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Farmers' Engagement with Community Food Insecurity: Approaches, Perspectives, and Implications for Extension

Rachel Schattman

University of Vermont, rachel.schattman@uvm.edu

Linda Berlin

University of Vermont, linda.berlin@uvm.edu

Francesca Finch Bochner

Duke University School of Law, francesca.finch.bochner@duke.edu

Maija Lawrence

Formerly University of Vermont, maijalawrence@gmail.com



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Farmers' Engagement with Community Food Insecurity: Approaches, Perspectives, and Implications for Extension

Abstract

Hunger is an issue of growing concern nationwide, and farmers can play a critical role in helping individuals and families gain access to healthy, fresh, locally produced food. In 2011, we conducted interviews with 12 Vermont farmers who provide local food to low-income Vermonters through a wide array of activities including sale, donation, or other means. By better understanding how and why farmers work to address hunger in communities, Extension professionals can better support them to achieve the dual goals of food security and farm viability.

Rachel Schattman
University of Vermont
Burlington, Vermont
rachel.schattman@uvm.edu

Linda Berlin
University of Vermont
Burlington, Vermont
linda.berlin@uvm.edu

**Francesca Finch
Bochner**
Duke University
School of Law
Durham, North
Carolina
francesca.finch.bochner@duke.edu

Maija Lawrence
Formerly University of
Vermont
Burlington, Vermont
majjalawrence@gmail.com

Background

Food insecurity (the inability to meet basic food needs) and hunger (the painful sensation caused by lack of food) are issues of growing concern nationwide. In Vermont, where we conducted our study, the percentage of the population that is food insecure has risen from 9.6% in 2004-2006 to the most recently reported rate of 14% (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013). The United States Department of Agriculture reports that the food inflation rate has outpaced inflation in the rest of the United States economy in recent years (USDA-ERS, 2015). As a result, many people are forced to choose between food and other basic necessities such as heat, transportation, or medicine. For children in families that lack adequate food resources, the stakes are particularly high. Hungry children are sick more often and can suffer more physical, intellectual, and emotional impairments compared to well-nourished children (Murphy et al., 1998; Weinreb et al., 2002). As an organization that places a central focus on food from production to consumption, Extension is perfectly positioned to engage in efforts to strengthen the linkages between producers and low-income consumers and facilitate all families' efforts to meet their own needs and the needs of their communities.

As food producers, farmers can play a critical role in helping individuals and families gain access to healthy, fresh, locally produced food. Extension professionals can and should also play a significant role in addressing lack of food access. Not only does Extension have a long history of working with farmers to help them stabilize their livelihoods, but also it has a deep history of supporting communities to address hunger. In the 1960s, Extension began the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), which continues to this day to provide nutrition education to low-income families and youth based on the recognition of a link between poverty and malnutrition. Given the role that Extension professionals have in supporting efforts to establish financial viability and social connections at the household and community levels, it is critical that a more informed understanding of feasible approaches to alleviating hunger and food insecurity become the norm among Extension professionals.

How might this happen? Outreach professionals who work directly with farmers and with food insecure individuals and households can engage in more helpful service if they are more informed about how farmers already address food insecurity. Many Extension professionals believe that food insecurity is an important factor in the robustness of food systems: research by Thomson, Radhakrishna, and Bagdonis (2011) shows that Extension professionals believe that food security and food system viability are critical components of Local Food System programming. Some ways in which Extension programming has addressed local food in communities have focused on evaluating efforts such as farm to school (Cirignano et al., 2013; Oberholtzer, Hanson, Brust, Dimitri, & Richman, 2012), farmers markets (Byker, Misyak, Shanks, & Serrano, 2013; Parsons & Morales,

2013), and community gardens and master gardener programs (Murphy, 2013). However, there are few examples of research and outreach that addresses both hunger and farm viability or that examines farmer efforts to address hunger.

Methods

Before Extension outreach professionals can fully support the efforts of farmers to increase food security in their communities, we must first understand what strategies are currently being used. In addition, it is necessary to understand why farmers attempt to address hunger in their communities and what impact these efforts have on their farm's financial viability. We asked 12 farmers what activities they engage in that contribute to reducing hunger and food insecurity, as well as what their motivations were. We also asked about the impact of these activities on farm viability and the barriers that farmers faced to increasing access to local food for low-income Vermonters.

In our interviews, we focused on vegetable and diversified producers. We chose to do so because direct-marketed vegetables and other low cost, non-consolidated food products are relatively easy to get to low-income consumers through direct markets, such as farmers markets. Farmers who produced consolidated products that rely on restricted supply chains, such as fluid milk, were not included in the study. All but one of the farms interviewed for the project sold whole vegetables, three sold meat, and one produced dairy products. In addition, one producer sold value-added products, one sold bedding plants, one sold honey, two sold maple products, and two sold dried beans and grains. The interviewees reported selling to a mixture of outlets, including direct to consumer, direct to restaurants, co-ops, grocery stores or institutions, and wholesale through a third party distributor. In addition, several interviewees served a resale function themselves, buying in local product produced by other farmers for their farm stand or to offer additions to basic community supported agriculture (CSA) food subscription programs.

