

Keystone Community Leaders and Their Role in Farmer-Led Community Organizations

Research Brief

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Synopsis: This brief provides an examination of the role of keystone community leaders in helping farmers navigate stress. Keystone leaders in this context are founders, CEOs, executive directors or other representatives of farmer-led organizations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four such leaders to understand their roles related to resource access, their advocacy efforts and barriers they face.

Introduction

Finding ways to assist farm populations in navigating farm stress is a major issue for both public organizations (e.g., Cooperative Extension Systems), private and nonprofit farmer organizations (e.g., Farm Bureau, Rural Advancement Foundation International USA), and public policy initiatives (Beehler et al., 2023). Empirical studies of farm financial distress demonstrate the importance of social support for how farmers navigate the stress process (Meyer & Lobao, 2003; Schulman & Armstrong, 1990). While social support may occur through both formal and informal social ties such as family, friends and community, research shows that farmer-led community organizations provide important culturally relevant services to their members (Liang et al., 2022; Smolski et al., 2022; Younker & Radunovich, 2021).

Farmer-led community organizations, such as nonprofits and cooperatives, create social support through farmer networks. In addition, these organizations

provide resources that help farm households address the challenges they encounter in their farm operations and in their daily lives (Shortland et al., 2023). By being grounded in a local community, these organizations are able to understand the nuanced needs, language, dialect, and assets of their community members, thereby increasing their efficacy in disseminating relevant information and resources to differentiated farm populations (Porter, 2018).

Keystone community leaders carry out critical roles in the daily operation and functioning of farmer-led community organizations. Keystone community leaders, or “key people” (Onitsuka & Hoshino, 2018), are founders, CEOs, executive directors, or informal representatives of organizations who function as bridges to outside organizations and as leaders who facilitate bonding and cohesion among members of their organization. Through these roles, the keystone community leader develops networks with other organizations that may provide resources

or information to their organizational members. Therefore, it is important to understand the role played by keystone community leaders and how they provide leadership for their organization's efforts in connecting farmers to the resources they need to navigate stress and other issues related to their farm operations and households (Smolski et al., 2022).

In this brief, we report on the results of a study of how keystone community leaders develop, operate, and function within farmer-led organizations. In 2023, leaders from four farmer-led community organizations in North Carolina participated in semi-structured interviews directed at understanding their roles and functions related to resource access for members of their organizations, advocacy around policies and programs to address community needs, and barriers they confront in fulfilling their roles.

Background Literature

Farmers, farm families and farm workers face unique challenges not found in many other industries, including:

- Physical demands and isolation
- Climate change
- Obtaining loans at affordable interest rates
- Seasonal demands for labor
- A 24/7 work schedule
- A household division of labor, whereby different members of the family provide varied sources of income from both farm and non-farm jobs (Keeney et al., 2023; Malin & Jones, 2023).

This type of work environment and lifestyle, when paired with the stigma of admitting mental health struggles in a small community and a lack of local professionals who are cognizant about the unique struggles of farmers, can present problems for the delivery of mental health information and services (Cole & Bondy, 2020). One solution to assist farmers in navigating the stress

they encounter includes participation in farmer-led organizations where they share feelings with other farmers and build social support networks (Liang et al., 2023).

Farmer-led community organizations are important parts of the landscape of support for agricultural communities. These organizations may provide formal and informal mental health networks and social services that lessen the effects of stressors on farming communities (Rose et al., 2023). Studies show that farmers are more inclined to trust informal mental health services provided by members of their community than services provided by outsiders (e.g., Smolski et al., 2022). In addition, farmer-to-farmer networks that permit casual, peer-to-peer interactions may encounter fewer barriers than other types of delivery formats (Shortland et al., 2023). Farmers' trust is also based on their lived experience, with race and gender conditioning who farmers will seek out for support (Smolski & Schulman, 2024; Tutor-Marcom et al., 2014). Research shows that farmer-led community-based organizations increase resilience through collective action that enables farmers to adapt to change and sustain their operations (Liang et al., 2022; White, 2018).

