

© The United Nations University, 1980
Printed in Japan

ISBN 92-808-0148-1
ISSN 0379-5764

HSDRGPID-34/UNUP-148

**TRADITIONAL RURAL INSTITUTIONS AND
THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT
PLANNING: STUDIES FROM HAMADAN
PROVINCE OF IRAN**

M. Hossein Haeri and M. Taghi Farvar

With the collaboration of J. Eghbalian, M. Rahmati,
and J. Moradi

Centre for Ecodevelopment Studies and
Application (CENESTA)
Box 33-109
Teheran, Iran



This paper by M. Hossein Haeri and M. Taghi Farvar is a revised version of one first presented at the GPID III Meeting, Geneva, 2-8 October 1978. It can be considered as a contribution to the Liberation and Autonomy sub-project of the GPID Project.

Geneva, March 1980

Johan Galtung

It is being circulated in a pre-publication form to elicit comments from readers and generate dialogue on the subject at this stage of the research.

Water has always been the limiting factor in the development of agriculture in Iran. Desert and waste constitute close to one half of the country. Approximately 15 to 20 per cent is forest and pasture, and some 10 to 15 per cent cropland. The remainder could be cultivated if given water. In all areas agriculture is threatened by the capricious climate. Droughts, due to insufficient seasonal rain, often cause partial or total crop failures. Floods, after sudden storms which destroy irrigation channels, high winds, violent hailstorms, and ravages by pests are also detrimental factors which frequently cause heavy losses. These factors, coupled with the shortage of water, create a generally inhospitable condition for agriculture in many areas of the country.

Under the compelling circumstances shaped by an acute shortage of water, farmers and peasants have, from early times, adopted many laborious methods of irrigation, such as constructing elaborate and extensive irrigation channels and underground conduits known as qanats.¹ At the same time, since the sources of water were few, and their discharges too low to allow for simultaneous irrigation of all farms, the farmers had to devise systems for regulating the distribution of water.

These systems gradually evolved into very effective institutions in agricultural areas of the country, which regulated the distribution of water and systematized its utilization. The exact historical origin and the course of evolution of these institutions are not known, yet it is certain that they have been an inherent part of ancient traditions in Iran.²⁻⁴ The existence of these institutions in ancient times can be inferred from circumstantial evidence. A look through Firdowsi's semi-

epic, semi-historical Shah-nameh, written more than 1,000 years ago in a language which is, nevertheless, completely intelligible today, shows quite similar relationships of production between landlords and peasants existing then to what existed until a decade or two ago. Khosrow Khosrovi³ demonstrates that the basic Iranian organizations of land tenure, such as muzari'a, were adopted by the Arab Moslems after their conquest of Persia. (It will be remembered that the Arabs were a largely nomadic people and had scarcely any elaborated structures of land tenure within their own tradition.)

Today these ancient institutions have largely survived in agricultural areas throughout Iran, in spite of the changes wrought by "modernization" and the ill-fated land reform measures of the old regime. Certain, though not substantial, differences can be traced among these institutions in various areas according to local customs and regional particularities. These institutions everywhere have extended their functions beyond systematizing the distribution of water and assume a central role in organizing the entire process of agricultural production in the village. As the main organizational units in rural areas, these institutions also exercise great administrative authority in conjunction with a wide range of affairs in the social life of the village community.

Recent studies indicate that these institutions are extremely successful and efficient in their functions. Further testimony to this could be found by actual observations in rural areas. Despite this, agricultural planners and policy-makers in Iran have insisted on implementing "modern" organizational methods of agricultural production in rural areas. Experience has shown that these "modern" methods, wherever tried in the country, have not only failed to improve agricultural production, but have, on the contrary, worsened it. Even the lesson of the failures of such experiments — frequent as they are — has done little or nothing to weaken these planners' preoccupation with "modern" methods and to incline them toward considering the possibilities of the endogenous systems which have effectively organized the agriculture of the country for centuries.

