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**LEARNING ABOUT SMALLHOLDER FARMERS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN US:  
THE APPLICATION OF SONDEO METHODOLOGY**

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**Abstract**

*The Gender, Environment, Agriculture and Participation (GEAP) Program at the University of Florida (UF) collaborated with Heifer International (HI) to conduct a study in rural communities in the southeast of the US. This study examined issues of socio-cultural as well as socio-economic nature among smallholder farmers served by HI in Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Tennessee. The researchers utilized a flexible and interactive research methodology, Sondeo. This methodology enabled the research team to disentangle complex social issues within the communities served by HI. This study demonstrates the strength of the Sondeo methodology in providing insightful, complex, and richly textured information about rural communities that is inaccessible through conventional research methods.*

**Introduction**

Although large-scale agriculture is largely growing to the detriment of smallholder farms (Delaney, Undated; Flanagan and Inoyue, Undated), a great diversity continues to exist among smallholder farmers in the southeastern United States (US). This diversity has made it difficult to obtain widespread adoption of new enterprises or technologies among these smallholders. To date there has been little recognition of the importance of addressing small farmer diversity; and as a result, there are few tools to assist in this effort. The growing populations of immigrants to the US also perpetuate this diversity. It is estimated that minorities constitute approximately 17% of the rural population and continue to grow (USDA, Undated). These minorities continue to receive disproportionate attention from development efforts, particularly in agriculture and other related fields (Schelhas and Zabawa (Undated).

Because of the declining relative importance of agriculture in the world's economies, investments in agriculture have increasingly drifted away to focus on other emerging and priority policy areas. On the other hand, attitudinal dispositions towards smallholder agriculture have

been scale-neutral (DFID, 2005; Collins, 2000). Despite renewed interest, smallholder agriculture in the US and in other parts of the world has not benefited from organized agriculture in large part. As a result, there has been only limited improvement in the livelihoods of limited resource farmers.

Comparatively, smallholder agriculture has the capacity to benefit the local economy more than large-scale agriculture (DFID, 2005). Although large-scale agriculture has kept pace with the population growth over the past 50 years (Chambers, 1997) the majority of the world's population farm largely on a small-scale basis (Hildebrand, *et al.*, Undated). Therefore, efforts to better comprehend smallholder farmers remain crucial.

It is argued that limited advancements in smallholder agriculture can be attributed to lack of understanding of the context within which farmers perform farm activities (Hildebrand, *et al.*, Undated); i.e., limited understanding of the livelihood systems of farmers. Livelihood systems pertain to those activities that contribute to the production as well as reproduction of a family unit. The knowledge gap is no exception to the dynamics within families and communities, and on how individuals within such structures interact with one another.

Understanding socio-cultural dynamics is an issue of concern for Heifer International (HI). HI is a non-governmental international organization with a mission "to end world hunger" including impoverished communities in the US Heifer International strives to serve smallholder farmers as well as minority populations within the US in counties with high poverty levels, particularly those with high-minority populations (Anon, 2002). The domestic communities served by HI in the southeastern US represents a diversity of ethnic and socio-cultural groups including African-American, Hispanic, and white farmers.

Since HI recognizes that understanding, socio-cultural issues and livelihood systems are of paramount importance they requested the Gender, Environment, Agriculture and Participation (GEAP) Program at the University of Florida (UF) to identify socio-cultural as well as socio-economic issues in some of the diverse communities served by HI in the southeastern region. The aim of this initiative was to increase the knowledge and understanding of smallholder farmers served by HI in order to increase the effectiveness of service delivery. UF-GEAP utilized the Sondeo methodology to conduct research in communities served by HI.

### **Purpose and Objectives of the Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the effectiveness of the Sondeo methodology in gathering pertinent information from communities served by HI. This methodology allowed gaining a holistic and better understanding of livelihood systems as well as socio-cultural issues of diverse smallholder farmers. An in-depth analysis and assessment of livelihood systems among smallholder farmers is imperative for researchers, policy makers as well as practitioners. Such assessment and analysis serve as a stepping-stone to addressing relevant issues and formulating pathways for achieving set goals.

This paper illustrates the extent to which the methodology enabled the research team to elicit information on socio-cultural issues as well as livelihood systems information that may not be revealed from superficial assessments. This undertaking was made possible through a flexible and interactive methodology that enabled the research team to disentangle complex social issues within the communities.

This manuscript attempts to build and expand on the existing knowledge base about smallholder farmers within HI. It had become a matter of concern when field coordinators from HI recognized that there are limited resources and a reliable knowledge base that begins to

introduce them to issues pertaining to particularly socio-cultural issues affecting the communities they serve.

