“Extension(al) Crisis: University of Minnesota Extension and Urban Agriculture in Minneapolis”
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PROJECT DESCRIPTION
In this project, we trace the institutional apparatus of United States cooperative extension programs and their interactions with emerging urban food movements, using the University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension program and its engagement with Minneapolis urban food movement organizations as a case study. Cooperative extension played a critical role in the development of United States agriculture by connecting rural America to technical agricultural knowledge. Despite its public service mission, it historically prioritized highly-capitalized commodity production at the expense of small-holder farmers and landless rural communities. Since the 1970s, long-term demographic and technological trends have eroded Extension’s stakeholder base and decreased its role as a valued source of technical information. In addition, shrinking public sector funding has created an environment in which it is important to display impact and value to access financial resources from the state. These changes have resulted in fears within the institution that Extension is losing its relevance.

In recent decades, interest in urban agriculture has proliferated across the U.S., driven by many of these same demographic transitions. Urban agriculture encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, from home gardening to intensive vegetable production on vacant lots. In many cities including Minneapolis, barriers to for-profit urban agriculture, such as limited land access, investment and infrastructure, have hindered the growth of this sector. Yet many within Extension view engagement with urban agriculture as a way to integrate Extension’s historic role in agriculture with an burgeoning urban stakeholder base. However, Extension remains limited in its ability to support urban food movements. This project explores the apparent contradiction between UMN Extension’s interest in urban agriculture based on its need to prove its legitimacy to a growing urban constituency, and its marginal position in Minneapolis’ urban agriculture, despite Extension’s historical strength in supporting agricultural production.

Methodology
Preliminary research
Explored social and institutional relationships within Extension and in Extension’s interaction with urban agriculture using qualitative inquiry methods.

Framework
We use theories of institutional sociological theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Theone 2011) and political agroecology (de Molina 2013) to contextualize our work. We conduct this project studied as agroecology graduate students studying at the University of Minnesota.

Methods:
- Review of UMN Extension history, analyzing historical texts and Extension bulletins
- Analysis of histories of development of agricultural research and outreach institutions in the United States
- Conducted five interviews with agricultural extension agents, Extension administrators, and Extension agricultural deans representing different levels of the Extension structure. Interviews were informal and exploratory, primarily used to generate themes and inform future research directions.

Thematic questions:
- How do you perceive your role in Extension?
- How does your work relate to urban agriculture?
- How do you perceive the role of the Extension institution in developing, supporting, and interacting with urban agriculture?

Further questions explore:
- Extension’s ideological apparatus
- “Success” stories in urban agriculture
- Creation and dissemination of agricultural knowledge in Extension

UMN EXTENSION: ORGANIZATION

Extension Structure Interview subjects
- 2015 UMN Extension Budget:
  - Funding mechanisms:
    - State and Federal funding (50-70%)
    - Grants (5-10%)
    - County (variable, dependent on county)
    - >90% funding = personnel
    - <$10 funding = programming
- Decision-making:
  - Distributed oversight structure
  - County agents have considerable degree of autonomy
- NEEDS
  - Minneapolis urban agriculture
  - Urban Gardens
- SERVICES
  - Extension Programs
  - Minneapolis County Ext. Agent
    - Single agent provides services to range of clients including suburban horse owners, rural dairy farms, urban agriculture
  - Master Gardeners program
    - 500+ Volunteers
    - Volunteers provide expertise to urban gardeners, institutions interested in gardening

UmN EXTENSION: HISTORY

References

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REFERENCES