

Race and Corporate Power in the US Food System: Examining the Farm Bill

By Elsadig Elsheikh*

In nearly every aspect—socially, economically, politically, and environmentally—the US food system is characterized by widespread inequity. This inequity, however, is not inevitable, but is orchestrated and perpetuated by structural racialization and corporate power. The US food system not only suffers from widespread racial/ethnic, class, and gender disparities but is also a reflection of a society that produces inequity in every domain of life.

Inequity within the food system, such as limited access to nutritious and affordable food, income disparities for food and farm workers, or racial/ethnic disparities in accessing land cannot be addressed without addressing inequality within society as a whole, including low income and limited employment benefits, unfair treatment of people of color by state and federal institutions, and limited access to positions of power. Therefore, a major concern is the nexus of marginality and “othering” perpetuated by corporate power and structural racialization within the US food system and society as a whole.



On “Othering”

“Othering, is a set of processes that engender marginality across any of the full range of human differences, such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, skin tone, and more.”

-john powell

Corporate power refers to control of political and economic systems by corporations in order to influence trade regulations, tax rates, and wealth distribution, among other measures, and to produce favorable conditions for further corporate profit. In most cases, these measures produce conditions where women and low-income communities fare worse. Structural racialization, on the other hand,

*Elsadig Elsheikh is the Global Justice Program Director at Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley. This background (including figures) is largely drawn from a larger report titled “The US Farm Bill: Corporate Power and Structural Racialization in the United States Food System,” published by Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley (November 2015).

refers to the set of practices, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements that are reflective of, and help to create and maintain, racialized outcomes in society, with communities of color faring worse than others in most situations.

While corporations control agricultural production and prices and enjoy record profits, many small farmers cannot make a living, are increasingly vulnerable to price fluctuations, and struggle for market access in increasingly concentrated commodity markets. Corporations also reap the benefits of an overworked and underpaid work force in the fields, the processing plants and even restaurants. One in seven consumers—many of whom are food workers—do not have access to affordable, nutritious food. Additionally, large-scale industrial agriculture is the largest contributor to soil degradation, water pollution, and global climate change.

The racial/ethnic, class, and gender disparity relating to socio-economic inequity in the United States, in terms of wealth, land access, access to positions of power, and degree of democratic influence, is more a product of cumulative and structural forces than of individual actions or malicious intent on behalf of private or public actors.

To challenge and eliminate corporate power and structural racialization in the US food system and society as a whole, we need to analyze the ways that public and private institutions are structured, and how government programs are administered and operated in a way that marginalize low-income communities and communities of color.¹

The Farm Bill, the most important piece of legislation influencing the US food and agricultural policies, is both a reflection and driver of inequities in the food system today.

Feature and Structure of the US Farm Bill

On February 7, 2014, President Barack Obama signed the Agricultural Act of 2014, also known as the 2014 US Farm Bill. The Bill establishes and maintains feder-

al support for agricultural production, nutrition programs like SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps), conservation programs, rural development programs, and more. These programs are then operated in large part through the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The food and agricultural provisions and programs of the Farm Bill are divided into overarching categories called “titles.” These titles are not static and can change between Farm Bills during the re-authorization process. The 2008 Farm Bill had 15 titles, for example, while the 2014 Farm Bill has 12: commodities, conservation, trade, nutrition, credit, rural development, research, forestry, energy, horticulture, crop insurance and miscellaneous.

The 2014 Farm Bill provided \$489 billion in mandatory spending for all titles for five years and \$956 billion in mandatory spending until 2024. Among the titles of the 2014 Farm Bill, the nutrition title is the largest, accounting for 80 percent of spending, followed by crop insurance, which accounts for 8 percent of spending; conservation, which accounts for 6 percent of spending; and commodity programs, which account for 5 percent of spending. The remaining 1 percent of spending includes trade subsidies, rural development, research, forestry, energy, livestock, and horticulture/organic agriculture.

