Discovering Ourselves

A Pilot Network of Women-in-Agriculture

Genesee County and Extended Area







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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This publication outlines the planning process, proceedings, and the lessons learned from a unique pilot project that created the Women in Agriculture of Genesee County and Extended Area Network (hereafter referred to as the Network). To create the Network, the planning team landed on three design strategies and a set of norms:





Network Design Strategies

- 1. Geographic Limitation
- 2. Grower-Centricity
- 3. Co-Creation

Norms

- * Active listening
- * Be open, honest, and transparent
- * Commit to the process
- * All voices and experiences are welcome
- * Respect differences
- Identify whether comments/ideas are confidential
- * Maintain confidentiality
- * Disagreement is okay!
- * No phones, please
- ***** Have fun!

CONSENSUS WAS REACHED ON A SPECIFIC GOAL OF THE NETWORK

"This Network is aimed at sharing challenges and opportunities for women in agriculture. Together, we hope to build knowledge and connections, innovate, problem-solve, and create new opportunities for women's livelihoods in Michigan." A total of six pilot sessions, held between February 2014 and September 2014 at various locations across Genesee County. These sessions provided insight into an important set of lessons learned for the women participants and the planning team:

1. The Struggle with Titles

One of the key opportunities and challenges is the multiple identities that women growers hold; how do we identify ourselves in this farm and food work?

2. The Importance of Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluation was effective at helping wrap up each evening while taking a quick temperature of the room without traditional evaluative tools like pens and paper.

3. Co-Creation Works

Tapping into the expertise within the Network to teach the group new skills meant that Network participants directed which educational workshops they would pursue.

4. Breaking Bread

Having a meal at each session was more than a tool to attract higher attendance; the women were able to connect with one another over the meal, providing elements of sharing and trust-building.

5. Capturing the Moment

Photos were shared with the group on online social networks and gave women another way of seeing themselves as part of a larger group.

6. Quality of Ties Is Greater than Quantity of Ties

The number of women involved is not as important as the quality and strength of relationships. Progressing through the six sessions, the group was not bigger, but the relationships among those who participated grew stronger.

The Network wrapped up the pilot project in September 2014 with a meeting to celebrate the fall harvest. MIFFS plans to continue to support the Network through two key initiatives: continuation of the Network and implementing a Women in Agriculture (WIA) Farm Site. This new Farm Site will be hosted by Genesys Health System, supplying land and staff time at their Genesys Health Park Campus in Genesee County. Initial operational funds are coming from The Community Foundation of Greater Flint and a USDA Beginning Farmer grant awarded to MSU CRFS and MIFFS.



INTRODUCTION

On a sunny autumn day in 2012 at the Michigan Organic Food and Farming Alliance (MOFFA) Gathering in Flint, a group of female farmers approached Michelle Napier-Dunnings, executive director of Michigan Food and Farming Systems (MIFFS). MIFFS is dedicated to supporting beginning and historically underserved farmers in Michigan. These farmers wanted to know what MIFFS was doing to help female farmers in Michigan. Napier-Dunnings took the question as a call to action. After exploring the question with a variety of colleagues and partners, the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (MSU CRFS) partnered with MIFFS and provided a small grant to explore how to engage female farmers in the Greater Flint region. Two years later, MIFFS and MSU CRFS wrapped up the sixth and final pilot session of the Women in Agriculture of Genesee County and Extended Area Network (referred to as the Network from this point forward) with a room of smiling, joyous female growers and producers from across the region, already planning 2015 activities.

This publication outlines the planning process, proceedings, and the lessons learned from this unique pilot project. The pilot spanned a total of six in-person convenings, held between February 2014 and September 2014 at three locations across Genesee County. The Network pilot offered women growers and producers in Genesee County meaningful opportunities to find social support for their work in agriculture and enhanced their livelihoods by helping them gain new skills and connections.





Women are the backbone of the development of rural and national economies. They comprise 43% of the world's agricultural labor force, which rises to 70% in some countries.¹

Women in Agriculture in the U.S.

In the United States, programs targeted specifically at female growers are important to ensuring the long-term sustainability of agriculture as well as supporting a population that has long been critical to farming's success but often marginalized. A variety of programs aimed at supporting women's roles in agriculture have recently expanded in regions across the United States, parallel to growth associated with the local food and sustainable agriculture movement(s).

