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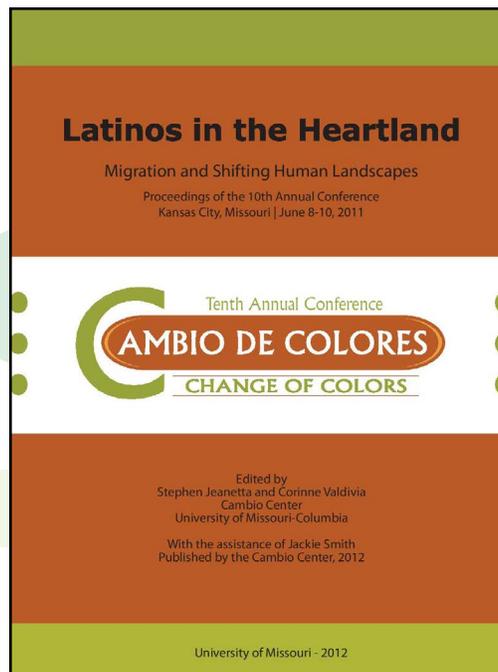
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Involving Immigrant Latino Farmers in Local Food Systems: A Community Capitals Approach

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Abstract

Using the community capital framework, this study analyzes two projects that engage immigrants (Latinos) in gardening. The first project focuses on creation and implementation of a farm incubator program for both immigrant Latino farmers and beginning native (Anglo) farmers and the subsequent organization of a local foods group in a non-metropolitan Iowa community. The second project revitalizes a community garden by involving immigrants (Latinos). The paper uses multiple sources and methods to document the successes and shortcomings in building a multicultural food system. These include focus groups with Latino/a farmers and organizers of the program, participant observation, notes from steering committee meetings, analysis of participatory evaluations, and content analysis of documents from meetings and classes.

Human, social, and cultural capitals are essential elements for these programs to succeed. The interaction among these three capitals mobilizes other community capitals for program improvement. However, in a multicultural situation, these capitals can inadvertently challenge continuity and success. The intergroup relations that emerge from the interaction among these capitals can be unpredictable. Recommendations center on how to reduce risk in mobilizing the most critical community capitals.

Introduction

Using complexity theory and the community capital framework, this study analyzes the creation and implementation of a farm incubator program for both immigrant Latino farmers and beginning Anglo (European American) farmers and the subsequent organization of a local foods group in a non-metropolitan Iowa community. We also examine the effort to rejuvenate a partially declining Latino community gardening effort in a second community. Both communities are meatpacking communities, and meatpacking was the initial magnet that attracted immigrant populations that are culturally distinct from the descendants of immigrants that arrived during and following the settlement period to rural Iowa. The effort to involve Latino immigrants in local food systems was based on the assumption that Iowa needs a new generation of community-scale organic and sustainable farmers and market gardeners and that Latino immigrants, many of whom have previous experience in agriculture, whether in their country of origin or in other parts of the U.S., have much to contribute to the resurgence of food production for local use.

The centerpiece grant for developing the work in the two communities was a two-year grant to Iowa State University Sociology Extension, from the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University that included over \$60,000. Other sources of funds were important contributors, such as: 1) \$25,000 from two local and regional foundations for which the Leopold Center grant provided the match to cover the cost of hiring a farm manager at the community college; 2) a \$10,000 grant from the Organic Farming Research Foundation to the community college; and 3) a grant from the National Immigrant Farmer Initiative to build production and marketing capacity among immigrant community gardeners received by the RC&D.

The authors of this paper were participants in these two projects, taking the roles of evaluators, coordinators, interpreters, grant directors, Extensionists, and researchers. Most of us played more than one role. We do not pretend to be writing this paper from a disinterested point of view; quite the contrary, we are committed to positive outcomes.

Conceptual Framework:

The Community Capitals Framework provides a way of looking at system change by analyzing the assets mobilized in community-change work across the capitals and the subsequent impacts on the various capitals. Using this approach, we find that human, social, cultural, and political capitals are

essential elements for these programs to succeed, even more than financial capital. The interactions among these four capitals mobilize other community capitals for program improvement. In a multicultural situation, these capitals can inadvertently challenge continuity and success. The intergroup relations that emerge from the interaction among these capitals can be unpredictable.

