

FACTORS AFFECTING INVOLVEMENT OF VOLUNTEERS IN EXTENSION EDUCATION ACTIVITIES IN TALESH TOWNSHIP, IRAN

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Abstract

Self-sufficiency in food and fiber production is a goal of Iran's Extension service. In an effort to bolster Extension's efforts, volunteers are enlisted to work with Extension agents and farmers. Well-trained and competent volunteers are effective in helping the Extension service disseminate knowledge to farmers. Little is known about factors that affect involvement of volunteers in Extension education activities. All Extension volunteers (138) in the Talesh Township, Iran were surveyed. Factors that most encouraged volunteers to participate in Extension education programs were for the sake of God, leaving a good name and memory, and closer relationships with Extension agents. Volunteers were also more likely to participate in tasks and training programs that provided immediate benefit towards farming operations. Men were more likely than women to become volunteers.

Introduction

Extension has a long tradition of working with volunteers to achieve its goals (Patton, 1984). The use of volunteers is a distinguishing characteristic of successful Extension organizations (Prawl, Meldin, & Gross, 1984). These authors further noted that the lack of volunteerism is one of the primary reasons distinguishing successful Extension organizations from unsuccessful Extension organizations throughout the world. Malone and Gingera (1989) noted that successful Extension organizations have well-developed programs for using the time and energies of volunteers. Extension agents spend a substantial amount of time and energy cultivating volunteerism, recruiting volunteers, and training volunteers (Culp & Schwartz 1998). Locating good volunteers to assist Extension with its programs and goals is critical (Penrod, 1991). To minimize potential problems, volunteers should be carefully screened and selected (O'Neill, 1990). During the screening process, consideration should be given to the anticipated tenure of a volunteer (Culp,

1996). Extension agents who are successful at using volunteers are more likely to be successful at achieving program goals (King & Safrit, 1998).

Extension volunteers are local technical leaders who have a positive presence in both agricultural and rural development (Shahbazi, 1993). This author further noted that rural people are more willing to accept and collaborate with Extension volunteers when they perceive the volunteers to be well trained and competent. According to Watson and Lewis (1976), the widespread use of local volunteer leaders represents one of Extension's most important contributions to the field of informal adult education. Although volunteerism has historically served Extension well, careful assessment and scrutiny is essential to ensure Extension volunteerism programs effectively meet contemporary needs.

Clarifying the reasons and motivations promoting volunteerism is one means of stimulating volunteer involvement (Culp, 1997). The longevity of volunteer service to an

organization is related to a volunteer's perceived value added to that organization (Murk & Stephan, 1990). Watson and Lewis (1976) indicated active participation in any worthwhile organization brings rewarding experiences. They noted that volunteers who participate in providing programs sponsored by Extension have the added benefit of being trained for the specific work they have been selected to perform. Hawthorne (1997) stated that today's volunteers are more focused on what they will personally gain from their experience.

Culp (1997) noted that learning how to increase volunteer participation and improve motivational techniques would enable Extension educators and volunteer coordinators to devote more time to program management. Identifying potential volunteers and recognizing what motivates and satisfies them are necessary to understand the volunteer experience (Culp & Schwartz, 1999). Culp (1997), Rouse and Clawson (1992), Henderson (1981), and Atkinson and Birch (1978) found that volunteers were motivated by reasons that were affiliation based. Culp and Schwartz (1998) and Penrod (1991) found that volunteers were motivated by reasons that were recognition based. The volunteer experience occurs when volunteer motivation and organizational needs intersect.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe factors that affect participation of volunteers in Extension education programs in Talesh Township, Iran. Specifically objectives of this study were to:

- 1) Identify selected demographic characteristics of Extension volunteers in Talesh Township, Iran.
2. Identify factors that encouraged volunteers to participate in Extension education programs in Talesh Township, Iran.

