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Measurement of social empowerment of farmers in SHGS: Evidence from India

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The Self Help Groups are generally formed by promoter agencies as a facilitating mechanism in extending micro finance and have been used to generate income and employment and alleviate poverty, especially in the developing countries. Review of previous literature indicated that they also contributed in other areas of economic development and growth such as poverty eradication, social transformation and empowerment. The present study used cross sectional data to measure the empowerment of farmer members of SHGs formed by Vegetable and Fruit Promotion Council Keralam. Empowerment index was calculated for sample farmers using the information collected on the dimensions of empowerment such as leadership propensity, self confidence, employment generation, increase in income and decision making power. The farmers were classified based on the empowerment index score. It was found that the members of the older self help groups scored better in empowerment index measurement. Any intervention from the promoter agency should include the empowerment of the new members as one of its objectives. Further research should focus on issues of creating a legal framework that sustains the SHGs activities and developing them as agents of rural development.

Key words: Self help group, fruit and vegetable farming, empowerment, participation, vegetable and fruit promotion council Keralam.

INTRODUCTION

A Self Help Group (SHG) is a small economically homogenous affinity group of 10 to 20 persons who come together to save small amounts regularly, mutually agree to contribute to a common fund, have collective decision making, or resolve conflicts through collective leadership and mutual discussion (Ramanathan, 2007). The SHGs are generally formed by the NGOs as facilitating agencies right from the pioneer effort of Mohammad Yunus in Bangladesh and the Grameen Bank in 1975. World over SHGs have been used to generate income and employment and alleviate poverty, especially in the developing countries.

In India, the SHGs have been formed following different approaches. Several types of agencies such as banks, welfare trusts, co-operative unions or the members of the community themselves have initiated the efforts to organize the SHGs. The National Bank for Agriculture

and Rural Development (NABARD) is the apex financial institution established by the Government of India in 1982, for promoting, monitoring and refinancing the rural financial system in the country. The SHGs provide inspiration, provide financial inclusion for the small and marginal farmers, empower them and often assume political role (APMAS, 2005). The SHGs can be functionally categorized as given in Table 1.

Several researchers have reported that SHGS contribute in other areas of economic development and growth such as poverty eradication, social transformation and empowerment (Anand, 2002; Chavan and Birajdar, 2009; Nidheesh, 2009; Sujatha, 2011; Aruna and Jyothirmayi, 2011). They indicated that the organizational structure provides opportunities for collective public action. Participation in Self help groups helps members to empower themselves. The self help groups help the

Table 1. Functional categories of SHGs in India.

Type	Description	Feature
Model I	SHGs formed and financed by banks	the banks themselves act as agents in forming and nurturing groups, opening their savings accounts and providing them with bank credit.
Model II	SHGs formed by NGOs, and formal agencies but directly financed by banks	SHG formed directly by banks under this model. NGOs and formal agencies in the field of micro finance act as facilitators. They propagate the message, organize groups, train them in thrift and credit management and nurture them over a period. Banks in due course, link these groups by directly providing loans to them
Model III	SHGs financed by banks using NGOs as financial intermediaries	In this model, NGOs take on the dual role of facilitators and financial intermediaries. They help in formation of SHGs, nurturing them, training them in thrift and credit management. Eventually, the NGOs approach banks for bulk loan assistance for on lending to these SHGs.
Model IV	NGO Guided but self supported SHGs	This category of SHGs are entirely formed and supported by the group members, neither getting any assistance or support from bank nor from NGOs. By observing the group formed in the neighborhood areas, these groups have initiated themselves and function like the other models mentioned above.
Model V	Completely Self-Supported SHGs	Very rarely found are the SHGs formed and initiated by the NGOs, guided by them on the rules and regulations, accounts to be maintained etc. But no financial support either directly or through the linkage with banks is arranged but only the savings of the members is used for internal lending as well as for starting an enterprise.

