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A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF A REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM: THE SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE CONSORTIUM FOR HISTORICALLY DISADVANTAGED FARMERS PROGRAM

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Abstract

The Sustainable Agriculture Consortium for Historically Disadvantaged Farmers Program (SACH) was designed to carry out an experiment by five 1890 Land-Grant Universities in partnership with five farmer based cooperatives in five states to assess marketing fruits and vegetables to Walmart from a regional perspective. Using the Consortium as a case study, this study examined the Consortium within the framework of implementation evaluation. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The study answered the questions such as, what did the Consortium do, and what were some of the accomplishments of the Consortium? Consequently, farmers were able to: negotiate price points; develop a cold chain management system; properly package and store produce; and cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship with the buyer. The benefits derived from the Consortium included: providing supplemental income for the participating farmers; expansion of the existing regional food system; and promotion of good farm management practices.

Key Words: Historically Disadvantaged Farmers, Regional Food Systems, Collaborative Marketing, 1890 Land-Grant Universities, Small Farmers and Commercial Markets

Introduction

Historically disadvantaged farmers have been trying to penetrate commercial markets for decades. Regardless of their race or socioeconomic backgrounds; historically disadvantaged farmers face the traditional on-farm and off-farm challenges that have plagued most small farmers. Individually, they have lacked the volume and consistent supply necessary to attract buyers from commercial, wholesale, and retail markets. These farmers have also had limited access to capital and facilities to store, process, and distribute their products. The lack of distribution infrastructure and services make it difficult for this group of farmers to take advantage of the growing demand for locally and regionally grown foods in larger volume markets such as grocery stores, universities, restaurants, military bases, and hospitals (Barham et al., 2012).

A major challenge that historically disadvantaged farmers face is competition from large farms that produce at industrial scale levels. Large farmers with greater production and access to capital can invest in new techniques to make their products “market ready.” Historically, disadvantaged farmers have not had the production volume needed to utilize advance packing and handling techniques and find it difficult to access mass markets (Bragg, n.d.; Cantor and

Stronchlic, 2009). Due to their small scale of production, historically disadvantaged farmers have been unable to obtain the low production input costs that large farmers achieve through large-scale production and lower cost per unit of associated inputs (e.g., fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, packaging, and transportation). The combination of higher costs per unit of inputs and relatively low quantities produced makes it extremely difficult for historically disadvantaged farmers to compete in commercial markets (Black Belt Family Fruit and Vegetable Marketing Center Business Plan, 2006).

Additionally, historically disadvantaged farmers have encountered a myriad of on-farm challenges including inadequate irrigation systems, maintaining the cold chain needed to extend produce shelf life, availability of labor, and meeting food safety standards (Cantor and Stronchlic, 2009). According to Hill et al. (2014) many of the challenges that have faced historically disadvantaged farmers can be characterized as a social justice issue. This social justice issue is due to a history of slavery, sharecropping, land loss, lack of access to capital and profitable markets; as well as discrimination by USDA agencies. Despite the obstacles and the challenges they have faced, historically disadvantaged farmers are a tenacious group and are resilient in their pursuit of sustainability and the enhancement of their quality of life.

The long-term prosperity and competitiveness of historically disadvantaged farmers is dependent on these farmers working collaboratively, coordinating their marketing efforts, engaging in value-added activities, incorporating specialty enterprises into their farming operations, and basing their marketing decisions on reliable, up-to date information. Aggregation will also play a role in the survival of historically disadvantaged farmers. Aggregation is the collection of agricultural products from a number of area farms at a central hub (Wallace Center, 2012). Aggregation through regional food systems will give historically disadvantaged farmers a competitive advantage over medium and large farms. According to a study completed jointly by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity et al. (2012), food hubs have emerged as critical players in establishing and building strong local and regional food systems.

Regional food hubs are the key for historically disadvantaged farmers to reach wholesale and commercial markets. Barham et al. (2012, p. 4) defined a regional food hub as “a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.” A regional food system can not only satisfy the demand for locally grown food, but also increase farmer income and create jobs (Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity et al., 2012). Food hubs can (1) increase market access for local and regional producers, (2) add value to the current food distribution system, and (3) have significant economic, social, and environmental impacts within the communities (Barham et al., 2012). Another strategy for historically disadvantaged farmers to penetrate commercial markets is to utilize non-traditional marketing tactics. These tactics include working closely with 1890 Land Grant Universities by participating in non-traditional sustainability initiatives aimed at sourcing locally grown products to commercial markets. An example of such an opportunity is Walmart’s Heritage Agriculture Initiative (Walmart, 2010).

