

OBSTACLES FACING AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION WORKERS TO ENHANCE THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE LOCAL AGRICULTURAL PRODUCT OF VEGETABLES IN BAGHDAD PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to identify the obstacles facing agricultural extension workers to enhance the competitiveness of the local agricultural product of vegetables in Baghdad province. The research community included all workers in the Department of Agricultural Extension and Agricultural Training, and the Directorate of Agriculture of Baghdad\ Karkh and their number (114) workers. To achieve the research aims, a questionnaire was prepared consisting of (34) items as obstacles distributed over three areas (obstacles related to the agricultural extension aspect, obstacles related to the local agricultural product, and obstacles related to vegetable farmers). To measure these obstacles, a four-graded scale was used, consisting of four levels according to the degree of importance of the handicap to the respondent (a major handicap, a moderate handicap, a slight handicap, and an unimportant handicap), and weights were assigned to them (4, 3, 2, 1), respectively. Data was collected in October and November 2023, and the data was analyzed using the statistical program (SPSS). The results of the research showed that the obstacles suffered by the respondents were of high importance, as they obtained weighted means that ranged from (3.256 - 3.719) and these scores are much higher than the hypothetical mean of (2.5) degrees, and with a percentage weight that ranged from (81.35 - 92.97%). This means that agricultural extension workers suffer from many obstacles that hinder them from performing their work properly.

Key words: Agricultural extension services, protecting local products, sustainable agricultural development, vegetable crops

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INTRODUCTION

In Iraq, a number of challenges have emerged which confronts the ability of the agricultural product of vegetables to become competitive with similar agricultural products in the region, which are often imported and packaged according to the desires of the consumer (Pavlenko & Kudryashova, 2015; AboAl-Enein, 2019; Al-Zubaidi, 2021), especially since Iraq today has become an open arena for marketing most of the agricultural products imported from neighboring countries and others (Al-Jubouri, 2012; Al-Taiy et al. 2021; Al-Tulaibawi, 2024), while showing that countries that import more than 25% of their similar agricultural needs lose Its production

independence becomes incapable of competition (Raidimi, 2019; Afful, 2020), which requires the need to move towards raising the competitiveness of local basic agricultural crops, which enter the arena of competition with the rest of the agricultural products supplied to the markets of other countries (Al-Okabi, 2019; Al-Shammari, 2019), agricultural development is not achieved by the quantity of production only, but rather by the ability to spend and marketing this production at prices that bring profits to farmers that enable it to cover production costs and with a quality that falls within international standards (Akrami, 2014; Ali & Al-Aqabi, 2018; Ocran & Barriers,

2024). Accordingly, agricultural extension services have a decisive role in enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops in Iraq, which aims to provide farmers with knowledge, skills and resources necessary to improve their agricultural practices, increase productivity and achieve sustainable development (Kryuchkova et al., 2020; Rawaa & Al-Taie, 2021; Ahmed & ALmosabbeh, 2024). Many agricultural extension workers view marketing problems as being outside the scope of agricultural extension tasks, and even if they were able to identify the marketing problems and requirements for achieving competitiveness that vegetable farmers face, the lack of experience in the field of marketing and the conditions for achieving marketing efficiency and competitiveness (Anderson & Feder, 2021; Sahab & Al-Ajuela, 2022), while there is little interest in marketing and developing a market-oriented marketing culture that aims to achieving the competitiveness of local agricultural products based on scientific foundations among vegetable farmers (Comelia, 2018; Asmaa & Lafta, 2023). Here the importance of redirecting agricultural extension services from a limited focus on increasing production is highlighted to improve farm management, access to markets, and agricultural business (Al-Daini, 2014; 29. Armsh & Ali, 2023). Farmers need agricultural extension to provide them with information about problems related to farm management and marketing, and given the importance of the role of agricultural extension workers in the field of achieving the competitiveness of agricultural products. To successfully produce local vegetables, it requires developing their technical capabilities in the field of increasing competitiveness (Al-Taei et al., 2020; FAO, 2020; Al-Kubaisy & Lafta, 2021). In order to achieve this, it first requires identifying the obstacles facing agricultural extension workers in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of the local product of vegetables, and then starting to develop their technical capabilities in this field, considering that the extension service provider represents the basic foundation for the success of extension work in the extension organization (Al-Hafiz, 2021; Lafta & Al-