Source: APMAS, 2005.

members to cope with stress and problems and empower them in their relationship with the organizations that serve their interests and the community at large in which they live. Empirically, it has been proven that the self help group activities are instrumental in vital familial relationships and can affect government decisions as well (Medvene and Krauss, 1989).

In this context, this paper seeks to analyze the activities of Vegetable and Fruit Promotion Council Keralam (VFPCK) in developing the SHGs. It also measures the characteristics affecting participation in the SHGs and the empowerment of the farmers through SHGs. From a random sample of 200 SHG members in Kerala (India), relevant information on variables related to their participation and empowerment dimensions were collected. The descriptive statistics on the characteristics affecting participation and dimensions of empowerment were calculated. The dimensions of empowerment were identified as leadership propensity, self confidence, employment generation, increase in income and decision making power (Renuka and Lekshmi, 2003) after discussions with subject experts. For each of the five dimensions of empowerment, a score is obtained by dividing the individual total score with the maximum possible score. Summation of the score for the dimensions gives the empowerment index for the individual member. Thus the empowerment index will

range from 0 to 5 (Panda and Misra, 1996).

VFPCK and its activities

In VFPCK an SHG is a voluntary group of 15 to 20 commercial fruit and vegetable cultivators. The SHG is formed on the basis of neighborhood principles and run according to a set of mutually agreed norms, have regular meetings, discussions and common decisions. Currently, there are 6699 SHGs with 130,000 members actively supported by VFPCK. Among them, 405 SHGs are run by women farmers. The SHGs in a village initiate farmers markets which are managed by the farmers themselves, assisted by VFPCK. The organizational linkage between the SHGs and the promoter institution is indicated in Figure 1.

An SHG is led by the farmer leaders nominated by the group known as Master Farmers (MF). They guide and assist the member farmers in the fields of credit, marketing and production technology. The Production MF (PMF) is entrusted with the tasks related to dissemination of innovation. The Credit MF (CMF) facilitates easy access to institutional credit, monitors utilization and encourages timely repayment through peer effect. The Marketing MF (MMF) is to effectively lead and contribute to the management of the Marketing Committee of the

