

# **The Presence of Adult Education Theories in African American Farmers Advocacy Campaign**

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The field Adult Education holds to the theory that adult learners are internally and not externally motivated (Knowles as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This theory seemed to hold true in the empirical research which was conducted to determine how underrepresented small black farmers acquire knowledge of agricultural policymaking process and how these farmers use this knowledge to become active participants in the creation of agricultural policies. Every five years, the United States of America (U.S) Congress passes a set of agricultural policies know as a Farm Bill. Although the allocations in farm bills are to serve the entire farming industry; traditionally these bills have provided the greater amount of subsidies to large farms. Small farmers, especially small underrepresented African American farmers have not proportionately reaped the benefits of the programs generated by the Farm Bills (O' Sullivan, 2000). Underrepresented small black farmers have not significantly benefited from the U.S. farm bill because these farmers do not produce commodity crops in sufficient quantities and they are not generally considered key participants in the creation of the farm bills (USDA, 1997).

African American farmers were largely ignored in the agricultural policymaking process until 1990 when Section 2501 was written into the 1990 Farm Bill. Underrepresented small black farmers gained further recognition in farm politics when a group of African American farmers brought a racial discrimination lawsuit -“Pigford, et al. vs Glickman”- against the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1997. This lawsuit proved that the USDA discriminated against black farmers by not providing them with the same services as white farmers (USDA, 2002, a). The lawsuit clearly demonstrated the need to focus on how agricultural policies affected black farmers. With Section 2501 been included in the 1990 Farm Bill and the 1997 lawsuit, small black farmers begun to have a minute impact on the agricultural policymaking process. Small black farmers have also been able to have their voices heard in the 2002 Farm Bill (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/ Land assistance Fund, Rural Coalition, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, 2002). Although these farmers are still not seated at the agricultural policymaking table (Cervero & Wilson, 1994) the impact that they have had in effecting the direction of agricultural policies is worthy of further investigation. Throughout this research the terms underrepresented small black farmers, small black framers and African American farmers are used interchangeably.

## **Methodology**

As was previously stated the purpose of this study was to determine how small black farmers acquire knowledge of the agricultural policymaking process and how these farmers used this knowledge to become active participants in the creation of agricultural policies. The study looked at the black farmers' participation in the 1990 and 2002 farm bills processes. The Case Study methodology was the research design chosen. It was conducted as an instrumental case study, where the purpose of case was “to help understand the phenomenon” (Stake, 1995, pg. 77). This phenomenon under study was the involvement of underrepresented African American farmers in the agricultural policymaking process. The case in this study was the Federation of

Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (Federation/LAF). This organization was chosen for two reasons: (a) its members are small black farmers, and (b) the organization have been actively directly involved in the agricultural policymaking process. African American farmers fall under the grouping of “Socially Disadvantaged Group” which is defined as a “group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities” (S. Res. 2830, 1990). The participants for this study were selected from among the members, staff and leaders of the Federation/LAF.

Three qualitative techniques were used to collect data: individual interviews, group interviews and documents. There were 18 individual interviews and three group interviews conducted. Of the 18 individual interviewees, three were the leadership of the Federation/LAF, two were state branch directors, two were staff members, and the remaining 11 were conducted with farmers who are members of the Federation/LAF. All three group interviews were conducted with farmers. Interviews were conducted in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. The interview script consisted of open-ended questions. As agreed upon the names of the farmers were substituted with pseudonyms and only the first names of the leaders of the organization were used.

Data were analyzed using the Constant Comparison method of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). The interviews with the leadership and staff of the Federation/LAF were compared to each other. The individual interviews and the group interviews with the farmers were compared and the interviews with the staff and leadership were compared with those of the farmers.

### **Findings**

The journey of the Federation/LAF into the arena of agricultural policymaking officially began in the early 1980s. During the farm crisis of the 1980s a large number of farmers were losing their land due to extraordinarily low commodity prices and loans becoming due at the same time. It was at that time, according to Jerry, the Federation/LAF fully realized black farmers did not have an active voice in Washington DC. The Federation/LAF made a formal commitment to become an active voice for black farmers on agricultural policymaking. Jerry stated:

*Advocacy became a primary program initiative in the 1980s and we were just coming out of the farm crisis of the 1980s when people were just losing, black and white, were losing their farms at an alarming rate. And we knew then that we had to have some input into policies and initiatives to save our farms..... And we knew then that we would be left out of the process because we were suffering the same things they were but ours were compounded by discrimination. ....So we decided that we had to speak for ourselves. We had to make sure that we had a seat at the table.*

The Federation/LAF's first major thrust into the agricultural policymaking process was the creation of the Minority Farmers Rights Act (MFRA), which was a legislative proposal to U.S. Congress. The purpose of the MFRA was to help black farmers and other ethnic groups to have equitable access to the programs of the USDA and have adequate technical assistance. Coalitions were formed between Federation/LAF and other minority groups to create the MFRA. The Act was written in 1987 and the campaign to have it integrated into the farm bill began. Portions of the MFRA were included in the 1990 Farm Bill as Section 2501-Technical Assistance Program.

