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A TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SOCIALLY AND HISTORICALLY DISADVANTAGED FARMERS, 1890 LAND GRANT INSTITUTIONS, AND WALMART

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Abstract

Ensuring a sustainable future for socially and historically disadvantaged farmers (SHDFs) remains a central mission of many 1890 land grant universities. As major corporations adopt socially responsible and sustainable policies they are exploring new partnerships, including those with the aforementioned farmers and institutions. This article explores the opportunity presented by the partnership between Tuskegee University and Walmart during 2011, 2012, and 2013 that focused on assisting SHDFs to work together to expand their produce marketing opportunities to include large commercial retailers. This article provides perspective for the articles that follow in this issue of the Professional Agricultural Workers Journal (PAWJ). The articles focus specifically on microirrigation and solar powered pumps, integrated pest management, farm and food safety certification, challenges of forming the new cooperative, the role of Black women farmers, and progress made by the Sustainable Agriculture Consortium.

Key Words: Sustainable Agriculture, Agricultural Cooperative, Small Farmers, Corporate Sustainability

Introduction

Sustainable agriculture has many definitions and components that depend on the backgrounds and experiences of those involved in the defining term (Gold, 2007); for example, components of sustainable agriculture include production in order to satisfy human food, fuel and fiber needs; enhancement of environmental quality and the natural resource base; efficient use of non-renewable and on-farm renewable resources; profitability of farm operations; and social aspects, including quality of life (Gold, 2012). Agriculture is sustainable when it is ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate and based on a holistic scientific approach (NGO Sustainable Agriculture Treaty, 2007). Sustainable Agriculture requires farmers, communities, universities, businesses and governments to work together creatively and in new ways both at the local and global levels.

Sustainability of farms owned and operated by socially and historically disadvantaged farmers (SHDFs) as a part of the American farm landscape is a social justice issue; this is due to a history of slavery, sharecropping, land loss, lack of access to capital and markets, and discrimination by USDA agencies. Despite an unjust playing field over many years as documented through the Pigford Cases (Cowan and Feder, 2011; Hill et al., 2013), Black farmers have persisted, and in recent years, their population has increased by 9% in southern states (USDA-NASS, 2009). Enhancement of market opportunities and timely access to needed resources, remain challenges but are currently being addressed by the government (USDA-ERS, 2008; USDA, 2010; USDA-FSA, 2013) and the private sector (Walmart, 2010) in a manner that is proactive, but limited in addressing these problems.

The Opportunity

Black American farmers in the U.S. are predominantly small farmers and most reside in the Black Belt region of the U.S. (USDA-NASS, 2009). This is a crescent shaped area that cuts across eleven southern states, and coincides with counties characterized by persistent poverty. This particular study covers the Alabama Black Belt and adjacent counties, which winds through the south-central portion of the state from Barbour County in the east bordering Georgia, and ending in Sumter County in the west bordering Mississippi. Described variously as encompassing 12-to-20+ counties, the Alabama Black Belt follows its regional namesake in terms of both soil characteristics and demographic indicators. These counties are characterized by a relatively high percentage of Black citizens (e.g., 44 to 85% in Alabama) who have made highly significant cultural/ethnic, educational and political contributions. However, these counties have remained underdeveloped as manifested by persistent poverty, low incomes, low population densities, and high unemployment rates (e.g., currently 20% in Alabama). These and adjacent counties include a majority of the Black farmers in the U.S.

During 2010-2011, eight USDA agencies joined with Tuskegee University to establish the Carver Integrative Sustainability Center (CISC), a unique 1890 Land Grant-USDA center of excellence for sustainable agriculture. The founding director (Walter A. Hill) described CISC as follows: “Guided by a heart and spirit of service, CISC focuses on beneficial and sustainable science and technologies, marketing strategies, policies, program delivery innovations and connections between agriculture, art, culture and history such that small, underserved, beginning and socially disadvantaged (including underrepresented minorities and women) farmers, ranchers, landowners and rural communities develop profitable, environmentally friendly farms; sustainable agriculture and natural resource-based enterprises, and rural communities where people gain ever improving quality of lives.” USDA and Tuskegee University articulated the integrative, cross-agency/organizational nature of CISC’s approach to problem solving in an agreement in 2010 (USDA-Tuskegee University, 2010).

