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Bilingual Organic Farm Incubator Program Both Generates and Depends Upon Community Capital

By Katherine Smith¹ and Marcia Ostrom²

Abstract

Farm incubator programs have been presented as a solution to reduce barriers to entry for beginning farmers. While various forms of the farm incubator model have been documented in the literature, the significance of community capital building in the development of viable beginning farm businesses through farm incubator programs has not been investigated. Our participatory research with the bilingual, organic Viva Farms Incubator partnership in Western Washington shows how a farm incubator program can facilitate access for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers of different races and cultures to access financial capital and markets through the development of social capital. In this case, cross-cultural capacity building appears to be both an end result and a necessary condition to connect diverse, new-entry farmers with education, farming infrastructure, and markets.

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Introduction

In community-based food systems, social capital includes the connections, resources, and knowledge shared between people and can be measured by network connections within a community and access gained to institutions, agencies, and other support structures (Flora, 2001; Kilpatrick and Falk, 2003). In direct and values-based marketing systems, these connections also include the social relationships from field to table. The community capital's framework offers a way to investigate the outcomes of the bilingual Viva Farms Incubator Project from an integrated, sustainable development perspective where "vital economies deploy financial, natural, and human resources to create, maintain and improve local livelihoods" (Flora, 2001:11).

Research has shown a relationship between the success of "public-private collaborations for economic development" and "entrepreneurial social infrastructure" at the community level (Flora, 2004:98). In particular, agricultural resiliency will depend upon coordinated efforts to remove barriers and provide robust support networks for diverse new entry farmers (Carlisle et

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al., 2019). A farm incubator is defined as providing “temporary, exclusive and affordable access to small parcels of land and infrastructure, and often training, for the purpose of honing skills and launching farm businesses” (Massey et al. 2014).

Project Objectives

Our participatory research with the bilingual, organic Viva Farms Incubator in Western Washington (1) explores the role of social capital in enabling access for beginning farmers to capital, land, and markets; and (2) examines how bilingual programming, organizational partnerships, and community-supported infrastructure can improve equitable access to resources.

Steps Taken

The bilingual English/Spanish Viva Farms Incubator Program in Western Washington was founded as a collaboration of the Viva Farms nonprofit, Washington State University (WSU) Skagit County Extension, and the Port of Skagit for beginning farmers to access land, markets, capital, training, and equipment. The sustainable farming and business planning classes offered through Extension and Viva Farms build comfort with mixed language learning environments for both Spanish and English speakers and foster cross-cultural social relationships. Classes teach farmers how to use agroecological methods and incorporate these values into their marketing. Farmers follow organic standards and learn how to become certified.

The program facilitates farmer-to-farmer mentoring and introduces farmers to buyers, consumers, lenders, and grantors through ongoing collaboration with WSU Extension and many government, private and nonprofit partners. These partners include banks, cooperatives, community colleges, farm stores, land trusts, and other companies. A key strength of the farm incubator model is the peer-to-peer and farmer-to-resource provider learning environment that facilitates skill and knowledge building in production, business management, and marketing. As part of the program, farmers are mentored by experienced local farmers and develop their own customer base in the community. They also share knowledge, labor, and equipment with each other. These connections (social capital) and skills (human capital) enable participant access to resources.

Evaluation Methodologies

We began this case study of Viva Farms in 2016 with 22 in-depth interviews of current and past participants at the Viva Farms Incubator Program and have continued to support the organization in gathering data through annual end-of-year participant interviews. Interview questions, adapted from the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) and the UC Santa Cruz ecological apprenticeship program, collect quantitative data on production, business management, and marketing, as well as qualitative data on farmer experiences and perceptions of the program (Perez, et al., 2010; *see* Smith et al. 2019).

Specific questions explore internal and external linkages to understand the role of social networks within the program and with the greater community in enabling individuals to access financial and natural capital. Qualitative data were analyzed using comparative coding to identify common themes. Preliminary data and responses have been analyzed from 2016 and further analysis of 2017-2019 data will be released in the future.

