EDITORIAL FORWARD

Place of qualitative methods in agricultural research

This journal processes numerous manuscripts for consideration to publish. A large number of these are from various areas of agriculture such as crop science, soil science, livestock production, food science, and related fields. A feature of these manuscripts is that they have predominantly chosen quantitative approaches as their research methodology. We receive quite a few manuscripts grounded with qualitative methodologies within this subject area. These few manuscripts fall into the areas of agribusiness, agricultural economics, agro-entrepreneurship, agro-tourism, and agricultural extension. There is a lack of research utilizing other methods such as qualitative approach, or mixed methods. This paper emphasizes on the usage and applicability of qualitative methods in agricultural research and to motivate agricultural researchers to embark on qualitative research.

Certain understandings are necessary to explain how theories and practices can function in reality. A set of ideas and beliefs constitutes understandings. Research should be undertaken with such understandings in a context of a research paradigm. A research paradigm can be a method, model, framework, or a pattern for conducting research. Researchers have a choice in terms of research methods. The methodological choice is an important discussion in research according to Saunders et al (2016). They further contended that researchers can use quantitative, qualitative or a mixed method which include a combination of the above two research methods. A bulk of agricultural and agribusiness research are grounded with quantitative methods. Quantitative research is mainly based on numbers. They use mathematical or statistical analysis to shed some light on numeric profile about agriculture, agribusiness and markets. Quantitative research is useful to find answers to questions such as: the degree of profitability of the farm business, the amount of market awareness for a certain product, or the efficiency of a farmer training program.

Agricultural research is broadly aimed at the improvement of agricultural productivity and the quality of agricultural produce although its primary role is to enhance knowledge. While the mainstream agricultural research deals with crops, livestock and their environments, it also can be focussed on the human dynamics in agriculture as well. One such component is agribusiness. Agribusiness is the business aspect of farming and farming-related commercial activities (Chen. 2021). It also can be considered as the complete value chain in agriculture, from the raw materials and resources necessary to create biological products to distributors and retailers that get products to consumers. Agriculture sector is made up of three key components: the agricultural input sector; the conversion process; and the output sector. The input sector deals with the supply of all the materials that are necessary for the primary agriculture and the processing-manufacturing sector. The conversion process deals with the actual production of agricultural and allied products. It can be separated into two links: producers and processors. The output sector deals with what happens to the products after they are produced. It is worthy to note the interrelatedness of above components due to their dependency on each other. Agriculture is considered an important sector in the world economy, as it is a major generator of employment and livelihood worldwide.

Agriculture industry periodically requests for professional assistance. A strong area for such requests lies in research (and development). Although qualitative expressions can include bacterial and fungi colony descriptions; soil colour descriptions; farm demonstration trials; or farm development, qualitative methods are more useful in describing human subjects and their dynamics. It could focus more on economics and management of farms as well as processors, food retailers and restaurants. Agri-

cultural research is able to provide information for academia, policy makers and funding agencies. It can provide benefits to society through research-based technology to farmers, processors and allied businesses.

On the other hand, basis for the use of qualitative methodology should be understood prior to use of such methodology. Several considerations should be taken into account prior to adopting qualitative research. Strauss and Corbin (1990) mentioned that qualitative research can be used particularly when the researcher has no idea what to expect as the outcome to better understand such phenomena are not known. It is sometimes used to define the problem; to develop an approach to the problem; or to further elaborate on the problem.

Qualitative research is quite useful in a process of real-life inquiry with a goal to understand and explain human behavior or social phenomena. It focuses on "why" and "how" questions rather than "what" questions to explain social phenomena (Yin, 2003). Therefore, it is recommended that qualitative approaches are more appropriate when a particular study focuses on contemporary events over which the researcher has little or no control, and seeks answers or explanations for 'how' and 'why' questions.

There are situations where quantitative analysis is deemed inadequate to describe or interpret constructs or a situation. Most of the qualitative inquiries are inductive. They are more interpretive, could explore human behaviour at a more fundamental level and can understand farmers' behaviour from their own point of view. Many of the constructs that are difficult to be defined and measured can be extracted through inductive inquiry. Thus, qualitative research is appropriate when researcher needs to identify or define and measure the variables that may be later subjective to quantitative analysis. Qualitative methodology is ideal when the researcher wants to capture in-depth information that may be difficult to convey using quantitative research. These studies could be very useful on their own, or in combination with quantitative methods.

Qualitative research uses various tools to gather non-numerical data and focusses mainly on human behavior. Varying methods of inquiry such as case study, biographies, historical analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, content analysis, thematic analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology are used in qualitative research. Qualitative data are rich and broad and involve human behavior (for that matter, business behavior), strategy formulations, marketing and value chain studies. They are often presented as detailed essays, descriptions and narratives. They are inferred and interpreted as experiences, views and insights of farmers, agribusinessmen, agro-entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in agricultural production systems and value chains of agricultural commodities.

Qualitative inquiry can be used to explain drastically changing focusses such as human behavior. But its rigor is regarded as generally poor. Its poor generalizability to its population is a key weakness. In contrary, quantitative methodologies are more representative hence higher generalizability to a population. However, the qualitative researcher does not worry too much about this as qualitative research can be generalized to theory (Yin, 2003) but not to populations. Therefore, it is imperative that qualitative studies are grounded systematically with theoretical foundations.

Agricultural research areas such as exploring farmers' understanding of agri-food system concepts; entrepreneurial drive of farmers; resilience in agrifood supply chains; and factors affecting commercialization of smallholder agriculture can be subjected to in-depth inquiry through qualitative methods. Therefore, qualitative methodology is very important to agriculture and its development as it helps in achieving an in-depth understanding of complex socio-cultural and economic factors influencing agricultural industry and this journal will certainly welcome such manuscripts.

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