Organized networks that aim to connect women growers and producers have seen significant expansion in the past two decades, including in the Midwest and Great Lakes region states. The Women, Food, & Agriculture Network (WFAN) was founded in lowa in 1997 in response to long-standing concerns about systemic rural, agricultural, and environmental problems and gender role.²

Today, WFAN is a national model for creating a community of women involved in sustainable agriculture, including farmers, landowners, researchers, students, advocates, and mothers. The WFAN website lists 15 unique regional networks for women in sustainable agriculture.³

Beyond the Midwest, the National Women in Agriculture Association (NWIAA) was founded in 2008 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on the belief that the lack of resources and empowerment of rural minority women of color has played a role in stagnating rural development. NWIAA became the first minority woman-owned and operated organization of its kind. It provides innovative outreach education that attracts and sustains current and future generations with innovative, spiritual, and USDA-certified production or marketing practices techniques.

On a more national scale, *Annie's Project* was founded to provide risk management education for farm/ranch women with the goal of empowering them to be better business partners. Since its inception in 2009, *Annie's Project* has served more than 6,500 women in 25 states in both sustainable and conventional agriculture networks.



¹ Retrieved December 2014 from http://www.wfo-oma.com/women-in-agriculture/articles/the-role-of-rural-women-in-agriculture.html

² retrieved December 2014 from http://wfan.org/resources/resources-for-women-farmers/

The growth of these networks coincides with several important trends in farming in the U.S. Despite the fact that the overall number of new farmers in the U.S. has been declining, women have been entering farming in increasing numbers, which corresponds to the growth of networks focused on female growers. Preliminary figures released by the USDA in February 2014 show that women are principal operators of just 14% of the nation's farms. This data justifies the USDA's continuing support of programs for women farmers and ranchers; while farming is declining overall, women are a potential source of future growth in farming. In fact, women are the fastest growing farm population in the United States.



LITERATURE

Much of the academic literature suggests that productivist or conventional agricultural models marginalize women from knowledge production and dissemination spaces, whereas sustainable agriculture provides empowering spaces for women farmers (Trauger, 2004, Trauger, et al., 2010; Rissing, 2013; Barbercheck et al., 2012; Keller, 2014).

In an exploration of women's identities in the Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network (PA-WAgN), Trauger (2004) states that "when women assume the role of farmer they transgress the traditional roles, work cultures and ideologies that define the social narratives of farming" (p. 290).

Keller, in agreement, powerfully states that "...a supportive place to exchange farming knowledge, a women-only space where personal agency can be realized, and a place where the opportunity to assert themselves as farmers is available" (p. 78) is typical of American sustainable agriculture organizations.

This opportunity is particularly potent in Michigan, where women are a growing number of principal operators of Michigan farms. Over the last 30 years, the number of Michigan farm acres where women are the primary operators has more than doubled, fueled in part by new opportunities in small-scale farming. Although profit-driven operations aren't the ultimate goal for many women farmers, as claimed by Trauger (2010), female principal operators in Michigan managed to increase their market value of agricultural products sold by 30% between 2007 and 2012. They managed this growth despite the fact that women's total acreage in Michigan is declining, dropping from 552,000 in 2007 to just under 519,000 since 2007.⁴

⁴ USDA Census of Agriculture, 2012. Retrieved October 2014 from http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/







Women continue to operate smaller farms than men, earn less income on average, and own a greater percentage of their farmland. This corresponds to the kind of farm that most women operate: small-scale, diversified farms producing goods for direct sale, rather than the large commodity farms that tend to be operated by men. This unique role underscores the need for targeted opportunities to help women find support for both the social and economic aspects of agricultural work. In her analysis of the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), Trauger (2004) found that farm women are "legitimated and recognized" (p. 300) as farmers in the sustainable agriculture community. Building upon this concept, the women in agriculture networks can serve as validating spaces where women share skills, knowledge, and resources that can reaffirm their identities as legitimate experts and leaders in farm production and marketing while also developing visions for their farms through cooperation with one another.