The Evolution of the Sustainable Agriculture Consortium for Historically Disadvantaged Farmers Program

On October 14, 2010, Walmart unveiled its global sustainable agriculture goals. The key component of this Initiative was the concept of supporting local farmers and their communities. Walmart outlined three core areas: (1) sell \$1 billion globally in food sourced directly from small, medium, and local farmers; (2) provide training to 1 million farmers and farm workers in such areas as crop selection and sustainable farming practices; and (3) raise the income of farmers it sources from 10 to 15 percent. Walmart also stated that they would double the sales of locally sourced produce. This included the sales from its Heritage Agriculture Program, which reintroduces the cultivation of produce by small- and women-owned farms and works with larger growers to expand their operations to Walmart's distribution network (Walmart, 2010).

McCormick and Pinkston (2009) summarized Walmart's anticipated results for the Heritage Agriculture Program. They stated that Walmart's anticipated results at the local level included: (a) create current supply chain visibility to local and regional sources, (b) develop new local and regional sources, (c) market local to Walmart customers and educate on benefits, and (d) improve freshness with less road time and lead time. They also indicated that Walmart would focus on ethnic items. This included items that are popular with the U.S.'s growing minority communities.

The Sustainable Agriculture Consortium for Historically Disadvantaged Farmers Program (SACH), also referred to as the "Consortium", was designed as part of the Walmart Heritage Agriculture Program. SACH initially included five partners: (1) Alcorn State University (MS); (2) Fort Valley State University (GA); (3) Prairie View A & M University (TX); (4) Tuskegee University (AL); and (5) University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (AR). Also, SACH initially started as a project, and the official project period was from February 1, 2012 to December 31, 2013 (Hill et al., 2012); however, a pilot project was initiated in 2011 in Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi. The pilot project formed a collaborative partnership between historically disadvantaged farmers, 1890 Land Grant Universities, and retail partners (e.g. Walmart, C.H. Robinson). The goal was to assist small farmers with the sale of their produce to commercial markets. This partnership resulted in improvements in production and harvesting, learning commercial grading and packaging techniques, and facilitating pick-up and delivery of produce. Examples of activities learned and improved during 2011 included:

- negotiating fair and profitable prices,
- agreement of acres to be planted and harvested,
- implementation of cultural practices that optimize yield and quality and meet food safety standards,
- packaging and controlling the produce environment temperature, and
- coordinating efficient delivery schedules with Walmart distribution centers (Hill et al., 2012).

The overall goal of SACH was to bridge the gap between the ability of historically disadvantaged farmers to grow vegetables and fruits and their ability to pack and market their produce in a manner that results in enhanced profits and quality of life. A secondary goal was

to develop a region-wide consortium that leverages the strengths of each partner in a manner that would build the capacity of small, socially and historically disadvantaged (underserved, minority, women and beginning) farmers to work together in organizing and marketing produce such that sustainability of their agricultural operations is enhanced. In addition, SACH sought to increase access to commercial markets and develop and strengthen cooperatives. The opportunities that was envisioned for farmers participating in the Consortium included: (1) having access to a guaranteed market, (2) ability to market collaboratively, (3) hands-on training in food safety, cold chain management, value-added processing, record keeping, and transportation, (4) increased farm incomes, and (5) access to good farm management practices (Hill et al., 2012).

A review of 1890 collaborative programming efforts revealed that 1890 Land Grant Universities have been engaged in the development of regional food systems since the late 1990s. The “Collaborative Research and Outreach for Small Farm Enterprises and Community Development in the Black Belt South” is an example of one of the collaborative efforts by 1890 Land Grant Universities. This project was a competitive grant and part of the United States Department of Agriculture’s Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems Program (IFAFS) (Hargrove and Hill, 2014). The objectives of this IFAFS’s project were to (1) develop and enhance a regional vegetable and fruit marketing system and build capacity and collaboration among farmers and farm-related enterprises, community based organizations and university outreach, (2) create opportunities for small and minority producers to access higher profits by increasing their participation in the meat goat/small livestock industry, and (3) form a collaborative link between the Southern Food Systems Education Consortium (SOFSEC) and the Southern Rural Development Initiative (SRDI), that is based on the sharing of each organization’s strengths for the creation of long-term benefits for small farmers and related businesses in the Black Belt Region of the South (Hargrove and Hill, 2014).

