

Social Sustainability on the Farm

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Introduction

Improving quality of life is a central component of the missions of both the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) Program and University of Vermont Extension. But what does quality of life mean, particularly to Vermont's farm families? To explore this and other social sustainability issues, from 2011 to 2014, the Vermont state SARE program offered a professional development training project for Extension educators and other agricultural service providers.



Entrepreneurship

The vision and adaptability needed by farm business owners to develop, organize and manage a farm business, particularly during periods of change and/or stress.

How you can help farm families:

- Help farmers define family and farm business needs and goals.
- Source or provide reliable technical assistance.
- Foster peer-to-peer networking and idea exchanges.
- Support farmers' ability to adapt their businesses to contemporary issues.

What is Social Sustainability?

Social sustainability is generally defined as the ability of a social system (in this case, a farm) to function at a defined level of social well-being indefinitely. Farms face a myriad of social issues both internally (including health and wellbeing, human resource management, etc.) and externally (interaction with the community). How farm families identify, plan, and manage social sustainability on their farms has significant impacts on the viability of their individual farming operations as well as their communities.



About the Project

The goal of the training was to increase understanding of farm-level social sustainability among Extension educators and other professionals. Social issues were organized into 5 thematic areas (see descriptions on right). Annual on-farm trainings were offered with farmers as instructors, articulating the importance of social issues within their businesses. Round tables and webinars were also held that focused on the specific themes and social indicators.



Results

101 Extension educators and other ag service providers participated in the trainings; 57% increased their knowledge of farm-level social sustainability based on what they learned. Of 17 core Vermont Extension participants, 12 changed their work with farmers to include social sustainability topics; those efforts reached more than 47 farmers, as a result, 27 farmers reported better understanding of social issues and/or reported improvements of social issues on their farms.



Next Steps

To assess household-level social sustainability impacts from education and outreach efforts delivered by Extension and other organizations, the team sought to develop a set of social sustainability indicators and accompanying verification tools for use in programming with farmers. Informational briefs for each of the five social sustainability themes were developed that include definitions, relevancy, suggested actions, and questions that may be used for evaluating programs and measuring outcomes.



Five Themes of Social Sustainability



Health and Well-Being

The state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy.

How you can help farm families:

- Encourage farmers to take breaks.
- Attend to your overall well-being.
- Portray optimism and encouragement in your work.
- Connect them with health insurance and health care providers.
- Know warning signs of suicide, anxiety, and depression, and who to refer to for help.



Community Connections

Also known as "social integration," these are principles by which individuals are related to one another, including the processes of building values, relationships, and institutions necessary to actively participate in society.

How you can help farm families:

- Foster connectedness by supporting access to people and services in their communities.
- Support community-to-farm relations.
- Encourage participation in social and civic activities.



Equity

The ability for all individuals within a community to access the benefits of that community, e.g., information, expertise and support, and capital.

How you can help farm families:

- Offer a safe space that meets a range of learning and personal needs.
- Provide ways for farmers to have a voice and/or to engage in programs and policies that affect them.
- Include *all* stakeholders in project planning and programming.