Khafaji, 2022; Makarem et al., 2023) and based on the above, the research came to answer the following research question: What are the obstacles facing agricultural extension workers to enhance the competitiveness of the local agricultural product of vegetables in Baghdad province? Research aims: The research aims to identify the obstacles facing agricultural extension workers to enhance the competitiveness of the local agricultural product of vegetables in Baghdad province.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research area and community: Baghdad province was chosen as an area to conduct the research because of its proximity to the source of government decisions related to the agricultural sector, as well as the presence of large numbers of workers in the field of providing extension services to farmers. The research community included all agricultural extension workers in Baghdad Province, numbering 114 extension agent for the year 2023, distributed among the Agricultural Extension and Training Department, the Baghdad Al-Karkh Agriculture Department, and its affiliated agricultural divisions, and all members of the community were taken as a sample for the research.

Research tools: The questionnaire has been adopted as a tool for collection of data, as this method is considered a means approved in scientific research to collect data and use them to obtain information (Al-Jadiri, 2006; Al-Taay et al., 2021). To achieve aim of the research, (34) paragraph were identified, distributed into three areas: obstacles related to the extension aspect, with (14) paragraph, obstacles related to vegetable farmers (11), and Obstacles related to the local agricultural product (9) paragraphs, through reviewing scientific sources, studies and research. related to the subject, as well as the opinions of specialists on the subject from the University of Baghdad. To measure these obstacles, a four-graded scale was used, consisting of four levels according to the degree of importance (a major obstacle, a moderate obstacle, a small obstacle, and an unimportant obstacle), and weights were assigned to them (1, 2, 3, 4), respectively. The obstacles were arranged in descending order according to the degree of

approval and based on the weighted average for each obstacle. 114 Questionnaires were distributed on the respondents included in the research, data was collected in the months of October and November of the year 2023. After collecting the data, it was unloaded, tabulated and analyze it using statistical software (SPSS), as well as manual data analysis, and statistical methods (weight percentage and weighted mean) were used to analyze the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In light of the answers of the researchers who work in agricultural extension regarding the obstacles they face to enhance the competitiveness of the local agricultural product of vegetables in Baghdad Province, the results were as follows:

1. Obstacles related to the extension aspect:

The research results showed that there is agreement among all respondents that there are (14) realistic obstacles related to the extension aspect that agricultural extension workers face when providing extension service to enhance the competitiveness of the local product of vegetables, where their answers ranged within the weighted mean of (3.254 - 3.666) with a percentage weight ranging from (81.35-91.65%), with a total Weighted mean of (3.468) degrees and a percentage weight of (86.7%) according to the degree Imaginary, and this weighted mean is higher than the hypothesized mean of the scale, which is (2.5) degrees (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Obstacles of the extension are arranged in descending order according to the weighted average of their importance to agricultural extension workers.