The word "modern," in the pejorative sense in which we have used it here, does not necessarily refer to the technological aspects of the process of agricultural production. Our contention is not a complete denial of the advantages of mechanized and advanced techniques of agriculture. Our criticism is directed against the alienating character of the organizational, and specifically administrative, aspects of these methods. As we shall see, these organizational elements have, in most rural areas, deactivated the traditional organizational systems, thereby causing the destruction of the social organization of the village and the disintegration of its social fabric.

In the course of the present study we shall explain, in a historical perspective, the nature and structure of one such existing institution which we have studied in the villages of the Khorram-Rud (Green River) Valley of Tuyserkan county in Hamadan. We shall also pursue the development course of "modern" organizational systems in the rural areas of Iran during the period which begins shortly before the Land Reform Act of 1962 and continues until the present. By the aid of more thorough studies of these institutions we shall seek to reach alternative models for the planning of an endogenous style of development through indigenous management and organization. It is our hope that such models will also attract the interest of post-revolutionary agricultural planners in Iran and guide their attention towards sounder and more practical approaches to planning for agricultural development.

The Khorram-Rud Valley is a semi-arid area typical of the Zagros range extending through western Iran. The average altitude of the valley is about 1,800 metres above sea level giving rise to severe winters. Average annual precipitation is about 300 to 350 mm a year, the majority of which takes place in the form of snow during the winter months, thus creating a long dry season which begins early in June and continues through late October. The Green River runs through the valley, maintaining an uneven flow throughout the year. In addition to the river, which is the main source of water in the area, there are also some ganats and springs with low outputs. The discharge of water from ganats has diminished rapidly during the past years due to inadequate maintenance.

The valley is located between 30 and 60 kilometres from the province centre of Hamadan. The only direct road to the area leads through a mountain pass which is blocked in winter. During this time the economy of the area is virtually closed. Most of the settled population are Persian-speaking Lurs, with Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking people in some parts. The main economic activities in the area are irrigated and dry farming, animal husbandry, fruit raising, and handicrafts such as rug-weaving and pottery.

In this area a pilot project on ecodevelopment was launched under the joint sponsorship of the Cluster of Environmental Sciences and Natural Resources of Bu-Ali Sina University and the United Nations Environmental Programme. The Cluster tried to implement an innovative approach involving ecodevelopment in its community-level development programmes, as well as in its research and training programmes. The Cluster was disbanded during the events surrounding the revolution of 1979 by rectors appointed by the central government. The long-run objective of this project is to reach a style of development in the area which is primarily characterized by need-orientation, self-reliance, endogeneity, and environmental compatibility which at the same time allows for maximum participation and control by the local population. But in order to achieve these ends there is a need for sound planning and effective popular management. It was observed from the very outset of the project that, unless there were appropriate management, this endeavour would inevitably lead to a complete failure, especially if the project is to have as its major component the control by and participation of the local population.

The incentive for this study, therefore, stems from the two-fold realization that (a) if the participation and active involvement of the villagers is to become an operative force in the process of development the presence of a certain organizational pattern for the systematization of their participation is indispensable; and (b) any such system must necessarily be congruent with the prevailing local traditional institutions, with a management system that is acceptable to the villagers. Thus, in the extensive socio-economic and cultural studies

that our team conducted in five of the villages in the area, considerable effort was directed towards discovering existing institutions and organizational systems and understanding their structural patterns.

Before the Land Reform Act of 1962, as was true in most rural areas of Iran, the relationship between the peasants and the landlords in the Khorram-Rud area was based on crop-sharing terms (mozare-eh or muzarila, which are the Persian and Arabic pronunciations, respectively).⁴ In rare cases some peasants had a tenancy agreement. In the former case, payment to the landlord was mainly in kind; in the latter, usually in cash or kind, or both. The crop-sharing terms usually varied from one area to another and were regulated to a large extent by the landlord according to local customs and conditions. Normally, in fixing the shares of each party, the five elements of land, water, seed, draught animals, and labour were taken into consideration. The shares of each party were determined by the number of the elements that each supplied. The share of the peasant thus varied between one-fifth and four-fifths in different areas. In areas where access to water was more difficult, more weight was given to this element. In the Khorram-Rud area, the share of the peasant was generally three-fifths in irrigated farming and four-fifths or five-sevenths in dry farming.

