



PICTURED: A farmer in Sandwich, New Hampshire/A.Cline/Shutterstock

BEYOND THE WEST:

Linking Creative Farming to Economic Mobility and Rural Development in New England

By Kathleen Liang

“Everyone loves this farm and stops by to see the animals and enjoy the stories. Our farm is only 19 acres. We produce vegetables and fruits. We also take in rescue horses and sheep, give away food to those in need, and give away compost to people who have vegetable gardens – just making this spot a better place in this world!”

-- An Anonymous Farmer's Response to the author's Survey

ISSUES CONCERNING ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND RURAL/COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN THE U.S.

Successful community development strategies often involve a creative mindset and an entrepreneurial spirit, which lead to improvement of economic mobility for an individual, a family, or a cluster of people who seek improvement of their income, social status, or quality of life. In recent years many individuals, families, and enterprises in the U.S. have been challenged by recession, financial instability, and volatile domestic and international markets. Significant job loss in manufacturing sectors has pushed many communities out of prosperity and optimism.

A large volume of existing literature has linked economic mobility to resource availability, environmental endowment, economic opportunities, and income distribution (Brown et al., 2014; Liang and Dunn, 2015a). Factors such as poverty, declining land value, environmental degradation,

and volatile economic structure seem to be major constraints that prevent individuals and families from achieving reasonable goals of economic mobility. The agriculture industry often provides the underpinning development framework for many rural communities by offering and maintaining primary resources and services. Given the pressure from highly competitive markets, many farm operators need to seek and generate innovative opportunities to achieve economic mobility. The 2012 Census of Agriculture has revealed that the number of farms has been slowing and steadily declining over time, and a growing percentage of farm operators have introduced diversified activities such as agritourism, value added, direct sales, and off-farm jobs to supplement farm income (USDA, NASS, 2012).

Many small farms in New England, for example, have introduced farm tours, sold at farm stands or farmers' markets, organized educational and training workshops, and sought off-farm employment opportunities. The 2012 Census of Agriculture reported over 92 percent of the farmers in New England had participated in off-farm work. These “creative farm operators and family members” have developed managerial strategies and engage in activities and services beyond producing conventional food and fiber by building a collaborative network to improve economic mobility that are mutually beneficial to People (farmers, local residents in farming communities, and consumers), Place (communities to include farming and non-farm activities), and Prosperity (farm income and profits, health of local farming communities, quality of life for farmers/farm families and consumers or local residents).

SURVEYS TO IDENTIFY CREATIVE FARMING AND OFF-FARM EMPLOYMENT

A series of surveys were funded by the USDA to explore how off-farm jobs interface with increasing volume of diversification and contribute to economic mobility for farm households and others in communities in New England (Liang, 2015; Liang and Dunn, 2015b; Liang and Dunn, 2014a; Liang and Dunn, 2014b). With the assistance of the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Services (NASS), all farm operators (33,112) in New England were invited to participate and the reference year was 2011. Information gathered from surveys included:

- Farming operation, profile, diversification categories, participation in government programs, and how farmers connect with other farmers and organizations for advice, training, education, and technical support.
- Financial information regarding estimated sales and expenses in dollars with respect to conventional distribution/sales, direct sales to non-conventional outlets, agritourism activities, and value added production beyond fresh produce and meat products.
- Individual demographics, family/household composition, and off-farm income of farm households including types of jobs and income in dollars.
- Reasons, challenges, entrepreneurial characteristics, and expectations/future outlook as the result of their participation in diversified farming activities.

Totally 1,029 farm operators responded to detailed farm surveys, and 450 respondents had also included detail off-farm income and sources. We defined four income levels using the off-farm job title and income provided by survey participants, and calculated percentage of respondents in each category:

- 15 percent of respondents - High with income levels of \$80,000 or more including doctors, lawyers, professors, presidents and other similar highly educated individuals;

- 71 percent of respondents - Middle with incomes between \$30,000 and \$80,000 including teachers, nurses, truck drivers, plumbers, and other similar occupations;
- 10 percent of respondents - Low with incomes less than \$30,000 including laborers, teacher's aids, part-time workers, and other similar occupations and others including retired and volunteers; and
- Four percent of respondents - Others include retired people, volunteers, and respondents who did not write in a job title for off-farm work.

