

Social Sustainability and Family Development Stages

While families come in all shapes and sizes, family development theory suggests that family units generally progress through five developmental stages. The graphic below is provided to help agricultural service providers identify social sustainability challenges families may experience as they progress through these stages. It is meant to be used as an educational aide, recognizing that each family is unique and may or may not experience the development stages similarly if at all. In each family development stage, find a short summary of the stage as well as key social sustainability issues individuals and families may face during the stage; again, these are provided to help service providers anticipate and assist farm families, with the recognition that each individual and family face unique issues.

Social Sustainability Key



Community connections. Principles by which individuals are related to one another in a society and processes of building the values, relations, and institutions necessary to achieve a society for all.



Entrepreneurship. Vision, innovativeness and adaptability needed by farm business owners, particularly during periods of change and/or stress.



Health and well-being. The state of comfort, health or happiness of an individual or group characterized by social, economic, psychological, spiritual or medical dimensions.



Equity. Access to the benefits of society such as information, expertise and support, and capital.



Farm succession. The process whereby the traditions, skills, and capital of farming are passed from one generation to the next.

Young adulthood

During this stage, individuals are accepting separation from parents and taking responsibility for self. They are forming a separate identity; establishing peer relationships; advancing toward financial independence. Potential challenges may arise when young adults and/or parents have difficulty separating from interdependence.



Securing peer relationships



Access to farmland & capital is critical.



Transitioning from "child" to business partner or independent operator.



Developing financial & marketing skills and experience to make autonomous business decisions; developing relationship with service providers & farm advisors.

Senior years

During this stage, individuals are accepting shifting generational roles, and maintaining individual and couple functioning & interests in the face of aging. Individuals are typically dealing with loss of spouse, sibling, peers while preparing for own death. They may be exploring new familial and social roles. Challenges may arise around farm succession, particularly if personal identity is only/strongly tied to the farm.



Ability to "pass the baton" and disengage from farm business. Generational transfer of family leadership.



Attend to physical health needs, including end-of-life care. Manage stress during generational transition and change in position on farm.



Develop of new peer relationships or increased dependence on existing support networks.

Family Development Stages

Coupling

During this stage, individuals are joining together to form new family systems and establishing new identities as "couple." There is a realigning of relationships with members of extended family. Potential challenges may arise when partners experience difficulties separating from or being cut off by extended family members.



Building peer relationships both on & off-farm as support systems.



Business formation/establishment is common during this stage, therefore advisor networks important; customer relations and HR forming



Stress management during changes in business establishment and couple identity.



Access to farmland & capital is critical as well as access to technical assistance.



If farming with family, maintaining positive relationships (including "in-laws").

Launching adult children

During this stage, the family typically sees exits and entries into the family system; relationships are realigned to include in-laws and grandchildren. Challenges may arise when parents are not able to accept the exit of children and/or their changed status as adults and potential business partners in the farm. Other challenges may include health concerns and changes when children exit ("empty nest" stress), and other midlife transitions.



May see need in mid-career adjustments to farm enterprise and tolerance for adaptability.



Facilitating multi-generational business decisions. Fostering generational communication and cooperation.



Attention to health of aging bodies, including stress management during transitioning family and farm structures.



Further development of off-farm support networks for senior generation while building on- and off-support networks for junior generation.

Parenthood

During this stage, adjustments are made to accommodate parenting while preserving couple relationship; often this stage sees challenges with balancing work and family time as well as addressing child care (from time and financial perspectives). As children become adolescents, the parent-child relationship shifts to permit adolescents to move toward independence. Challenges may arise during the need for parents to allow for adolescent autonomy and refocus on coupling and/or career.



Key time of balancing work and family.



Entrepreneurship skills & enjoyment, effective HR management, ability to adapt to changes in business and family.



Established sense of belonging to community; peer support networks.



Next generation learning skills and traditions of farming from senior generation(s); during adolescence, moving toward autonomy.