The most common traditional system for the distribution of land among peasants was the division of the village land into ploughlands. The ploughlands were measured in terms of jofts meaning "pairs" (of oxen). The term joft (in some areas zouj or khish) refers to the amount of land that a yoke of oxen can cultivate during the year. The size of the ploughlands into which the village land was divided was not strictly quantitative but also qualitative, and was based on practical considerations. It would therefore follow that the actual size of a joft as a territorial unit of agricultural production would vary from one area to another depending on physical factors such as the quality of the soil. Usually, a joft of irrigated land amounted to 4-6 hectares.

As in most other landlord-dominated areas of Iran, in the villages of

the Khorram-Rud area it was customary for the ploughlands to be re-distributed periodically by the landlord or by lot. The apparent rationale for this periodic redistribution was to give all peasants an equal opportunity to cultivate various ploughlands. Behind this seemingly fair practice, however, lay the landlord's intention to prevent peasants from acquiring a vested interest and "roots" in their holdings. During this period, although the peasants had no ownership rights to the land they cultivated, nevertheless their right to cultivation was recognized by the landlord. This right, known as the peasant's "customary allotment" (næsæq), was preserved within the peasant's family. Thus, while the peasant's right to cultivate a specific amount of land remained preserved, the location of his holdings would vary periodically.

After each peasant's share of ploughlands was determined, the ploughlands were grouped together in varying numbers and worked together. The reason for the grouping of ploughlands was primarily to systematize the distribution of water. Each "group" of ploughlands in effect constitutes a "unit of agricultural organization" in the rural areas and they are called by various names in different rural areas of Iran.⁵ In the Khorram-Rud area they are called boluks.⁶ The irrigation of ploughlands and the organization of agriculture in the villages of the Khorram-Rud area were — and still are — generally based on this system. The term boluk usually refers to that number of jofts (grouped together and worked co-operatively) which, using the available sources of water in a village, can be irrigated within a 24-hour period. Within each boluk one farmer is chosen as the boluk-head.

The founders of this system were probably the old village farmers who initiated this institution for organizing an equitable system for irrigation and agricultural production. Since this system reduced the amount of work required of each farmer on the one hand, and organized the process of irrigation without discrimination on the other hand, it is logical that its practice remained popular among peasants throughout ancient and modern times.

After the Land Reform Law was enacted in 1962, the peasants divided the land among themselves according to the traditional amounts of their næsæqs. However, since not all pieces of land were equally fertile the peasants first divided the total cultivable land of each village into the categories of rich land and poor land. Then each peasant received part of his share (næsæq) from the rich lands, and the other part from the poor lands. The location of a peasant's land within each category, however, was decided by lot. If the village had fruit orchards or other types of land, the same process was used, so that a peasant's cultivated land nowadays consists typically of several difficult pieces of quite heterogeneous land.

The drawing of lots took place in the villages in a variety of instances. Today, although the drawing of lots is no longer employed for distribution of land, it remains a fundamental technique for decision-making in the villages. The most common application of this technique today is for determining turns for irrigation among the boluks and also the ploughlands within each boluk.

The sources of water in the villages are few and their discharges usually insufficient for the simultaneous irrigation of all boluks; therefore, they must take turns in using the water. Thus, only one boluk can use the water at a time. The decision as to how the turns should be arranged among the boluks is determined by drawing lots. As we have already mentioned, each boluk can usually use the water for a period of 24 hours, or multiples thereof. The water is then distributed within the boluks and among the farms in proportion to the size of the specific farms, and the turns for using the water are again decided by lot.

Procedures used for drawing lots differ from one village to another; however, one commonly employed procedure is the simple method of drawing names out of a hat, which is done by an impartial person (usually a child).⁷ Another method is by adding the number of fingers each boluk chairman holds forth and going around from a fixed person till the given number is exhausted.