- 3 Identify the types of tasks in which volunteers in Talesh Township, Iran participated.
- 4 Explore the relationship between volunteer participation in Extension programs and selected variables.
5. Describe the training received by Extension volunteers in the Talesh Township, Iran.

Methods

Population

The population included all Extension volunteers in Talesh Township, Iran. There were 101 male volunteers and 28 women volunteers in the population ($N = 129$). The Talesh Township Extension office supplied the list of Extension volunteers. The researchers verified the list before distribution of the survey.

Research design and data analysis

The research design used for this study was a correlational survey method. From a review of the literature, the researchers developed a survey instrument to collect data. The survey was divided into two sections. The first section gathered data on the demographic characteristics of the population. The second section collected data on volunteer participation in Extension education programs, volunteer participation in various tasks, and training received by volunteers. A five-point Likert-type scale (0 = none; 1 = little; 2 = average; 3 = much; and 4 = very much) was used to gather data related to the second section of the instrument. Content and face validity were established by a panel of experts consisting of faculty and graduate students in the department of Agricultural Extension and Education at Tarbiat Modarres University, Iran. Instrument reliability was estimated by calculating a Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Reliability for the second section of

the instrument was .87.

A pilot test was used to determine content and face validity. Some modifications were made in the procedures and questionnaire because of the pilot study. Data were collected through a questionnaire mailed to each volunteer in at the Extension Volunteer's Society of Talesh Township. Questionnaires contained the coded survey, cover letter, and stamped return envelope. Approximately three weeks after the initial questionnaire was mailed, telephone calls were made to all nonrespondents, encouraging them to complete the questionnaire and return it in the envelope provided. Approximately one week after the first follow-up, a second telephone follow-up of nonrespondents was completed. After each follow-up, additional questionnaires were sent to all Extension volunteers who had lost or discarded the original questionnaire. The response rate was 92%. The alpha level for statistical significance was set a priori at .05.

Results

Objective One: Selected demographics of survey participants are listed below. The age of participants in this study ranged from 23 to 64 years. Male volunteers were, on average, 48 years old and female volunteers were, on average, of 35 years old. Most participants (41%) had at least an elementary education, 33% had secondary or post secondary education, and 15% were illiterate. Ninety-three percent of the respondents stated they had less than 5 hectares of farmland. The mean farm size of respondents was 3 hectares. Overall, the respondents had served an average of six years as a volunteer; women volunteers had served an average of three years and men had served an average of seven years.

Objective Two: As shown in Table 1, for the sake of God ($M = 3.9$) and leaving a good name and memory gained ($M = 3.7$) were the highest rated factors that encouraged volunteers to participate in Extension education programs. The

two lowest rated factors that encouraged volunteers to participate in Extension education programs were getting honorary certification ($M = 3.4$) and extra money ($M = 2.9$).

Objective Three: As shown in Table 2, encouraging farmers to attend and participate in Extension education programs and activities ($M = 3.0$) was the highest overall rated factor related to participation of volunteers in various tasks. This was also the highest rated factor for men ($M = 3.1$) and women ($M = 2.8$). Determining production problems and delivering them to Extension agents ($M = 2.5$) was the second highest overall rated factor. This was also the second highest rated factor for men ($M = 2.7$). The second highest rated factor for women was linking farmers and Extension agents ($M = 2.3$). Attending weekly and monthly meetings of specialists and agents ($M = 1.6$) and attending meetings of volunteers ($M = 1.6$) were the two lowest rated factors. This was also the lowest rated factor for men ($M = 1.6$ & $M = 1.6$). The lowest rated factors for women were determining educational need ($M = 1.3$) and attending meetings of volunteers ($M = 1.4$).