The importance of collective work with other similar minded groups, as one of the strategies of the Federation/LAF's was further explained by John:

*And that's what the Federation/LAF is about I think to be open to how we can have broader and broader coalition and support. I mean I don't think we would have gotten the Minority Farmers Rights through if we didn't have a fairly broad coalition*

Although John viewed collaboration as a worthwhile strategy for gaining access to policymaking, he cautioned that any collaborative effort must be symbiotic if it is to meet the needs of all groups. He stated, *"On the other hand we don't want to get going in a coalition with somebody who wants to get objective A and we support all your objective. And in the end, every meeting, the only thing they really talk about is objective A and not any of the things that we are interested in."*

After the leadership of the Federation/LAF concluded that they would be able to play a role in the agricultural policymaking process, they actively sought to involve the farmers. Ralph recollected how they were able to accomplish this inclusion of farmers:

*We just took some boards like that one there [pointing to an easel board and flip chart] and actually wrote down what farmers wanted. They wanted credit. They wanted loans for getting farms. They wanted access to markets. They wanted to have technical assistance.*

The members of the Federation/LAF were further involved in the policymaking process when a 'Caravan to Washington' was organized to take all able small black farmers to Washington DC to participate in the hearings of the agricultural committees on the 1990 Farm Bill. The efforts that went into organizing this caravan were noted by Shirley:

*We had a caravan to Washington where farmers; I think it actually started somewhere in Mississippi and then moved on up this area and on up the coast to DC. Farmers from Georgia did not join the caravan until it was in Richmond Virginia, because it was right in the middle of peanut harvest. Well, we worked with them to get the information out to farmers. So that information came through Federation/LAF. Well they knew that, they would actually get to meet with their congressmen and hopefully the senators or senator from Georgia because we had people in DC who were working to arrange those meetings... Well all together, we had a lot of support from other groups. But I know we had 30 [farmers] from Georgia and I would estimate may be as many as 100 farmers were a part of that whole trip. But when you think, the group stopped in Atlanta, in South Carolina, you know, farmers from those states were a part of it. And each of those states' capitals was the stop [for the caravan].*

When the caravan arrived in Washington DC, some of the Federation/LAF staff members were allowed to testify for the agricultural committees. Yvonne remembered her experience testifying:

*We talked to the senators of agriculture. I made a speech, about farming. And we were talking about losing farms, family farms. Although the Caravan to Washington was very successful it was also very costly.*

Based on their experiences in creating the MFRA and the Caravan to Washington, the Federation/LAF learnt that a more focused and less costly program was needed to educate and involve small black farmers in the agricultural policymaking process. Hence, the Comprehensive Education Campaign (CEC) was created, which is spearheaded by Jerry. Jerry explained what the CEC is:

*Well again every five years, whatever the farm bill is, we go on a comprehensive educational campaign, in having listening sessions with farmers. And we make sure that, we come up basically with our policy and initiatives that we would like to see in the farm bill, and it is based from inputs from the farmers. So they have their input and they help*

*us go, not lobby, but advocate for that and meet with their congressmen, they meet with them and let them know what they want to see in the farm bill and other legislations.*

Through the CEC, the Federation/LAF has informed, educated, and involved small black farmers in the agricultural policymaking process. The CEC gave small black farmers an opportunity to have a direct input into creating the policy options that are put forth on their behalf.

One of the components of this more comprehensive campaign was the Leadership Development Project. This project took place by providing “hands on” training to leaders of the various farmers’ cooperatives and other farmers who were leaders in their communities. Jerry emphasized the importance of such a project:

*So as I said, what we have is a local leadership development project. We’ve always had that, where we go in and teach leaders one-on-one, and in workshops. And we also bring [local] leaders to Washington and other areas to meet with congressmen. To sit down and talk with them about what is needed ...to go back and organize at the local level.*

*Organize and educate the people within their community about policies and what’s going on. Have listening sessions in their community, where we may bring in people from outside to talk. so it is an on going on the job type thing. We do, do intensive workshops and one-on-one assistance. And we also bring in other organizations, policy type organizations that might be more familiar with the process than we are.*

The local leaders are exposed to these activities in order for them to be able to in turn inform, educate, and motivate the members of their cooperatives or other individual farmers to become involved in formulating agricultural policies.

Many of the participants of this study proactively sought educational opportunities to learn about the farm programs. These farmers not only attended meetings held by the Federation/LAF but also attended other meetings that provided information on the farm program in which they were interested. Elijah considered attending meetings in person to be very important, because he is a primary receptor of the information given. He commented, “*I go to every meeting I could go to. Because it’s like this here, once they say something they might scratch it from the records but they can’t scratch from what I done heard.*” Morris also attended meetings to learn about farm programs of the USDA. According to his recollection of the topic of the meetings, he stated, “*They were about policy on what you need to farm, what you need to grow, what they going to buy, what they wasn’t going to buy and what was best for the market.*” These farmers were self motivated to seek information on how to access USDA programs.

