

Role of Rural Organizations in Resource Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

The large majority of rural farmers in Sri Lanka are small scale farmers operating on land extents less than 1ha. Poor access to resources resulting in less productivity are inherent problems faced by small holders which demands attention of policy makers. A collective approach therefore is perceived as more appropriate for gaining access to resources through rural organizations that are already in operation. Findings reveal that Farmer Organizations, Death Benevolent Societies and Women's Societies are recognized by the majority of farmers as active rural organizations that are capable of mobilising resources for a self-reliant rural livelihood.

Keywords: farmers, organizations, resources, rural

Introduction and research problem/issue

The majority of peasant farmers in Sri Lanka are engaged in small scale agricultural production. Nearly 80 percent of the agricultural lands are recognised as small holdings which operate in an unorganized manner with poor productivity, leading to greater vulnerability. Poor access to farm resources and poor bargaining power are among the main constraints identified among individual farmers who operate on small scale farms.

In the modern context, gaining access to new technology and related support services, is considered essential for achieving higher levels of productivity and intensifying agricultural production. Having identified the advantages of collective and organised operations, the government in collaboration with the DOA and other agencies has taken necessary measures to establish a number of rural organizations in farming areas. Farming which is a collective social activity necessarily demands such organizations to make collective decisions regarding irrigation and water management, share cropping, sharing or hiring of machinery, technology transfer and sharing agricultural information etc. From another perspective, the governments have already recognised for instance, economies of scale, reduced cost, increased efficiency and sustainability as benefits gained through collective mechanisms. Considering these advantages government support is extended to the operation of Farmer Organization, Women's Societies, Samurdhi Association and social welfare organizations etc. under the guidance of the government officers.

The broad objective of this study therefore is to study the functions of rural organizations and to analyse the role of these rural organization in gaining access to resources.

Research Methodology

This study pursued the theoretical background of ‘Sustainable Livelihood Approach’ proposed by Robert Chambers, which refers to social relations, affiliations, associations and social networks as attributes of social capital. The five capital bases described in the assets pentagon for example natural, physical, financial, human and social capital are essential elements in the sustainable livelihood framework which advocates that structures and processes can influence gaining access to these assets.

This qualitative study was conducted in the Anuradhapura District employing social science research methodology. Four divisions namely Anuradhapura, Kahatagasdigiliya, Thirappane and Ipalogama under the purview of the Provincial Department of Agriculture in the North Central Province were selected for the study. While in depth interview was adopted as the main research tool for gathering data, participant observation and focus group discussions were conducted for data triangulation.

Ten farmer families from each division participated in the survey and in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of forty farmers using a detailed interview guide.

Results and findings

There are a number of village level organizations operating in the research area out of which Farmer Organization (FO) is the main organization that link farmers with the government, by representing them at higher level decision making forums such as the District Coordination Committee.

Village level organizations operating in the research area other than the Farmer

Organization include women’s societies, rural development society, young farmers’ clubs, seed producer’s societies and cut flower producer’s society etc. Besides these production oriented organizations, social and welfare organizations for example death benevolent society, elder’s society, religious societies, cooperative society and Samurdhi association etc. assist farmers to achieve common objectives related to social, religious and welfare needs.

Moreover, these organizations are assigned with different levels of importance by the farmers depending on the benefits received through their membership. To elaborate this further, farmers make judgements about the organizations based on their perceived importance of the particular organization. While the following figure illustrates the importance of the organizations among the farmers in the four divisions, the discussion highlights the functions of village level organizations and comparison of their importance as perceived by farmers in the four segments.