Objective Four: Table 3 shows the relationship between the variable volunteer participation in Extension programs by selected variables: Age, level of education, size of field, years of volunteerism experience, listening to Extension programs via radio, watching Extension programs via television, accessing Extension publications, visits with Extension agents, feeling responsible, training, and monetary and spiritual motivation. Statistical analysis revealed significant relationships between volunteer participation in Extension programs and six variables. There was a substantial positive relationship between volunteer participation in Extension programs and training $r = .63$, $p < .05$. There was a moderate positive relationship between volunteer participation in Extension programs and feeling responsible $r = .34$, $p < .05$. There was a moderate positive relationship

Table 1. Factors That Encouraged Volunteers to Participate in Extension Education Programs as Viewed by Volunteers

Factor	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
For the sake of God	119	3.9	0.6
Leaving a good name and memory	119	3.7	0.7
Closer relationship and friendship with Extension agents	119	3.6	0.7
Attracting the interest and kindness of others	118	3.6	0.8
Accessing equipment and agricultural inputs	119	3.6	0.9
Visiting administrators at the Ministry of Agriculture	119	3.6	0.8
Acceptance of volunteers in rural communities	118	3.5	0.8
Gaining popularity in the community	119	3.5	0.8
Emphasizing the importance of Extension volunteers task to the executives and agents	119	3.5	0.8
Reflecting the activities and performance of extension volunteers in mass media	119	3.5	0.9
Getting honorary certification	118	3.4	0.9
Extra money	119	2.9	1.4

Note. none; 1 = little; 2 = average; 3 = much; and 4 = very much

Table 2 Participation of Volunteers in Various Tasks

Factor	All Volunteers		Male Volunteers		Female Volunteers	
	<u>f</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>f</u>	<u>M</u>
Encouraging farmers to attend and participate in Extension education programs and activities	119	3.0	96	3.1	23	2.8
Determining production problems and delivering them to Extension agents	119	2.5	96	2.7	23	1.9
Linking farmers and extension agents	119	2.5	96	2.5	23	2.3
Determining educational needs	119	1.8	96	2.0	23	1.3
Participating in training workshops	119	1.8	96	1.7	23	1.9
Collaborating and coordinating between various economical groups	119	1.7	96	1.7	23	2.0
Attending weekly and monthly meetings of specialists and agents	119	1.6	95	1.6	23	1.6
Attending meetings of key volunteers	119	1.6	96	1.6	23	1.4

Note. 0 = none; 1 = little; 2 = average; 3 = much; and 4 = very much

between volunteer participation in Extension programs and monetary and spiritual motivation $r = .32$, $p < .05$. There was a moderate positive relationship between volunteer participation in Extension programs and visits with Extension agents $r = .30$, $p < .05$. There was a low positive

relationship between volunteer participation in Extension programs and accessing Extension publications $r = .26$, $p < .05$. There was a low positive relationship between volunteer participation in Extension programs and years of volunteerism experience $r = .20$, $p < .05$.

Table 3. Relationshiu Between Volunteer Participation in Extension Programs bv Selected Variables

Selected Variables	r	p
Age	0.03	0.27
Level of education	-0.07	0.20
Size of field	0.14	0.06
Years of volunteerism experience	0.20	0.02
Listening to Extension programs via radio	0.10	0.12
Watching Extension programs via t.v.	0.02	0.49
Accessing Extension publications	0.26	0.00
Visits with Extension agents	0.30	0.00
Feeling responsible	0.34	0.00
Training	0.63	0.00
Monetary and spiritual motivation	0.32	0.00

Objective Five

Table 4 summarizes the training received by Extension volunteers. Volunteers received the most training on principles of agricultural and food

production ($M = 2.6$) and reducing costs of agricultural production ($M = 2.4$). Volunteers received the least amount of training on marketing ($M = 0.7$) and fundamentals of Extension organization ($M = 0.8$).