Social capital, as Portes (1988) suggests, can have negative consequences. Focusing on bonding social capital, he cites four negative features. First, strong bonding capital bars others from access to a particular group or network. This group closure not only strengthens the boundaries that keep others out, it may also prevent individuals within the group from trying new ways of doing things, accumulating wealth, etc. The second negative feature of bonding social capital is when in-group free riding occurs. The third negative aspect of bonding social capital, is the tendency toward conformity, and turning inward. Individuals that do not adhere to the clearly defined and enforced norms of the bounded group feel constricted by the group, and may be driven from the group. Finally, “there are situations in which group solidarity is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society... In these instances, individual success stories undermine group cohesion...” (Portes 1988: 17). Portes calls this downward leveling, or it could also be called, a “victim mentality,” and often results in the more ambitious or outwardly looking members escaping from the group.

An important antidote to the negative aspects of bonding capital is complementing it with bridging social capital. Flora and Flora (2008;126), in examining geographic communities, call the combination of moderate-bonding and strong-bridging social capital “progressive participation.” Rusch (2011) examines multi-ethnic organizing in Detroit through a social capital lens. She argues that willingness to risk establishing multi-ethnic ties (bridging social capital) to build a multi-class and multi-ethnic change organization, varies according to social position, and can be very much related to race and ethnicity. However, those concerns can be overcome if power relations are discussed frankly and interpersonal trust (as aspect of bonding social capital) is established one-on-one. Equally important is diverse individuals acting collectively. This can build interpersonal trust through their actions. Under proper circumstances, bridging and bonding social capital between diverse individuals and organizations can be a virtuous cycle. Attention to political power (a component of political capital) and explicit recognition of cultural capital differences by race and ethnicity and of inequality (financial capital) are all highlighted in Rusch’s conclusion regarding successful community organizing:

“Community organizing offers one philosophy of what is necessary for democratic bridging and a strategy for achieving it. The emphasis on power relations in leadership trainings encourages participants to initiate bridging ties that are pragmatic and respectful of diverse communities. Attention to power dynamics and systematic inequalities is not incompatible with the development of interpersonal trust. To the contrary, Paul Lichterman (2005) has observed that community groups have greater success with political collaboration when they engage in reflexive discussions of inequality and personal experiences. Organizing methods have been developed to create bridging relationships across deep social divisions. Their example suggests that without explicit attention to power relations, well-intentioned bridging efforts risk reinforcing inequality and compounding mistrust,” (Rusch 2009: 499).

Integration processes of new immigrants have been historically determined by the dominant identity of European Americans (King 2000). These processes have been characterized by an ideology that contends that American means white, and the Americanization (assimilation) process has been reflected in immigration policies that have historically reinforced this view (King 2000). At a local level, acculturation is driven by dominant groups that have access to knowledge, information, and political power. In the U.S., policies from 1920s and 1930s still have strong influence in the Americanization process and in people’s imagination which requires immigrants to give up their previous sense of group identity in order to make them Americans (King 2005). This false sense of “one people” is not real (King 2005) in daily life, where group differences make inclusion of immigrants and other minority groups more difficult. Small towns in Iowa, where cultural and ethnic diversity is a new (or renewed) phenomenon, shows the hegemony of white America is still palpable and the cultural and political differences with

culturally diverse urban America “are barely reconcilable” (King 2005, p.117). While issues of ethnic/racial dominance and subordination were previously at the forefront in these same communities, the current descendents of those who experienced both sides of those divides were not alive then and the strong force of Americanization has limited or even erased the transmission of those experiences across the generations. In this scenario, power is exercised over disadvantaged groups by those who have access to knowledge and can implement discourses and practices “of truth” (Foucault 1994) about what should be done. Knowledge (human capital) becomes a unique truth and is exercised by dominant groups and those that have access to educational institutions, which is reinforced through what Bourdieu calls the *modus operandi* (Bourdieu 2004, p 88).