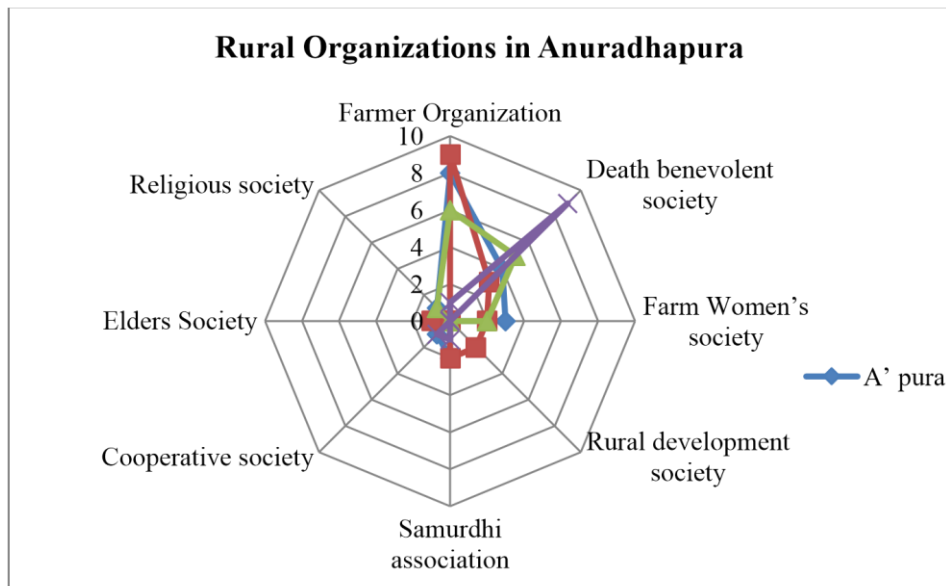


Figure 1: Farmer Participation in Rural Organizations in Anuradhapura.

Farmer organizations in the four divisions in Anuradhapura district play a major role performing many functions, while little variations were noted among the divisions in the level of performance and perceptions of farmers.

Out of the four divisions, the most active and well organised farmer organizations were found in *Kahatagasdigiliya*, where paddy cultivation is practiced under the main irrigation tank. Whilst literature highlights that distribution of inputs (fertilizer, seeds) and water management were among the main functions of the Farmer Organizations, FOs in the research area, especially in paddy growing areas perform a variety of functions, of which water management is the major function. Even though the main responsibility of managing the tanks and the irrigation systems lies in the hands of the Department of Irrigation, FOs share this responsibility at the village level.

The benefits gained from the village tank is not only limited for obtaining water for cultivation in the Farmer Organization in this division. This resource is also used by members for additional income generation for the organization. They enter into a lease agreement with private entrepreneurs and implement 'inland fisheries' projects. Such income earned through various projects, along with the collection of membership subscription generate the capital base of the farmer organization. Thus, Farmer Organization is perceived by the farmers as a source of credit as well.

Farmer Organization was the most active village level association in *Kahatagasdigiliya* with 90 % of members while Death Benevolent Society has a membership of 30%. Other associations for example Womens' Association, Rural Development Society and Samurdhi Association with 20 % membership in each, are less active in this division.

Similar to *Kahatagadigiliya*, farmers in *Anuradhapura* division maintained close affiliations with the farmer organization (80 % membership) and the Death Benevolent Society had a membership of 40 %. Women's society was a popular choice of the members (30 %) while the Samurdhi Association here functions with 20 % of farmers being members. Cooperative society and religious society were distantly functioning (10 %) while members of the rural development society were not found within the sample.

Ipalogama segment followed the same pattern observed in the other segments in the sample, for instance Farmer Organization was considered the most important (60% of farmers being members) followed by the Death Benevolent Society (30 %). However, the noteworthy feature here is that their relationship with all village level organizations were remote, irrespective of whether they are members or not in these organizations. Participant observations within this vegetable growing area captured evidence on poor links among farmers themselves resulting in poor access in information and other resources.

In *Thirappane*, farmers maintained closer relationships with the Death Benevolent Society with almost 90 % of farmers in the sample being members. Compared with other divisions, FO has a poor relationship with farmers with only 10 % referring to the importance of the FO. Cooperative Society, Farmer Organization and Samurdhi Association were given equal importance by the members. Notable feature in Thirappane is that the representation of the members of the Womens' association being zero within the sample.

Conclusions, implications and significance

Farmer Organizations that have been set up under the Agrarian Services Act No 58 of 1979 with the aim of promoting self-reliance of the farming community, is the most recognized village level organization especially in paddy growing segments. As stipulated in the policies farmer organizations in the four segments in Anuradhapura district play a major role in performing the above function while little variations were noted among the divisions in the level of performance and perceptions of farmers.

All the farmers who were interviewed for the survey are members of the farmer organizations in spite of their level of perceptions. Similarly, Death Benevolent Societies are operating in every rural village performing social and welfare functions in addition to the financial assistance extended in the event of the death of a family member. Death benevolent Society is the village level association that brings villages together and maintain social ties irrespective of the gender, social class and other disparities such as crop or livestock farmers. Hence, in the rural culture it's like a social obligation to be a member of the Death Benevolent Society.

The membership in the above societies show variations among the different AI ranges depending on the cropping patterns and the socio –economic requirements of the farmers.

Rural organizations are assigned with different values of importance by the farmers depending on the benefits received through their membership. More clearly, farmers make judgements about the organizations based on their perceived importance of the particular organization. As such variations among divisions is attributed to the perceptions of farmers on the distinctive functions of those organizations facilitating access to resources in real terms.

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