The ultimate goal of IFAFS’s regional marketing system was to enable small-scale farmers throughout the region to market as a unit, securing a larger share of commercial market, and at the same time, develop, enhance, and effectively compete in local markets. The regional marketing system sought the development of a central marketing hub which was located in South Central Georgia and two satellite hubs in Arkansas and Alabama. In addition, the IFAFS project provided opportunities for farmers in the Southeast to collaboratively engage in farm to school efforts through an existing production and distribution system (Hargrove and Hill, 2014). In summary, the IFAFS project utilized a regional approach to serve its targeted clientele and share best practices. It focused on building the capacity of small farmers and rural communities in the poorest counties of the Black Belt South to engage in sustainable development. IFAFS was able to accomplish this through the provision of technical assistance, developing human and financial capital, disseminating information, and providing hands-on realistic educational training to producers in the areas of goat production, vegetable production, business management training, and marketing (Hargrove and Hill, 2014). There were 14 participating organizations in the IFAFS project. Table 1 provides a list of the IFAFS participants. SACH evolved out of the work of the IFAFS project and built on some of the findings of this historical project.

Table 1. Institutions Participating in the IFAFS Project

Organization	State
Alabama A& M University	Alabama
Alcorn State University	Mississippi
Arkansas Land and Farm Development Corporation	Arkansas
CMC Farmers' Cooperative	North Carolina
Federation of Southern Cooperatives	Georgia
Florida A & M University	Florida
Fort Valley State University	Georgia
North Carolina A & T University	North Carolina
North Carolina Coalition of Farm and Rural Families	North Carolina
Penn Center	South Carolina
South Carolina State University	South Carolina
Southern University A & M University	Louisiana
Tuskegee University	Alabama
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff	Arkansas

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to provide an analysis of the procedures used in the implementation and delivery of technical and outreach assistance to farmers participating in SACH. Using the Consortium as the case study, the study examined the projects within the framework of implementation evaluation. Implementation evaluation involves finding out what is happening in the program, what the program consists of, what are the program's key characteristics, and what is working and what is not working (Patton, 2012). Process evaluation is one of several types of implementation evaluations; "process evaluation focuses on the internal dynamics and actual operations of the program and attempts to understand its strengths and weaknesses" (Patton, 2012, p. 201) Process evaluation provides answers to questions such as (a) what did the program do, (b) how well did the program staff do it, (c) what is happening and why, (d) how do the parts of the program fit together, and (e) how did the participants experience the program (Patton, 2012)? This study answered the questions: what are the key characteristics of the Consortium as a whole and as individual projects; what did the Consortium do, how well did the individual projects fit together, and what were some of the accomplishments of the Consortium?

Methods

Data Collection

The data for the study were collected using the qualitative case study methodological approach, which included semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a set of interactions with case study participants during three 2-day conferences. This last step is referred to by Lev and Stevenson (2011) as learning across value chains and follows a community of practice approach. The data collection period extended from February 2012 to February 2014. Six site visits were completed in each state. Twenty semi-structured interviews were completed with members of the Consortium.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the within-case technique and the crossed-case technique. The within-case technique treated each project as a comprehensive case in and of itself (Merriam, 1998), while the crossed-case technique built general explanations that fitted each of the individual projects, but the projects varied in details. These two techniques are consistent with the approaches recommended by Yin (1994) and Merriam (1998) when analyzing case study data. In order to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the research design, several techniques were employed including mechanically recoding the data, member-checking, triangulation, and maintaining a reflective journal.

Results

What are the Key Characteristics of the Consortium as a Whole?

SACH evolved out of a need to enhance market opportunities for historically disadvantaged farmers in the targeted states. This overarching goal was accomplished by strengthening each of the farmers and their respective farmer organizations. A review of the findings indicated that; the five projects varied in their implementation process, organizational structure, produce grown, volumes of sales, prices received for the products, number of farmers participating in the projects, and infrastructure.

Tuskegee University served as the lead and administrative institution for the Consortium. The four remaining universities were collaborating partners. The Consortium was structured in a manner where each university worked closely at improving each farmer's strategic position individually as well as collaboratively in the regional food system. The participating cooperatives included: Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative, East Arkansas Enterprise Cooperative, Inc., North Delta Produce Growers Association, Synergy Cooperative, and Costal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative. In addition, individual farmers were also selected to participate in the project from Texas and Arkansas. Requirements for participation also varied across the individual projects. The general criteria included prior experience producing the targeted crops, access to irrigation, access to land, and willingness to participate in an extensive technical and outreach program.