The Farm Bill comes up for renewal every five years or so. Congressional negotiations on the Bill typically take between two to three years. Many interest groups and corporations shape the Farm Bill by lobbying and campaign donations. Though they vary greatly, actors include large retailers and food manufacturers (e.g., Walmart, Coca-Cola), grain traders, suppliers and manufacturers of agricultural inputs (e.g., Cargill, Monsanto, DuPont), members of government and special interest groups (e.g., the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Corn

¹ John Powell, (2013). *Deepening Our Understanding of Structural Marginalization*. Poverty & Race research Action Council. September/October issue; John Powell (2008). *Post-Racialism or Targeted Universalism*. 86 Denv. U. L. Rev. 785.

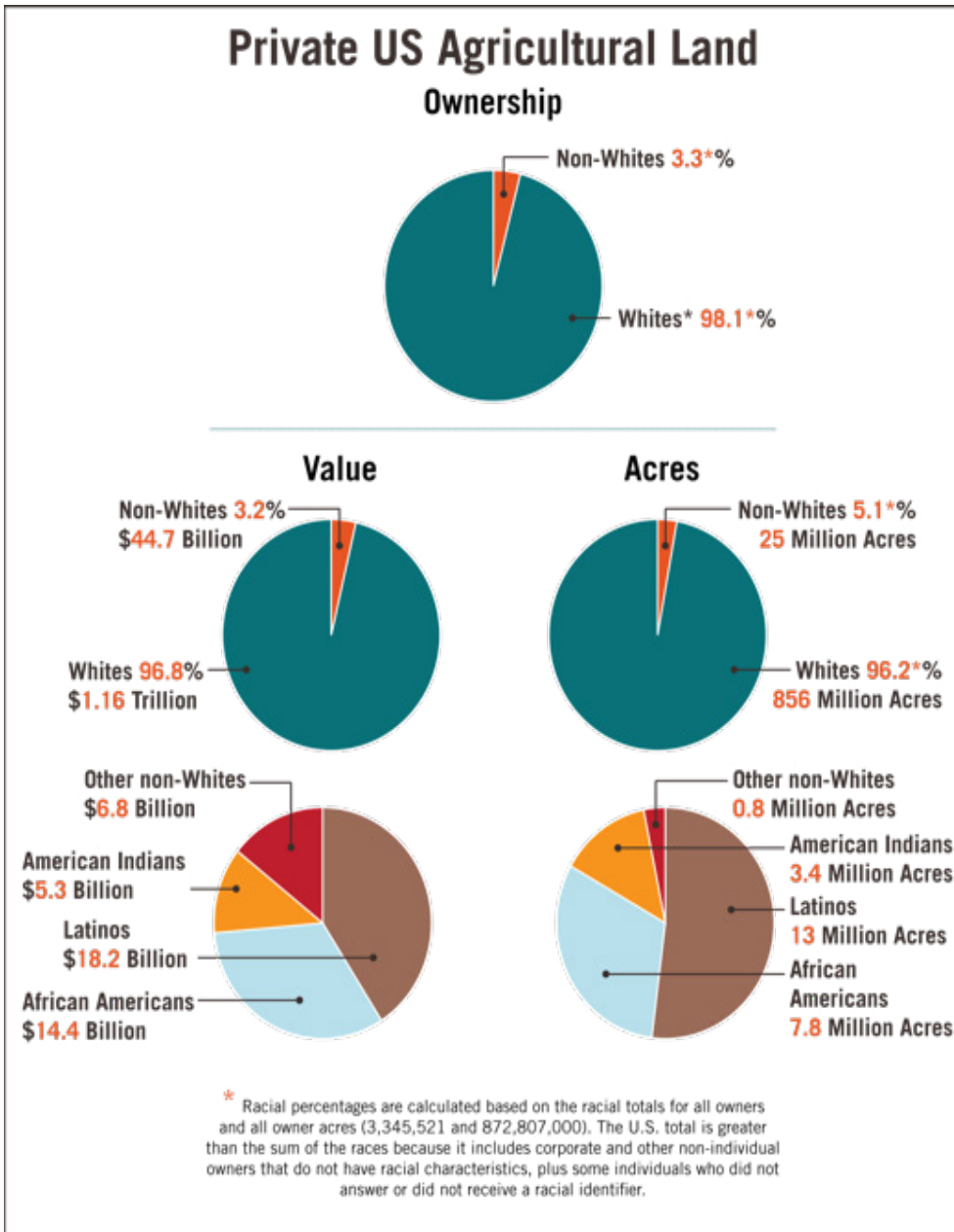


Figure 1: Private US Agricultural Land Ownership

Growers Association, and the International Dairy Foods Association), as well as a diverse set of advocacy organizations (e.g., the Center for Rural Affairs, the Environmental Working Group, and the Food Research and Action Center, among others).

Corporate Power in the Food System

Increasingly, however, it is corporate interests that

have had the greatest influence in pushing for specific language and policies that advance their respective interests in the Farm Bill first, with regards to food production, processing, distribution, and service; and second, in terms of education, research, and development. Corporations also exert influence through lobbying efforts within both political parties, private funding for higher education and research institutions, and strategic mergers. They efficiently translate their economic power into political power through the “revolving door” between corporate positions and government appointments.

For instance, in 1999 the Toronto Global Mail described Monsanto as a “virtual retirement home for members of the Clinton administration.”² The outcome of such tight relationships between corporations and government is readily apparent in federal legislation that upholds agribusiness power. Republican Senator Roy Blunt worked directly with Monsanto employees to draft the initial provision of the “Farmer Assurance Provision.”