
SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Overview

Agricultural sustainability is often discussed using a three-component model including environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability. There are currently no regulations in place to directly link organic certification to social sustainability although consumers and producers alike may harbor perceptions regarding differences between organic and conventional agriculture in promoting some sort of social sustainability. These social dimensions can include consumer, producer, and farmworker perspectives. Potential issues to explore with students that relate to organic agriculture include food access and cost to consumers; farmer and farmworker health and well-being; community development; and concentration and diversity of consumers, producers, and farmworkers according to race, ethnicity, and gender. For one overview of human dimensions of sustainable food systems (not specific to organic agriculture), see the report from Allen and Melcarek (2013), which could serve as an introductory reading for students.

Learning Objectives

Concepts

- Social sustainability is not addressed in the organic certification standards, and there is debate about whether social standards belong in organic regulations.
- There is a lack of diversity among farmer operators, and people of color face unique barriers to becoming farmers.

Skills

- Use critical thinking to identify different ways that organic agriculture may or may not impact members of society (consumers, producers, and farmworkers).
- Debate whether “social sustainability” should be incorporated into organic certification regulations, using readings as foundation.
- Identify and communicate barriers and opportunities of organic farming to people of color and women.

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Notes for Instructors

Lesson 1: Organic & Social Sustainability

Description

National Organic Program regulations are eligible for review and change in the future. One area that is not currently addressed in existing regulations relates to social issues such as welfare of farmworkers. Through recent scholarly work, students can engage in open and lively discussion of whether such topics should or should not be addressed in NOP regulations.

Lesson Notes

This discussion has previously been executed in an online class. In our experience, online discussions are most fruitful when each student is required to post their initial thoughts without being able to see the posts of their fellow students. This tends to yield more detailed and thoughtful work from each student. We then require students to respond to at least one other student with questions, comments, or supporting information.

For in class discussions, it may similarly be helpful for students to bring an initial written response with them to be checked at the start of the period to hold them individually accountable for the reading and to encourage participation in the group discussion. If you observe that your students are shy to participate in large group discussion, another strategy to break the ice and increase confidence would be to begin with a “talk to your neighbor” or “think-pair-share” type exercise. For this activity, students would first answer a prompt in conversation with just their neighbor or a small group before bringing it back to a large group discussion.

Performance Expectation

Students will discuss whether social sustainability standards should be included in organic regulations considering the perspectives presented in readings and their own values.

Skills: Critical Thinking

Disciplinary Ideas: Social & Economic Dimensions

Concepts: Ethics and Values

Time

30-45 minutes

Discussion: Organic & Social Sustainability

Additional Background

Several peer-reviewed scholarly articles from the last decade offer a good launching off point for discussion of organic agriculture's role in achieving (or not) social dimensions of sustainability. We recommend the following for consideration but there are certainly others out there. Complete citation information for the following can be found in 'Resources':

- Shreck et al. 2006: address inclusion of social sustainability in certification topic (based on California organic producers)
- Goldberger 2011: examines role of conventionalization and civic engagement in perceptions of sustainability (based on Washington organic producers)
- Finley et al. 2017: tests whether organic farming offers more employment & community development opportunities (based on Washington and California organic producers).
- Dimitri et al. 2017: models decision of retailer to offer organic food for sale (based on Manhattan NY retail landscape)

Notes

If you are trying to avoid a heavy reading load for students, consider the idea of splitting the class in groups where each group reads one paper and then on the day of, small groups comprised of a member of each previous group meet briefly at the start of class to provide paper synopsis to one another ("jigsaw" classroom lesson format) prior to a larger class discussion of the topic as a whole.

Discussion Questions

Do you think organic agriculture is socially sustainable? Should "social certification" or social sustainability issues be a part of the organic certification process in the United States? Support your answer with a few statements of why you have made this decision, and make sure to tie in findings from the readings. To be clear – this is not regarding whether these social issues matter in general in agriculture as a whole, but specifically, whether they result from or should become part of organic certification.

[As always, please be respectful of your peers and with your language. We all have different backgrounds and values. You may connect with this paper, and this issue in particular, in a dramatically different way than a classmate depending on your past experiences. Your classmates may have experience managing a farm and managing workers, or may have experience being a farmworker, or have family who are farmworkers that may have experienced challenges reported here.]

Notes for Instructors

Lesson 1: Diversity and Inclusion

Description

This lesson explores farmer diversity and barriers and successes to inclusion of people of color as farm operators. Only 6.5% of farmer operators in the United States are nonwhite, while people of color are more likely to work in low-earning food positions (Allen and Melcarek 2013). The following assignment asks students to read a selection of readings on this topic and answer questions about the barriers and value of having a more diverse group of farmers.