Women have historically played unrecognized roles on farms in the United States. While there is a rapid increase of women farmers as displayed by the U.S. Census of Agriculture, perhaps this increase is just a reflection of the growing societal acceptance of women as principal farm operators rather than a significant increase of the women farmer population. According to Sachs (1983), female farm partners or wives have become "invisible farmers" because their critical role in the farm process is overlooked.

PLANNING PROCESS



Housed at Michigan State University, MIFFS is dedicated to supporting the many faces of farming, particularly beginning and historically underserved farmers. As a statewide-nonprofit organization, MIFFS has been connecting farmers to resources and opportunities since 1998. MIFFS works to honor each farmer's passion for working the land and growing food while also recognizing that farmers can and must do it in a way that is viable and sustainable for the earth and for their pocketbooks.⁵



To serve the needs of women growers and producers following the call to action in the fall of 2013, MIFFS convened a diverse planning team, including educators from Michigan State University Extension - Flint, a local grower cooperative called edible flint, individual local growers, and a professional facilitator. Beyond building relationships and outlining an initial vision for the Network, the planning team also scoured best practices and lessons learned from other networks of women in agriculture to inform their program design. The planning team was intentional about designing the Network in a way that would ensure adequate capacity for women growers and producers to develop strong bonds-ones that would endure beyond the pilot. This intentional approach also built a strong bond between the planning team members, a positive unexpected outcome beyond the pilot's goals.

To gather best practices, three members of the planning team traveled to Iowa in November 2013 to participate in the Women and Sustainable Agriculture National Conference in Des Moines, sponsored by WFAN. Formerly based in Iowa and familiar with the growth of WFAN as a resource for women growers and producers, MSU CRFS Senior Associate Director Rich Pirog encouraged the three planning team members not only to attend the conference, but also to engage key WFAN representatives working on outreach projects for women in agriculture, including WFAN's Women, Land, and Legacy project. Pirog also encouraged the team to engage the female leadership of Practical Farmers of Iowa, a farmer-based nonprofit organization with goals similar to MIFFS.

This conference provided the team with a number of best practices and resources and helped highlight one key observation that was particularly important in informing the Network design: the contrasting diversity between Iowa and Michigan. As of the 2010 Census, Iowa was 92.3% white and just 2.9% black or African American, 1.7% Asian, and 0.4% American Indian, whereas Michigan was 78.9% white, 14.2% black or African American, 2.4% Asian, and 0.6% American Indian. The planning team consciously committed to ensuring the engagement of women of color in the pilot.





PROGRAM DESIGN

After holding several planning meetings, attending the WFAN Conference, and having a number of conversations with key stakeholders, the planning team landed on three network design strategies and a set of norms:

Geographic Limitation

First, to constrain the focus and create enduring network ties, the planning team decided to limit participation to the Genesee County geographic region (Flint is located in Genesee County). This way, women participating would be more likely to enter the pilot with some pre-existing ties to other participants, often referred to as "weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973). Many were already involved in networks of growers in Flint, including the edible *flint* growers' cooperative, while others were vendors at the Flint and Grand Blanc Farmers Markets. By bringing together women with "weak ties," the planning team hoped to create an environment where participants knew each other well enough to walk into the first few sessions with a basic level of trust-just enough to allow the facilitators to help participants transcend differences like race, the kind of growing they were doing, and urban versus rural growers. Given the diversity of Genesee County, the planning team aimed to create an environment where participants would be challenged to consider multiple points of view and, eventually, to create bridges between diverse groups that might not otherwise connect.

Grower-Centricity

Ensuring that the Network remained grower-centric was a second important factor. The planning team sought to maximize skill-sharing among growers and producers and to avoid a situation where the room ended up overloaded with participants without a solid footing in the challenges women growers and producers face on a day-to-day basis. In part because of the emphasis on convening a group that was diverse in other ways (such as racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity), the planning team wanted to ensure that women felt their peers in the room could legitimately engage in conversations about the challenges and opportunities of growing and producing food.

Co-Creation

The third aspect of network design that was critical to the planning team was to ensure the Network was facilitated in a way that encouraged co-creation. The facilitation sought to hold both a sense of driving and servant leadership.⁶ In other words, the agenda of each session was designed to include a set of activities that fulfilled the requirements of both the planning team and the grant funding, but also a set of activities that the *group* determined was important to cover. Participants were strongly encouraged to discuss where they collectively wanted to take the Network.