Although a body of knowledge on socio-cultural issues exists from other parts of the world, particularly developing countries, it is challenging for HI field coordinators to apply it domestically. Therefore, The HI collaboration with UF-GEAP resulted from an attempt to unravel context-specific information (i.e. within the US).

It is important to acknowledge that service delivery performed by particularly HI field coordinators involves a wide array of aspects. This kind of programming does not only focus on identifying project priorities in productive activities, but also encapsulates tasks pertaining to application for funding. With this milieu of tasks awaiting field coordinators, it can be argued that a deeper understanding of the partners is necessary. On the other hand, groups served by HI are located in areas classified under the poorest in the US. Therefore, the provision of effective services to such impoverished communities necessitates a better understanding of issues affecting their livelihoods systems. A Sondeo is one of the promising methodologies that could aid in learning about the groups served by HIP or groups that HIP intends to serve in the future.

### Methods

The researchers conducted the study in several of the communities served by HIP in four southeastern states namely, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee. The communities involved in the study were as follows:

- Three groups in Alabama including West Alabama Farmer's Association, Green County Self-Help Group, and Sinai Self-Help Cooperative;
- The Appalachian Spring Cooperative Honeybee Project in Sneedville, Tennessee; and
- In Georgia, a HI community in Atlanta and representatives from a community in Quincy, Florida.

The research methodology utilized in this study is a form of rapid appraisal technique known as "Sondeo." In Spanish, "Sondeo" refers to the act of sounding out and exploring (Butler, 1995). Unlike statistical data commonly reported in conventional research methods that are mainly extractive in nature, this methodology demonstrated the potential to provide a rapid and preliminary sketch of the target audience. Sondeos are one of the breakthroughs made in the field of agricultural development that allows a broader understanding of farmers' circumstances; and consequently integration of farmers' needs into the research agenda. During the Sondeo, interdisciplinary teams of social and agricultural specialists (UF faculty and students as well as HI field coordinators) conducted informal, unstructured interviews with farmers (Hildebrand, 1981). The research team composition was also highly diverse in terms of academic discipline, nationality, ethnicity and sex.

This study demonstrates the strength of the Sondeo methodology in providing insightful, complex, and richly textured information about rural communities that is inaccessible through conventional research methods. The multidisciplinary nature and participatory approach of the team enables practitioners to develop a clearer understanding of smallholder farmers' priorities and the factors shaping their economic and socio-cultural context (Seevers *et al.*, 1997). When well managed, this knowledge can increase the self-reliance and self-efficacy of resource-limited communities.

Preliminary visits by the research team preceded the process of data collection. This introductory process was meant to raise awareness, facilitate the process, and present the purpose of the intended study to the communities served by HI.

### Results

Traditionally, HI field coordinators begin working with the target audience (usually organized groups seeking assistance) from formative stages of establishing the groups. Usually trained in community development, field coordinators perform duties pertaining to developing proposal for funding purposes (funding is usually pursued with HI). With successful funding from HI, field coordinators continue to provide technical assistance in later stages of partnerships with groups. Therefore, the nature of the tasks performed by field coordinators also necessitates a holistic understanding of the context within which their partners; i.e., smallholder farmers, operate.

Traditional research methods generally rely on the use of structured questionnaires for data collection and this tends to limit the scope the nature of the information that can be gathered. This methodology also limits the ability of the respondents to articulate other issues affecting their day-to-day lives, yet such issues are critical for programming in an organization such as HI.

The GEAP field research team employed the Sondeo methodology that provided not only detailed information about individuals and their families; but also more importantly, a holistic picture of the HI communities, illustrating the interrelationship of diverse aspects of their socio-cultural structure. Informal conversations with community members revealed their perceptions, attitudes and practices in terms of leadership, gender, youth, family, livelihood systems, and other socio-cultural issues. It became apparent during the study that Sondeo can be effective at different stages of program development with HI partners.

The researches classified the results into the following categories:

- Livelihood systems
- The involvement of youth in agriculture and landholding patterns
- Positions occupied within the groups and family

#### *Livelihood systems*

Livelihood systems were mainly centered on agricultural or related activities, and the majority of the group members earned income from pensions because they were retired. Agriculture was considered a part-time engagement because the income derived was not adequate to earn a living. The farmers were quite aware that it is almost impossible to earn a living out of productive practices, but understood that diversification of their practices was important. Other farmers either worked part-time on their farms, usually in the evenings after a workday, or one of the spouses was employed.

