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Kentucky's Community Farm Alliance: From Growing Tobacco to Building the Good L.I.F.E.

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In 1998, tobacco was Kentucky's top cash crop. Kentucky was one of the three states with the largest number of family farms still in operation—and domestic tobacco was their main crop.

Major changes swept over the tobacco industry that year when it was pressured to compensate states for the public health costs associated with smoking as part of the National Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement. Kentucky received a payout of $3 billion over a 25-year period.

The changes stood to both benefit and threaten the family farms that cultivated tobacco. The crucial questions were how this money would be used and who would benefit. Many other states were using their settlement money to balance their budgets. Family farmers in Kentucky feared that any funds designated for agricultural purposes would be siphoned off by industrial agriculture, biotechnology, and large farming operations. Furthermore, they knew the tobacco industry would, in turn, pressure the federal government to eliminate a tobacco subsidy program that had limited the number and size of allotments for growing tobacco while setting a floor on prices. Small farmers feared that without such supports, they would be forced to quit farming altogether.

But that's not what happened. Kentucky leaders opted to allocate $1.7 billion of its $3 billion share to agricultural development, and much of it went to support small-sized farms.

This was thanks to a small but highly effective grassroots organization of family farmers and their allies, the Community Farm Alliance (CFA), which helped to ensure that much of the money devoted annually to agriculture would benefit small-sized farms directly through crop diversification grants and the building of marketing infrastructures for local farm products. Its success would benefit farmers in Appalachian Kentucky and throughout the rest of the state.

Here, in part, is how CFA accomplished its goals and what can be learned from its efforts.

A Short History of CFA

The Community Farm Alliance was established in 1985 amid a national farm credit crisis. Its goal was to preserve family farming in the context of an increasingly industrialized agricultural economy. When other farm organizations around the country focused on national policy in the 1980s, CFA went local. It built county-level chapters across the state of Kentucky and made the development of leadership skills among its farmer-members its highest, long-term priority. And it went beyond networking with other farm organizations to build strong alliances with environmental, social justice, Appalachian, and religious organizations as well. Some of the latter helped it become a biracial organization, which proved to be an important factor in its most recent success.[1]

As Kentucky leaders began to debate how to allocate Tobacco Settlement Funds, CFA made several moves to shape the state's agricultural policy.[2]

- In the summer of 1999, CFA began to convene public meetings to discuss how tobacco settlement money should be spent, using these meetings to get more small farmers involved in the debate.

- Also in 1999, the governor of Kentucky created the Kentucky Agricultural Resources Development Authority (KARDA) to strategize about how to channel tobacco settlement funds toward agriculture. The Farm Bureau, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, university agricultural scientists, and various commodity groups were included, but not CFA. In response, CFA demanded that the process of decision-making be "farmer-driven."
- In testimony before the Kentucky state legislature's Tobacco Task Force that same year, CFA proposed the novel idea that a significant portion of tobacco settlement funds be channeled through farmer-led county councils to ensure that small farmers in each county would receive a fair share of the benefits. Deborah Webb (executive director of CFA from 1995 to 2008) recalled a key legislator saying with surprise, "That's very democratic. That sounds like democracy."[3,4] Afterward, CFA received a standing ovation from the legislative body. The applause was not a superficial gesture. CFA's model of farmer-led county councils would soon become law.

These efforts, along with others advocated by CFA, helped to ensure that small farmers would benefit from, and be included in, decisions about tobacco settlement fund allocations. But another policy tool had to be implemented to determine where funds would be directed if small farmers were truly to benefit.

The simplest definition of tobacco dependence, pounds of tobacco grown, would have predominantly benefited counties in northern and western Kentucky, where larger tobacco growers predominated. Instead, CFA proposed a map of tobacco dependence that depicted, county by county, the number of farms, the percentage of per capita income represented by tobacco, and the amount of tobacco grown. This map extended tobacco dependence to 118 counties, including many in central and Appalachian Kentucky that otherwise would have been excluded. CFA's redefinition of tobacco dependence was a big hit with legislators who represented counties across the entire state that would at least receive a share of the money.

Although its path was by no means inevitable or smooth, *House Bill 611*, passed in 2000, authorized farmer-led county councils to determine how 35 percent of the state's tobacco funds over 25 years would be allocated locally, based on CFA's definition of tobacco dependence. Subsequently, county councils began awarding money to individual farmers who requested grants to support alternatives to tobacco growing, whether by building greenhouses to cultivate flowers or by shifting to other crops. But CFA's work was still not done.

