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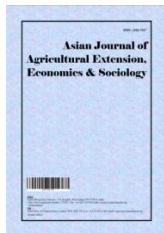
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Factors Responsible for Participation of Self Help Group Farmers in Vegetables and Fruits Promotion Council Kerala, India

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Self Help Groups (SHGs) are farmer-led cooperatives in which all members work together to solve issues and take advantage of opportunities through participatory action following cooperative decision-making for the members' overall growth. In this context, a study was conducted in Palakkad district of Kerala to identify the factors responsible for the participation of farmer members in SHGs of Vegetables and Fruits Promotion Council Kerala (VFPCK). A proportionate random sampling technique was employed to collect data from 68 respondents and analyzed using mean score then ranked accordingly. The factors like economic, social, personal, organizational and marketing factors may be responsible for members to participate in VFPCK. The results of analysis revealed that marketing, organizational and economic factors were the important factors responsible for the participation of farmer members in VFPCK. Membership to a farmers' group improves access to technology, training and output markets and consequently increasing expected profits. The results of this study have implications as to which factors need to be addressed to encourage farmers to participate in the SHGs of VFPCK.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala being a consumer state gets a large portion of its vegetable supply from neighbouring states. Mridula and Alex had found that while it comes to solving food security challenges in a state like Kerala, more coordinated attempts to sustain community activity are necessary than technical interventions[1]. Nxumalo and Oladele referred that participation is the individual and group participation in development processes with the goal of promoting self-sufficiency and a higher standard of living [2]. With this insight, Vegetable and Fruit Promotion Council of Kerala (VFPCK) was formed as successor of Kerala Horticulture Development Programme (KHDP) with financial assistance from European Union and Government of Kerala with the aim of promoting fruits and vegetable production in Kerala. The activities of VFPCK are carried out by SHGs formed by 15-20 members. SHGs join and form Swasraya Karshaka Samithi (SKS) where they pool their market produce and traders come there for purchase which help them avoid the role of middle man in marketing of agricultural produce. Input supply, need base trainings, Participatory Technology demonstrations, Insurance schemes are carried out through VFPCK. Farmers who were members of a farmers' cooperative had more cohesion in terms of learning and sharing information, as well as the ability to produce more for a marketable surplus. Von Oppen et al., found that physical infrastructure like market sites can increase the efficiency of both marketing and production of agricultural products [3]. Farmer markets are meeting points for farmers and traders where there is free haggling which leads to better prices than selling at the farm gate and commission mandis. Farmers save money on transaction costs and have more market opportunities by selling directly to buyers rather than through brokers because they have a closer place to offer their produce. Mukherjee et al., concluded that if a farmer becomes member of an organization they will have timely access to input supply and value added services which resulting in higher quality produce and a stronger market profit [4]. Chandran and Sreedaya found that an increase in income showed positive relationship with planning, production and marketing aspects of vegetables among farm women groups [5]. The main reason for this was that working in a group creates synergy among the farmers and enables them to access market

information as well as sharing experiences. A very less number of studies have been carried out to determine the factors contributing for participation of vegetable farmers in organizations. In this context, the present study makes an earnest effort to find the factors responsible for the participation of farmer members in VFPCK.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in the most prominent Vegetables and Fruits Promotion Council Kerala which is engaged in horticulture related activities located in Palakkad district of Kerala. The units of analysis of the study were individual members of farmer Self Help Groups formed by VFPCK. Vadakarapathy village from Chittur block and Elevencherry village from Nenmara block were purposively selected from the district. A proportionate random sampling was followed to select the respondents. In the selected two villages, there were 447 VFPCK members in 17 groups. It has been decided to select fifteen per cent of the above population from both villages as the member respondents for the study and thus the sample size of members has been fixed as 68. Data were collected by personal interview using a structured schedule. The factors contributing for the extent participation of the members in the Vegetables and Fruits Promotion Council of Kerala were categorized as economic, social, personal, organizational and marketing factors as adopted by Anju Abraham with slight modifications [6]. The members were asked to indicate the factors responsible for their participation on the responses viz., 'greater extent', 'somewhat extent' and 'not an influencing factors' with the scores assigned as 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Mean score and rank has been worked out to get meaningful interpretations of the results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Active participation of farmers in SHGs of VFPCK leads to their prosperity and overall economic development and their participation solely depends upon the factors which are responsible for their membership. Several factors like economic, social, personal, organizational and marketing factors may be responsible for members to participate in VFPCK. The above factors may influence the farmer members directly or indirectly. The mean score was

calculated by dividing the total scores given by all the respondents to the statement by the total number of respondents. Based on the mean score value, the ranking was given.

3.1 Economic Factors

Most of the farmers joined VFPCK with the motive to fetch better price for their produce (2.65). This might be because Swasraya Karshaka Samithis (SKS) provide group marketing facilitates better price for their farm produce. They also added that VFPCK provided credit packages to clear debts and crop insurance to overcome uncertainties during cultivation period (2.25) and provided linkages

with financial institutions and improved their savings habit (2.09). The accessibility to credit has been increased because of the support of VFPCK. This reaffirms the findings of Moahid et al., that farmers' access to credit contributes positively to the adoption of commercial farming thereby increased income [7].

The results of this study pointed out that higher market prices will enhance the farmer willingness to produce more, increasing the proportion of farm produce to be sold in the market by the farmers. The results are consistent with the findings of Kyaw et al., revealed the positive relationship that the probability of selling of rice is higher when the market price of rice is high [8].