Norms

The planning team also developed a set of guidelines for participation, called norms (see Norms sidebar on page 11). These norms were aimed at creating a framework to ensure open, respectful dialogue and maximum participation in the Network —an important concept in light of women's traditionally marginalized roles in agriculture. In the spirit of co-creation, participants were asked to review these norms at the first session and to actively contribute ideas and opinions.

Among the norms was the notion that Network meetings were safe spaces where participants would be encouraged to "agree to disagree." The planning team sought to create a place where disagreement was the norm, not a source of conflict.



⁶ Spears, L.C. (2005). The understanding and practice of servant leadership. Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University School of Leadership Studies



NORMS	 * Active listening * Be open, honest, and transparent * Commit to the process * All voices and experiences are welcome * Respect differences 	 * Identify whether comments/ideas are confidential * Maintain confidentiality * Disagreement is okay! * No phones, please * Have fun!



OUTCOMES

Ultimately, the planning team convened a total of six pilot sessions, held between February 2014 and September 2014 at various locations across Genesee County (see Table 1; the group took the beginning of the growing season off to help participants focus on their farm work).



CONSENSUS WAS REACHED ON A GOAL FOR THE NETWORK

"This Network is aimed at sharing challenges and opportunities for women in agriculture. Together, we hope to build knowledge and connections, innovate, problem-solve, and create new opportunities for women's livelihoods in Michigan."

Table 1: Network Sessions

SESSION	LOCATION	DATE	NO. OF ATTENDEES
1	Michigan State University Extension – Flint	Feb. 6, 2014	20
2	Michigan State University Extension – Flint	March 4, 2014	19
3	Michigan State University Extension – Flint	April 1, 2014	18
4	Yvette's Taco Farm, Flint	June 16, 2014	16
5	Thread Creek Farm, Grand Blanc	July 22, 2014	22
6	Michigan State University Extension – Flint	Sept. 16, 2014	12











LESSONS LEARNED

The Struggle with Titles

By the end of the first hour of the first session, it became clear to the planning team that one of the key opportunities and challenges is the multiple identities that women growers and producers hold. Participants had a variety of ways that they referred to themselves: *gardener, producer, farmer, and grower,* for example. Some of the women struggled with assuming the farmer title, because as Keller (2014) reveals in a study of white women dairy farmers in Wisconsin, the recognition of *farmer* is difficult because the title is invisible when applied to men.

Meanwhile, many women identified themselves in multiple ways, such as "mother, grower, community organizer, and volunteer," highlighting the complexity of women's roles in our society. To encourage participation across a diverse age range, the planning team always offered child care to participants through the meeting invitation. Although no women enrolled in the child-care offered, women did feel free to bring children along, particularly to the onfarm field trips during the summer months.

INTERSECTIONALITY

Most of the women of the Network were white, and this not surprising given 94% of U.S. women farmers are white (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2012). The black women of the network operated on smaller scales (like vacant city lots and back and front yards). However, because they had \$1,000 or more in annual sales, they were in fact farmers by the USDA definition of a farm: a place where \$1,000 or more of agricultural products are produced and sold.

As more women from all backgrounds enter agriculture, we will continue to face the challenge of rethinking and re-identifying how to address various women's nuanced roles.





"I didn't think you really meant it when you said we were going to create this together. You all really listened to us." —Network Participant

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The Importance of Participatory Evaluation

The facilitators used a participatory evaluation at the end of each session. The "Fist of Five" ⁷ evaluation method was effective at helping wrap up each evening while taking a quick temperature of the room without traditional evaluative tools like pens and paper. The facilitators chose this evaluation because of its importance of evaluating in a way that lifts up both strengths and deficits in a participatory manner. The participants gained the opportunity to voice their opinions and explain their reasoning to the larger group, which provided the facilitators the opportunity to apply feedback in a formative manner (revising before completion of program) rather than a summative evaluative manner (revised after program is completed).



