A Priority Research Agenda for Agriculture of the Middle

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Why Another Research Agenda?

Although multiple agricultural research agendas have been proposed in the last decades, most (but certainly not all) are fairly generic and bland. This may be process-related, as diverse advisory groups often develop lists limited to items they can all agree on (Lockeretz and Anderson 1993). In contrast, the agenda-setting process described here collected research ideas from a more focused set of respondents – food and agricultural researchers within universities, government agencies, and nonprofits. The resulting agenda, developed by the researchers themselves, is designed to encourage better targeting of research on topics related to Agriculture of the Middle (AOTM).

AOTM is a five-year-old initiative addressing the problem of the disproportionate disappearance of midsize farms and ranches in the US, and the markets and infrastructure needed to maintain their viability (http://www.agofthemiddle.org/). From the beginning, the initiative identified research as a critical component. Information is lacking on new models that would enable farmers and other community entrepreneurs to become full partners in business ventures, so that they and their communities can improve their economic viability.

In the last decade, many of the most important issues—for example, climate change, bioenergy, and local and regional food supplies—have required new thinking and research that crosses disciplines. Advancing AOTM poses similar challenges. As such, a central goal of this project is to encourage cross-pollination among agricultural researchers. We also hope that, through exposure to relevant and viable research ideas such as those presented here, scholars will be inspired to conduct more of the research so needed in this field.

How Did We Get The Information?

The motivation for the project arose from two sources. The first was the Organic Farming Research Foundation (OFRF)'s interest in a social economic research agenda for organic and sustainable agriculture to complement its research agenda for organic production. The second was the work of the USDA multi-state research project NC 1036, "Research and Education Support for the Renewal of an Agriculture of the Middle," which was formed to encourage and seek funding for research useful to the AOTM mission.

In phase one of the project, 15 researchers from around the country were interviewed by phone and asked to describe their top four priority research projects for moving organic and sustainable agriculture forward. The compilation of those ideas was completed in 2008 and can be found at the OFRF website (http://ofrf.org/networks/scoar_products/socioeconomic-research-agenda.pdf). Phase two included interviews with 35 more researchers from a broader spectrum of disciplines, all of whom were interested in AOTM and almost all of whom were working on related research. Phone interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2009.

The respondents were asked to describe three specific research projects that would best further the goals of AOTM. Responses were placed in nine clusters, with a total of 125 priority research projects gathered from the 50 individual researchers. Since our intent was to produce a smaller list of the highest priority projects, the categorized list was returned to all respondents. They were asked to first choose three of the nine clusters, and then select one to three specific ideas from each of the three clusters. Eighty percent of the respondents returned their priorities, and the items were organized into the agenda presented below.

Which Ideas Ranked Highest?

The 18 highest priority research ideas were found in four of the nine prioritized clusters: impacts, incentives, scale, and value chains.

There are several things to note. First, there appeared to be overlap in some of the research ideas on the original list sent to respondents for their prioritization. However, within a research discipline and a researcher's own framework, the outcome of similar sounding projects may be quite different. For this reason, and to stay true to the specificity of each idea as described by the researchers, related ideas were not aggregated (although identical ideas were). Second, two of the priorities are phrased as collections of ideas related to cost and farm size, respectively. Although they could certainly be studied as such, they more likely would be divided into separate research efforts. Third, many of the ideas listed do not incorporate the possible effects of important variables, such as climate change, energy availability and prices, and water availability, which will be crucial to a carefully crafted alternative research agenda. Thus, a more comprehensive perspective will need to be considered when proceeding with the research ideas presented here.

The four categories, and the research priorities found within each of them, are designed to serve as points of departure for establishing a new research program for sustainable agriculture and food systems in the 21st century, with particular attention to Agriculture of the Middle issues.

Impacts

Analyze the economic impact of local food production, including supply and demand at the local level

Measure the multiple benefits of different agricultural production systems, including more lifecycle analyses of their components

Compare the internal and external costs of sustainable and conventional production and processing with regard to the environment, food prices, infrastructure development, incorporation of new elements into sustainability, standards, and new uses such as bioenergy

Document positive and negative effects of one-size-fits-all food safety regulations and policy

Conduct case studies of how improved access to land and capital has increased social equity for low resource farmers

Identify the policies and programs that would be most successful in increasing the access of low-income populations to high-quality food

Incentives

Study factors, such as policy and values, influencing the ecosystem services produced by midsized farms

Examine how federal and state policy can encourage the transition of more midsized farms to organic production

Conduct a national study on the differences in county permitting/licensing processes that affect small- and mid-scale production and processing

Design and evaluate incentive programs and packages that reward farmers for building up capital (e.g. soil, water, community)

Scale

Assess policies that influence the profitability of different size farms producing different commodities

Measure the effects of farm size on energy use, product demand, farm income, types of crops across different regions, provision of ecosystem services, biomass production, food safety, and sustainable technology

Explore options for scaling up from local to regional markets

Determine which food safety regulatory costs are scale neutral (or not)

Value chains

Conduct more case studies/evaluations of marketing systems including wholesale and retail sourcing, markups throughout the supply chain, short supply chains, margins for distributors who aggregate products from small-scale producers, and viable models for small and mid-scale meat processing

Look at how the dynamics inside food value chains are different when the driver of the chain is different

Examine, in depth, how partners come together to explore and develop a food value chain

Determine how existing policies can be combined in a way to support food value chain development

Where Do We Go From Here?

Existing research on several of these ideas has already begun to inspire action and legislative efforts. We believe that more and better research can make important contributions to groups of farmers seeking to change their operations, entrepreneurs interested in developing new value chains, local suppliers seeking to scale up to a regional level, cities and regions that wish to address food insecurity in new ways, and policy makers who can be instrumental in changing policies to facilitate all these efforts. We hope that this agenda will inspire researchers to explore these issues and begin tailoring their research with these goals in mind.

Reference

Lockeretz, W. and Anderson, M.D. (1993). *Agricultural Research Alternatives*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press. 239 pp.

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