Guang Zhou Peasant Community Connection and Ecological Agriculture in the Future

Hai Yun Jiang

ABSTRACT

While questions about the environmental sustainability of contemporary farming practices and the socioeconomic viability of rural communities are attracting increasing attention throughout the Chain, these two issues are rarely considered together. This paper explores the current and potential connections between these two aspects of sustainability, using data community members’ and farmers’ views of agricultural issues in Guangzhou Central Valley. These views were collected from a series of individual and group interviews with biologically oriented and conventional farmers as well as community stakeholders. Local marketing, farmland preservation, and perceptions of sustainable agriculture comprised the primary topics of discussion. The mixed results indicate that, while many farmers and community members have a strong interest in these topics, sustainable community development and the sustainable agriculture and promoting more engagement between ecologically oriented farmers and their communities could engender more economic and political support for these farmers, helping them and their communities to achieve greater sustainability in the long run. Key words: California’s Central Valley, Community development, Farmer-consumer connections, Farmland preservation, Local marketing, Sustainable agriculture. 1

KEYWORDS


1HaiYun Jiang, Guangzhou pearl-River vocational College of Technology
INTRODUCTION

Two increasingly important areas of public concern have emerged around China agriculture. One is the environmental have suggested that environmental sustainability and community viability are inherently linked and are most effectively addressed together. This paper draws from a study of community members and farmers’ views of prominent agricultural issues in California’s Central Valley to explore possible beneficial connections between sustainable agriculture and rural community development, and to determine where this nationally important agricultural region stands in terms of making these connections.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Conceptual Framework: Sustainable Agriculture And Community Development

The need for an agriculture that makes more sustainable use of natural resources has become increasingly clear. The pollution of our soil, water, and air are but a few of the detrimental environmental impacts of many agricultural practices still commonly used. At the same time, a need for improvements in the social and economic sustainability of farming is also gaining publicity in the wake of the continuing loss of family farms; growth of suburban sprawl; high health risks and low compensation rates to and resulting loss of vitality among rural communities nationwide.

Some authors have begun to address these diverse issues holistically by linking sustainable agriculture to community development, suggesting that a shift to more sustainable farming practices—which rely more on natural ecological processes than on synthetic chemical interventions—will not only protect the natural environment, but will also inherently benefit rural communities (Bird). Proponents of this view have used socioeconomic as well as philosophical perspectives to argue for the community benefits of sustainable agriculture.

One socioeconomic argument relates to farm structure and rests on the assumption that sustainable agriculture is more labor-, information-, and management-intensive.

Therefore, it is thought to favor smaller, family run farms over larger corporate farms;

To our knowledge, the argument that sustainable agriculture will lead to a predominance of smaller farms has yet to be empirically substantiated and is likely to vary by crop and region. However, the second part of the argument, that smaller farm size benefits rural communities, has already been widely documented. Many scholars have shown that larger, more industrially organized farms with less personal forms of ownership tend to have negative socioeconomic consequences for local communities. Also demonstrate empirically that small and firms of many types
(not just farms) tend to be more “anchored to place by social and economic relationships” (1998: 404) and thereby foster higher levels of civic engagement within rural communities. This engagement, in turn, enhances community welfare according to several standard indicators. One additional economic argument is that sustainable farming practices tend to require more locally produced inputs, to replace obtained in distant markets, and so they will increase local trade and support businesses within communities. Preliminary evidence, however, suggests that the latter cannot happen when local economies are not yet set up to provide the types of inputs alternative farmers need. Some authors attribute community benefits to a presumed tendency of sustainable agriculture to bring about a more communally minded style of farming through its very philosophy. According to and, this philosophy advocates not only working in concert with nature, but also cooperating with one’s neighbors and fostering a communal spirit.

Such claims suggest that because sustainable farmers must understand the relationships between their crops and the surrounding environment, they are also more predisposed to view themselves as embedded in local community relations that are essential to their well-being. Flora likewise argues that sustainable agriculture, with its food quality concerns, is inherently more consumer-oriented and more closely tied to local markets. Sustainable farmers, therefore, may be intrinsically more disposed towards civic participation and working together to achieve regional self-sufficiency.