Interviews were conducted in late winter and early spring 2011 with 12 Vermont farmers. Farmers were selected using purposeful theoretical sampling to generate information-rich case studies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Participant names were solicited from food-access and agriculture-focused organizations (such as the Vermont Foodbank and the Northeastern Organic Farming Association of Vermont) based on their membership or affiliation with organizations that address agricultural production *and* food insecurity in Vermont. Geographic location was used in selecting interviewees, in an effort to represent different regions of the state (Kasemire, Jaeger, & Jager, 2003).

A semi-structured interview guide and field notes were used in order to capture main themes of the interviews while allowing for the interviewer to probe for more in-depth information (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by two coders (Boyatzis, 1998), using the constant comparison method (Boeije, 2002). We used a Grounded Theory approach to our study design and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), allowing us to identify emergent themes and values, relating sub-categories to primary categories to differentiate between interviewee responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

What Do They Do?

The farms interviewed for the project engaged in many different types of activities, from offering subsidized CSA shares to selling to low-income customers at a discounted price. Some strategies were initiated and performed solely by the farmer, while others were facilitated by an outside organization (non-profit, volunteer, governmental, or otherwise). Table 1 lists the 14 strategies used by farmers interviewed in the study, differentiating between those activities that were charitable in nature and those that generated income for the farm (however modest.)

Table 1.
Anti-Hunger Strategies Used by Farmers

	Income Generating										Charitable Donation			
Farmers	Subsidized CSA share	Sliding scale pricing	Keep pricing "reasonable"	Work trade opportunities	Payment plans	Accept EBT cards	Accept F2F	Sell to food bank/schools	Sell at a discounted price	Offset cost (lost leaders)	Host gleaning projects	Donations	Grow an extra row	Pay staff to do community service
A														
B														

C	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
D	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
E	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
F	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
G	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
H	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
I	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
J	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
K	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
L	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

The majority of farmers who participated in the study engaged in activities in both the charitable and income-generating categories. No farmers in the study engaged in only one strategy, a practice referred to as "stacking benefits." This practice can present significant challenges: farms that offer a subsidized CSA share, provide work trade opportunities, offer discounts to customers who use Electronic Benefit Transfer cards (EBT), and strive to keep prices on par with local supermarkets can quickly whittle their net income down to zero.

Why Do They Do It?

The values that motivate farmers to engage in anti-hunger activities are largely associated with concern for the wellbeing of the community. While farm values may be shared among many farm operators or decision makers, often the role of coordinating anti-hunger efforts belongs to a single person. According to some farmers in the study, the decision to engage in anti-hunger efforts through the farm business was not always agreed upon in cases of multiple farm operators. One interviewee described an ongoing bone of contention between himself and his partner regarding product pricing, a key strategy for keeping his products accessible: "One of my values is really getting affordable, organic produce to people who don't necessarily choose to spend money on it because they feel like it is too expensive. That's a bit of a battle between myself and my partner because she thinks I don't charge enough."

Motivating factors varied among the interviewed farmers. Some managers were influenced by a mission or program that was put in place before they became involved with the farm (e.g., programs that were initiated by a family member of the previous generation), while others were directed by a governing body or board. Farms also differed depending on whether or not the strategies they employed were incidental in nature (require little planning or time commitment, often facilitated by an outside organization or agency) versus those that required in depth knowledge of the specific needs of their community. Incidental strategies include donating to a food shelf that is located close to the farm, agreeing to let volunteers pick up extra food left over from farmers' market, or even participating in a program where the majority of the administrative duties are performed by an outside organization. Responding to specific community needs, however, requires a great deal of time, planning, and initiative on the part of the farmer.

Impact on Farm Finances

Farmers had different opinions about how anti-hunger efforts affected the financial viability of their businesses. When asked if they were satisfied with their anti-hunger efforts, seven out of 12 farmers stated that they were satisfied. Some see it as an important part of their business plan, especially if they can use their own financial resources to leverage additional sales through a program that provides matching funds. One interviewee stated, "It's sort of free money from our perspective. I think we've leveraged the equivalent of \$4,000...that's a huge amount of money for us." Most participants who sell food to low-income customers, either through direct sales or through contracts with public or charitable organizations, said that they believed these sales positively affected their financial bottom line. This was due to both the community goodwill generated by their efforts (as self-reported by the farmers) and by the actual income these sales represented. These farms sell directly to low-income consumers either through reduced cost CSAs or through donations to local food shelves.

This type of community service does not have a consistent impact on all farms, however. Not all farmers who participated in the study were confident that their anti-hunger strategies contributed in a positive way to the financial solvency of their farm. One participant noted that their farm loses money on selling meat to local schools. Other farmers noted seasonal difficulty making ends meet and how sliding scale pricing negatively affected their business during these times. A third farmer noted that for every subsidized share she makes available, she essentially loses the difference between a share paid in full and the subsidized price.

The Biggest Barriers, the Greatest Opportunities

When asked what kept them from providing low-income Vermonters with more food, farmers identified three barriers: (1) personal time constraints and program inefficiencies, (2) consumer perceptions of local food, and (3) the price of local food versus the price of commodity food.

