

## Community Participation for Poverty Reduction in Iran

Fatemeh Allahdadi

Dept. of Organizational and Industrial Psychology, Marvdasht Branch,  
Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht, Iran  
[fatemeharef@gmail.com](mailto:fatemeharef@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This study assesses the level of community participation for poverty reduction in rural areas of Iran. Data were collected using focus group discussions. Results indicate that although there is sense of community towards poverty reduction between the rural people; but rural communities still face challenges and constraints which hinder their participation in poverty reduction.

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### 1. Introduction

The term 'participation' has recently come to play a central role in the discourse of rural development practitioners and policy makers (United Nations, 2009). Participation is a dynamic process. Participation is considered as an important factor for successful and prosperity of local development (Aref et al., 2010). At the same time, people's interpretations of the term – and criticisms of other people's interpretations – have multiplied, and the intentions and results of much participation in practice have been questioned or even denounced. In other words, participation has become a hotly contested term, in a debate with deep implications for the ways in which community, society, citizenship, the rights of the poor and rural development itself are conceived, and for the policies that are formulated about and around some of these concepts and the social realities to which they refer (United Nations, 2009).

Community participation refers to peoples' engagement in activities within the community. It plays an essential and long-standing role in promoting quality of life (Putnam, 2000). Participation is recognized as an essential strategy to strengthen the well-being of individuals, families and communities, government and non government agencies (Aref, 2010a). Community participation is one of the mechanisms to empower people to take part in community development. Increased participation is a means to achieve community capacity to resolve the community problems (Lasker, Weiss, & Miller, 2001). Community participation also is the mechanism for active community involvement in partnership working, decision making and representation in community structures for poverty reduction (Aref, 2011; Chapman & Kirk,

2001). It should be noted that community participation often means the involvement of people or community with the government to solve the community problems (Aref, 2011).

In Iran there are some local organization for poverty reduction; but there are many challenges that face organizations who make it their goal to rural participation (Narayan, 2002). Hence, this paper addresses the specific challenge that is faced by participation for poverty reduction in rural area of Iran.

### 2. Literature review

Community participation is a concept that attempts to bring different stakeholders together for problem solving and decision making (Talbot & Verrinder, 2005). The World Bank (1993) recognized the lack of community participation as a reason for failure of many community development attempts in developing countries (Aref, 2011). Community participation was measured in this study as a means of determining the level of community involvement in poverty reduction.

Poverty being a rural phenomenon where the majority of the people live in most developing countries, the mechanisms to be used should target the recipients. One of these methods which are used widely today is to organize people in form of associations or collaboration (Adebayo, Chinedum, Dabo, & Pascal, 2010). According to World Bank poverty is hunger. Poverty is lack of shelter. Poverty is powerlessness, lack of representation and freedom (Drinkwater, 2005). Whereas poverty is a multi-faceted phenomenon that hinders the satisfaction of basic life requirements, the tendency has been for some analysts to conceptualize it in narrow economic terms by insinuating that it is simply the lack of

money (Smith & Ross, 2006). Poverty has been defined as the “denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect from others” (Hirschowitz et al., 2000, p. 54). Poverty has been defined as the “denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy, creative life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect from others” (Hirschowitz et al., 2000). Poverty can be reduced through community participation. Hence this study provides an approach for enhancement of community participation for poverty reduction in Iran.

In despite of sense of community in rural areas, there is a number barrier for poverty reduction. For example lack of government programs and organizational capacity to respond to the opportunities provided (Jamieson & Nadkarni, 2009). Lack of formal education and skills and planning (Bushell & Eagles, 2007, p. 154). As a consequence, community facilities and services may be unacceptable for rural areas. Hence building local participation in rural communities is necessary for stakeholders involved in rural development (Bushell & Eagles, 2007).

### 3. Methods

The rural areas of Marvdasht in Fars province, Iran was selected as a case study area because it provided many opportunities to develop rural development; This study is based on quantitative methodology to investigate the barriers of community participation related to poverty reduction. The participants in FGD were educated people that were engaged in government and non government institutes. To achieve the objectives of this study, the researcher uses quantitative method. Focus group discussion (FGD) was performed to collect data from local residents.

FGD conducted in a group setting and was used for obtaining a better understanding of participants' attitudes (Aref, 2010b). There is no consensus among qualitative researchers on the optimal number of participants in FGD. But the ideal number of participants in each FGD is six to ten. The respondents were participated in 10 groups. They ranged in age from 22 - 45 years. The researcher explained to them the objectives of the study and what questions would be asked. The researchers examined, categorized participants responses from each focus group of villagers that were recorded in video tapes

### 4. Result

Information for this study was gathered from educated people through FGD. A qualitative analysis was undertaken to determine viewed the current level of local participation for poverty reduction and also barriers of participation for poverty reduction. There were overall 55 participants with an average of 33 years old. The FGDs held on in 10 convenient centers in Marvdasht, Fars, Iran. They were chosen because of their knowledge. The questions were asked about the local participation in poverty reduction and barriers of local participation for poverty reduction.

In terms of local participation in poverty reduction, they believe that rural residence does not have important role in their communities especially on poverty reduction. The findings showed that rural residence are without any certain planning for poverty reduction. Although the FGD respondent referred to variety barriers in terms of participation for poverty reduction in their communities, the study refer to some common barriers which have been discussed in majority of FGD groups. The most barriers in terms of local participation for poverty reduction were including:

**Lack of local conditions:** The majority of FGD participants believed there are no suitable conditions in their village for participation in social and political participation and decision making.

**Lack of training:** FGD respondents believed the lack of training; especially was behind the failure of participation for poverty reduction.

**Lack of skill and knowledge:** The participants in all groups mentioned to this issue as one barrier of community participation for poverty reduction in their communities. Moscardo (2008) also argues that a lack of skill and knowledge has been used in many developing countries to justify the exclusion of local residents to resolve this problem (Aref, 2011).

**Community structural barriers:** They respondents also referred to structural barriers for local participation in poverty reduction. Structural barriers are usually associated with institutional, power structures, legislative, and economic systems. Tosun (2000) describes a few of the relevant barriers including: attitude of professionals, lack of expertise, elite domination, lack of an appropriate legal system, lack of trained human resources, relatively high cost of community participation and lack of financial resources (Aref, 2011).

**Cultural barriers:** Through FGD respondents believed that there are some cultural barriers towards community participation. There seem to be some cultural factors including limited capacity of poor people to handle development effectively, apathy and

low level of awareness in the local community (Aref, 2011; Moscardo, 2008).

Overall the results of this study indicated that in most rural area local participation is limited by the some cultural restrictions that limit their access to education and health services, and these impose serious constraints on their autonomy, mobility, and on the types of livelihoods that are available to them. Their lack of access to education and resulting low-skill levels limits their opportunities for employment further.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper addresses the specific challenge that is faced by community participation for poverty reduction in Marvdasht, Iran. This study has identified the barriers of participation for poverty reduction. Lack of capable organizations, lack of resources, and cultural restrictions were an important element contributing to limited rural areas for poverty reduction.

Overall the findings indicated that residents have negative attitude towards contribution of rural residence towards poverty reduction in their communities. They referred to government policy and lack of local organizational capacity as main barriers related poverty reduction. Clearly, the described barriers may not be only specific to rural areas; some of them may also be considered as common general problems in urban communities in Iran. Base on the findings for community participation, any project should include, include the below items:

- The integration of procedures and principles aimed at enhancing and promoting the role of local people as creators of development,
- The enhancement of the image of rural people as guardians of the traditional know-how so as to favor and promote their involvement in rural economic activities, and management processes.

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