Civic participation, in turn, can benefit the farmers themselves by helping them to build social capital. According to Putnam and Coleman,

Social capital is the set of resources inherent in interpersonal relationships and social organization that can be used to enhance cooperation for mutual benefit. These resources include not only family and community relationships, but also norms of reciprocity and relations of authority and trust. Social capital can facilitate effective resource mobilization and community-based problem solving. Sustainable farmers in particular need to facilitate such processes to develop alternative information services and knowledge networks as well as alternative input sources and stable markets for their products. Social capital that extends into the wider, non-farming community can also help rural communities and farmers. A consuming public that understands how a healthy food system works and that sees the links between its own health and the health of farm communities is more likely
to support policies beneficial to agriculture. Sustainable farmers especially need the support of educated consumers in order to survive within the dominant economic and policy framework that often still favors more industrial scale and conventional modes of production. Consumers can develop an understanding of agriculture through appropriate education and by engaging with farmers in direct marketing mechanisms such as subscription farming, farmers markets, and farm-to-school programs. An already abundant literature on local food systems details the numerous
economic and social benefits accruing to both farmers and consumers when they are re-connected in direct marketing schemes.

In this exploratory paper we will investigate the connections between sustainable agriculture and community development by drawing on interviews with farmers and community stakeholders from Guang Zhou Valley. We will focus on a few key questions as a means of exploring a selection of the broader arguments outlined above. Do farmers practicing a more environmentally sustainable agriculture also engage in local community problem-solving initiatives and community-based organizations? Do they use local, direct marketing efforts and do community members see these efforts leading to greater economic sustainability? Do these farmers place greater value on civic participation? Do non-farming residents of these farmers’ rural communities understand the challenges and rewards of farming, thereby demonstrating the presence of social capital on which those in the sustainable agriculture movement might draw to influence public policy? What are the public education and policy implications of the answers to these questions.

Local Situation: Agriculture and Community in Guangzhou

There are some characteristics of Guangzhou that make it a useful place to study the sustainability of agriculture and the feasibility of local communities. The suburbs of Guangzhou grow fruit, nuts and vegetables. The production of such products accounts for more than half of the total supply in Guangzhou.

Guangzhou is also considered to be the world leader in economic agriculture, and boasts that its agricultural environment regulations are the most stringent in China. More and more sunny farmers are turning to more biologically oriented and ecologically oriented farming methods.

Guangzhou is also affected by urbanization with the highest population growth rate and high speed. About 30,000 acres of cultivated land are converted into urban land each year. Such high-speed changes in farmland will inevitably lead to rising land prices, changes in tax structure, and other fiscal pressures that will affect the sustainable economic development of agriculture.

Despite these rapid changes and the possession of a dollar agricultural industry, Guangzhou still has some of the poorest communities. Many of the communities in this area are made up of immigrant farm workers who are trapped in an economic structure with a very steep work pyramid.

Furthermore, we particularly wanted to focus on civic engagement of farmers and their direct connections to local consumers and other members of their communities, since these seemed important for building social capital and benefits.
RESULTS

This section details the results of the interviews with each group of respondents. It is organized into two main topic areas: (1) perceptions of sustainable agriculture; and (2) perceptions of interactions between farmers and communities.

Perceptions of Sustainable Agriculture

Farmers. Most of the farmers interviewed were already self-selected, belonging to an organization and a program that specifically promotes sustainable agriculture, and so all were familiar with the term. However, they noticed some initial skepticism and defensiveness among other growers when first introduced concepts locally. The reasons for these negative attitudes were thought by some to stem from the language used in early attempts to promote BIOS. These early attempts failed to acknowledge that careful business planning usually goes into farmers’ use of conventional practices, and it implied instead that conventional farmers simply used chemical sprays in a reckless manner, with no consideration for the environment. While the interviewees’ comments specifically addressed CAFF activities, they could be construed as characterizing some farmers’ negative perceptions of the sustainable agriculture movement generally. On the other hand, many of the farmers interviewed noted that other local farmers were starting to adopt more sustainable practices, including those promoted in, once they saw the economic and/or environmental benefits, and once these tangible advantages were more directly communicated to them.

Community stakeholders. When asked about their perceptions of sustainable agriculture, most of the community stakeholders from both Counties noted that they were unfamiliar with the term. Only three of the respondents from County were conversant with “sustainable agriculture practices” and knew farmers who used them. Only two respondents from County had more than a superficial understanding of how the term “sustainable” relates to agriculture. Overall, while understanding of the term was generally superficial, reaction to it tended to be positive. On the other hand, a few respondents rejected the notion that “sustainable” farmers should be distinguished in any way from “conventional” farmers on the grounds that all farmers are environmental stewards and that the purchase of grown products is a matter of consumer choice rather than food health or safety. In a similar vein, one respondent noted that he did not think that sustainable farmers constituted a fundamentally different type of farmer, but simply were farmers who were “on the leading edge or willing to make a difference.” In addition, a few respondents from County also cautioned that the term “sustainable” might be negatively perceived as synonymous with “no growth” or increased environmental regulations.