Co-Creation Works

The planning team's intentionality about tapping into the expertise within the Network to teach the group new skills meant that the Network participants directed which workshops we would pursue. This balance of social support and skill-building paid off. Like the Pennsylvania women heard in the research of Trauger et al. (2010), the discussion of gender in farming begins with not being taken seriously as farmers and with reported incidents of sexism in search of financial support, purchasing equipment, attempting to integrate into the local farming community, and obtaining education for farm-related issues. In addition, the need for and challenge of obtaining appropriate education illuminated the need for the women to teach each other. After a few months of networking and bonding, the women realized that much of the educational expertise on farm topics existed within the Network.

In order to gain a better understanding of the women farmers' perspectives, we asked the following sequenced questions:

- Desired Future: What does a perfect world look like for women farmers?
- * Current Reality: What is our current reality?
- Bridge: What actions can be taken to bridge the gap between desired future and current reality?



⁷ "Fist of Five" is a participatory evaluation method that can be altered to apply to variable contexts. Participants are asked a question and prompts a response through showing a number of fingers on a scale of 1-5, 1=no, 2= probably not, 3= probably yes, 4= yes, 5 = definitely yes. When everyone has indicated their response, the facilitator counts each response and asks a few participants to explain why they indicated that particular response to the question.

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CURRENT REALITY

BRIDGE

- Wear men's clothes
- Lack access to capital
- Need physical help
- Have learning curve
- Sometimes lack help, or tough to invest in help
- Huge burden between home
 and work
- Growing up on a farm
- Positive experience
- Hard work
- Having to do things I wouldn't have paid help do
- Happy place/ valuable
 experience
- Can be economically feasible
- Still has a bad reputation for being hard work
- Swapping equipment
- Sharing resources/networking
- Local food is not fully
 understood
- Supportive organizations
- At mercy of weather
- Available learning
 experiences/resources
- Getting better for women farmers
- Gender-based distance
 between farmers
- Work harder to communicate
- Jealousy price
- Time management subsidizing farm with off-farm business priorities

- Supporting role models and women educators
 Get Millennial generation
- involved
- Education and information for women farmers
- Hands-on training
- Social networking communication
- Build solidarity
- Resources knowledge of clothing and equipment
- Talk to manufacturers and entrepreneurs
- Modify/share how you modify things
- Incubation renting small portions of land and equipment
- Local financing/grants
- Access to knowledge/networks
- Raising daughters to believe in abilities and rights and that they can farm
- Grow in collectives and cooperatives
- Demonstrating that in numbers we claim greater percent of market share
- Using concerns over water and health movements to combine to our connectedness in earth
- Making good food more accessible
- Come together regularly
- Get politically involved/active in organizations run by men
- Self-care
- Support each other's businesses
- Gain a broader awareness of connectivity of ecosystem

- Water and weeding automation
- Need someone to fix dinner, do laundry
- Good emotional, financial, physical support – uplifting, like a good bra
- Being able to farm if you want to farm
- Possess needed implements/ equipment to farm: clothing, shoes, etc.
- Affordable land
- Universal preschool
- Culture that supports women farmers
- Spiritual aspect of farming supported
- Earth recognized as a spiritual entity/organism
- More collective efforts in small community scale
- Sharing knowledge base
- We are respected and recognized as farmers regardless of the number of years/duration, size, or location
- Harmony
- No assumptions about what I know
- Collegiality
- Pride
- Productive competition
- Common guidelines for growing
- More ecological practices on farms
- Cooperation and communication
- Producers have input on government rules and regulations
- Normalization
- Bathrooms on farm
- Soil health values
- School garden curriculums are the norm
- Seeing connections between farms
- Can make a living and anyone/ everyone can access my food
- General population recognizes and values "good food"



What is evident in these responses to the visioning of an optimal world for women farmers is their need to build solidarity and grow collectively as a whole and as individuals. This coincides with the Pennsylvania Women's Ag Network who responds to social and cultural needs in their communities as a way to be successful. As Trauger et al. (2010) suggest, the construction of masculinity and femininity and their relationships to work roles and decision-making are shifting in sustainable agriculture. However, this shifting doesn't remove the domestic work from the long list of women's work. In fact, women do the domestic work in addition to the on-farm production work (Sachs, 1996). This is reflected in one woman's response of the needs of being a woman farmer: "Someone come be my wife." While we couldn't provide a wife, we did provide for other desires voiced by that particular woman as well as many more voiced by her pilot partners.