Each boluk is usually named after the person who is chosen by the farmers of the boluk as the boluk-head. Before the Land Reform Act of 1962, the landlord could often exert influence in the selection of the head of each boluk. Today, however, they are selected from among and by the peasants through informal processes. We use the term "selection" here instead of "election" because the process through which the boluk-head is chosen is essentially an informal one and does not entail conventional electoral procedures. There is, nonetheless, a certain set of criteria that underlie the choice for a boluk-head. Our experience in the villages of the Khorram-Rud area shows that the following criteria are generally used in choosing the boluk-head: (a) trustworthiness, (b) experience in farming and agriculture, (c) managerial competence, and, above all, (d) having the unanimous support and approval of all members of the boluk. Possession of larger amounts of land and old age are sometimes, but not always, helpful in getting the job.

Sometimes when, as a result of old age, a boluk-head is no longer capable of performing the duties with which he is entrusted his oldest son is appointed by the members of the boluk as his father's successor. Despite the fact that this procedure does not follow the same formal electoral patterns as in western institutions, it is organized in a manner that is acceptable to all members. Besides, the number of members in a boluk is never so large as for the choosing of the boluk-head to require a formal procedure such as the written ballot.

Although the primary function of the boluk system is to organize and supervise the agricultural affairs in the village, nevertheless the influence of boluk-heads usually extends far beyond this and into other aspects of village life. This is mainly due to the fact that the criteria according to which the boluk-heads are chosen are not strictly based on the agricultural capabilities of the individual, but rather are based on his general competence and respectability of character. Thus the "council of the boluk-heads," which consists of all heads of different boluks in the village, constitutes an influential body of decision-makers which is, more often than not, the most commonly

respected indigenous authority in various affairs of the village.

Since early times in the history of centralized ownership of land in Iran, the entirety of the agricultural land in a village has been customarily divided into six parts. Each of these parts is called a donq or danq which is in turn divided into 96 shæ'irs where each shæ'ir constitutes 1/576th part of the total land. Thus, in some villages where the organization of agricultural production is divided into six units, the two terms boluk and donq are used interchangeably. In these villages we find that the organizational unit of production (boluk) overlaps the organizational unit of ownership (donq). In relation to the origin of danq, our hypothesis is that it has its foundation in the beginning of centralized ownership of land in Iran, which dates back at least 1,500 years.

The boluk system, however, we can assume to have existed prior to the establishment of the danq and the centralized ownership system at least in some form; for the need for some kind or another of agricultural organization necessarily required such regulatory systems in the villages. Of course, the exact historical and social conditions in which the boluk system developed is not yet clear. What is clear is that it is an endogenous system and an intrinsically egalitarian traditional rural phenomenon.

There are also other forms of traditional organizational and co-operative systems which regulate various kinds of activities in the villages of this area, such as the processing of dairy products and the upkeep of water canals. Yet none of these systems and institutions is as ubiquitously effective and deep-rooted as the boluk.

Similar organizational systems in many rural areas in Iran have maintained their status as powerful and effective economic and social institutions. A marked diminution of power and efficacy of these institutions can, however, be observed in many areas. Such decline and deterioration is notably more apparent in areas near large cities. A major contributory factor has been the expansion of modern agricultural

co-operative organizations. The modern co-operative organizations have by no means been able to substitute for the traditional institutions in terms of performing the same social as well as agricultural functions. The social functions are, of course, not within the scope of the formal capacity of these institutions; nor is it likely that under their present administrative structure an attempt on their part to perform such functions would be welcomed by the villagers.

The expansion of modern agricultural organizations in the rural areas of Iran began shortly before the Land Reform Act of 1962 with the establishment of rural co-operative societies. In theory what inspired the architects of the Iranian land reform to set up these co-operative societies in the rural areas were two arguments set forth against the land reform by its critics at the time of its inception that: (1) once the landlord was eliminated, the lack of management and sufficient credit would cause a breakdown in the process of agricultural production; and (2) without the landlord, the peasants would be unable to maintain the irrigation systems.⁸ As far as the first argument is concerned, it is true that some landlords, though by no means all, granted small amounts of advances to the peasants and some seeds (which were consequently deducted from the harvest). This was usually done through the institution of tæqaví, i.e., "strengthening (the peasants' productive capacity)," usually by an interest-free loan in kind or sometimes in cash to tide the peasants through to harvest time. Yet the managerial role of the landlord was by no means indispensable. Unlike the European landed aristocracy who generally lived in their mansions in the countryside, the Iranian landlord in most cases was an absentee and his affairs in the villages were normally managed by his representative, who was sometimes the village headman.