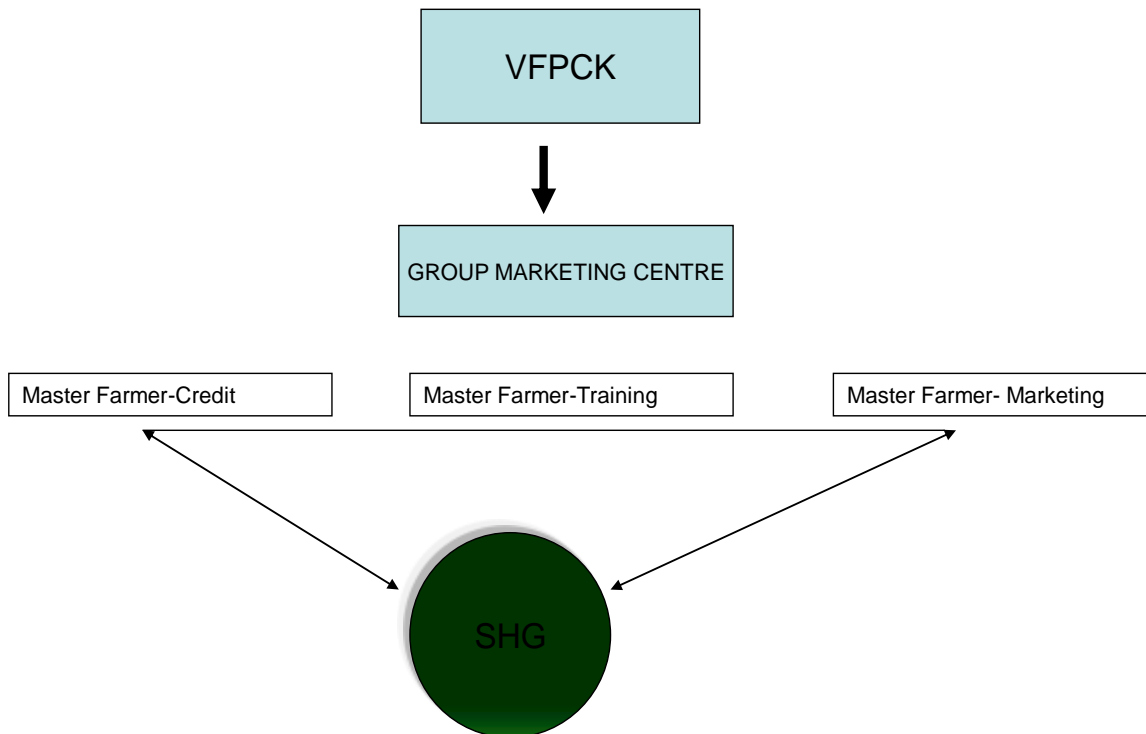


Figure 1. SHG-VFPCCK linkage.

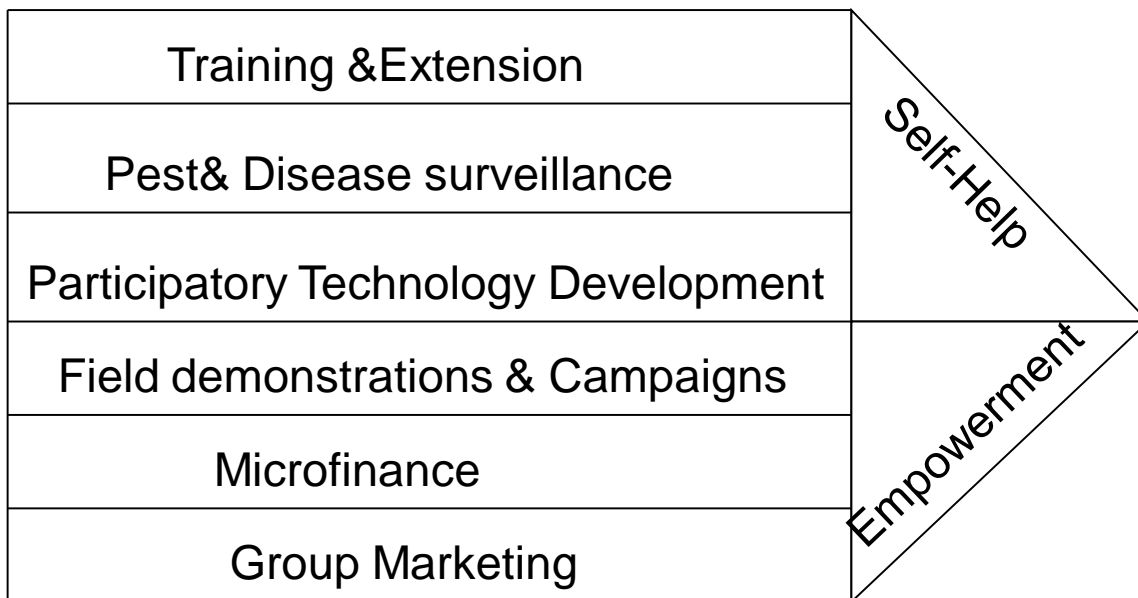


Figure 2. The VFPCCK model.

SKS. The activities of VFPCCK are indicated in Figure 2.

VFPCCK has envisaged SHG as a basic platform for increased social interaction, collective bargaining, quality input sourcing, advanced production technology and production planning, micro finance, development of farmer market, problem solving and total empowerment

of the farmer.

Training and extension

Training helps to empower through knowledge gain. The

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the sample farmers.