In our experience with immigrants in small towns of Iowa, human and political capitals (knowledge and power) influenced social and cultural differences which are used either as attributes or barriers, depending on the dormant groups’ interests. Community organizing and social change have an important role in overcoming these kinds of power barriers (Biklen 1983), particularly for the inclusion of new immigrants in small towns in the Midwest. But, these efforts can also be determined by unpredictable results as a consequence of the dynamics of power between community organizers and participants (Biklen 1983). Immigrant inclusion needs to be analyzed from complex dynamics approaches which need to leave room for unpredictability, uncertainty, flexibility, and innovation (Geyer 2004).

Our experience in working with immigrants and local food efforts in Iowa shows that new social relationships are intersected by critical aspects, such as trust (a component of social capital), political power (political capital), knowledge (human capital), and ethnic and cultural differences (cultural capital). The two cases we will examine involve more subtle and unrecognized, but nonetheless hegemonic, behavior that inadvertently excludes Latinos and immigrants from the local food system.

We sought to devise a program that incorporates (Latino) immigrant farmers and gardeners into local food systems in Iowa and to learn from the process to inform future efforts in Iowa. Two approaches, to that end, were tried in two communities with substantial immigrant populations. One approach was to train both Anglo (native white) and Latino aspiring farmers to participate as tenants on a community college-owned incubator farm and the other was to rejuvenate a community garden program that had been started by the local subsidiary of a regional meat packing firm for its employees with strong support of city government.

Collaboration to build and strengthen local food systems that feature multicultural value chains underpinned the project. Researchers attempted to link Latino organizing efforts with grassroots planning for local food systems. This included: 1) bringing new vegetable/specialty growers (immigrant and native-born) together with experienced local growers and professionals; 2) establishing a bilingual farmer training program with opportunity to rent plots for organic production at a reasonable rate; and 3) planning and developing marketing systems that link these small-scale growers with local consumers looking for healthy, locally grown produce.

The Leopold Center grant had the following objectives:

1. Develop organizations and institutional structures in the two communities to support new immigrant farmers and local multicultural food value chain development, and to develop bilingual training/outreach materials to facilitate implementation of local multicultural food systems.
2. Initiate, expand, evaluate, and adjust collaborative project leadership to involve local Latino leaders and build on a previous project for training Extension and Iowa-based USDA officials to work with Latino farmers, with an ultimate outcome being that Latinos and Anglos would be working and socializing together for a common future. Specific accomplishments would include helping beginning Latino/immigrant farmers to gain access to microcredit programs, establishing equitable market linkages between Latino farmers/market gardeners and a variety of local buyers, including restaurants, grocery stores, processors, schools and other institutional buyers, and direct marketing to consumers.
3. To make the lessons and bilingual training/outreach materials from these pilot efforts useful to other communities in Iowa and the Midwest

Approach and Methods:

The data for this study were gathered during the development of the projects described below. Results from focus groups with gardeners and beginning farmers, community organizers, evaluation reports, field notes, and materials previously presented in conferences and meetings, are inputs into this paper. The evaluation of the incubator farm project included: 1) focus groups with Latino farmers and with the project collaborative; 2) discussions with project organizers; and 3) a review of project-related documents. The focus group with four Latino farmers, three ISU students, an Anglo resident and the farm manager, elicited their views on the farming experience, training, and the community college. At the community gardens site, two of the Spanish-speaking co-authors interviewed all the stakeholders and the gardeners. The stakeholders were interviewed individually and the gardeners participated in focus groups that were conducted to give an overall picture of the social and political dynamics involved in the gardening project, the interaction among the community garden's participants, and their points of view about the impact of this project. (Emery 2010).

At the community college site, the project developed an eight-week bilingual, bicultural training program for Latino and Anglo (European American) beginning farmers to prepare them to farm vegetables and to assist them in the first year as tenants on the community college incubator farm. The course was offered through the continuing education program at the community college. In addition, the beginning farmers received assistance in direct marketing through a regional farmers market and aid in selling to regional retail outlets.