Productive agricultural and related activities included livestock (hogs, cows, goats, rabbits, honeybees and horses), a variety of vegetables, and sugar cane. Some group members had retired from employment as public servants (e.g. teachers). Vegetables were grown all year round, while sugarcane was seasonal. Productive output was sold in local farmers' markets. The group with honeybees processed honey at a community processing plant with a minimum fee.

There was idle land in some of the places because the land is abandoned. Idle land is usually utilized under informal arrangements to defray taxes and either pastures or crops can be planted on it. Although land use patterns were mostly based on ownership rights, the use of idle

land was contingent on whether the owner is willing to let someone else to put it under usage. Pastures were especially important during the winter season when there was little fodder for grazing animals.

Most of the farmers relied on family labor and did not hire outside labor. Children (generally grandchildren) at times helped their grandparents with farm activities, particularly over weekends. Extended family members visited the country-site occasionally. Family members reunite and celebrate from time to time, while members of communities celebrate together and engage in collective such as fundraising activities. Therefore, the availability of family labor was limited and sporadic.

Although groups engaged in reciprocal labor exchanges, additional labor could be accessed by hiring other group members. Therefore, group members engaged in complex processes of collective action that ranged from sharing information, labor exchanges (either reciprocal or paid), sharing resources such as farm implements and other production inputs acquired from partnering with HI. Farmers in the honey bee project could not afford the retail cost of bee hives and as a result, a few members invented other ways of constructing their own bee hives which they shared with others.

The groups displayed a high level of solidarity reflected by the level of reciprocity among them. Sharing of information was highly valued and information was shared in a timely fashion so farmers could make informed decisions. Farmers knew when to sell their beef cattle in the market based on updated information they shared. Other than HI, land grant universities such as Tuskegee, Auburn, the University of Tennessee, to mention a few provided support services to these groups. Particularly Purdue University was preferred for providing information on organic farming. However, farmers still have a need for more support that is technical as well as access to the market.

Some of the group members were certified bee inspectors, while some of them had high levels of education (master's degree) far more than that of the county average. Most of the group members in Tennessee could identify with one another because they moved to the area, either after retirement or to seek employment. These members knew that they were not regarded fully as members of the community because of the fact that they were not born and raised in the area. Only members whose parents originated from the area were considered 'insiders.'

HI partners from Georgia and Florida were mainly immigrants from Latin America. It was also very clear to them that they were not regarded as part of the communities they lived in because of their foreign status. These members were careful about their interaction with people they had not met before. As a result, it took the research team much longer to finally gain permission from these members to conduct the study. It became apparent that some of the HI partners were "communities within communities." The meaning of a community in this regard needs to be looked at very closely. Therefore, members belonged to a community with which they had an emotional attachment as well as that based spatial demarcation.

#### *The involvement of youth in agriculture and landholding patterns*

Youth programs such as community gardens were a common way to inculcate the "agriculture" into the younger generations. The adults involved with HI provided support and monitored ongoing activities for youth. The youth sell their agricultural produce at local farmers' markets together with the elders, and they can use the funds to finance other educational activities such as visiting the University of Tuskegee to attend workshops. However, there was a general feeling that schoolchildren were not taught agricultural subjects and the lack of career

counseling in schools was detrimental. Instead, youth were encouraged to join the military, particularly in Alabama.

Younger generations tend to leave rural areas to seek employment or attend school elsewhere and have not shown much interest in taking up farming after their aging family members. Particularly in Alabama, the aging farmers were concerned about losing their farmland because of the shrinking farming base and more farmland is increasingly turned into timber or wildlife fields. On the other hand, 'whites' increasingly purchase the land. This creates a threat among blacks of losing the land back to whites, yet blacks could only acquire land after they had gained the right to vote. Land prices in the area were highly volatile and this works against agriculture as well as 'traditional' land ownership. Therefore, land ownership either was through purchasing or has been the inheritance of the family.

The changing landholding patterns seem to be working towards altering the demographics of these rural regions. It appears that the absence of younger generations to take up the 'legacy' after their aging family members has potential to curtail family traditions that were around for several decades. The tradition of family reunions giving other family members the opportunity to visit the country-site from urban areas may not be continuing for long. This raises questions whether family values are important in the US as a nation and whether such values could be reflective of the future of the country. Such questions might be enshrined in the nature of rural development policy of the US. Evidence from this study depicts a continuous decline of farming among African Americans and this is concurrent with previous findings (Schelhas and Zabawa, Undated).