Table 4 Amount of Training Received by Extension Volunteers

Title of program	n	M	SD
Principles of agricultural and food production	119	2.6	1.1
Reducing costs of agricultural production	119	2.4	1.2
Reduction of wastes and processing agricultural products	117	2.1	1.3
Introduction to Extension volunteer's task	119	2.1	1.2
Sustainable agriculture	119	2.0	1.3
Mechanization	119	1.2	1.2
Extension education teaching methods	119	1.0	1.2
Introduction to teaching aids	119	1.0	1.0
Principles of Research, Extension, and Education	119	0.9	1.1
Fundamentals of Extension organization	119	0.8	1.1
Marketing	117	0.7	1.1

Note. 0 = none; 1 = little; 2 = average; 3 = much; and 4 = very much

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were drawn and recommendations made.

An active and continuous participation of volunteers in Extension programs is necessary for Extension to be successful. In order to encourage active participation of volunteers, the Extension service in Iran needs to know what factors and parameters affect volunteer participation. All of the rated factors affecting volunteerism in Talesh Township, Iran were important when considering Extension volunteer participation.

Males were more likely to be volunteers than females. The results presented here support previous findings by Chizari, Lindner, and Bashardoost (1997). Although women play an important role in the production of food in Iran, they continue to have limited access to extension programs including volunteerism programs. Extension is most effective when it ensures equal access to and participation in extension education and training programs by minorities and diverse groups including volunteerism programs (Buford, Bedeian, & Lindner, 1995). The Extension service in Iran should continue to work with women and minority groups to ensure equal access and participation in all programs.

The three factors that most encouraged volunteers to participate in Extension education programs were for the sake of God, leaving a good name and memory, and closer relationship with Extension agents. The least effective factors were getting honorary certification and extra money. The results presented here support previous findings by Culp (1997), Rouse and Clawson (1992), Henderson (1981), and Atinkson and Birch (1978), who found that volunteers were encouraged to serve by reasons which were affiliation based. However the results presented here do not support the findings of Culp and Schwartz (1998) and Penrod (1991) who found

that volunteer recognition was critical to the success of Extension volunteer programs. To encourage volunteer participation and continuation of service primary motivations such as affiliation, personal feelings of being needed, as well as spiritual factors should be emphasized.

Volunteers were more likely to participate in tasks that provided immediate benefits toward farming operations: encouraging farmers to attend and participate in Extension education programs and activities, and determining production problems and delivering them to Extension agents. Volunteers were less likely to participate in compulsory organizational and administrative type meetings such as attending weekly and monthly meeting of specialists and agents and attending meetings of key volunteers. To increase volunteerism in Talesh Township, Extension should emphasize volunteer tasks that have a direct benefit to farming operations and establish alternatives to compulsory organizational and administrative type meetings. This could be accomplished by offering flexible meeting schedules. Additionally, organizational and administrative type meetings could be broadened to include information that would directly benefit farming operations.

The results indicate significant correlation between variable volunteer participation in Extension programs and training, feeling responsible, monetary and spiritual motivation, visits with Extension agents, accessing Extension publications, and years of volunteerism experience. This information helps to clarify our understanding as to why volunteers have participated in Extension programs in the Talesh Township. Implications, however, have not yet been fully explored. These variables provide focus for additional research on volunteerism. Further research is needed to help explain why people volunteer in Iran.

Extension volunteers in the Talesh Township, Iran tended to participate in training

programs that would provide direct benefit for farming operations: principles of agricultural and food production, and reducing costs of agricultural production. Volunteers were less likely to participate in training programs that did not focus on production issues such as fundamentals of Extension. The results presented here support previous findings by Hawthorne (1997). The Extension service in Iran should tailor its volunteer programs toward issues in which volunteers have a vested interest. Organizational and administrative information should be incorporated, in moderate amounts, into more popular programs. Iran's Extension service can play an important role in helping Iran to become self-sufficient in food and fiber production (Chizari, Lindner, & Bashardoost, 1997). Further Extension efforts can be bolstered by its volunteers and volunteer program. Extension volunteers are having a positive impact on Iran's food and fiber production goals (Shahbazi, 1993).

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