Based on initiatives carried out between 2005-2009, in 2010, Walmart held a Global Sustainable Milestone meeting in December 2010 that included a sustainable agriculture framework to “support farmers and their communities” with goals to “energize local farm communities, provide market access, offer technical training, and increase farmer income” (Walmart, 2010). Among Walmart’s global and long-term commitments was a “focus on local and small/medium farmer programs.” Such commitments were made concurrently with strengthening of local economies, providing customers around the world with long-term access to affordable, high quality, fresh food, and at the same time, reducing food waste.

Proactively Integrating Research, Extension and Education Resources

A large part of the history of Tuskegee University and its College of Agriculture, Environment, and Nutrition Sciences can be traced to the relationship of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, T.M. Campbell and the local African American farmers. This relationship built mainly on ideas or measures of cultural Sustainability influenced the focus of the institution in the past, and as evidenced by its contribution to the Walmart Initiative and other projects, it still influences it today. Booker T. Washington had many objectives, but two of them in particular simultaneously illustrated his innovative spirit and focused on students at Tuskegee University as well as potential students in the surrounding community. The first objective was to secure students who would become an integral part of the workforce by teaching them to

physically build the institution (e.g., making and laying bricks). This idea was important because it served the dual purpose of training students in various skills needed to enhance and sustain rural communities in the Alabama Black Belt and also providing physical labor to build the institution. The second objective was to go onto farms, into the homes, and into churches of rural Black Belt families, and share farming, quality of life and cultural experiences.

Such objectives, traceable to the early work of Booker T. Washington (Washington, 1901), and institutionalized by the work of early Tuskegee Extension Leaders such as Thomas Campbell (Campbell, 1936) and Jesse Coleman (Smith, 1995; Zabawa, 2013) have been manifested in the current Tuskegee University-Small Farmer-Walmart Initiative. Some of the faculty and staff working on this project have literally spent hours and hours each day with the members of the Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative (SFAC) to ensure that they would “get first-hand information as to their needs in order that these needs could be taken into consideration in the planning...” (Campbell, 1936).

Not only was this approach utilized in 1936 in training students, but also it helped to secure the human resources needed to assist and educate farmers and landowners, who were striving for a better quality of life. Today, Tuskegee University has continued this approach in support of the SFAC and its farmer members. Specifically, SFAC and its members went from knowing very little about producing food for commercial markets to actually negotiating price points, dealing with commercial buyers, transportation, logistics, commercial grading, refrigeration, cold chains, packaging, sales strategy and other supply chain requirements.

Participation in this SFAC-TU-Walmart project has included faculty, staff, and students cutting across boundaries of Extension, research, and education. All involved were literally engaged in on-the-job training when it came to working with Walmart, the largest retail operation in the world. New avenues for securing resources such as operating capital, irrigation, disease resistant seeds, bees for pollination, and labor supply were all learned during 2011-2013. Researchers were able to direct research questions specifically at problems and issues that Extension staff and resource specialists faced with farmers; thus, leveraging scientific knowledge in the development of alternative solutions. Co-engagement by CISC, Cooperative Extension (CE), and George Washington Carver Agricultural Experiment Station (GWCAES) staffs has co-evolved information, technologies, and education delivery methods targeted to SHDFs.

As a result, a new integrated program is utilizing the expertise of faculty and staff from CISC, CE, GWCAES, and other campus units (engineering, business, education, architecture and construction science, and arts and sciences) to create effective support strategies and an education series that will address issues for growing and managing SHDF farms and cooperatives for commercial production. It is anticipated that these workshops will normalize the production practices being used by individual members of the farmers’ cooperative. Areas of production that have given the impetus for such an idea are: (1) well and irrigation management, (2) integrated pest management, (3) food safety, (4) soil management, (5) harvesting and pre- and post-harvest handling, and (6) value-added products. It is the hope of the participants in the Walmart Initiative that this experience will transform and modernize both the content and delivery of programs by Tuskegee University, and other 1890 institutions.

Conclusion

Though success stories will undoubtedly evolve out of this unique venture, we note that there have not been many instances of previous SHDF-based cooperatives breaking into the commercial industrial scale markets and remaining viable over-time. The goal of breaking this cycle is not unattainable given the commercial success stories of U.S. agricultural cooperatives, such as Land-O-Lakes, Sunkist, Riceland Rice, and Ocean Spray. Land-O-Lakes over the past few years has consistently had over \$10 million in revenue, while Sunkist and Ocean Spray consistently see greater than \$1 million in net revenue (USDA-RD, 2012). All four of the named cooperatives had humble beginnings by farmers looking to improve markets, produce quality, and sustain their business over long periods of time.

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