Sln.	Particular	Mean
1	Mean age of farmer	53
2	Family size	4
3	Years of experience in SHG	8.2
4	Area owned (in hectares)	0.17
5	Average area cultivated (in hectares)	0.32

course content of the training is client-driven. The training is sequential and time bound. There is timely intervention and impact assessment done as part of training activities. The feedback from the trainees is analyzed and implemented.

The field staff members of VFPCCK pioneered a new mode of extension whereby the staff members go to the farmers, meeting them on their fields and not in the conventional way where the extension staff were met at their office. They build a long term relationship with the farmers by helping them to analyze their problems and solving them and the staff is always accessible to them. They provide the farmers with technology at the farmers' doorstep.

Pest and disease surveillance

Pest and disease surveillance and forecasting system are services to the farmers which are aimed at providing information to enable farmers of a particular area to take respective precaution with maximum economical benefit and lowest environmental hazard. Surveillance units are conveniently fixed so that there are sufficient number of units to represent the major vegetable and banana growing areas. The fixed plot survey is conducted and the information is recorded in the sampling format. The data received will be analyzed and the results will be communicated to the farmers.

Participatory technology development

As part of the participatory approach, VFPCCK ensures the active involvement of the farmers in technology improvement through Participatory Technology Development (PTD). It is a modern approach for technology generation and diffusion in which the farmers play the key role. It combines the development, dissemination and application of new technology in the field along with strengthening of the experimental capabilities of the farmers. The role of extension worker in PTD is helping farmers to analyze their farming situation and to identify their needs and problems, to provide the necessary technical and scientific options and to facilitate design, lay out and evaluation of the field

trials.

Demonstrations and campaigns

VFPCCK demonstrates proven technologies to farmers in order to convince them of the feasibility and efficacy of new practices. Demonstration is a very effective extension method to disseminate new technology. It also organizes campaigns to create mass awareness and to involve collective action. Through campaigns, extension messages reach maximum number of people in the shortest possible time.

Group marketing

The concept of group marketing, in simple terms, is marketing managed by farmers' groups. As the name implies, the major focus is to empower and facilitate the farmers to take more effective decisions with regard to the marketing of their produce. The concept of group marketing thereby provides the member farmers better access to markets and therefore a greater share in the consumer's rupee. 10 to 15 SHGs come together to establish a farmers market which caters to the needs of nearly 200 to 300 farmers of a village. Review of literature indicated that the financial performance of these markets is satisfactory (Nehru and Jayachitra, 2003)

Microfinance

The main objective of microfinance is to ensure easy access to timely credit in adequate quantities which is cost effective. The unique nature of microfinance in VFPCCK is providing credit for lease-land cultivators also. Credit is disbursed quickly with lesser farm visits and hence lesser transaction costs. VFPCCK staff members assist in disbursement, monitoring the utilization and recovery. The peer pressure for repayment of the credit in the SHGs ensures efficient utilization of credit.

The descriptive statistics of the sample farmers such as the age, educational status, area owned (in ha) and area cultivated are presented in Table 2. Age was reported to exercise influence on decision making (Dipali, 1974). The

Table 3. Distribution of farmers based on group characteristics influencing empowerment.

No.	Item	Category	Mean score	Distribution of sample SHG members	
				Less than mean score	Greater than mean score
1	Group cohesion	0.3 - 0.93	0.66	87	113
2	Group interaction	0.5 - 0.99	0.76	72	128
3	Group leadership	0.4 - 0.8	0.65	92	108
4	Transparency	0.20 - 0.66	0.40	100	100
5	Need satisfaction	0.55 - 0.99	0.84	104	96
6	Interdependence	0.32 - 0.99	0.67	85	115
7	Equity	0.44 - 0.92	0.74	95	105
8	Accountability	0.2 - 0.7	0.33	105	95
9	Group co-operation	0.28 - 0.78	0.50	97	103

Source: Primary data.

educational qualification with a score of 4.8 indicated that the average farmer in the sample was educated up to the middle school level. The extent to which a farmer can understand and adopt a new technology depends on his educational qualifications. Strong and positive influence was noticed for educational qualifications as far as adoption of technology is concerned (Jaleel, 1992). Most of the farmers cultivated leased land holdings in addition to their own land. Thus, the area cultivated is larger than the area owned.