Farmer management strategy interviews. The Q methodology resulted in three distinct groups of growers. For ease of reference, we labeled each group with a name that captured some of their most distinctive qualities, based on which types of statements the growers in each group ranked most highly. Environmental Stewards
were most interested in managing resources in cooperation with nature and decreasing pesticide use on the farm as a way of improving living and working conditions. They placed a higher priority on conserving natural resources than on getting the highest possible yields all the time. They tended to give a neutral rating, expressing neither strong agreement nor disagreement, to statements relating to off-farm and community interests. Production took a more industrial and business-oriented approach to farming. They getting the highest yields and quality ratings, and displayed the least interest in off-farm activities, whether social or employment related. Networking Entrepreneurs placed relatively less emphasis on earning a living from the farm and showed a correspondingly stronger interest in off-farm activities and social interaction, especially for information-seeking purposes. Possibly due to competing interests off-farm, they also showed a tendency towards a strong, business-like cost/benefit approach, in terms of time and money, in choosing farming practices.

Perceptions of Interactions Between Farmers and Their Communities

Farmers. The farmer focus group and interview respondents indicated that, as a whole, farmers seem to interact mostly with other farmers and people directly involved in agriculture and much less so with anyone outside of agriculture. Moreover, some farmers spoke about the possibility of “negative” interactions that might develop with residents of new rural subdivisions who found the noise and odor of some farming practices offensive.

Community stakeholders. Echoing the farmers, community stakeholders also expressed the opinion that many people view farmers as isolated from the broader community, often to their own detriment. One person commented that many farmers “work in their own circles and outside that circle they’re not interested. There’s only a small percentage that will become involved in community events that are not related strictly to agriculture.”

Farmer management strategy interviews. The growers participating in the management strategy interviews were not asked the same questions about farmland preservation and local marketing as were the previous respondents. However, issues of community involvement and local marketing were expressed in the statements they had to prioritize as part of the Q-method procedure. As in the BIOS farmer and community stakeholder interviews, the management strategy interviews revealed that some farmers are much more involved in community activities than others. Production were the most production-focused and the least keen to engage in social and community activities off the farm. For example one farmer noted that “if you are a farmer, you should concentrate on that.” Their statement rankings also indicated that Production tend toward being more private, competitive, and less willing to share information with other farmers.
CONCLUSIONS

The results presented here confirm that links between farm-level environmental sustainability and community-level socioeconomic sustainability in the Central Valley exist, but that the potential for greater concerted effort from many individuals and organizations to strengthen these links is evident. One of the biggest factors that hinders the further development of such links is undoubtedly the commodity export orientation of agriculture in this region. Since it is apparent that this fundamental factor will not change in the near future, some questions for further research arise. Given that some individual growers and organizations are indeed interested in smaller-scale local and regional connections through direct marketing and other means, how big must this fraction of growers be within a given community or region to ensure an adequate capacity for public education and social capital-building that benefits all of agriculture, even those continuing in a more traditional commodity orientation? In other words, is there some “critical mass” needed to fundamentally change the local public’s perceptions and understanding of agriculture, without having to transform the entire agricultural system? Further work should also focus on specific details of how to help those growers who are interested in making a transition to more local marketing. What are the best crop mixes that can optimally utilize existing farm resources currently devoted to commodity production while also appealing to local consumers? Farm-to-school programs at the district level appear to offer the possibility of a large enough buyer base to be able to engage with the existing mixed commodity production system at a level that is profitable enough for multiple commodity growers, such as fruit and nut producers, without the growers having to make large changes to their production base. Are there other institutional buying arrangements that offer similar advantages for fitting into the predominant commodity-oriented system? Finally, what is the potential for larger, growers to interact with the community, even if they continue to participate in global markets?

In the area of environmentally sound agriculture, further research is needed to identify what specific factors have motivated growers to participate in BIOS- and programs and what social and economic impacts their participation has had on their communities.

Finally, how can the large labor base already employed in agriculture be profitably tapped for local food systems? For example, training and incubator programs as well as small business grants and loans might be profitably deployed to assist underemployed agricultural workers to develop their capacity to become involved in local businesses in areas such as small-scale direct marketing and agritourism, for their own benefit as well as that of regional economies. Many workers are of Mexican origin, and, as previously mentioned, substantial numbers of small-scale immigrant farmers from South and Southeast Asia also populate the Central Valley. Work with these populations is needed to determine what aspects of
environmental and community sustainability are most important to them and how they might be able to contribute to larger-scale regional sustainability.

Ultimately, supporters of both ecological agriculture and community development will have to work together to build larger communities of interest with the power to marshal the social, political, and economic support needed to address intertwined issues of environmental and community sustainability.

REFERENCES

2. Herinz Strebel. Industrial Recycling Networks as An Entrance into Circular Economy.