The Federation/LAF reflected on the lessons they learned from their involvement in formulating agricultural policies. This reflection facilitated useful changes in CEC, such as the addition of the farmers’ survey, which allowed the Federation/LAF to develop a systematic way of recording the farmers’ suggestions for policy changes (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/ Land assistance Fund, Rural Coalition, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, 2002). The survey was used to determine the status of the farmers’ lives and how their lives were impacted by federal agricultural policies and programs, and the USDA.

During the CEC for the 2002 Farm Bill, twelve workshops were conducted. The purpose of the workshops was “to get grassroots farmers input on proposed Farm Bill legislation and to determine what they felt were some of the problems with current agriculture legislation and policies” (Federation of Southern Cooperatives/ Land assistance Fund, Rural Coalition, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, 2002). Documentation on the CEC, recorded responses from the different meetings, survey and workshops and these were combined with the efforts of the Rural Coalition, and the Missouri Rural Crisis Center to create the policy brief entitled “Campaign for

a Just Food and Farm Policy.” It contained four principles/goals and a list of descriptors of what was needed to achieve each principle/goal. The principles/goals were: Global and Community Food Security; Justice and Equity for all Participants in the Food System; Care for Land and Resources Base and Equitable Access to High Quality; and Affordable Food.

The final draft of the policy brief - Campaign for a Just Food and Farm Policy - was submitted to the respective congressional agricultural committees. Following the passing of the 2002 Farm Bill, the Federation /LAF, Rural Coalition, and Missouri Rural Crisis Center published, in the August 2002 issue of the Rural Agenda, the gains and loses that were achieved in the 2002 Farm Bill. Overall, these organizations concluded there were eight policy areas in which they had successes.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of the study showed that Adult Education theories were used by the Federation/LAF to help underrepresented small black farmers gain the skills required for participating in the agricultural policymaking process. Experiential learning, self-directed learning, cognitive learning, and an Africentric orientation were used to plan and execute the Comprehensive Education Campaign programs. The concept of learning from experience, experiential learning, was apparent in such activities as the caravan to Washington DC, conducting listening sessions, the Leadership Development Project and directly involving the farmers in the creation of the Federation/LAF’s legislative proposals. Leske and Zilbert (1989) stated that experiential learning is not simply hands on learning, but should also include critical thinking, reflection on problems, a sense of self-esteem, and teamwork. These criteria were a part of the collective work and evident throughout the entire CEC.

Self-directed learning and cognitive learning were also identified in the learning process that took place among the small black farmers. Garrison (1997) defined self-directed learning as cognitive and motivated by external management and internal monitoring. Many of the participants of this study proactively sought educational opportunities to learn about the farm programs. These farmers were motivated to obtain the information that was needed to help them access the programs.

Cognitive learning includes learning through ones experiences and mentally processing information (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The Federation/LAF and the black farmers reflected on the lessons they learned from their involvement in formulating the Minority Farmers Rights Act to creation of the policy brief – Campaign for a Just Food and Farm Policy. The farmers were encouraged to evaluate their experiences by examining the methods and outcome of all segments of the CEC in order to determine their level of success. This reflection facilitated useful changes in CEC, such as the addition of the farmers’ survey, which allowed the Federation/LAF to develop a systematic way of recording the farmers’ suggestions for policy changes.

The seven principles of the Africentric orientation “selfethnic liberatory and empowerment” were identified by the researcher in the implementation of the CEC. Collins and Guy (1998) delineated these seven principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. This study found that the Federation/LAF had a clearly stated purpose, which was to become involved in formulating agricultural policies in order to create policies that support small black farmers’ needs. This unity of purpose has allowed the Federation/LAF to work to find creative ways of impacting the policymaking process. Collective action was the method by which information was disseminated throughout the small black farmers’ communities. The Federation/LAF also used collective work

to collaborate with other minority organizations to achieve in roads into the agricultural policymaking process at the Congressional level.

Small black farmers have established a history of using the concepts of experiential, cognitive, and self-directed learning. This study stresses how these theories can be associated with underrepresented small black farmers. In addition, the study shows how these theories can be combined with Africentric orientations to provide “ethnoeconosocio-culturally” relevant education for small black farmers. The term ethnoeconosocio-cultural was created to be inclusive of the ethnicity, economic, social, and cultural status of small black farmers. The field of Adult Education can benefit greatly by including Africentric orientations in the mainstream literature. This study demonstrates that these orientations are valid tools for educating adult African American farmers.

This study stresses key issues that 1862, 1890 and 1994 Land Grant universities, the USDA, and community-based organizations would find to be beneficial when planning programs for black farmers. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund has weathered the storms of overt racial discrimination; farm foreclosures and blatant neglect in order to advocate for African American farmers having a voice in the agricultural policymaking process. Inclusion of the Federation/LAF use of Adult Education theories to achieve their goals would enhance the Adult Education literature.

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