

Why and How to Include Policy in Ag of the Middle Research

Christy Anderson Brekken, J.D., M.S., Department of Applied Economics, Oregon State University

Lauren Gwin, Ph.D., Center for Small Farms & Community Food Systems, Oregon State University

Kate Clancy, Ph.D., Senior Fellow, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, University of Minnesota

Publication date: November 2016

Why should we, as researchers, pay attention to policy?

Over the years, NC 1198 members have identified and articulated many issues facing Ag of the Middle producers and their supply chain partners. We all understand that public policy plays a role in the issues, opportunities and impacts on the Ag of the Middle sector. Explicitly addressing policy issues in straightforward ways can enrich our Ag of the Middle and supply chains research, and offers more outputs and outcomes from our work.

One of our NC 1198 project objectives is to collect data and identify issues that may be traced back to policy. Some NC 1198 members already include policy identification and implementation in their research. By extending and pooling our collective knowledge about how public and private policy affects Ag of the Middle, we can paint a more coherent picture of the policy implications of our work. Our research then becomes relevant to the policymakers and others who rely on data and analysis to make sound public policy decisions.

What do we mean by policy?

Policies arise from the institutions that interact with Ag of the Middle producers and their supply chain partners. The institutions may be public or private: policy enacted by government bodies, or policies of retailers or other private parties. Policies may exist at a macro or micro level: international, national, regional, state, or local. Policies may or may not be scale neutral. Policies may be explicitly aimed at food or farm businesses and programs, but many seemingly unrelated policies have unintended consequences for the Ag of the Middle sector.

Our past research indicates that policy does have important implications for Ag of the Middle. For example, AOTM researchers provided data that informed the federal definition of “local” as within 400 miles or within the same state. This definition was incorporated into USDA rural loan programs and then, as the only official federal definition of “local,” was adopted again in the federal Food Safety Modernization Act.

Research on specific Ag of the Middle production and supply chains has brought other policy issues to light, such as a lack of scale neutrality in many federal farm and food programs, access to capital for beginning farmers, risk management tools for specialty crops, labor and immigration laws, environmental regulations and payments for ecosystem services, agricultural production contracts, and land use regulations.

How can we incorporate policy in our research?

Understanding what policy questions look like and how they arise is the key to incorporating policy into research. If this is unfamiliar territory, you could include someone with policy expertise in proposals: from spending a small amount for an advisor to help with project design and analysis, to a co-PI who takes on policy as a major project component.

We suggest five ways by which you can incorporate policy into qualitative and quantitative research (and you may know of others):

1. In your project objectives: insert a policy angle or make a policy a stand-alone objective. Choose an existing policy and study the impact it has on your subjects. Is the government program being utilized as anticipated? Has it had unintended consequences?
2. In the questions you ask your subjects or the data that you utilize: by asking questions that explicitly relate to policy, we have learned that government programs are underutilized by Ag of the Middle producers and supply chain partners. If your subjects don't know about the program, they cannot tell you that they are not using it unless you ask. If you don't know about a program or policy you may not be getting all the information that would be useful to answer a research question. If you are utilizing quantitative data, consider participation in government programs, subsidy support (or lack thereof), or other relevant policy indicators as an explanatory variable.
3. In how you hear their answers: be able to recognize that if your subjects are talking about barriers or opportunities encountered in their dealings with institutions- these may have a policy base. For example, if access to capital is a problem discussed by your subjects, you might be able to articulate banking regulations as a barrier, or small business rural development loans as an opportunity.
4. In your analysis: as you conceptualize the structure of the Ag of the Middle sector or farmers' supply chain partners, look for the support and barriers that come from the institutions surrounding it, such as government or established market players. If quantitative data on policy variables are not readily available, consider existing institutional structures that may help explain the outcomes of your research. Based on your research, make recommendations regarding policy that could affect future outcomes.

5. Private institutions also create policy that applies to producers and food supply chain managers. Large retailers may require particular production practices to get on store shelves. Non-profit institutions may offer certifications or payments for ecosystem services that influence production practices. Keep private policy in mind to understand the full range of institutional interactions that affect Ag of the Middle research and outreach.

How do policy outcomes influence Ag of the Middle?

Ag of the Middle producers and their supply chain partners are engaged in the daily work of building a business. Researchers are engaged in the daily work of building knowledge. NC 1198 bridges that gap by doing applied research and extension. There are compelling reasons to be more proactive about including policy in research and proposals.

An important part of our work identifies barriers and challenges. An explicit focus on policy in our work can help build problem-solving capacity in our audience. If we want to suggest solutions, policy should be part of our toolbox.

You can also be more effective in procuring ongoing funding for your and others' research by talking to agency personnel about the need for more funding for agriculture and food systems research, and telling them how important it has been for your research program.

Focusing on policy can bring system wide changes. A policy issue that affects a large number of people can draw together groups working on different issues. By identifying policy barriers and solutions, diverse groups have the incentive to form coalitions or alliances and improve the chances of being successful at policy change, fundraising, or other activities. We, as researchers, can contribute to those policy changes by connecting the dots for the farmers, business networks, and myriad organizations organizing policy efforts at all levels.