Table 1. Factors responsible for the participation of farmers in VFPCK

S.No	Statements	Mean score	Rank
A. Economic factors			
1.	To fetch better price for their produce	2.65	I
2.	Provide linkages with financial institutions and improve savings habit	2.09	III
3.	Provide credit packages to clear debts and promote crop insurance among farmers to overcome the uncertainties	2.25	II
B. Social factors			
1.	Influence of family members	1.41	IV
2.	Influence of fellow farmers and peer groups	2.03	II
3.	Empowers the farmers towards progressiveness in adoption of improved technologies	2.00	III
4.	Inspiration from master farmers	2.59	I
C. Personal factors			
1.	To improve the livelihood status	1.47	IV
2.	To improve self-reliance for decision making	1.78	II
3.	Generates frequent employment for sustaining their livelihood	2.01	I
4.	Decreases family material hardship	1.65	III
D. Organizational factors			
1.	VFPCK helps in application of precise technologies for farmers	2.43	II
2.	Ensures participatory planning process among farmers	2.41	III
3.	Promotes Participatory Technology Development process among farmers	2.69	I
4.	Disseminating timely information on market prices to farmers	2.35	IV
5.	Capacity building training on package of practices and post-harvest handling to the farmers	2.19	V
E. Marketing factors			
1.	VFPCK helps farmers during market glut situations	2.96	I
2.	Reduces middle men involvement in the trading	2.91	II
3.	Increased bargaining power and transparency in transactions	2.50	III
4.	Linking the farmers to different marketing channels to sell their produce	2.19	V
5.	Ensures collective transportation of produce to the markets	2.28	IV

3.2 Social Factors

Most of the farmers agreed that they became a part of VFPCK due the inspiration from master farmers in their locality (2.59) and also due the influence of fellow farmers and peer groups (2.03). This might be because of the sense of belongingness experienced by the farmers due to the co-operative and friendly atmosphere of the group which facilitated them to remain as the members of VFPCK. Fayas stated that the group efforts and collective wisdom in vegetable farming has resulted in higher income which gave the farmers confidence and courage to be a member in VFPCK [9].

Societal influence which empowered the farmers towards progressiveness in adoption of improved technologies (2.00) was a motivating factor for the membership in the organization and to some extent influence of family members already having membership in VFPCK also contributed for their participation in VFPCK (1.41). Sangeetha et al., found that the facilitating factors which influenced the success of SHG with a mean score of 47.39 and 43.94 were co-operative approach and social protection respectively [10].

3.3 Personal Factors

Most of the farmers stated that they joined VFPCK because it created frequent employment for sustaining their livelihood (2.01) and improvement in self-reliance for decision making (1.78). 58.8 per cent of member farmers had attained secondary education. Education empowers a farmer to make informed decisions and identify market opportunities where they exist. Odulaja and Kiros found that indicated that farmer's ability to produce and sell more in a market was highly and positively related to their education levels [11].

Being a member helped them decrease their family material hardship and fulfill their felt needs (1.65) and improved the livelihood status of farmers (1.47). Better market price has resulted in increased annual income, reduced indebtedness and purchase of household assets. This is in accordance with the study report of Joshi and Piya that personal factors associated to farmers are considered precursor factors that have a substantial impact on any farm household's decision-making process [12].

3.4 Organizational Factors

Most of the farmer members had revealed that VFPCK promoted participatory technology development process among farmers (2.69) which ensured availability of relevant technology to farmers and helps in application of precise technologies for farmers (2.43). This paved way for reducing the cost of cultivation to greater extent. Access to technical assistance and inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, and improved seeds are some of the important technical factors that help farmers in adopting new technology. Sayooj found that the adoption of various cultural practices like seed treatment, use of pesticide/fungicide and nutrient management had shown a positive change among them [13].

They also expressed that VFPCK ensured participatory planning process among farmers (2.41) and kept disseminating timely information on market prices (2.35) to farmers and various other information related to schemes. Farmers had shown good adoption of improved and scientific agricultural technologies after joining VFPCK. They also stated that VFPCK provided capacity building training on package of practices and post-harvest handling to the farmers (2.19). Sebatta et al., stated that a farmer's group membership enhances access to banana technology, training, and output markets, resulting in higher predicted profits [14].

3.5 Marketing Factors

Most of the farmer members had expressed that VFPCK procured the farm produce and provided better price for the vegetables during the market glut situations (2.96). If there is excess supply of agricultural products, it is sold in 'Sasya' government outlets and transported to the nearby shops with the help of market officials and the received amount is divided among the farmers. They also stated that limited involvement of middle men in the trading (2.91) is a determining factor for the participation in the farmer markets of VFPCK. This is because the farmer markets provide facilities to directly sell their produce to the traders. Fletschner and Zepeda stated that smallholders' market access should be strengthened through policies that organize producers to limit the number of middlemen in input and output markets [15].

They also revealed that they have advantage of increased bargaining power and transparency in

transactions in the farmer markets (2.50). Market officials usually provide information on market availability as well as information on new and improved varieties that enhances the farmer's knowledge and provide information about the market opportunities. They also found that VFPCK ensured collective transportation of farm produce to the markets (2.28) which resulted in reduction of transportation cost. Ruijs revealed that access to information positively influenced farmer participation and access to markets due to their effect on reduction in transaction costs [16].

4. CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the marketing, organizational and economic factors were major responsible factors for the participation of farmer members in VFPCK. The unique marketing system, prevention of exploitation of middle men between trades, timely input supply, participatory technology development and fetching better price for their farm produce enhanced and sustained the income to the farmers. These factors need to be promoted to sustain the participation of farmer members in SHGs of VFPCK. Active participation of farmers in SHGs leads to their prosperity and overall economic development and their participation solely depends upon the success of group. The policymakers of VFPCK need to establish balanced policies for farmers and manage them in an appropriate way so that self-sufficiency can be induced, contributing to food security, and economic development. This would encourage and mobilize more farmers to participate in VFPCK to empower themselves and contribute to the self-sufficiency in vegetables and fruits production.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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