³ Although supporters stated that the provision was necessary to protect farmers from endless legal complaints by opponents of GMOs that hold up critical research, the Farmer Assurance Provision would have ensured a lack of corporate liability.

Such corporate influence in agricultural production has also been historically tied to racial/ethnic, gender, and economic discrimination. Although Blacks

² Rampton, S. & Stauber, J. (2002). *Trust us we're experts! How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles with your Future*. Paperback., New York, NY.

³ A provision of a bill that was signed into law in March 2013 by President Obama, yet only remained in effect for six months—undetermined the Department of Agriculture’s authority to ban genetically modified crops, even if the court ruled that such crops posed human and environmental health risks.

were able to establish a foothold in southern agriculture post-Emancipation, rural Blacks were virtually uprooted from farming over the next several decades. Pete Daniel brilliantly and persuasively contends that the federal government, through the USDA, collaborated with “Agribusiness and agrigovernment” to push small farmers off their farms, particularly, Black farmers.⁴ For example, in 1920, 14 percent of all US farmers were Black (926,000, with all but 10,000 in the South), and they owned over 16 million acres. By 1997, however, fewer than 20,000 were Black, and they owned only about 2 million acres. While white farmers were losing their farms during these decades as well, the rate that Black farmers lost their land has been estimated at two and a half to five times the rate of white-owned farm loss.⁵ Furthermore, although between 1920 and 2002, the number of US farms shrank—from 6.5 million to 2.1 million, or by 67 percent,⁶ the decline was especially steep among Black farmers; between 1920 and 1997 the loss of US farms operated by Blacks dropped 98 percent, whereas the loss of US farms operated by whites dropped 65 percent. (See Figure 1, Private US Agricultural Land Ownership).