Rather than pursue multiple commercial markets during the project period, the Consortium focused on assisting farmers with sourcing their local products to one retailer, Walmart. The primary focus was on purple hull peas. Two additional crops, watermelons and collard greens, were also selected as secondary crops. During the project period, three of the Consortium's members were able to collaboratively market their produce to local Walmart distribution centers in their respective states. These Consortium members included Alcorn State University, Tuskegee University, and University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. When evaluating the projects in their entirety, the results indicated that, in terms of price negotiation, each project negotiated independently. They received a competitive price based upon the farmers' production and the transaction costs. There were no minimum volume requirements in order to participate in the projects. For some projects, if the farmer received some form of benefit from their participation in the project, the farmer was required to devote a minimum number of acres to the project. During the project period, the demand exceeded the supply; therefore, farmers were encouraged to increase their production for the targeted crops.

This project provided historically disadvantaged farmers access to processing and marketing centers. The infrastructure for each of the projects varied significantly. Each individual project served as the aggregation center for its participating farmers. Alcorn State University had a fully functional vegetable processing and packing facility in Marks, MS. This facility allowed the farmers to produce commercial vegetables in order to diversify their farm operation and improve their marketing potential. The facility is used to educate the farmers on sanitation, and post-harvesting handling techniques. Moreover, the Marks facility is USDA certified. Farmers in Arkansas were processing and adding value to their products at two different processing facilities, namely, (1) Doolittle and Sons, and (2) the Agricultural Demonstration Outreach Center. The Agricultural Demonstration Outreach Center is owned by University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

Alabama farmers were in a very unique position. They had processing sites in four areas of the state. Two of the sites were temporary sites and located in Millbrook and Selma, AL. The third site was located in Malone, AL and shipped produced to the Walmart Distribution Center in Brundidge, AL. The fourth site was located at Al Hooks Produce Farm, and served as the main processing facility for the Small Farmers Cooperative and produce processed here was shipped to the Walmart Distribution Center in Opelika, AL. Plans are underway to obtain a new processing facility that will serve this targeted group. The proposed Black Belt Family Farm Fruit and Vegetable Marketing and Innovation Center (BBMIC) will be located in rural Dallas County, near Selma, AL. BBMIC will serve as the central packaging and shipping center for this project. This project will increase the number of farmers participating from less than 30 to 125 small farmers.

What were the Key Characteristics of Individual Projects?

Maintaining state brand identity was important and was not lost within the Consortium. Each state was able to maintain their own local identity for branding purposes. For the Southern Purple Hull Pea Initiative, each state sold their peas to Walmart Distribution Centers in their respective states. The peas were packaged in clam shells. Each clam shell received a label indicating that it was locally grown in that particular state. A summary of each project is given below:

University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB)

The UAPB project was primarily located in two areas: Southeast and Northeast Arkansas. Doolittle and Sons (D&S) completed the processing for farmers in Southeast Arkansas and the East Arkansas Enterprise Cooperative, Inc. worked with farmers in East Arkansas. East Arkansas Enterprise Cooperative, Inc. had an extensive history of providing marketing services for small, limited resource farmers. Approximately 22 producers grew purple hull peas on approximately 200 acres of land in 2012.

Alcorn State University (ASU)

ASU worked closely with the farmers in the North Delta Produce Growers Association. The North Delta Produce Growers Association consisted of 65 growers who worked closely with Alcorn State University in Mississippi. The North Delta growers utilized Alcorn's vegetable facility in Marks to wash, cool, grade and package their purple hull peas. Approximately 80 acres of peas were cultivated by the farmers. In 2012, Walmart picked up 27 pallets of peas,

which consist of 1,050 reusable plastic containers (rpcs) (shipping crates) and 10,500 clam shells.

Prairie View A & M University (PVAMU)

PVAMU worked with farmers in Smith, Houston and Waller counties. The focus of PVAMU's project focused on the production of cucumbers and strawberries. Emphasis was placed on working with assessing the needs of beginning farmers. Seasonal high tunnels were introduced as an alternative production option.