Lesson Notes

You may consider providing an introductory reading such as “The Human Face of Sustainable Food Systems: Adding People to the Environmental Agenda” (see Resources for permalink).

Possible readings to include:

- Introduction to the book *The Color of Food: Stores of Race, Resilience and Farming*
- *Scientific American* blog article “Organic Synthesis: Towards an Inclusion of African Americans in Organic Farming” [features producers from southeastern US]
- *National Public Radio* article “Black Farmers are Sowing the Seeds of Health and Empowerment” December 2017. [features producers from southeastern US and NYC]
- *TakePart* article “How a Mexican American Farmer is Making Organic Food More Accessible” [features producer from Minnesota]

Performance Expectation

Students will write about diversity and inclusion of farmers of color in the context of the perspectives provided in readings and ethics.

Skills: Ability to Communicate

Disciplinary Ideas: Social & Economic Dimensions

Concepts: Ethics and Values

Time

1 hour (for reading and responding)

Materials

None

Assignment: Diversity and inclusion Writing Prompt

Based on your readings, consider barriers to organic farming by people of color and the value of diversity in organic farming communities. Please respond to the following questions:

1. What are some barriers to organic farming by people of color?
2. What is the value of having a diverse group of food producers?

Resources

Print

Bowens, Natasha. *The Color of Food: Stories of Race, Resilience and Farming*. New Society Publishers, 2015.

This book contains a series of portraits of farmers and food activists of color, highlighting rich food cultures and struggles within these communities.

Dimitri, Carolyn, Jacqueline Geoghegan, and Stephanie Rogus. 2017. Two-stage determinants of the organic food retailing landscape: The case of Manhattan, New York. *Journal of Food Products Marketing*. 23:2, 221-238.

This paper examines where organic food is sold in Manhattan, looking at factors such as the socioeconomic status of neighborhoods.

Finley, Lynn, M. Jahi Chappell, Paul Thiers, and James Roy Moore. 2018. Does organic farming present greater opportunities for employment and community development than conventional farming? A survey-based investigation in California and Washington. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*. 42:5, 552-572.

This study compares the number of workers on farms and the duration of their employment to better understand if organic farms offer better employment opportunities than conventional farms in this region.

Goldberger, Jessica R. 2011. Conventionalization, civic engagement, and the sustainability of organic agriculture. *Journal of Rural Studies* 27, 288-296.

In a survey of organic producers in Washington, this paper examines how sustainable producers

think their operations are, including social sustainability.

Guthman, Julie. 2014. *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. University of California Press.

Guthman is a Professor of Social Sciences at UC Santa Cruz. In this book she examines how organic farming has come to resemble conventional agriculture in a number of ways.

Sachs, C.E, Barbercheck, M.E., Brasier, K.J., Kiernan, N., and Terman, A. 2016. *The Rise of Women Farmers and Sustainable Agriculture*. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City.

This book features women farmers describing their experiences getting into farming and the challenges they encountered. The authors also outline their feminist agrifood systems theory, tying together this study of farming women.

Shreck, Aimee, Christy Getz, and Gail Feenstra . 2006. Social sustainability, farm labor, and organic agriculture: Findings from an exploratory analysis. *Agriculture and Human Values*. 23, 439-449.

Organic farmers in California are surveyed to find out if they think that organic certification should include social sustainability.

Web

Allen, P. and H. Melcarek. 2013. The human face of sustainable food systems: Adding people to the environmental agenda. *Sustainability in the Balance series—Issue Paper No. 5*. Santa Cruz, CA: Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, University of California, Santa Cruz.

https://casfs.ucsc.edu/documents/issue-papers/sust_in_balance_5.pdf

This report covers the current status of a number of social food issues (i.e. food security, pesticide exposure, income distribution, etc..) and offers future directions to address these problems.

Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network

www.saafon.org

This network's mission is to ensure the success of black farmers using sustainable farming methods, with a focus on organic methods.

National Public Radio – Black Farmers are Sowing the Seeds of Health and Empowerment

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/12/16/553748898/black-farmers-are-sowing-the-seeds-of-health-and-empowerment>

This piece follows farmer Chris Newman and his mission to get more people of color involved in farming and food.

Scientific American – Food Matters Blog Post

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/food-matters/organic-synthesis-towards-an-inclusion-of-african-americans-in-organic-farming/>

This blog post covers some of the barriers African American face in farming and highlights the work of the Southeastern African-American Farmers Organic Network is doing to support black organic farmers.

Take Part – How a Mexican American Farmer is Making Organic Food More Accessible

<http://www.takepart.com/article/2016/10/30/a-fforaffor-accessible-organic-food>

This story follows Eduardo Rivera, and his steps to make his CSA more accessible to families of color in his area.