In 2001, KARDA convened a planning process to determine how to use the remaining 65 percent of the funds to develop a blueprint for agricultural development. State leaders initially favored investing significant amounts of money in biotechnology and industrial agriculture in order to build a high-tech "new economy" in Kentucky alongside hog-lots and industrialized poultry farms. CFA countered with a grassroots-based, participatory planning process that culminated in its comprehensive report *The Greenprint: A Long Term Plan for Kentucky's Agricultural Economy*. This now-famous *Greenprint* offered compelling evidence and well-elaborated plans for building infrastructures to market home-grown foods and to support value-added processing centers throughout Kentucky.

At the same time, CFA inaugurated an effective postcard campaign to the governor, stating: "Support CFA's *Greenprint*: No tobacco settlement funds for biotech!" Remarkably, the interests favoring biotechnology and industrial agriculture were out-maneuvered. Crop diversification, marketing, and value-added processing took center stage instead. About 80 percent of CFA's *Greenprint* has been incorporated into state law, according to those familiar with the process.

Since the passage of *House Bill 611*, CFA has initiated efforts to build viable, sustainable, and eco-friendly food systems that would maximize the amount of food produced, processed, distributed, and consumed within the state while minimizing the distance food traveled between "farm and fork." Its 2002 report, *Bringing KY's Food and Farm Economy Home*, demonstrated that Kentucky farmers could and should produce a much larger proportion of the food consumed in the state. CFA members coined the phrase "Locally Integrated Food Economies," or "L.I.F.E.," to envision the networks of farmers, producers, distributors, and consumers across Kentucky that would work collaboratively to institutionalize a new set of environmentally friendly agricultural processes.

Space does not permit a full discussion of the many obstacles that CFA and its allies have successfully overcome to demonstrate the viability of L.I.F.E. in Kentucky, but several accomplishments deserve mention:[5]

- The "scaling up" of local food systems across the entire state through the proliferation of local, regional, and urban farmers' markets
- The passage of state laws either mandating or recommending the purchase of locally grown foods for state parks, public schools, and universities

CFA members and staff understood that demonstrating the statewide viability of a locally integrated food economy also meant challenging the myth that farmers' markets could only succeed in high-income, niche markets. Success in two locales helped CFA overcome this myth:

- The establishment of a regional marketing and processing center in eastern Kentucky to provide infrastructure for institutional buying in public schools from farmers in the Appalachian portion of the state
- The establishment of viable urban farmers' markets in low-income and predominantly African American neighborhoods in Louisville

Building on its history as a biracial organization, CFA, an organization of rural farmers, became, by necessity, a group of urban organizers. By working with African American community leaders, extension agents, local officials and foundations, and neighborhood churches, CFA not only built the first explicitly low-income farmers' market in the state, but also contributed to holistic community renewal in what was once a "food desert." Indeed, by carrying out a Community Food Assessment, CFA documented the problems of food access in Louisville's low-income communities and has continued to take a leading role in efforts to improve both food access and the overall sustainability of the city's food system. The collaborative movement has included the facilitation of WIC voucher projects, buy-outs for homeless shelters, cooking demonstrations, student-painted murals, a youth community garden, "Stone Soup" (a monthly communal supper based on purchases from the farmers' markets and gleanings from their leftovers), and the establishment of a city-wide food security task force. CFA has since gone on to create the bulking, distribution, and commercialization systems to further bring L.I.F.E. to Louisville, and beyond.

In conclusion, other groups and organizations seeking solutions to current problems can learn a number of lessons from CFA's successes:

- The tobacco crisis did not call forth CFA. Rather, CFA's many years of community-based organizing and leadership development put it in the position to be able to influence agricultural policy in Kentucky at a moment when change became possible.
- CFA's emphasis on farmer-led decision-making—like its map of tobacco dependence, its *Greenprint*, and its development of policy tools—was used to counter expert knowledge with citizen knowledge and to express CFA's democratic vision that those who live with the problem own the solution.
- Much of CFA's success can be attributed to its focus on organizing not only *against* questionable practices (such as biotechnology) but also *for* positive solutions such as increasing market venues for diversifying farmers.
- CFA's strategy of spreading tobacco settlement money among the widest number of counties helped legislators find common ground across party divides, just as its efforts to scale up marketing strategies in new terrains required reaching across racial, rural/urban, and regional divides.
- Finally, CFA activists did not wait to be invited to the table before beginning to influence thinking and policy making for sustainable agricultural development in Kentucky.

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