Project Outcomes

From 2010 to 2015, 28 farm businesses participated in the Viva Farms Incubator Program. Of the 22 we interviewed, 17 were still in operation. Of those farms, 44.4% of the participant owners identified as either Hispanic/Latino/a or Indigenous and Latino/a, 15 were certified organic, and all farms reported utilizing some agroecological production practices (Smith et. al, 2019). Human capital development was evident in participant responses of skills acquired through the program, including skills for social capital building (Table 1.). For the 17 participant farms in operation in 2015, average gross sales were \$4,369. As farms have expanded and connected with more markets and capital over the seasons, sales have increased. In 2019, the 25 farms operating at Viva Farms reported average gross sales of \$47,913. This includes farms with one to ten years of experience.

Table 1. Respondent Reported Skill and Capacity Building (N=19) ^a

Skills acquired through the program	%	#
Improved financial and budgeting skills	58%	11
Interpersonal networking	53%	10
Gained agriculture experience/skill	47%	9
Community involvement and participation	42%	8

^a 2016 Interview Participants

Social capital development themes surfaced as critical to participant success in the responses to open-ended questions about perceived benefits of the program, indicating both internal connections and external linkages (Table 2). The value of the bilingual/cultural component of the program indicated cross-cultural relationship building between White and Latino/a participants and community actors.

Table 2. Respondent Reported Program Benefits (N=20) ^a

Perceived benefits of the program	%	#
Value of the social network	55%	11
Creation of “community” with other participants and local farmers	35%	7
Served to “open doors” and markets for a farmer to continue	35%	7
Bilingual/cultural component of the program	30%	6

^a 2016 Interview Participants

Qualitative comments describe the social linkages to mentors, service providers and peers as well as individual capacities built through the program:

“One thing that comes to mind immediately is the immense outreach and the community of people that I was able to meet, including farmers across the state.”

“Part of the community aspect was that it drew in farmers from the area that were interested in what was going on. We would end up getting connected with some people that

had really valuable advice to give or were able to offer services to other farmers for a reasonable rate... connecting with the broader community.”

“Culturally I learned more about farmworkers in the county.... I realized how privileged I am and so many things that I take for granted.”

“We wouldn’t be doing what we’re doing without Viva. It’s great having neighbors to exchange ideas and create friendships.”

“Financial skills and budgeting skills as well as managing and making lists. Those skills helped me be able to buy a house with land last year.”

As of 2019, three of the top five highest grossing farms operating at Viva Farms are Latino/a owned, all having transitioned from farm worker to farm owner. During their first year participating at Viva Farms, one Latino/a family sold enough produce to allow them to purchase a mobile home. An Indigenous Latina farmer at Viva Farms has now been highlighted in two published books and has purchased her own home. Another Indigenous Latino/a couple purchased a farm with acreage and a house in 2019. These successes demonstrate how social capital built through program participation can increase access to financial capital resources.

Participant responses document increases in internal and external social connectivity, access to resources embedded in the social network, new skills for social networking and participation, and leveraging both financial and natural capital. The themes reflect the participants’ valuation of the social network and the community connections created, as well as the skills and cross-cultural capacity they developed. Participation in a program such as Viva Farms can increase social capital, “opening doors” to new opportunities for improving the financial well-being of beginning farmers.

Conclusion

As beginning farmers develop their organic farming and entrepreneurship skills (human capital), they simultaneously build social capital to access financial capital and develop markets that value their unique stories and land stewardship. At Viva Farms, cross-cultural capacity building has strengthened peer support and mentoring networks between White and Latino/a farmers and fostered equitable access to knowledge and infrastructure. The bilingual program design and strong ties to the wider community have improved marketing outcomes and enhanced access to financial capital for socially disadvantaged farmers. In turn, the launch of a new generation of diverse, sustainable farmers has created new livelihood opportunities and enhanced community benefits across sectors.

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