling even in other provinces to share their farming experience with other farmers. Surely, farmers will listen to their advices much better compared to a young extension agent recently graduated from an agriculture college. The Extension organization can use these valuable resource persons as volunteers and save on hiring new personnel. Also, the Ministry of Agriculture should provide the necessary farming inputs on time that these model farmers need. We in Iran need to remember the first source of food in our country is wheat. The Bank of Agriculture should provide loans and full term insurance these farmers need. This will stop importing so much wheat from other countries.