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Overview of the Small Farmer-Tuskegee University-Walmart Project Articles

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Overview of the Small Farmer-Tuskegee University-Walmart (SFTW) Project Articles

The SFTW Project began in 2011 to enable small socially disadvantaged farmers to gain access into the commercial produce market. The following four articles by Wall et al., Karki et al., Vaughan et al., Robinson et al., and Hill et al. deal with different aspects of the Project. This overview captures the essence of the articles.

Wall et al. dealt with the challenges of developing a successful cooperative through an integrated resource approach. They mentioned that in 2012, Tuskegee University Research and Extension Team assisted in the formation of the Small Farmers Agricultural Cooperative (SFAC). It was formed from several small farmer associations and individual farmers in South and Central Alabama. In addition, in 2013, the Tuskegee University Team and partners worked cooperatively to assist members of the SFAC. For instance, the partners worked together to provide food safety training and certification, irrigation systems, bees for pollination, and integrated pest management training for farmers. Though the Cooperative farmers planted watermelon and pea crops as required in 2013, the weather (too much rain), and in some cases, insects and predators, affected the yields of their first watermelon crop. However, the yield of their second watermelon crop was better. Also, in 2013, 12 farmers became good agricultural practice (GAP) certified, about half of the SFAC members. A team, made up of SFAC leaders and Tuskegee University staff, was operationalized to make sure that things went well at harvesting and with shipping. The relationship between the partners in the SFTW Project has been great. Each party has learned from the other, especially during cross-party visits. Overall, because of the experiences, the Tuskegee University Team and the farmers are better equipped to deal with such opportunities in the future.

Karki et al. assessed the impact of the SFTW Project on the household economy of small and limited resource farmers in Alabama. For their analysis over a four-year period, 2012-2015, farmer productivity, measured as total farmer productivity ratios, was high, at least 2.5 (i.e., the farmer obtained 2.5 units of output for every 1 unit of input); farms were technically efficient. Watermelon was the most profitable crop with 93% of the total gross margin (gross revenue minus expenses). Furthermore, the SFTW Project created 252 part-time jobs with nearly \$400,000 earned as wages. Moreover, at least 96% the producers indicated increased or improved technical knowledge and skills in several aspects of production, such as land preparation, fertilizer application, identifying plant diseases, and food safety standards; all producers also indicated they gained agribusiness and entrepreneurial skills. In addition, there were other impacts, namely, social (being recognized by peers and neighbors) and ecological (conscious of protecting the environment). Overall, the impact of the Project on the household economy was positive.

Vaughan et al. focused on the observations within commercial supply. These observations are given in a framework of steps, comprised of a base assumption, progressive criteria, and an optional criterion. The base assumption is capacity; the progressive criteria are capability, quality, food safety, consistency, and sustainability; the optional criterion is marketability. Capacity entails ability to facilitate packaging and processing, storage and transportation, ordering and invoicing, and staffing and management. Efforts were made to provide capacity for

the SFTW Project by leveraging funds from federal, state, and private sources. Capability is the ability to grow the appropriate crop at the right time. Although most of the farmers grew the crops required by Walmart, the varieties were not the ones that Walmart wanted. In that regard, the farmers had to change varieties to meet Walmart's requirements. Quality is the ability to adhere to strict Walmart and industry standards (also known as quality assurance standards) for commercial produce. As expected, most of the farmers adhered to the standards required by Walmart. Food safety covers reducing risks of contamination to produce. Farmers in the Project were to be certified at the beginning of the partnership as meeting food safety standards before supplying to Walmart. In fact, over the past five years, several educational workshops have been conducted to make sure that farmers were certified and/or understood the implications of high food safety standards. Consistency is the ability to time supply of produce as appropriate or when needed in order to keep customer loyalty. Although a cooperative was formed to deal with the consistency issue, there were a few cases of inconsistent supply issues. However, in many cases, farmers were able to maintain consistent supply, because they agreed to work together. Sustainability refers to the ability to supply consumers with produce for long periods of time without interruption. In this case then, the use of inputs and assets must be flexible to meet changing needs. One example of this flexibility was the provision of irrigation assets to farmers in order to enhance production capabilities. Marketability is the ability to get one's product sold in a timely manner either through outside advertisement or in-store activities. Only minor efforts have been made at this. The reason is that market has not been an issue, because Walmart has provided the market. Overall, the "steps" have helped, for example, the Tuskegee University Team to learn certain lessons; for instance, (1) how integrated Extension-Research staff can engage with farmers; (2) irrigation assets are needed in commercial production to maintain and enhance production; (3) food safety education is needed by both farmers and assistance providers in order to supply healthy and non-contaminated produce to the public; (4) IPM is critical for commercial production.

Robinson et al. examined the Small Farmer Agricultural Cooperative today. They emphasized that in the initial stages of Project, several informational and planning meetings were held between partners; for example, between Tuskegee University and small farmers or between Tuskegee University, small farmers, and the other partners (e.g., third party managers, Walmart, and USDA). These meetings allowed the groundwork to be laid for the direction of the Project, and culminated in the launch of the Project in 2011 with 20 farmers. The main vegetables produced were watermelon, leafy greens, and purple hull peas, which were processed and shipped from several centers in Alabama and one center in Florida. In 2012, the SFAC was formed with three classes of members, A, B, and C. The higher the class, the more active and "entrenched" the class member. The SFAC was established for farmers to be more organized and have a "voice" in the process. The implementation of the actual shipment process exposed the SFAC members to the intricacies of the process, such as purchasing procedures, labels and packaging, and quality control. By 2013, the SFAC was formally and fully organized with all the structures in place. It opened a checking account with Liberty Bank. Ultimately, the SFAC's success depends on its board, management, and members; that is, how it handles its business will determine its survival.

Finally, Hill et al. take a broader and summative perspective of the SFTW Project. They explained how the small farmers initially had to learn from the challenges of supplying the largest retailer in the world. At the same time, the Tuskegee University Team working with the farmers had to be transformed in order to assist the farmers to more effectively deal with these challenges. They mentioned how several particular challenges, including weather and cash flow problems, caused some farmers to drop out of the Project. These challenges prevented the farmers from delivering the appropriate quantities of produce at agreed times. However, a few continued to supply to Walmart, with creative ways to stay in business. They acquired capital items and inputs, such as a processing facility, refrigerated trucks, and irrigated equipment, to facilitate their operations. Others who still remain in the Cooperative are using their acquired knowledge to supply to other retailers or are using direct outlets. Hill et al. also mentioned that because of the benefits of the Project, one large farmer who joined as row crop farmer is now mainly vegetables farmer. They concluded that the relationship between large and small farmers in the group has been fruitful, and that this success is due to large and small farmers working together for their common good.

The five articles generally show how if small farmers and partners work together progress can be made in production and marketing, especially gaining access into the commercial produce market. Obvious lessons have been learned. It is up to all partners or stakeholders to protect and improve on the progress made, while forging ahead to a better future. The ultimate goal is to make the small farmer successful, including increased profitability.

Walter A. Hill, Gertrude Wall, Lila B. Karki, Barrett Vaughan, and Miles D. Robinson