Racial and Gender Disparities in the Food System

Fundamentally, the increasing power of corporations within the Farm Bill has continued and in some ways worsened the racial, gender, and economic inequi-

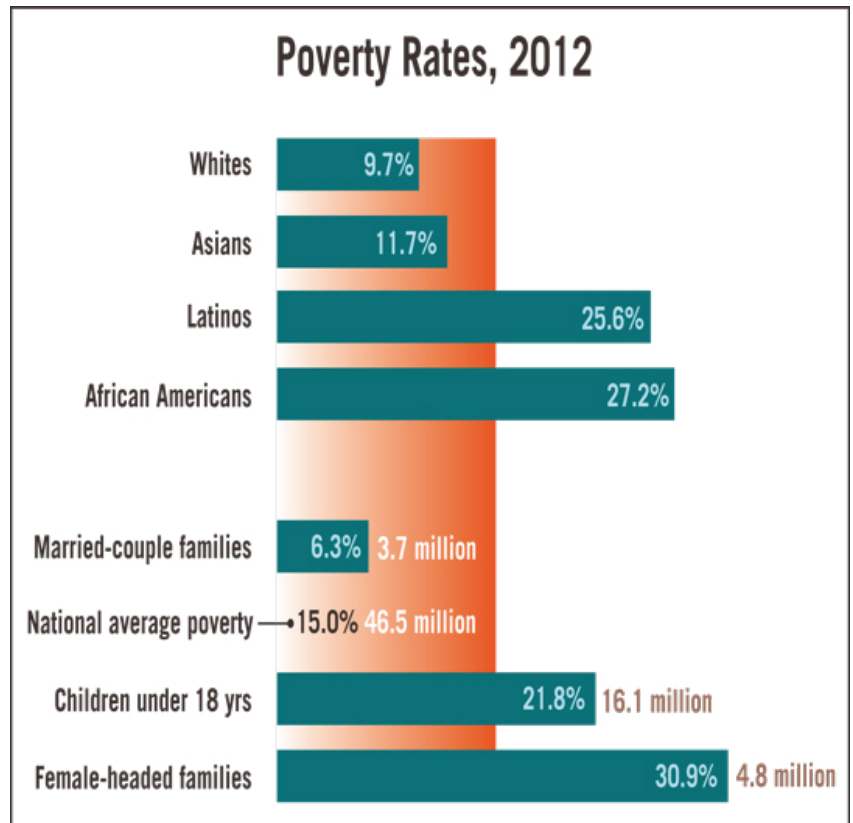


Figure 2: Poverty Rates, 2012

ties that have long characterized the food system and society more broadly.

For example, in 2012 the national average for poverty was 15 percent, over 46.5 million individuals, in which people of color constitute the majority (See Figure 2, Poverty Rates, 2012); however, the food system workers were far more likely to receive food assistance⁷ and more likely to live in or near poverty in relation to other industry workers.⁸ Additionally, of all government farm payments given to farmers, 97.8 percent of it went to white farmers. Of all farmers who received government farm payments, white farmers received an average of \$10,022 per farm, while Black farmers received an average of \$5,509 per farm.

As of 2009, 50 percent of commodity payments went to farms

⁴ Daniel, P. (2013). *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*. University of North Carolina Press.

⁵ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. (1999). *Census of Agriculture*. Washington, D.C.; Gilbert, J., Sharp, G., & FeZin, S. M. (2002). *The Loss and Persistence of Black-Owned Farms and Farmland: A Review of the Research Literature and Its Implications*. *Southern Rural Sociology*, 18 (2), 1-30.

⁶ Civil Rights Action Team (1997). *Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture*. Washington, D.C., <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/pigford/research/CRAT%20Report%201997.pdf>; Oliver, M., & Shapiro, T. (2006). *Black Wealth/ White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*. New York: Routledge.

⁷ The Food Chain Workers Alliance (2012). *The Hands That Feed Us: Challenges and Opportunities for Workers Along the Food Chain*. <http://foodchainworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Hands-That-Feed-Us-Report.pdf>

⁸ Allegretto, S., Doussard, M., Graham-Squire, D; Jacobs, K., Thomson, D., & Thompson, J (2013). *Fast Food, Poverty Wages: The Public Cost of Low-Wage Jobs in the Fast-Food Industry*. University of Chicago at Urbana-Champaign and UC Berkeley’s Labor Center.

operated by households earning over \$89,540, 25 percent went to farms operated by households with incomes greater than \$209,000, and 10 percent went to farms operated by households with incomes of at least \$425,000.⁹