First, some felt that anti-hunger efforts, even if the burden of administration rested with an outside organization, required too much time. Having a point person on the farm who is dedicated to facilitating participation in programs was identified as a positive change farms could make to alleviate time pressure, though this solution is most likely not an option for farms unless they have achieved a certain level of financial stability.

Second, farmers noted that many low-income members of their community believe that local food and organic food is more expensive than they can afford, though the validity of this assumption was questioned by the farmers.

Third, farmers recognize the difficulty of competing with commodity food prices in a state such as Vermont, where small-scale farm businesses dominate and typically cannot access the economies of scale of larger operations in other parts of the country. This makes their relative cost of production much higher. One farmer stated, "The fact that you can get a bag of Cheetos cheaper than you can get a bunch of carrots, that's the primary barrier. Let's face it." Still, others noted that some of their best customers are people who are very low-income, yet prioritize purchasing local, fresh food when possible. One farmer noted, "A lot of (customers) ...are low-income, single moms...they're psyched about healthy food, they care about it, they care about their own health and their kids' health."

When asked what the greatest opportunities are for improving low-income access to local food, farmers had a broad range of responses: some referenced wishing to increase charitable donations, while others wished to decrease charitable donations. Some wished to cultivate institutional contracts, while others wished to reduce the diversity of crops grown. Several farms agreed that solving food insecurity was not the responsibility of the farmer. One farmer stated, "Well, I feel like the farmers are pretty well strapped, and it would be more of an organizational issue... I think most farmers are very generous and willing to be involved, it's just more the logistics of getting things to happen." Another noted, "I think it's a lot to ask. My honest opinion is that farmers are so busy all the time. We're farming, we're making all this food and it's a full time job." Several farmers identified the need for a point person to be responsible for coordinating food access activities and building relationships.

Discussion

Our study finds that farmers often use more than one approach simultaneously to address hunger in their communities, but that stacking too many approaches can threaten the financial viability of their business. We suggest that that farmer participation in anti-hunger efforts would increase if organizations, including Extension, that support farmers were able to streamline food-access programs when farmers are involved or provide more administrative support to farmer participants. In addition, Extension outreach professionals should be prepared to counsel farmers against taking on too many service activities through their farm business, thereby avoiding detrimental effects.

In our study, personal time constraints and program inefficiencies were cited as the biggest barrier to farmers stepping up their efforts. Technology was seen as intricately tied to this issue: one farmer noted that accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits was difficult because the farm did not own a wireless Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machine, and benefits had to be called in for each SNAP enrolled customer. However, opportunities to access technology that allow farmers to accept EBT and credit cards (through wireless readers or smart phones) is ever evolving. Future streamlining of program requirements should be integrated with efforts to take advantage of efficient, affordable new technology. This is another area in which Extension outreach professionals should be prepared to counsel farmers, bringing awareness of emerging technology when appropriate.

As the local food movement becomes more established, journalists and anecdotal reports suggest that certain direct-market

venues, such as farmers markets, have become saturated (Zezima, 2011). As the market becomes crowded in some places, farmers are forced to look beyond the traditional markets for specialty products. It is possible that the low-income market represents a new type of niche market. In some parts of the country, this market is already served by non-profits, government programs, and volunteer organizations with anti-hunger and/or food justice missions. It is not yet clear what the long-term impact is of some of these programs and whether for-profit or non-profit entities are more effective at increasing the availability of culturally appropriate food to low-income consumers. Collaboration between these non-profit and for-profit farm businesses will have the greatest chance of ensuring farm viability while decreasing food insecurity. Extension professionals, with their historical connection to communities and their expertise in both farm viability and hunger issues, are important assets in developing programming that addresses these dual goals.

Though not every Extension professional works with the type of farms described in this article, it is important that these professionals are aware of the challenges and opportunities faced by such farmers. Increased training in this area would allow Extension outreach professionals to develop better tools for facilitating challenging conversations with farmers around service and profitability. Tools for evaluating whether or not the activities contribute to the economic or social goals of the farm business could help facilitate discussions about the challenges associated with stacking benefits. In the context of farm viability planning, farm transfers, or transition planning, tools of this kind would have great utility.

Last, diversity trainings for Extension professionals could enhance sensitivity to cultural differences that manifest in communities of various races, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes. These types of professional development would help professionals to better serve their clients (both farmers who want to make a difference in their communities and food insecure individuals and households) by understanding the social and economic forces at play, and by developing a better understanding of what approaches are currently being used by farmers in their area.

Limitations

The qualitative research reported here explored the views of 12 Vermont farmers who are involved in efforts to improve food insecurity in their communities. While this research was exploratory and helped lay the groundwork for understanding how and why farmers participate in such work, it does not enable the authors to generalize to a wider population. Farmers were not selected randomly, and Vermont farmers are not representative of farmers across the country. As is the nature of qualitative work, we were able to dig in deeply to understand the experiences of a small number of people. Future work that builds on these efforts by creating a written survey distributed to a significantly wider group of farmers would greatly enhance our ability to understand these issues.

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