The second argument was also based on the false assumption that the landlords played a central managerial role in the maintenance of the irrigation systems. While it is true that in many areas the landlord provided the initial funds for the construction of qanats and irrigation systems, the entire process of keeping up irrigational

systems was organized and supervised by local traditional organizations such as the ones we have already mentioned.

The setting up of these rural co-operative societies was sponsored and supervised jointly by the Plan Organization and the Agricultural Credit and Rural Development Bank. As we have already seen, these societies were set up to take the place of the landlord in villages after the land reform. They were intended to become multi-purpose organizations and assume a central place in the conduct of village affairs in general. In its preliminary stages the project proceeded with considerable success and the officials of the societies, in villages where they were set up, were able to win the approval and trust of the villagers. This success, however, was somewhat short-lived and none of the aims and objectives originally intended by these societies was realized.

One of the reasons for this preliminary success was that these societies started out as independent organizations and their officials were not regarded by the peasants as government officials. However, gradually until 1963 and then rapidly after the establishment of the Central Organization for Rural Co-operation in 1963, these co-operative societies were transformed into fully governmental organizations. This was indeed a fatal blow to the popularity of the rural co-operative societies among peasants.

Another reason for the decline in popularity and effectiveness of rural co-operative societies is to be found in their managerial aspects. Under the Land Reform Law of 9 January 1962, membership of a co-operative society was a condition for receiving land. Therefore, the government began setting up societies in as many villages as it could. The direct consequence of this hasty operation was a marked decline in the quality of the management of these societies due to the lack of adequately trained personnel. Ineffective, often corrupt management and the incongruity of the managerial system of these societies with the existing traditional institutions in the villages, together with the discouraging condition of mandatory membership, caused the villagers to refrain from active participation in the societies. A revealing

study by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development documents this failure.⁹

With the failure of the rural co-operative societies another attempt was made in 1968 to complement the economic aspects of the land reform. This was the establishment of "agricultural corporations." The basis for the establishment of the agricultural corporations, unlike that of the rural co-operative societies, was purely economic. The scope of the activities of these corporations usually extends to a number of villages. In areas where these corporations are set up, the rights of the villagers over their holdings are permanently turned over to the corporation. The stocks are distributed among the villagers according to the size of their holdings, and the profits of the corporation are annually divided among the stockholders.

The managers of the agricultural corporations are usually trained agricultural specialists and are appointed by the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs. The personnel, which usually includes two agricultural specialists and a number of agricultural extension workers, are all paid by the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs.

At the present the agricultural corporations are in a trial stage. By 1972 only 46 corporations had been set up, and the number has not increased. These corporations have indeed succeeded in increasing the level of production within their domains. The main reason for this increase has been the extensive investment made by the Ministry of Co-operation and Rural Affairs in the form of agricultural specialists and inputs, such as machinery. Besides this minor increase in the level of production, the agricultural corporations have done little or nothing to improve the general quality of life in the villages. In the Darjazin area near Hamadan, where an agricultural corporation was established, many members are unhappy about the corporation and regret having joined. Some find the corporation's highly sophisticated methods and advanced procedures too alienating to allow for their participation. Others complain that they cannot have a meaningful working relationship with the management. "He is just like other

government officials," says one villager of the manager. Another member explains: "This isn't like having your own land."

