JUST FARMING:
AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE ON THE CAPACITY
OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS TO SUPPORT THE RIGHTS OF
ORGANIC FARMERS AND LABORERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY- RESULTS SUMMARY & IMPLICATIONS FOR NOFA

In this study, I provide insights to the question, “How do various justice-related issues (including competition in the market, pay, housing, and health) impact farmers and farmworkers on organic farms in the Northeast, and how does involvement in a grassroots organization like the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA) help them address these issues, if at all?” My findings in this report will hopefully contribute to a deeper understanding of how economic and environmental justice, asset-based community development, and coalition building practices are implemented within NOFA.

The thorough exploration of the justice-related issues that are impacting farmers and workers on organic farms that are a part of this network reveals both strengths of and challenges for the organization and its various state-level chapters, and will be discussed in this report. I also expose some areas of continuous challenge for farmers that may help to refocus the organization and the work of the Interstate Council and state-level chapters so that these issues can be addressed head-on.

The economic justice issues facing organic farmers and workers in this study are consistent with some of the challenges faced in conventional agriculture, such as inadequate pay, lack of housing, intense market competition, and health-related problems due to the strenuous nature of the work. However, the reasons for these issues differ in the organic farming sector. In conventional farming, much justice-related research focuses on pesticide use and its effects on worker health as well as effects of immigration policies and the exploitation of immigrants due to the reliance in conventional agriculture on workers from outside of the United States. In small-scale organic farming, the issues largely come from a lack of systemic infrastructure
within which the farmers themselves can make enough income to support and enact their values of justice and sustainability.

From their perspective, the positive emotional value that participants realized in living this lifestyle far outweighed the economic challenges they discussed, which were many and significant (including little to no pay, no health insurance, and the difficulty of the work itself). Participants experienced the farm as a place to learn and grow, in addition to work, whether for just room and board or for full pay. My findings suggest that NOFA should consider how it can help ensure ongoing employment opportunities and training for workers in the case that full-year employment cannot be achieved. It might be possible for NOFA to build alliances with other employers that could use the skills of agricultural workers during their off season. Finally, because access to both health and retirement benefits is a consistent challenge across the network, there is a role for NOFA in creating a collective, lower-cost way for farmers and laborers to access benefits.

This study has implications to consider for future practice within NOFA, particularly as it pertains in assisting to create a context within which justice can be realized for the farmers and workers that are a part of its network. NOFA should consider what it can do to ensure ongoing employment opportunities and training for workers, particularly considering how this overlaps with a consistent theme that came up throughout the data collection process, which is the need to get more young people involved in the work of organic agriculture. Because of the challenges in recruiting and retaining quality workers, NOFA has the opportunity to build an infrastructure that would connect the right workers with the right farms by identifying not only skill sets, but also values. The workers who had the most positive experiences, as shown in the site visit interviews, were those who connected at a personal level with the farm's purpose.

Farms selected for the interviews provide examples of best practices within NOFA for creating just environments for not only workers, but throughout the life of the farm. Farmers understand justice issues, but the political-economic context within which they operate prevents them from realizing it, therefore reinforcing the necessity of the network to create systemic change. While navigating this came naturally to some, others learned through their work with other farmers and on other farms how to do this while still operating their farm in a sustainable business model. This suggests an opportunity for NOFA to work with these farms and others like them to offer training and education on creating a just environment on the farm in the same way that NOFA offers education and outreach about sustainable farming practices and other business-related concerns. Doing so would leverage the assets within NOFA’s own community of practitioners.

NOFA’s Interstate Council should revisit and rearticulate its shared set of values, and name strategies for inclusiveness of its members, thinking of new ways to draw upon their strengths or resources, and creative ways of continuing to connect their members to one another for organic practice education and business growth. To navigate the tensions described between NOFA’s state and regional entities will require trust-building and honest conversations about the balance between the Interstate Council’s role as a network facilitator
and individuals’ roles within their state-level chapters. Establishing such processes will be a necessary next step for the continued success and growth of NOFA as a regional organization with independent state chapters. Since it emerged in the survey data (and the participation rates of the survey) that some state chapters are stronger than others, which means that participants across the network are having inconsistent experiences and receiving inconsistent benefits from their membership, it would be worthwhile to develop some consistency in how the state-level chapters operate. Without taking away the independence of the state chapters, the Interstate Council should commit to some common values and practices that would be shared among them.

With respect to policy advocacy, the collection of opinions needs to be coupled with education, as some farmers commented in the survey that they were not able to answer policy-related questions because they did not know enough to have an informed perspective on the matter. Related to this, NOFA should work to educate its members on the positive wins for organic agriculture from the new Farm Bill so that they can take advantage of new programs and incentives. In contrast, they should continue to educate members about the areas where organic farmers lose out due to this bill so that they can form a more coherent message for the next round of legislation. In addition, NOFA’s Interstate Council should carefully consider the pros and cons of involvement in justice certification and assess potential concerns that arise from its members’ perspectives to decide whether it will add value or be an added bureaucracy or constraint on time. While I did not specifically inquire about their members’ attitudes toward justice or social certification requirements, the literature indicates that NOFA should take the steps necessary to secure buy-in as they continue to support involvement in initiatives such as the Agricultural Justice Project.

In all of this, NOFA should consider the potential benefits of offering more specialized sub-networks for their farmer-members who focus in just one or few areas of agriculture. As noted, farmers who had a focus area felt less connected to NOFA and more connected to their other networks. It could also be an opportunity for NOFA to collaborate with other networks to ensure the diversified involvement of all potential audiences. NOFA has the opportunity to connect with these other organizations and movements to provide education, policy, and advocacy for justice for organic farmers and laborers in their network and to involve participants more intimately in the very processes and decisions that shape their lives.

In the next phases of research, we will be looking to expand upon the work started here to profile farmers and laborers in the network, specifically gaining insight into their values and motivation to farm organically or to work on an organic farm. Longer term, research will contribute to NOFA’s ongoing work on justice certification.