Structural Barriers to an Inclusive US Food System

There are four major hurdles to addressing the racial/ethnic, gender, and economic inequities perpetuated by the Farm Bill policies:

1. The Farm Bill—always a pillar of agrarian capitalism—now functions as tool of neoliberalism. The long-term shift from domestic safety net programs for farmers that protected producers during lean years, to the subsidization of agribusiness itself through commodity support and crop insurance, has structurally positioned low-income farmers and communities of color on the losing side because they have been given few options for resources. Furthermore, as the Farm Bill has been designed to be insulated from any democratic influence by way of countless layers of congressional committees, it has become difficult to challenge or introduce changes into the Farm Bill by those who are negatively impacted by its policies.

2. Under the current Farm Bill, supporting public nutrition assistance programs and fighting poverty and racial/ethnic inequality are antithetical to one another, despite evidence that public assistance programs provide support to some of the most marginalized communities. The Farm Bill ultimately maintains structural inequity, particularly in terms of wealth, by channeling profits to corporations such as Walmart and other large retailers, which benefit greatly from benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—SNAP (food stamps). Many of these corporations are then able to funnel profits back to their corporate headquarters outside their respective retail sites, while still paying workers low wages and granting few benefits.

3. Including producers of color into current payment schemes that are skewed towards a market-based economy controlled by corporate interests is actu-

ally antithetical to fighting poverty and inequality. This is the case despite recent gains with USDA Civil Rights settlements and slowly increasing participation in current payment schemes by producers of color, specifically, the exclusion of farmers of color from the Farm Service Agency's committees ultimately maintains such structural inequity. They do so, for example, by re-entrenching existing property regimes that consistently push producers be they of any racial/ethnic background, to cut costs where possible. While such disparities may be addressed in part by better outreach and assistance, these payment programs, and even crop insurance, ultimately maintain structural inequity, particularly in terms of wealth and land access.

4. Finally, any short-term policy interventions to “fix” the Farm Bill and its corporatized and racialized outcomes must be aligned with the long-term strategy of challenging the structural and racialized barriers to an inclusive and sustainable food system, and thus the existing social, political, and economic realities that make such barriers possible. That is because structural change must arguably begin with the tools that are available at the moment, in this case the US Farm Bill, in order to address immediate needs. Yet, history has shown that such tools can only address the needs of some. While the condition of some women, communities of color, and low-income communities, for example, has improved in some regards, many members of these communities ultimately still experience the brunt of an unjust food system, particularly in terms of wealth, land access, access to positions of power, and degree of democratic influence.

Given these major racial/ethnic, gender, and economic inequities and the structural barriers to addressing such inequities, what strategies could bring new life to the Farm Bill and food and agriculture policy in general? They are both long and short term:

Farm Bill programs that have the potential to be effective anti-poverty programs, such as SNAP, could be overhauled so that they stay beyond the influence of corporate interest groups and lobbying efforts. This would require removing such programs

⁹ White, T. Kirk & Hoppe, Robert A. (2012). *Changing Farm Structure and the Distribution of Farm Payments and Federal Crop Insurance*. United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service.

from the Farm Bill, redesigning them primarily as anti-poverty and economic stimulus programs, and recovering, in part, their original potential of 1930s era.

The Farm Bill's remaining titles that have somewhat improved the conditions of marginalized communities, such as its Rural Development programs, should be given a more central role within a new Farm Bill in order to lift up farmers and the communities in which they live and work. However, as women, people of color, and immigrant food system workers are disproportionately affected by economic inequality, any new farm bill should recognize labor conditions and income disparity and ultimately adapt fair labor conditions and earnings for all farmworkers. For example, it could increase Department of Labor (DOL) funding to enforce protection of migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. Studies have shown that the DOL's enforcement of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (AWPA), and the H-2A agricultural guest-worker program has improved following the additional funds and the hiring of 300 new DOL investigators.