Problems pertaining to delinquency among the youth were prevalent, and high pregnancy rates were common among teenage girls. As one group member stated, "teenage pregnancy is a choice because the girls feel there's nothing else to do." Therefore, the future of youngsters is a concern with the elderly. This implies that more attention should be paid to addressing youth issues, and this can be tackled through relevant educational programs.

#### *Positions occupied within the groups and family*

Regarding the organization of the groups, men usually occupied leadership positions, while women provided support to the male leaders. The general lack of women leaders demonstrated that women occupied 'private space' more than men did as the case often is in other countries. The triple role played by women (Elson, 1996) was apparent with these groups.

Although the majority of group members were retired, men were usually recruited in the past to work in the military, trucking or police force; while women worked as school teachers, librarians and restaurants, to mention a few. Women were very visible in community volunteer work. They assisted with community youth gardens, old age homes, in the church, etc.

Although gender issues among the members as well as within their families may not be as pronounced as those in developing countries there was a clear division of labor within households. Men usually took care of the heaviest duties in the home, while women did most of the household chores as well as handling accounts. Therefore, women performed productive and reproductive activities as well as community work.

It was apparent that decisions made in the homes were based on consensus for most of the married couples. In contrast, women in developing countries do not have the leeway to make choices (Visvanathan, 1997). Therefore, addressing intra-household inequalities can enhance efficiency and maximize poverty reduction particularly in developing countries (DFID, 2005).

### **Importance, implications, and application**

The rapid pace of change in recent times came up repeatedly and did not leave any sector unaffected; the delivery of extension services of some sort is no exception. As a way to meet accountability requirements, the delivery of extension services evolved to embrace approaches that helped service providers better learn and understand their target audience. Such approaches might include needs assessment as well as customer profiling. However, it has become widely acknowledged that the nature of agriculture is no longer a technical issue but also involves both socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. Understanding such issues may not be important for large-scale commercial agriculture, but they are issues affecting the wellbeing of smallholder farmers in their day-to-day lives. Ignoring such issues in agricultural programming has proved to be detrimental in the past.

The work done by HI overseas as well as domestically is enormous. However, it is very important for HI field coordinators and others in similar positions to clearly define their target audience (that is, the community within which they work). The concept of community was somewhat different in some of the groups visited. Although group members were spatially separated, members of the groups felt a sense of belonging and could identify with other members within the group more so than their proximal neighbors.

Group identity resulted in high levels of reciprocity among group members. Group members shared important information with each other, exchanged labor as well as other resources. The level of solidarity within the groups was instrumental for the benefit of individual group members. Although it can be argued that group members engaged in collective action based on individual interest, the groups provided a stage for reinforcing cultural values. However, only aging people are involved in this kind of exchanges and interactions. Therefore, there is a slight chance that the younger generations will learn from family members and such values will probably fade away over time. Although youth programs are a way to encourage the involvement of youth in agriculture and other related activities, youth tend to leave when they grow older. This leaves rural areas with predominantly elderly people. Career counseling should be encouraged in order to motivate youth to pursue education as well as become involved in agriculture, instead of joining the military for example. Schelhas and Zabawa (Undated) differentiated between racial patterns of land ownership. These authors assert that African-American landowners value passing down the heritage within the family.

The absence of younger generations to take up farming after their aging family members changes landholding patterns. This in turn changes the demographics of rural areas. White people are perceived to be buying more land in the predominantly black rural communities, while retirees coming from other parts of the country with high educational levels purchase land in counties with low educational levels. This creates tension among the people entering the communities as well as those who have always live in such areas. Of particular importance, small farms are fading away due to lack of interest among younger generations to take up farming, creating opportunities for large-scale enterprises to move into the rural areas. Such trends will not foster sustainable development in rural areas. Unlike large farms, small farm enterprises tend to support local economies resulting in sustainability (DFID, 2005; Delaney, 2006).

### **Conclusion and Practical Importance**

In conclusion, issues presented in this manuscript may not be unearthed from superficial assessments. Robert Chambers (1983) asserts that practitioners who are not members of the

community hold a distorted view of smallholder farmers. This may be true if field coordinators do not take time learn and better understand their partners.

Citizens in the US are taught about the importance of freedom and generally do not have problems with expressing their views or opinions. The opposite may be true with minority farmers who may think they have no voice or for immigrant farmers who are in the process of establishing themselves. As a result, these people were cautious about what they said and were deferential (Chambers, 1983). Such nuances might hinder effective interaction with the target audience. Therefore, it is important to employ communication tools such as Sondeo that would aid in achieving the most relevant information.

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