The new farmers held other jobs that kept them very busy, so the class was offered from 2–5 p.m. on Sundays. It was decided that the classes would also serve as family time, with activities planned for the children to introduce them to farming as well. For these families, being active together, around producing and preparing food, was an important legacy and identity to pass on to their children. Students took turns bringing ethnic foods for snacks. A list of interpreters and translators were developed to bridge the language barrier during the course and the seed selection. Handout materials were both in English and Spanish. For the teaching of the class, farmer-presenters were paired with professionals that ranged from Iowa State University (ISU) extension specialists, a private food business consultant, a Practical Farmers of Iowa staff person, and students from ISU's graduate program in sustainable agriculture. The farmer-teachers had fruit and vegetable or mixed-crop livestock farms. They produced high-value products rather than commodities, and generally had small acreages compared to their corn and soybean counterparts in Iowa, thus, they could empathize with the students' aspirations to become small-scale market gardeners and small livestock producers. This combination of professionals and farmers helped us show the students that there are people out there, already working on the improvement of their farming practices. These farmers were convinced that the healthier the farming practices, the healthier our bodies and our environment, and that you can actually make a living of it. They shared their practical knowledge, making the class very accessible for the students. In addition, the Iowa Foundation for Microenterprise and Community Vitality (IFMCV) and a representative from the state Farm Services Agency (FSA/USDA), made brief presentations to the class to let the students know about potential sources of funding for beginning farmers.

Seventeen individuals, half Anglo and half Latino, were trained in the first class and of the six teams of farmers that rented land from the incubator farm, five were Latino families. Three teams sold produce in a large Farmers' Market in a metropolitan center, an hour-long drive from the incubator farm, and one experimented with selling directly to local and regional retailers.

The class was repeated in 2010 with similar numbers and diversity of students. The class was again about half Anglo and half Latino. A greater emphasis was placed on developing farm plans. The section on obtaining external financing was dropped since it was clear from the first year's experience that people were not ready to expand their operations to a point where financing was an issue. Only two Latino families continued as tenants on the incubator farm in 2010, and several new Anglo farmers participated, essentially reversing the ratio of the two groups.

The effort in the other community was aimed at broadening the number of local organizations involved

in planning and executing the community garden program, that was initiated a few years earlier, by the Human Relations department of one of the meatpacking plants in the town. In 2010, there were only two empty plots, of the 20 offered, for gardening. For the 2011 season, the second year of the rejuvenation project, the number and size of plots was increased and tenancy expanded from Latinos-only to include Anglo gardeners.

This site involved the collaboration of: 1) the regional Resource Conservation and Development entity (RC and D, an NGO with participation of the Natural Resource Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture); 2) the city government (which provided the land and installed a new hydrant in the first year of the project); 3) the New Iowans Center; and 4) Iowa State University Extension, which provided the coordinator, a co-author of this article. The collaboration of local organizations in the community gardens project was so strong and enthusiastic by the fall of 2010, that the ISU team relinquished its role and allowed the effort to be organized entirely by local partners, with oversight provided by the RC and D. The new volunteer coordinator was a Master Gardener, trained through the ISU Extension Master Gardener program.

Results and Discussion:

The three foci of the project: 1) building a successful and sustainable collaborative to support Latino/immigrant participation in local foods systems; 2) creating a farm incubator to support successful small farming efforts; and 3) designing a model that can be applied elsewhere, were intended to lead to more inclusive, diverse communities, organizations and institutions and to stronger, viable local food systems. However, none of the three objectives was fully achieved:

1. Latino/Immigrant Participation in Local Foods Systems:

An outgrowth of the monthly leadership team meetings that governed the development of the incubator farm was an effort to develop a local food system consisting of individuals throughout the food value chain. The regional RC&D took the lead in organizing a series of four community meetings (held on Monday nights, when most Latino families would be unable to attend) that culminated in the establishment of a vibrant local foods organization. It was established in November 2009, published a local foods directory for the area 30 miles around the county seat and held periodic dinners that featured local foods and speakers. One Latino, a restaurant owner, serves on the board of the local food group, but does not attend regularly. A Latino family that participates in the farm incubator attends occasionally. The Board made a strategic decision not to expend precious human resources to assure that Latino immigrants (who now make up nearly one-fourth of the population of the city) were active participants. One leader expressed that both goals of establishing a local food group, and involving Latinos in it, were important goals, but that focusing on the former did not negate bringing in Latinos later. An earlier effort, in 2008, was attempted under auspices of this project that sought initially to develop two local foods groups, one Latino, the other European American. Later, when each was strong, the two groups were merged. Latino immigrants participated actively in the initial meetings, but that effort did not prosper for reasons not related to the approach being used. In the community gardens case, we believe a successful handing-off of responsibility to a local team for coordinating the effort occurred. The fact that there are Latino advocates on the team, facilitated by the fact that the community is approaching 50 percent Latino population, and has an increasing number of Latinos in responsible positions in city government and elsewhere, is helpful in that regard. The weak link in terms of interest is the meatpacking plant, which recruits its workers to participate in the garden. It will be interesting to see, now that the gardens are open to all residents, whether the number of Latino gardeners diminish or grow in number over time.

2. A Successful Farm Incubator That Includes Latino Immigrant Tenants:

The farm incubator now has a completed washing and packing shed on the premises (dedicated in June 2010), thanks to an earmark from the local Congressman and the support of a local Foundation. The community college has been hit by budget cuts and has been unable to devote enough of its own resources to make the farm prosper. While there is strong moral support from the administration, it

remains on the side of the main function of the college, to provide post-secondary training through academic course work. It may be that a farm incubator, with a focus on immigrant farmers, would be more successful if it were not directly linked to an educational institution. The incubator (with the wash and pack station and perhaps later an institutional kitchen) may prosper in the future, but more closely linked to the academic objectives of the community college.

3. *Designing a Model That Can be Applied Elsewhere:*

In a curious way, the third objective came closest to fruition. Clearly, a good deal was learned from the experience. We learned a lot about designing and delivering a multi-cultural farm training program to both Anglos and Latino immigrants with widely varying levels of formal education. We will assist another farm incubator organization in Des Moines with a training program for beginning immigrant and refugee farmers.

Conclusions

The theory of change embedded in the project proposal focused on Latino/immigrant farming experiences, primarily in terms of market participation and income generation. The initial motivation was to produce food for friends and family. The community gardens effort in Denison calls into question the efficiency and efficacy of encouraging community gardeners to become market gardeners, at least in the short term. This generalization appears to be true for Latino-immigrant community gardeners, but may apply more broadly. It appears to be more appropriate to embrace the interest they have in producing food for their family and friends, and seek ways to measure the positive effect that expansion of community gardening can have in other areas.

The evaluation data indicates that emerging Latino/immigrant gardeners and farmers may be as motivated, or more, by four other factors: 1) providing family and friends with a better diet and perhaps lowering food costs; 2) finding ways to involve children in traditional cultural activities related to farming; 3) offering a way to give back to the community; and 4) providing an enjoyable, recreational activity for the farmer and his/her family.

These factors, while not contributing to the local foods value chain, do contribute to the project's goals of increasing family self sufficiency, making friends across cultures, building trust across the community, and supporting emerging Latino leadership. Hence, a greater focus on community gardens, rather than farm incubators, seems merited. Better yet, a robust community garden program may feed into a farm incubator program. This is the approach that a group of organizations are attempting in metropolitan Des Moines.

Returning to the conceptual framework, the development of local foods systems should be approached from a community organizing perspective. This approach includes, a progressive participation approach in building multicultural and multi-class coalitions for the purpose of strengthening local food systems, improving nutrition of children, youth and adults, and changing policies to facilitate local foods value chains (Cite Leopold Center Food and farm Plan and IFSC policy paper here.)

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