Methods

The research protocol and data analysis procedures for this study were reviewed and approved by the NCSU Institutional Review Board (Project #25978). An informal listing of farmer-led organizations in North Carolina was developed through the researchers' individual and organizational networks. Organizations had to be formal (i.e., registered nonprofits), led by a farmer, and serve small-scale operations. From this list, five organizations were contacted based on existing network connections with the organization and the goal of having a diverse representation of agrarian communities (e.g., race, veteran status, environmental values). For instance, we were not able to select an indigenous farmer-led organization due to a lack of

established connections. Therefore, we do not claim to have produced an exhaustive list of all small-scale farmer-led organizations in the state. This makes the sample non-probabilistic and biased toward our existing relationships.

Each keystone community leader of these organizations was provided with information on the study to make informed consent. Four organizations and their individual keystone leaders agreed to participate in the project, while one did not participate due to time constraints. In order to maintain confidentiality, we do not report demographic or other characteristics of the organizations that could identify the keystone leaders or their organizations. Masking of the participants at the expense of detailed organizational descriptions is necessary because there are a small number of farmer-led organizations in North Carolina with particular attributes that make them easily identifiable. Therefore, we report the results in aggregate, presenting a composite, thematic picture representing an ideal type of farmer-led organization.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to interview each organization's keystone leader. A semi-structured interview is an iterative and open-ended data collection process, whereby the interviewer is able to ask follow-up and probing questions to elicit clarifying and detailed responses from the interviewee (Berg, 2007). The interview protocol contained questions about the structure and purpose of the organization and access to resources for farmers and how these resources could be improved. The interviews were conducted over Zoom between June and July 2023, lasted between one and two hours, and were recorded and then transcribed. The participating informants received a \$50 gift card as compensation for their time.

Standard qualitative data analysis procedures were utilized to code transcripts and identify core themes (Saldaña, 2016). A first-round read-through of each transcript was conducted

to establish a baseline understanding of the data, as well as a set of fixed codes. During this first round, ongoing discussions of data interpretation occurred between a main coder and a secondary coder based on a simplified in-text coding with hard copies. Afterward, the main coder utilized an Excel spreadsheet to collect excerpts from the interviews to organize them according to the fixed set of codes. From that spreadsheet, core themes were identified and summaries developed, involving consensus discussions between the main coder, the secondary coder, and the third author of this brief. Discussion and consensus are a key part of the qualitative data analysis process, supporting the establishment of intercoder reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). In the following sections of this brief, we use the results of the qualitative data to illuminate the specific roles and functions of the keystone community leader in our limited sample of farmer-led community organizations.

Roles and Functions of Keystone Community Leaders

The farmer-led organizations in this study function within small-scale farming communities that may not be adequately served by the more mainstream farm organizations. Operating on a community-level basis allows the leaders of these organizations to understand the needs of their members, and this shared knowledge allows specialized and relevant resources to be disseminated to them. According to the keystone community leaders, there are two primary functions that they provide for their organizations: The first is acting as a resource clearinghouse, and the second is acting as an advocate for their members.

Resource Clearinghouse

One of the important functions of the keystone community leader in farmer-led community-based organizations is providing information and conduits for a broad array of resources related to the

needs to their members. Access to these resources might impact mental health, but these resources are not exclusively mental health resources. The keystone community leader serves as a clearinghouse by being a link between their communities and outside resources. They take in and filter large amounts of information about a wide variety of resources in order to select those that best align with the needs of their community and the mission of the organization. Resources are identified through member experiences or by developing networks with other organizations that can provide services. For instance, one informant reported, "When you go into nonprofit work, you have got to involve good community-based organizations close to you, and you've got to pull them in, and keep them close to you." Another informant explained, "Normally, people ... send me information, because they know that I have a ... connection with the community."