Sort by Questionnaire	Paragraphs	Weighted mean	Percentage weight	Sort by importance
4	The extension organization's lack of supplies and tools necessary to present and implement programs and activities in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.666	91.65	1
3	Lack of training programs to develop the performance of extension service providers in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.596	89.9	2
1	Extension service providers lack the skills of persuasion and effective communication with vegetable growers to enhance the competitiveness of the local product	3.578	89.45	3
14	Weak information and knowledge of extension service providers required to be delivered to farmers to enhance the competitiveness of local agricultural products in the markets	3.508	87.7	4
8	Lack of publications and guidance bulletins provided to vegetable growers in the field of enhancing the ability of vegetable crops	3.5	87.5	5
9	Weak coordination between the Agricultural Extension and Training Department and the agricultural extension departments in the agricultural directorates in providing extension service to promote locally produced vegetable crops.	3.491	87.27	6
13	Lack of application of the results of market-focused agricultural extension research to understand consumer needs for vegetable crop products	3.482	87.05	7
10	Lack of training and education opportunities outside the country for extension service providers to increase their knowledge and experience in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops.	3.464	86.6	8
2	Weak skills and knowledge of extension service providers in determining appropriate agricultural practices to enhance the competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.447	86.17	9.5
6	Weak ability of extension service providers to prepare and plan extension programs and activities to enhance the competitiveness of vegetable crop products	3.447	86.17	9.5
5	Weak activation of the role of marketing guidance for vegetable growers through effective means of communication such as television advertisements, social media, and agricultural exhibitions	3.394	84.85	11
11	Lack of incentives provided to extension service providers working in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.377	84.42	12
5	Lack of specialists in agricultural marketing extension in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crop products	3.350	83.75	13
7	Lack of extension radio and television programs directed to farmers to enhance the competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.254	81.35	14
Total average weighted means =3.468				

From (Table 1), the results show that the obstacle (the extension organization's lack of supplies and tools necessary to present and implement programs and activities in the field of enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops) came in first place in terms of importance according to the point of view of the respondents, with a percentage weight of 91.65 and a weighted mean of 3.666 degree, and this may be due to the extension institution's lack of interest in its major role in improving the competitiveness of the local vegetable product and thus the necessity of providing the requirements to persuade farmers to follow the instructions for achieving good product specifications. While the obstacle (lack of extension radio and television programs directed to farmers to enhance the competitiveness of vegetable crops) came last in terms of importance to the respondents, with a percentage weight of 81.35 and a weighted mean of 3.254 degrees. The reason may be due to the lack of interest of the extension institution great role in raising awareness

providing farmers with the most important standard specifications for the local vegetable product to make it capable of competing with imported agricultural products.

2. Obstacles related to vegetable farmers:

The results of the research showed that there was agreement among all respondents that there were 11 realistic obstacles related to vegetable farmers that agricultural extension workers face when providing extension service to enhance the competitiveness of the local product of vegetables, where their answers ranged within the weighted mean of 3.385 - 3.684 with a percentage weight ranging from 84.62 - 92.1%, with a total weighted mean of 3.528 degrees and a percentage weight of 88.2% according to the degree of importance this weighted mean is higher than the hypothesized mean of the scale, which is 2.5 degrees. As in (Table2).

Table 2. Obstacles of vegetable farmers are arranged in descending order according to the weighted average of their importance to agricultural extension workers.

Sort by Questionnaire	Paragraphs	Weighted mean	Percentage weight	Sort by importance
11	Vegetable farmers' lack of interest in consumer requirements and focusing only on the quantity without the quality and price of the local agricultural product of vegetables	3.684	92.10	1
8	Vegetable farmers suffer from increased production input costs compared to outputs	3.578	89.45	2
10	Weak investment by vegetable farmers due to consumer desire and preference for local agricultural produce of vegetables at the expense of imported ones	3.570	89.25	3
3	Lack of interest by vegetable farmers in post-harvesting processes (grading, sorting, packing,...) to enhance competitiveness	3.561	89.02	4
9	Lack of knowledge of vegetable farmers about the latest agricultural technologies in the field of vegetable cultivation and sustainable agricultural practices	3.543	88.57	5
4	Weak ability of vegetable farmers to apply modern practices to enhance qualityLocal vegetable products	3.526	88.15	6
5	Vegetable farmers lack knowledge and information regarding quality standards for vegetable productsstandard	3.517	87.92	7.5
6	Lack of vegetable farmers' use of production requirements (improved seeds, organic fertilizers, modern irrigation systems, greenhouses) to improve production quantity and quality.	3.517	87.92	7.5
2	Poor knowledge of vegetable farmers about the concept of competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.473	86.82	9
7	Vegetable farmers suffer from a lack of sources of obtaining up-to-date information relating to enhancing the competitiveness of vegetable crops	3.464	86.6	10
1	Weak interest of vegetable growers in how to serve vegetable crops through regular irrigation, correct fertilization, and pest and disease control	3.385	84.62	11
Total average weighted means =3.528				

