

## 29 - Research Through Action with Nomadic Pastoralists in Iran

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The geo-climatic characteristics of Iran contributed to the country's suitability for pastoralism more than crop cultivation, particularly in the Zagros and Alborz mountains of the central plateau. History illustrates that nomadic pastoralists have been the main users of these resources, from times which probably preceded any settlement by sedentary people (Lambton, 1953).

The nomadic pastoralists had been able to achieve some sort of "balance" between their environment and their economy through a long-time co-adaptation. But this has changed over the recent decades as nomads are now being held liable for the significant degradation of the rangelands, over which they migrate with their livestock. Efforts to improve the natural resource status of rangelands have traditionally been attempted through the use of technology transfer and centralized top-down planning.

Natural resource degradation seems to be the most important and growing concern, and this has not been addressed by resource redistribution, technological and conservation strategies.

### **Key Issues in Nomadic Pastoralism**

1. Nomadism is responsible for the degradation of the natural resource

base. Extensive soil areas erode due to over-grazing. Yet, roughly 1/3 of the total area of Iran (164 million ha) is unusable for any purpose other than pastoralism. There are very limited productive options for this land in a way which will benefit the national economy.

2. The utilization of the rangelands by nomadic pastoralists is characterized by low levels of productivity. Although they represent only a small proportion of the population, even in rural areas, the nomads are the main breeders of indigenous species of livestock in Iran. They provide the breeding stock for the rest of the livestock industry in the country, including large-scale commercial livestock enterprises.



3. Poverty and low levels of social welfare among the nomadic peoples are causes for significant concern to government agencies committed to matters of equity and social justice. But while a large proportion of the nomadic population now wish to improve their own welfare through settlement, the government does not enthusiastically support such a strategy for a number of different reasons including those above.

4. There is an increasing national concern about the deterioration of the diverse cultural identity and heritage of the nomads, yet equally, with their capacity for independent action, there are concerns that the nomads pose potential problems of control by the government.

The relatively limited achievements in nomadic development and natural resource conservation stem from the fact that policies are based on a reductionist viewpoint and analysis, which separates theory from practice, and neglects the diversity, complexity and recursiveness of the different dimensions of nomadic life. These policies are also developed on the basis of government perceptions of the nature of the issues confronting nomads rather than on the basis of shared concerns with the nomads themselves.

The current approach to development activities needs to shift from conventional empiricism, with its linear logic and power relationships, to models which endeavor to establish systemic and mutual recognition and accommodation of change among "clients" and the researcher as facilitator.

### **Research Process**

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Three phases of inquiry characterized a "research through action" effort of the researcher in Iran, which when taken altogether, represent what might be termed

a "system of participatory methodologies".

### **Aim of Participatory Methodologies for Each of the Three Phases**

- **First Phase** - explore the complexity and diversity among current problematic situations
- **Second Phase** - assist both nomads and different government agencies in understanding each others' perspectives and go beyond the "symptom" and to find common issues/goals
- **Third Phase** - facilitate organizational change within the Forest and Rangeland Department

### **Phase 1: Ethnographic Exploration**

The first phase of the research comprised an ethnographic study of the Bonkoh as a "human activity system" (Checkland, 1981). The question involved what the nomads themselves perceived as the threats to their welfare and cohesion as a purposeful group of nomadic pastoralists.

The Bonkoh is territorially identifiable and acts as a "system" for purposes of environmental management both in summer and winter quarters. Secondly, it acts, for a number of other purposes, as a cohesive group, providing a basis for collective action, even if the higher level of tribal organization does not function any more (Emadi *et al.*, 1992).

Critical reflections on this phase of the research from the researcher-as-participant/observer confirmed the following:

- the complexity of the current situation as perceived by the nomads themselves
- the unease of the nomads at their present situation
- the lack of any signs of improvement in future trends as they saw them
- an essential need for a mutual understanding between government officials and the nomads.

Without the necessary changes, the Bonkoh believe their circumstances were "not improvable".

### **Phase 2: Assisting Nomads and Government Agencies Understand Each Others' Perspectives**

The perceived "non-resolution" of the issues between government agencies and the nomads suggested the need for an approach grounded in a context of "Research through Action for Development".

In the action-oriented approach to research, the researcher was extremely conscious of the two quite different "traditions" which characterize it. As Brown and

Tandon (1983) have pointed out, one can recognize profound differences between what he has termed the "northern tradition" of action research (AR) - with its emphasis on organizational change through problem solving - and the "southern tradition" of participatory action research (PAR) - which has been developed in the context of the "empowerment of disempowered communities" of the so-called Third World.

At first glance, each of these two approaches would seem to have relevance in the present context. The "northern" tradition is perfectly relevant for exploring changes in the organization of government agencies to more closely fit the self-espoused needs of the nomads. The "southern" tradition, on the other hand, is highly appropriate to the nomadic communities in their search for greater empowerment and their participation in the planning and decision-making processes.

The researcher chose an approach which combined both mechanisms: adopting a more or less conventional AR approach to work with agents from relevant government departments who in turn, practiced a PAR approach to encourage much greater participation of the nomads in the quest for "improvements in their situations". Thus, action research teams were formed comprising of local officers of different government departments concerned with nomadic issues. The researcher served as facilitator.

#### **Tasks of the Research Action Team**

- understand the general situation of the nomads in terms of various issues
- explore the nomads' views about their situation and their main concerns, interests and issues
- discover, with the nomads, possibilities for improvement in the provision of government services

Collective reflection on, and explanation of, the social context led to an environment in which all participants were able to look at the situation in the same social context. When the officers had conceptualized their findings, theoretical discussion was introduced to inform their findings and practice.

