



The social experience of drought in rural Iran

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ABSTRACT

Using qualitative social research methods at the farm family level, this paper considers the social impacts of drought on two purposefully-selected villages in Fars Province, Iran. It examines the experience of drought on different types of farm families, specifically the less vulnerable, the resource poor, and the very resource poor. Our results show that all three groups experienced economic impacts of drought, but more importantly they all suffered major social impacts as well. The less-vulnerable families sought diversified sources of income in order to cope with drought. The vulnerable families (resource poor and very resource poor) were more affected by social and emotional impacts than less-vulnerable families. The economic and social impacts that were experienced included: reduced household income; shortage of alternative income sources; increased workload; conflict of water access and water use; food insecurity, shortages and associated malnutrition; health impacts and reduced access to health services; reduced access to education; inequitable drought relief and associated stress and conflict; rural to urban migration; impoverishment and reduced quality of life; psychological and emotional impacts including depression, frustration and alienation; changed family plans such as delaying marriage; and family and community disharmony and disintegration. Recommendations and implications for drought management policy are offered to reduce the negative social impacts of drought.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, Iran has experienced its most prolonged, extensive and severe drought in over 30 years. This drought of 2003–2011 (at least, as it is still ongoing) has affected many farm families and rural communities across most of the central, eastern and southern parts of Iran. Although Iran has a history of drought, critical features of the current drought are not only its widespread nature and severity, but the fact that the impacts of the current drought have been exacerbated by its proximity to the previous drought (1998–2001). Consequently, farm families lacked the opportunity to recover and have therefore been severely affected by the current drought. From their perspective, the two droughts are in effect one very long drought, and will be treated as such in this paper.

There is no doubt that drought has a major impact on farm families around the world, however the focus of assessment has typically been on economic impacts. Only a small amount of research (much of it from Australia) has considered the social impacts of drought (e.g. Stehlik et al., 2000; Alston and Kent, 2008; Easdale and Rosso, 2010; Alston, 2011; Drought Policy Review

Expert Social Panel, 2008). While it is noted that disaster impact ratios (the amount of damage compared to available resources) (Lindell and Prater, 2003) increase as the unit of analysis moves from the national to the regional, community and household levels (CDRSS, 2006), drought impact studies have mainly focused at national and regional levels with less emphasis on farm level analysis. As a result, there is a lack of information at the farm family level. A lack of recognition of the far reaching impacts of drought on farm families has been an impediment to obtaining adequate knowledge about how to recover more efficiently and about what mitigation strategies might be appropriate. Without this information, it is difficult to convince policy and other decision makers of the need for additional investments in drought monitoring, prediction, mitigation, and preparedness (Wilhite et al., 2007). Although it is generally accepted that drought causes social impacts, there is a lack of understanding about the actual experiences of farm families and how they cope. This study, therefore, focuses on the social experience of drought among Iranian farm households.

This paper first explains the social impacts of drought, and then proceeds by outlining the drought impacts in Iran. These initial sections provide an understanding of drought as a complex event which makes arid and semi-arid regions of the world like Iran vulnerable. The focus then shifts to the design of the study and the investigation of drought impacts on farm families in Fars Province, followed by an analysis of the results and concluding remarks.

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