

Assessing Farmers' Expectations from Members of Agricultural Engineering and Consulting Firms (Case Study: Islam-Abad –e-Gharb Township, Kurdistan, Iran)

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

The agricultural sector has always been the focal point of attentions in rural development. If we are convinced that agriculture plays a pivotal role in rural development, human resources are therefore the key elements to reach the goal of development. Among the valuable resources in agricultural discipline, are the graduated students of factories of agriculture across the country. While these graduates were in constant search for employment, the Ministry of Agricultural Jihad (MAJ) proposed a semi-privatized extension approach using young agricultural graduates. They were supposed to be stationed in Rural Service Centers (RSC) and work under the supervision of government based extension agents as agricultural engineering and consulting firms (AECF). They were given extended pre-service training in addition to what they have already earned in college. Currently, there are 112 firms working as private extension agents with 1129 young engineers across Kermanshah Province. Moreover, in Islam-Abad–e-Gharb Township, there are approximately 10 AECFs with nearly 100 young engineers providing farmers with agricultural advice. Since their establishment in rural areas, their performance has been studied by different researchers. However, what is missing in the literature is what is expected of AECFs as perceived by farmers.

Methodology

Therefore, the purpose of this descriptive study was to assess farmers' expectation from AECFs. Wheat farmers were selected as the population of the study. Using stratified random sampling, 290 wheat farmers participated in the study. A researcher- made questionnaire was designed based on literature review and informal meeting with wheat farmers. The validity of research instrument was determined using judgments from panel of experts from Department of Agricultural Extension and Education and subject matter specialist from Agricultural Jihad Organization in Kermanshah province. Besides, the AECF members stationed in townships other than Islam-Abad-e-Gharb provided feedback to the questionnaire. In order to test the reliability of research instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used. A reliability of 0.84 was achieved indicating that the research instrument is reliable. Statistical Package for Social Sciences software was used to analyze data. Results revealed that farmers' expectations can be organized into five categories: Behavioral, Technical, Educational, The AECF principles, and Access to Resources. The behaviors expectation of farmers from AECF members included manners and the way they treated farmers. Farmers expected

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to be treated with outmost sincerity. The technical expectations included issues such as technical proficiency among young engineers. In other words, the farmers expected competent professional and expertise advice from AECF members. The educational expectation of farmers included sound and up-to-date information from consulting firms' members. In regards to AECF principles, farmers' perceptions towards private extension services were important. In other words, the question here was how farmers perceived AECFs in compare to government based extension services. Finally, farmers expected AECFs to provide them with resources when needed.

Results

The results of the study showed that all categories of expectations were met by AECF members. This means that farmers were quite happy with performance of private extension agents working under agricultural engineering and consulting firms. The results of this study have implications for Agricultural Jihad Organization. The current government-based extension approach may consider AECF as a potential extension approach in the country; while it has been criticized for being less effective and not meeting diverse needs of farmers. The development of AECFs may help Agricultural Jihad Organization in making a smooth and gradual transition towards privatized extension system in Iran. The results of this study also include educational implication for Iranian agricultural higher education. Since the number of potential students in agricultural major is on a decrease compare to other disciplines, the result of this study indicates that there is a potential for agricultural majors to be involved in entrepreneurial activities.

Conclusion

The young engineers in this study are somehow involved in entrepreneurial behavior, since they are providing a new type of services to all farmers, either innovative or marginalized ones. This in turn may remedy the unemployment rate among agricultural graduates. Moreover, the current take-a-job behavior of agricultural graduates may change into make-a-job behavior. This would consequently develop more entrepreneurial mentality among agricultural graduates across the country.

Keywords: Agricultural engineering consulting firms, College graduates, Higher education, Islam Abad-e- Gharb.