The farmer-to-farmer education approach in building a learning community with the women was immensely successful. As demonstrated in other contexts, traditional agricultural education organizations have offered very little production-focused education geared toward women farmers and their educational needs (Sachs, 1996; Barbercheck et al., 2009). A survey conducted by Pennsylvania State University Extension revealed that more than half of the women farmers surveyed preferred hands-on participatory workshops, networking, interactive learning, and peer teaching (Barbercheck et al., 2009). Women farmers can obtain this through emerging organizations that provide mentoring, networking, education, and camaraderie for women who sometimes find a lack in traditional sources of agricultural community (Rissing, 2013).

Although the facilitators of the Network were already cognizant of this approach, the co-creating process presented the opportunity to develop topics centered around the women's collective assets and interests. Amy Freeman-Rosa, a composting expert who has taught workshops on composting nationally, taught a skill-building workshop on composting at the fourth session, hosted by an urban farmer and business woman, Yvette McClain-Henley. A mother-daughter team, Ginny Knagg and Emma Blinkenberg, led an equipment and tool use workshop at their multigenerational Centennial Farm at another session.

Breaking Bread

Not surprising for a group of women with livelihoods centered around food, a key feature of each meeting was providing a large spread of food. The planning team worked with participants to create a large potluck meal at each session, often with dishes featuring foods grown by participants. Having a meal at each session was more than a tool to attract higher attendance; the women were able to connect with one another over a meal to provide elements of sharing and trust-building.

Capturing the Moment

After experiencing the passion and intensity of the first few meetings, the planning team decided that it was important to capture the spirit of the group in a visual manner. One participant who has expertise in photography was encouraged to photograph each session, particularly the field trips. These photos were shared with the group on online social networks and gave women another way of seeing themselves as part of a larger group.

Quality of Ties Is Greater than Quantity of Ties

At the outset, the planning team hoped that one sign of the group's success might be growing organically at a rate that the team would have trouble managing. At the end of the sixth session, the group was not bigger, but the relationships among those who participated had grown stronger. Together, the Network participants decided to continue into 2015.

"About to give up because I didn't know other women farmers." —Network Participant

NEXT STEPS

The Network wrapped up the pilot project in September 2014 with a meeting to celebrate the fall harvest. MIFFS plans to continue to support the Network through two key initiatives: continuation of the Network and implementing a Women in Agriculture (WIA) Farm Site. Initial operational funds are coming from The Community Foundation of Greater Flint and a USDA Beginning Farmer grant awarded to MSU CRFS and MIFFS.

The physical location of the WIA Farm Site is a collaboration with Genesee County-based Genesys Health System. Genesys is partnering with MIFFS to establish this farm site at the Genesys Health Park Campus, just south of Flint. The WIA Farm Site will occupy three acres and will serve as a community-based, resource-sharing and educational center for producers and consumers in the region.

Genesys is committed to transforming health care through a population-based care model in which keeping patients well is as important as treating them when they are sick. The WIA Farm Site reflects a strategic use of the physical space making up the Genesys Health Park Campus and coincides with the organization's desire to nurture healthy and economically viable community initiatives. The farm site aligns with these strategic directions by providing a mechanism to deliver healthy food to individuals throughout the region and also to serve as an economic development opportunity to grow the capacity of women farmers to be a part of the local economy.

Recommendations for Other Networks

The lessons learned in this pilot project are applicable to women producers interested in starting a network. We intentionally focused our pilot in a small geographic area. To those who want to convene a women in agriculture network over a large geographic area (such as a state or multi-state network, we recommend dividing up the area and channeling information through a set of trusted partners in smaller networks). With a keen awareness of the quality of ties rather than the quantity of ties, small networks should focus on the partnerships and collaborations that can be developed regionally rather than statewide. Focusing on building a network of primarily farmers is critical to the credibility of the group, as well providing a place where farmers could feel comfortable joining when their busy lives allowed. Given the stronger kinship that can arise out of a regionally based network (rooted in geographical communities where facets such as local markets, land value, farm product pricing, and others are more than likely grounded), network participants are then positioned to discover the power within themselves to build an effective group.









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