Additionally, while the Farm Bill does not deal directly with immigration policy, the combination of a dysfunctional immigration system and corporate power, exacerbates the exploitation of migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. As such, the new Farm Bill should explicitly protect the rights of all food system workers regardless of their immigration status and protect them from fear of losing their jobs or deportation.

Ultimately, reform needs to be introduced through a combination of short-term policy interventions and long-term strategies, with the specific goals of dismantling racism and inequality in the food system.

Dismantling Racism and Corporatization of the US Food System

Exposing corporate power and structural racialization within the US Farm Bill offers a prime opportunity to challenge racism within society from multiple angles: social, political, economic, and environmental. It is also a prime opportunity to address corporate power and structural racialization within mul-

multiple time frames and at multiple scales—from the scale of the food system to that of society itself. Such attempts at structural change will have little traction, however, unless these demands come from a very powerful social movement.

Structural change requires a strong and united movement that is capable of organizing and mobilizing at the state and national level, and that ultimately aims to produce the conditions required for food sovereignty. This includes the restraint of corporate influence in the public sphere, just access to food, health equity, fair and living wages, land access, fair immigration policy, non-exploitative farm labor conditions, environmental well-being, and more. Such a movement would therefore need to encompass grassroots and advocacy organizations that are anti-racist, anti-capitalist and feminist, and that are oriented toward a new economy of and for environmental justice, labor rights, immigration rights, food justice, climate justice and human rights.

The food sovereignty movement itself already embodies much of this coalition work and is carried forth by a wide ranging group of organizations including: La Via Campesina, The Network of Farmers and Agricultural Producers Organizations of West Africa (ROPFA), Eastern Africa Farmers Federation (EAF), Eastern and Southern Africa Farmers' Forum, We Are the Solution, and other agrarian-based farmers' movements; the International Planning Committee on Food Sovereignty; ATTAC; World March of Women, The US Food Sovereignty Alliance; many food justice and rights-based movements; and indigenous peoples movements in North America and elsewhere that engage with the particular histories of colonialism in their respective regions.

This movement necessarily calls for food systems change on the basis of entitlements, structural reforms to markets and property regimes, and class-based, redistributive demands for land, water and resources. Demands for food sovereignty are frequently anti-imperialist, anti-corporatist and/or anti-capitalist. In the pursuit of a framework for political, economic, and social change, the Farm Bill then is a barrier to true structural change and a tool for excessive privatization, free trade agreements, and

new regulations that benefit corporations over people, communities and the environment.

Although the food sovereignty movement is oriented towards a number of critical issues (e.g., dismantling corporate agri-foods monopoly power, recovering parity, redistributive land reform, community rights to water and seed, regionally-based food systems, democratization of food systems, sustainable livelihoods, protection from dumping and overproduction, and the revival of agroecologically-managed agriculture, collectively geared toward resource redistribution), there is still a gap. Missing from the core of such efforts, particularly as they take shape in the United States, is an anti-racist critique that acknowledges and addresses the underlying racial logic and history of not only the Farm Bill, but of the food system and even within contemporary food justice movements. Such a movement must not be afraid to call out the racial logic and history of white supremacy, and its concomitant logics and histories

of heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and imperialism, visible in all the ways we have outlined.

A just and democratic food system is not simply the end goal. Rather, it is also a strategic means to challenge the structures that impede the possibility of a just life for all peoples in every domain of life.

Only when the broad-based food sovereignty movement upholds a justice narrative that takes into account wealth, race/ethnicity, and gender, can the struggle that low-income communities, communities of color, and women face with regard to the food system be connected to the struggles they face elsewhere—including labor, employment, health, housing, the school-to-prison pipeline, and police violence. Only then can such a movement truly strive for a just society that upholds the dignity of all people.

About this special series:

This Backgrounder is the second in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.

Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle racism in the food system. Different aspects of the topic can include land, labor, finance, food access, nutrition, food justice and food sovereignty organizations.



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398 60th Street, Oakland, CA 94618, USA