We have already explained that the traditional systems of agricultural organization perform a multitude of social functions. The major adverse effect that "modern" methods of agricultural organization, especially the agricultural corporations and the co-operatives, have had on village life has been the destruction of the traditional systems without the provision of effective substitutes, thereby causing a breakdown in the social and economic structure of the village community. In the Khorram-Rud area, no agricultural corporations have been set up as yet. There are some co-operative societies in several villages of the area, but the scope of their activities is too narrow to have any influence on the traditional institutions in the villages. Traditional institutions in the area, chief among them the boluk, still constitute the main form of economic and social organization in the area. The lesson of the failure of "modern" agricultural organizations in other areas has led us to consider the far-reaching implications that traditional institutions can have for the planning of endogenous development projects. Similar attempts are also being made in other areas of Iran, such as Fars and Kerman, to implement large-scale agricultural co-operatives within the framework of local endogenous institutions.¹⁰ In an area such as the Khorram-Rud Valley, where traditional organizational systems still effectively dominate the conduct of every individual village, any development scheme must necessarily be compatible with, and take account of, the structural framework of the existing endogenous institutions. Furthermore, the absence of conformity between development programmes and the structural patterns of local traditional institutions could have negative impact on not only the village community, but also the progress of the development project itself, and agricultural production in general.

In future research articles, we shall investigate further the means by which the boluk system and its close equivalents can be used to construct a more endogenous model for the future organization of the peasants in Iran.¹¹

NOTES

1. Qanats are underground conduits which carry water from the piedmonts to settled areas and farms. These conduits begin in water-bearing layers and, by using less slope than that of the soil surface, bring water to the surface. The construction of qanats is a very complicated operation demanding highly skilled labour. Qanats have played a significant role in both past and present Iranian civilization. See further H.E. Wulff, The Traditional Crafts of Persia (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967), pp. 248 ff; A.K.S. Lambton, Landlord and Peasant in Persia (O.U.P., London, 1953), pp. 217 ff.; M.T. Farvar, Qanats Can Make Iran's Agriculture Self-reliant Again (manuscript prepared for the UN University's HSD STT Project, Teheran, CENESTA, 1979).
2. G. Ensafpoor, Tarix-e Zendegi-e Eghtesadi-e Rustaiian [The History of Economic Life of Iranian Villagers and Social Classes] (Sherkat Sahami Enteshar, Teheran, 1974), pp. 195-200 (in Persian).
3. Khosrow Khosrovi, Systems of Land Tenure in Iran from Ancient Times until the Saljuqi Dynasty (Teheran, School of Social Sciences, 1975; in Persian).
4. For a detailed discussion of the crop-sharing terms in various rural areas in Iran see Landlord and Peasant in Persia (op. cit.), ch. 16. Lambton has described this relationship as a "crop-sharing 'agreement'"; however, since the terms for the sharing of the crop were decided unilaterally by the landlord himself, the use of the term "agreement" here is somewhat misleading.
5. Names such as boneh, harasseh, sahra, etc. are given to similar organizational units in different areas of Iran. See J. Safi-Nejad, Boneh (Toos Publications, Teheran, 1974), p. 10.
6. The term boluk may have been adopted from Turkish and be a variation of the Turkish word bolyk meaning "portion" or "segment," which has its root in the word bolmax or bolmax.
7. J. Eghbalian, Decision-making Institutions in Segari Village, Khorram-Rud Valley, Hamadan (unpublished manuscript, Bu-Ali Sina University, Hamadan, Iran, 1978).
8. See also A.K.S. Lambton, The Persian Land Reform (Oxford University Press, London, 1969), pp. 274 and 300.
9. Four co-operatives that were thought to have been doing well were selected for study: Baharestan, Saman-abad, Shah-ahad, and Sharif-

ahad. All were evaluated as performing very poorly, even having negative impacts. See Inayatollah, Co-operatives and Development in Asia: A Study of Co-operatives in Fourteen Rural Communities of Iran, Pakistan and Ceylon (Geneva, UN Research Institute for Social Development, 1972).

10. T. Ajami, Shesh-dangi (Toos Publications, Teheran, 1975), p. 177.
11. One such attempt is now available in another CENESTA article: M. Hossein Haeri, "Economic Development and the Village in Iran: Prospects for an Alternative Approach" (CENESTA, Teheran, 1979, also published as a UN University GPID Research Paper, 1980). This line of research is one of the main themes in CENESTA's research programme on Alternative Development Strategies for Post-Revolutionary Iran.