Group characteristics that influence empowerment

When participants of the SHGs interact with each other to make meaningful changes in their behavior and influences, individually and collectively empowerment occurs. Research has shown that participation and empowerment are related to each other (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977; Thomas and Velthouse, 1990; Schulz et.al., 1995; Rappaport, 1987, Nylund, 2000).

The group characteristics contributing to empowerment were identified by extensive review of literature and consultation with experts. They are group cohesion, group interaction, group leadership, transparency, need satisfaction and interdependence in the group, equity, accountability and co-operation among the group members. These group characteristics were measured among the sample farmers using relevant questionnaire and the quality of the information collected was ascertained by interviewing the VFPCCK personnel working in the locality. The figure describes the relationship between these group characteristics and the sample mean score for each characteristic.

The mean scores for the group characteristics are presented in Table 3. Except for the need satisfaction and accountability, majority of the farmers scored higher than the mean level. Maximum score was obtained for group interaction and interdependence. With the active

involvement of the VFPCCK personnel, the group meetings kept recorded minutes of the meeting and this keeps the interactions in the group focused. The homogeneity within the group and the geographical proximity of the members are added contributory factors to this score.

Dimensions of empowerment

The context of the working of the SHG has always influenced the definition of empowerment (Reddy, 2005; Velde, 2009; Manimekalai, 2004). The dimensions of empowerment were identified as leadership propensity, self confidence, employment generation, increase in income and decision making power (Renuka and Lekshmi, 2003) after discussions with subject experts. For each of the five dimensions of empowerment, a score is obtained by dividing the obtained score of the individual with the maximum possible score for each of the dimension. Summation of the score for the dimensions gives the empowerment index for the individual member (Panda and Misra, 1996).

The empowerment index (Table 4) was calculated as the sum of the component scores. The farmers were classified based on the empowerment index score. Majority of the sample farmers were in the categories with greater than average value for empowerment index (Table 5). Since the score is summative, we can conclude that the employment generation and decision making are the most important components in empowerment.

CONCLUSIONS

SHGs can act as change agents in different livelihood activities of the rural poor. Capacity building and empowerment through SHGS can be used as effective mechanism for strengthening the democratic institutions.

Table 4. Mean Score for components of empowerment index.

Component	Mean score		
	Mean score	Standard deviation	t - value
Leadership propensity	0.59	0.12	0.29
Self confidence	0.56	0.16	0.23
Employment generation	0.73	0.22	0.25
Income generation	0.36	0.12	0.42
Decision making	0.78	0.13	0.27

Source: primary data.

Table 5. Distribution of sample farmers based on empowerment index score.

Class	Number of farmers	Percentage
0-1	12	6
1-2	31	15.5
2-3	42	21
3-4	85	42.5
4-5	30	15
Total	200	100

Source: primary data.

With the active intervention of VFPC, the SHGs have been successful in empowering the small and marginal vegetable and fruit farmers of the state. The study points is at the major components of empowerment and any intervention strategy from the promoter agency to empower the SHGs should target these components especially, the decision making and the employment generation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

VFPC has demonstrated its ability in coordinating the SHG activities and directing them towards the goal of improving the livelihood options of the vegetable and fruit farmers. This paradigm is aided by the informal nature, the homogeneity and the small size of the SHGs. Streamlining of the different models of SHG activities is an important issue that requires the attention of the policymakers. The state is yet to evolve a legal framework that supports this multi-dimensional extension system which involves the financial institutions, state department of agriculture, research institutions and the local administration. Further research should focus on issues of creating a legal framework that sustains the SHGs activities and developing them as agents of rural development.

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