From (Table 2), the results show that the obstacle (vegetable farmers' lack of interest in consumer requirements and focusing only on the quantity without the quality and price of the local agricultural product of vegetables) came in first place in terms of importance according to the respondents' point of view, with a percentage weight of 92.10 and a weighted mean of 3.684 degrees. This may be due to farmers' lack of awareness of the importance of taking consumers' desires into consideration when producing and marketing vegetable crops. While the obstacle (weak interest of vegetable growers in how to serve vegetable crops through regular irrigation, correct fertilization, and pest and disease control) came last in terms of importance to the respondents, with a percentage weight of 84.62 and a weighted mean of 3.385 degrees, and the reason may be due to the lack

knowledge and information farmers with scientific recommendations for serving vegetable crops.

3. Obstacles related to the local agricultural product: The results of the research showed that there was agreement among all respondents that there were 9 realistic obstacles related to the local agricultural product that agricultural extension workers face when providing extension service to enhance the competitiveness of the local product of vegetables, as their answers ranged within the weighted mean of 3.359 - 3.719 and a percentage weight ranging from 83.97 - 92.97%, with a total weighted mean of 3.559 degrees and a percentage weight of 88.975%. The reason for the degree of importance: This weighted mean is higher than the hypothesized mean of the scale, which is 2.5 degrees. As in (Table 3).

Table 3. Obstacles of the local agricultural product are arranged in descending order according to the weighted average of their importance to agricultural extension workers.

Sort by Questionnaire	Paragraphs	Weighted mean	Percentage weight	Sort by importance
8	The decline in the quality of local vegetable products in terms of quantity and size of fruits as a result of environmental and climate changes and water scarcity	3.719	92.97	1
4	Poor packaging of local agricultural produce of vegetables	3.666	91.65	2
9	Difficulty loading and transporting local vegetable products from one place to another due to their varying maturity	3.605	90.12	3
6	Delay in the marketing process of local vegetable products, which negatively affects their quality	3.596	89.9	4
2	The presence of harmful effects of agricultural pests such as insects and diseases on local vegetable products	3.570	89.25	5
3	Damage resulting from poor storage of local vegetable products	3.552	88.8	6
5	Poor application of post-harvest processes for local vegetable products and their arrangement according to size, color and shape	3.543	88.57	7
7	High costs of purchasing local vegetable products compared to imported ones	3.429	85.72	8
1	The poor quality of the local vegetable product in terms of cleanliness and the abundance of impurities	3.359	83.97	9
Total average weighted means =3.559				

From (Table 3), the results show that the obstacle (the decline in the quality of local vegetable products in terms of quantity and size of fruits as a result of environmental and climate changes and water scarcity) came in first place in terms of importance according to the point of view of the respondents, with a percentage weight of 92.97 and a weighted mean of 3.719 degree. This may be due to farmers' lack of knowledge about how to

produce crops with good specifications and quality by reducing the effects of climate change on agricultural products. While the obstacle (the poor quality of the local vegetable product in terms of cleanliness and the abundance of impurities) came last in terms of importance to the respondents, with a percentage weight of 83.97 and a weighted mean of 3.359 degrees. The reason may be due to farmers' lack of awareness of the

importance of cleaning vegetable crops from impurities and dust to gain consumer satisfaction.

To demonstrate the importance of obstacles to agricultural extension workers in general: The results showed that the weighted means for the areas of obstacles according to their degree of importance to the respondents ranged from 3.468 - 3.559 degrees and with a weight that ranged from 86.7 - 88.975%, with an average weighted means of 3.518 degrees and a percentage weight of 87.95%, which is

Table 4. Fields of obstacles are arranged in descending order according to the weighted average of their importance to agricultural extension workers.