Tuskegee University (TU)

TU worked closely with farmers in the entire state of Alabama. During the project period, TU was instrumental in assisting a group of farmers established the Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative (SFAC). SFAC was in the early stages of incorporation and consisted of individual farmers and cooperatives members in Alabama and Florida. It consisted of 25 farmers actively engaged in sourcing their locally grown produce to the Walmart Distribution Centers in Opelika, AL and Brundidge, AL. This group of farmers focused on watermelons, purple hull peas, and collard greens. The SFAC was the only project that successfully sourced all three crops to Walmart during the project period. As of February 2013, selected farmers had sold 2,434 cases of greens to Walmart.

Fort Valley State University (FVSU)

FVSU provided education and training to over 200 farmers during the project period at their annual Farmers Conference in 2012. FVSU worked closely with the Costal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative and the Synergy Cooperative to increase their incomes by marketing their produce collaboratively. The Costal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative is located in Glennville, GA, about sixty miles southwest of Savannah, GA. It consists of 7 producers who grow southern leafy vegetables, yellow squash, purple hull peas, and Vidalia onions.

Activities and Accomplishments

A myriad of activities were completed during the project period. These activities included production planning, post harvesting, distribution, processing, aggregation, farm management training, business development, and food safety. Over 50 training sessions and meetings were held in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and Texas during 2012 and 2013. At the annual Conference for Successful Marketing Opportunities for Historically Disadvantaged Farmers training was provided to over 150 participants in 2011, 2012 and 2013. Training sessions focused on: (1) opportunities and requirements for selling produce to Walmart; (2) knowing your true cost of production; (3) effectively marketing your produce for commercial markets; (4) current and new crop potential; (5) quality control from the seed to the store; (6) food safety; (7) Farm Service Agency and the noninsured crop disaster assistance program; (8) starting and sustaining a cooperative; (9) pricing, grading, irrigating, packing, and transporting produce for commercial markets; and (10) minimizing your risk on the farm.

Each of the universities also implemented an aggressive Good Agricultural Practices/Food Safety Certification Outreach Campaign. For example, Alabama reported that in 2013, 50 farmers received training in this area. Twenty (20) farmers received customized standard operating procedures, and half requested pre-audited consultations. Ten (10) farming

operations (nine farms, one processing facility) were certified for GAPs and the Global Markets Primary Production Assessments (Vaughan et al., 2014). Alcorn State University reported similar results. They indicated that 7 farmers were GAPs certified in 2013. University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff trained 25 farmers on food safety and GAPs, and good harvesting and handling practices.

Learning across Value Chains

During the course of this project, three collaborative marketing conferences were held with Consortium participants. The initial meeting was held at the conclusion of the pilot project in December of 2011. The second and third conferences were held in December 2012 and 2013, respectively, at Tuskegee University, AL. Each conference was focused on exploring collaborative marketing opportunities farmers. Information was shared regarding individual projects successes, lessons learned, and future plans. Participants included university representatives, participating farmers, and representatives from retailers such as Walmart, Wholefoods, and Sodexo. Despite having different organizational structures and resources, the institutions formed a community of practice (COP) and readily exchanged ideas, insights, and suggestions for improvement. A better appreciation for the Consortium and the potential for the regional food system occurred at the project meetings. The outcomes that resulted included: (1) sharing information and transparency among the projects; (2) the emergence of trust and communication as the foundation of the partnership; and (3) sharing resources among the Consortium members. These three items contributed to the successes that the Consortium experienced. Key ideas and recommendations that emerged from the meetings included:

- Food safety certification is critical and without it the marketing and delivery of products cannot happen;
- Walmart is willing to work with the farmers to assure a successful program; and
- Consistent, e.g. weekly, deliveries of produce are required to facilitate sustainable markets.

Conclusion

The goal of SACH was to bridge the gap between the ability of historically disadvantaged farmers to grow produce and their ability to pack and market their produce in a manner that resulted in enhanced profits. Based upon the data collected, this project provided access to a more stable market for historically disadvantaged farmers than previously available. In addition, the Consortium provided farmers involved with the tools necessary to compete in a market that has traditionally been dominated by large farms. Initially, the participating farmers had limited knowledge of growing and selling their local produce for commercial markets. At the conclusion of this study, the farmers were able to: (1) negotiate price points, (2) develop a cold chain management system for their crops, (3) properly package and store their produce, and (4) cultivate and build a mutually beneficial relationship with the buyer, in this case Walmart. Furthermore, the benefits that were derived from the creation of the Consortium included: (1) providing supplemental income for the participating farmers, (2) expansion of the existing regional food system, and (3) promotion of good farm management practices. The strategic position of each of the players in this regional food system was greatly enhanced as a result of their participating in the Consortium.

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