While the keystone community leader filters information, they may lack a formal vetting process, instead relying on their own judgment to decide whether a resource will be useful for their members. Informants reported that they are often contacted by organizations that wish to provide support for their members. Since these leaders are often overworked, they may not have time to fully vet all outside services and prefer to create relationships with organizations in their community who share their values. One informant remarked, "We don't have a formal vetting process, but we do try to be in authentic community with folks first." What the informant meant by "authentic" is that the resource has a grounded understanding of the community's values, assets and needs, thereby increasing the beneficial impact of services provided.

Even though there is not a formal review or vetting process, when a new potential resource emerges, filtering occurs based on prior experience and knowledge about how the new organization provides

resources. For instance, one informant expressed a lack of trust in "pamphlet organizations." These "pamphlet organizations" are described as organizations whose main job is disseminating repackaged information that has been compiled from other organizations.

Additionally, leaders provide resources and services for their members based on shared values related to organizational goals (e.g., sustainable agricultural production) and a grounding in the concrete identities (e.g., race, veteran status) of their members. For example, when providing resources and services to their members, keystone community leaders review and monitor what they share with their community members to ensure that these resources are culturally grounded and appropriate for their specific needs and assets.

Advocacy

A keystone community leader in farmer-led community-based organizations also functions as an advocate to facilitate systems-level change towards alternative types of agri-food production systems. For example, a leader may advocate for better treatment of their constituents from government agencies or may advocate for an increase in sustainable agricultural practices. This approach was stated succinctly by one informant: "I think the most important thing that we are trying to do, it's advocating. I think that is the most important job we try to do."

Advocacy for organization members follows from organizational mission or goals. For example, in organizations that have as their mission providing values-based services for production of agricultural products, advocacy is characterized by a shared framework surrounding farming and a goal of creating alternatives for small-scale producers in the food system. These organizations may emphasize network building for the community of producers and consumers, the promotion of

alternative production practices, or an overarching mission of equity within the food system. While these organizations can be for-profit, there is still an emphasis on goals other than financial success. According to one informant, “I think that the hope is...to connect folks and, that through those connections, we’re connecting people around better food.”

Barriers

While discussing the positive impacts of their organizational roles, the keystone community leader informants also elaborated on capacity-based limits. For example, maintaining organizational relationships requires an immense amount of labor. Because of financial constraints, there is limited ability to expand capacity to address organizational needs by employing additional personnel. The stability of financial support was considered a major stressor by the keystone community leader. As one informant stated, “We’re starting to stabilize a little bit with income, but [there is] certainly anxiety around financial sustainability.” Due to the amount of work these keystone leaders endure and the financial challenges for expanding the organization, they often mentioned high levels of burnout and stress during their interviews as exemplified in the following quote from an informant: “Burnout has been a major thing that I’m starting to experience, and, I’m trying to work with my mental health professional people, and how do I keep from just collapsing and saying ‘I’m done?’” Because of these conditions, the ability of the keystone leader to vet resources, amplify quality resources and expand the number of network connections is constrained.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate how keystone community leaders perceive their roles in farmer-led organizations as advocating for and providing nuanced and culturally grounded resources and services for their community members. Accordingly, individuals and organizations

seeking to support local farming communities should seek to establish relationships with keystone community leaders. This includes developing a grounded understanding of the needs and assets of the local community prior to engagement and the ability to demonstrate that the collaboration will produce direct and tangible resources and services for farm community members. Additionally, the major role of the keystone community leader in sustaining farmer-led community-based organizations may create immense stress, burnout, and anxiety for this person due to the lack of organizational resources. One recommendation for individuals and organizations that wish to collaborate with farmer-led community organizations is to find ways to increase direct financial support for these organizations in order to help them build and strengthen their organizational capacity for outreach and engagement (Rose et al., 2023). In conclusion, the important roles of keystone community leaders in small-scale and niche farmer-led community organizations include building social support networks, vetting and providing access to resources for their community members, and acting as advocates for achieving individual and collective goals.

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