Sort by Questionnaire	Fields of obstacles	Weighted mean	Percentage weight	Sort by importance
2	Obstacles related to the local agricultural product	3.559	88.975	1
3	Obstacles related to vegetable growers	3.528	88.2	2
1	Obstacles related to the extension aspect	3.468	86.7	3
	Total average weighted means	3.518	87.95	

From (Table 4), the results show that the obstacles related to the agricultural product ranked first according to the degree of their importance to the respondents, with a weighted average of 3.559 degrees and a percentage weight of 88.975%. The reason for this may be due to the poor quality of the local product in terms of size, color, taste, shape, packaging, etc., compared to the product. Imported vegetables. Accordingly, it is important that the local product has standard specifications and standards that make it able to compete with imported products and thus capture the desire of the consumer. While the obstacles related to the extension aspect came in last place according to their degree of importance to the respondents, with a weighted average score of 3.468 and a percentage weight of 86.7%. This may be attributed to the agricultural extension workers' conviction that they have good experience in their field of agricultural extension work, which gives them confidence in their abilities. To carry out their agricultural extension duties and tasks to the fullest extent.

higher than the hypothetical mean score of the scale of 2.5 degrees. This confirms the presence of various obstacles suffered by agricultural extension workers that prevent them from providing extension services to farmers to enhance the competitiveness of the local vegetable product. This gives an indication that the studied obstacles These are really realistic and very important obstacles that require attention and treatment by the concerned authorities. As in (Table 4).

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that agricultural extension workers face several obstacles that limit their ability to enhance the competitiveness of locally produced vegetable crops in Baghdad Province. Obstacles related to the local agricultural product ranked first in importance, followed by obstacles related to vegetable farmers and then those related to the extension aspect. These findings highlight the need to improve product quality, increase farmers' awareness and adoption of modern practices, and strengthen the resources and capacities of agricultural extension services.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR/S DECLARATION

We confirm that all tables in this manuscript are original.

Author/s signature on Ethical Approval Statement.

Ethical Clearance and Animal welfare : **The study was conducted according to ethical research standards, and participation of agricultural extension workers was voluntary.**

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Both researchers collaborated on conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing, and review.

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المعوقات التي تواجه المرشدين الزراعيين لتعزيز القدرة التنافسية للمنتج الزراعي المحلي من الخضر في بغداد

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المستخلص

يهدف البحث الى التعرف على المعوقات التي تواجه المرشدين الزراعيين لتعزيز القدرة التنافسية للمنتج الزراعي المحلي من الخضر في محافظة بغداد. شمل مجتمع البحث جميع العاملين في دائرة الإرشاد الزراعي والتدريب الزراعي ومديرية زراعة بغداد/الكرخ وعددهم (114) عاملاً. ولتحقيق اهداف البحث اُعدت استبانة مكونة من (34) فقرة كمعوقات موزعة على ثلاث مجالات (معوقات متعلقة بالجانب الإرشادي الزراعي، ومعوقات متعلقة بالمنتج الزراعي المحلي، ومعوقات متعلقة بمزارعي الخضروات)، ولقياس هذه المعوقات تم استخدام مقياس رباعي متدرج متكوّن من أربع مستويات حسب درجة أهمية المعوق للمبحوث (معوق كبير، معوق متوسط، معوق قليل، معوق غير مهم) وحددت لها الأوزان (4،3،2،1) على التوالي. وتم جمع البيانات في شهري تشرين الأول وتشرين الثاني لعام 2023، وتم تحليل البيانات باستخدام البرنامج الإحصائي (SPSS). اظهرت نتائج البحث ان المعوقات التي يعاني منها المبحوثين كانت مرتفعة الأهمية، إذ حصلت على أوساط مرجحة تراوحت من (3.256 – 3.719) وهذه الدرجات اعلى بكثير عن الوسط الفرضي البالغ (2.5 درجة)، وبوزن مئوي تراوح من (81.35 – 92.97 %). هذا يعني أن العاملين بالإرشاد الزراعي يعانون من معوقات كثيرة تعيقهم في تأدية عملهم بشكل صحيح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: خدمات الإرشاد الزراعي، حماية المنتجات المحلية، التنمية الزراعية المستدامة، محاصيل الخضراوات.