At this time, some nomads were invited to share their views and perspectives on the various projects with the government officers. This was an attempt to seek the views and perspectives of the nomads on the situation. When their logic was interpreted and contextualized by the facilitator, the participants became more familiar of the nomads' indigenous knowledge and its importance in the process of decision-making for change and development. The nomads were able to see and understand outcomes of various projects while they were in the planning stages.

Regular group discussions among team members were conducted as a means of collective reflection on daily personal observations and the organizational perspectives of each member. The role of the facilitator was to establish an environment for negotiation between participants and at the same time create an opportunity for all to see the situation in a different way, in a broader and longer term framework considering different viewpoints.



Creating and maintaining a learning environment among all members was the most crucial task. Appreciation and respect for the personal, professional and organizational perspectives of others and, more importantly, keeping in mind the nomads and their perspectives in the discussions of the daily observations and activities, were the major elements in the process of learning. The action face of the research included "actions to broaden the perceptions of the government agents" as well as "actions to practice novel participative researching approaches". Taking a wider perspective, rather than a purely organizational one, and focusing on Bonkoh, enable them see the effects of various organizational strategies and their inappropriateness within the social context and nomads' needs.

### Summary of the Regular Meetings and Discussions Between the Nomads and the Government

1. equalizing the context and facilitating interaction for effective communication between team members and nomads



2. facilitating a learning environment in which all participants were informed and could consider other perspectives that were presented



3. exploring the possibilities and facilitating the processes to improve the situation



During each session, the whole process was reviewed from the meta-level to see "what we learned" and "how we learned" (Bawden, 1990). Combining social practice and research (action research), introducing learning from experience (experiential learning), and systems thinking, were very unfamiliar activities to all

participants at the early stages of this research. On many occasions they were very uneasy with the situation and the new way of thinking and viewing situations.

What came as a surprise was discovering the unique possibilities to improve the situation for all the members of Ghareghani and the action research team to improve the situation without any fundamental investment or transfer of technology.

Among the outcomes of this (second) phase of the research were clear agreement within the action research teams of the failure of their conventional approaches to the "problems with the nomads", and the particular transformation of that worldview into one more accurately portrayed as the "problems being faced by the nomads" (including that of the perceived failure of achieving any sense of shared meanings between the nomads and the government agents).

### **Phase 3: Facilitating Organizational Change Within the Government Agencies**

Reflection on the outcomes of the second phase of the research showed that changes in the attitudes and beliefs of practitioners to "see things the other way around" are very crucial. To start and maintain these crucial changes in attitudes of practitioners and specialist toward people and resources needed new strategies for institutional change and action research in organizations for "learning to learn, and learning to help in participatory ways".

The reasons mentioned above, on one hand, and the need for up-scaling the outcomes of the research on the other hand, led to an intensive workshop for officers from the Forest and Range Organization (FRO). Learning process and the learning strategies behind this phase of research could be summarized as follows:

- creating a critical learning environment
- collective reflection on past experience and current problems
- assisting the participants to see their views toward the problematic situation from a meta-level
- introducing systems thinking as a new way of looking at the situation
- supporting participants in creating a new strategic plan for the next action
- reviewing and evaluation of the whole process as a new way of monitoring, planning, researching and learning

The program of the workshop was carefully designed by the facilitators to meet the proposed goals and follow the theoretical position and the learning strategies. The major learning themes of the workshop focused on three different areas:

- fundamentals of experiential learning

- systems thinking
- people's participation in natural resource co-management

The workshop was designed for 13 working days in such a way that the four major learning tasks complemented each other to maintain a continuous process of action and reflection. At the end of each task and, after personal questions and comments of participants, a group discussion was conducted to facilitate group reflection on the content and process of the workshop.

### **The Learning Process was Facilitated Through Four Learning Tasks**

- group discussions and team work
- propositional inputs including lectures and learning packages
- field trips
- personal reflection on the process through preparation of a paper by each participant

The essential metaphor introduced during this workshop, was that of the organization as a learning system as distinct from a regulating system. During the workshop, there was a difference in perception about local people and their role in natural resource destruction. But this has shifted toward recognizing the impact of social issues on ecology.

Due to the tremendous diversity of personal, professional and organizational backgrounds of participants, there were significant clashes about ways of looking and conceptualizing the experience and collected data. What made these clashes fruitful to all participants was the applied methodology which considered this diversity of viewpoints. Considering the same reality from different angles and perspectives helped all participants to move from their strict discipline toward multidisciplinary perspectives to an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing the situation. Evaluations confirmed that most of the participants found the inputs and lectures of invited academics and researchers irrelevant to their current complex and changing issues.

Feedback from the participants confirmed that there had been significant transformations in ways of thinking about the complex relationships between nomads in Iran, the environments in which they live and work, the technologies that they use as pastoralists, the agents of government departments concerned with these aspects of sustainable development, and Iranian society at large.

The outcomes of this phase showed that there will need to be some significant changes in the way we go about our "seeing" and our "doing" if we are to improve on current, apparently intractable complex situations within the organization as a learning system.

### **Conclusion**

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It would have been quite unrealistic, given the limits of these particular projects, to have expected major and permanent changes in the way the complex issues of nomadic pastoralism in Iran are approached by the various stakeholders involved.

Yet, there was evidence provided that the methodologies used in the course of these inquiries have a potential to empower the nomadic pastoralists for sustainable development the integrity of their rangeland environment.

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