Results from our surveys showed that most New England farmers were middle age or older, male, and well-educated. A majority had middle to high incomes from off-farm employment. This same group also farmed small acreages, had low sales, and over a third incurred losses from their farming activity. Over half had diversified agricultural operations and were engaged in off-farm jobs. There seemed to be clear segmentation among different types of off-farm jobs that farm households obtained given levels of education and skills. Many small farm households had high-level to medium-level of off-farm income by working as executive officers, engineers, lawyers, or other leadership positions which obviously demand advanced education and skills. Interestingly, farmers who engaged in more diversified activities did not earn much off-farm income, probably due to time constraints and locations of the farms. It is important to acknowledge that each state in the New England region has various endowments offering farm households various opportunities, such as networks, professional services and support, and broader options of employment. Farmers who have advanced education and skills, and who live closer to metropolitan areas, would be more likely to obtain higher salary jobs.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Economic mobility is critical to rural America, and the agricultural industry plays a key role. The findings of our study support the notion that farm households use a variety of strategies that directly and indirectly contribute to economic mobility and

rural development. Farmers are creative to leverage resources including their own time and intellectual property to generate income for their own families and to offer support to other families. According to our survey results, a combined 86 percent of respondents received between High and Middle off-farm income contribute directly in promoting employment, education, and benefits for other families. This creative process indicates that many farmers in our study are willing to seek opportunities to promote economic mobility and intellectual mobility simultaneously - making themselves "better off" by sharing their own resources in productive ways, thereby creating opportunities and wealth that lead to community prosperity.

Diversification and creative farming have existed in the U.S. for many generations. The discussion of diversification, creative farming, and their impacts on farm households and rural development is an emerging topic. It is essential for researchers, educators, and service providers to help farm families understand the variety of tradeoffs when making decisions. Encouraging diversification and off-farm employment will not directly solve problems such as poverty or unemployment. Scholars have suggested that diversification and off-farm employment have to add income, value, benefits, and satisfactions to farm families and rural communities (Marsden and Sonnino, 2008). The practices of multifunctional agriculture needed to directly contribute to the construction of a new agricultural sector that corresponds to the needs of the wider society and it must reconfigure and re-direct rural resources in ways that lead to wider rural development benefits. (Ellis, 1999). An emerging rural development paradigm should encourage utilization of farm resources to engage in a variety of activities, leading to greater involvement in the local economy, expand income sources for rural families, and reduce the farm's dependence on commodity prices (Ellis, 1999).

Some policy implications need to be considered:

- States and regions should continue to encourage small farms through land use policy in or near urban areas, provide educational opportunities for young people and new farmers interested in

farming, and provide improved and continuous education and Extension assistance for those interested in diversification or seeking off-farm jobs.

- Training, management strategies, and educational information should be appropriate, flexible, and equitable for all stakeholders in states and within the region.
- While regulations are necessary and appropriate, the more understandable, accessible, consistent, and appropriate they are, the easier for regulators, farmers, and the public to meet their shared goals. If local policies encourage farm-direct sales, it should not be more difficult to sell in one state than another. Federal regulations should provide reasonable, scale-appropriate standards and exemptions to allow fair distribution and transportation.
- While many emphasize "local" products (however defined), regional efforts should be considered and encouraged. States should provide more recent, more accessible, and transferable information about regulations, rules, and support provided to creative farming practices or to farmers who need off-farm income to supplement farming operations.

Overall, the key to achieving economic mobility in a rural area relies on a combination of economic and intellectual mobility supported by farm operators and their families as well as other community partners. The ultimate goal to improve, strengthen, and sustain positive rural development is for farm households to achieve the highest satisfaction and for communities to reach higher goals in sustainability and prosperity. •