

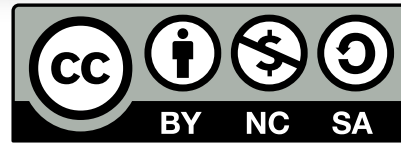


Agri-Culture & Future of Farming

An Interactivity Foundation Discussion Guidebook

Edited By
Shannon Wheatley Hartman, Ph.D.
Dennis Boyer, J.D., M.P.A.
& Timothy J. Shaffer, Ph.D.

Creative Commons



Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

This material is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution, Noncommercial, Share Alike International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0), the basic terms of which are summarized below. To view a copy of this license and a link to its full legal code with all its terms, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_US. This material is also protected by copyright and/or other applicable law. Any use of this material other than as authorized under this license or copyright law is prohibited.

Generally, under the terms of this license, you are free:



Share — to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.



Adapt — to remix, transform, and build upon the material.

The Licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:



Attribution — You must—

- give appropriate credit, including the title of the material, the name “Interactivity Foundation” as its creator, and the names or pseudonyms designated in the material for any images or other elements of the material,
- provide a link to the license, and
- indicate if changes were made.

You may provide such attribution in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use of the material or any elements of the material.



Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.



ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon this material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

No additional restrictions – You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Notices:

You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation. No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy or moral rights may limit how you use the material. The terms of the license may be waived if you get the written permission of the Interactivity Foundation.

Printed in the United States of America by the
Interactivity Foundation
412 Market Street, Suite 202
Parkersburg, WV 26101
www.interactivityfoundation.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
List of Concerns.....	4
Summary Table of Contents.....	6
Policy A. We Are One Ecosystem.....	8
Policy B. Embrace Efficiency.....	10
Policy C. Rural Renaissance	12
Policy D. Food Matters!	14
Policy E. Democracy Through Farming & Rural Life	16
Policy F. Create Your Own Policy.....	18
How to Use This Guide.....	20
Photo Credits	22
IF Publications	23

A Note of Appreciation: This discussion guidebook is the product of several years of discussions with farmers, experts, and everyday citizens interested in farming. We explore in this guidebook the idea of agri-culture: the practices, beliefs, values, collective memory, and everyday existence of folks who work with the land to produce food, fiber, and fuel for themselves and others. We are especially grateful to the anonymous panelists who met over the course of a year in Manhattan, Kansas, and Dodgeville, Wisconsin, to develop these policy ideas. We are also thankful to the farmers, producers, students, professors, extension workers, politicians, small-business owners, and many other engaged community members who met with us to further develop these ideas. These discussants are too many to list, but their ideas and imagination span from the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona and Sonora to Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Kentucky, West Virginia, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and New England states. We thank you for sharing your ideas with us. The photographs in this guidebook were generously shared by Brandon Chase Goldsmith, Jason Banks, and several other great photographers. Finally, we would like to thank the Interactivity Foundation for its continued support of community discussions. The work of the Interactivity Foundation is nonpartisan and non-advocacy. It is driven by the mission to engage citizens in exploratory discussions of divergent policy ideas for the purpose of promoting civil, anticipatory discussion about possible policy ideas. To learn more about the Interactivity Foundation, visit [its](#)

Introduction



Imagine you are a farmer of the future. Your job is to produce food, fiber, or biofuel. How do you do this?

Do you imagine yourself driving a tractor? Are you sitting at a control panel? Do your crops reach as far as the eye can see, or do you manage plots of land scattered throughout the city or countryside? What do your hands look like? Do they work in the soil? In the laboratory? Who do you see during the workday? Do you work alongside neighbors and family members? Are you part of a larger group of hourly workers spread over fields and warehouses? What do your fellow farmers look like? How old are they? Where are they from? Are they mostly men or women? What skills and traits do they need to do their jobs well? What would happen if you didn't show up for work? What would happen if you just stopped farming? Why do you keep doing it? Is it rewarding? Is it a public service? Are you contributing to the greater good? Can you support your family? Are you respected and valued? Are you part of a community? Is this a life you want for your children?

Activity: Select just a few of the questions to help you imagine what farming of the future will look like. Take a few moments to construct a picture in your mind. Share your image with those around you. What stands out most from your vision?

What will agriculture look like in the future?

Agriculture is often described as the science, practice, and/or art of farming. It is the cultivation of the soil for growing crops and rearing animals. Many of us think of agriculture as a means of sustaining and enhancing human life, but we give little thought to how, where, why, and by whom this work is done. We often neglect the social practices, language, history, inherited wisdom, shared values—the culture—of working the land. How has this culture influenced us as a country and what will it look like in the future?

These are hard questions for many of us. Although agriculture is a huge part of American history, most of us don't know much about it now. For example, many Americans think that small family farms feed the U.S. (and even global) population. But what counts as a small farm? We know little about the size of farms or the agriculture industry. We know even less about the regulations and subsidies around this work and how they affect people, communities, and the environment. In fact, most Americans have never met a farmer or visited a farm! What do we know about farming communities? Do they have to be rural? Where does rural end and urban begin? What sort of threats or challenges do farmers and farming communities face? What sort of values and practices do we associate with farming communities? In what ways might farming practices and agri-culture affect all of us?

Activity: Take a few moments to discuss what you already know about farming and agriculture. Share a personal story that helps others understand your starting point in this discussion. Share a concern you have when you think about the future of farming or agri-culture.

Concerns, Challenges, and Trends

Over the course of several years, the Interactivity Foundation organized discussion panels with farmers, experts in agriculture, as well as everyday citizens representing a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. We asked these "thinking groups" to discuss the topic of agri-culture. We noticed some trends in these discussions. Many were concerned about the environmental impact of agriculture and the general disconnection we have with the land. Others were concerned about the rising costs, low returns, and general uncertainty of farming in the future. They saw expansion as the only way to keep up with farming trends, but were concerned that this would inevitably exclude many people from taking up this work or from continuing it. This led to discussions about "Big Ag" or corporate farming. Many discussants were concerned about the

consolidation of farming and the growing control that corporations held over farming, while others expressed concerns about the negative framing of corporations and modern farming techniques. They saw the efficiency associated with modern farming as being key to addressing other concerns related to a growing global population, predicted to reach 10 billion by 2050. They noted that food insecurity could lead to conflicts around the world. Others noted that our food concerns for the future are not issues of production, but issues of conservation, waste management, nutrition, storage, and distribution. Clearly, the concerns related to this topic cross multiple dimensions and stretch around the globe. That is not to suggest, however, that we didn't spend a lot of time discussing local concerns, such as the closing of rural grocery stores and the boarding up of main streets in rural small towns. We talked about food deserts in urban centers. We also explored concerns related to identity and how the farmer has become diminished, if not invisible, in the eye of the general population. We discussed how women have been central but often undervalued on farms, as has the labor of seasonal farmworkers.

Activity: Before moving ahead, take a few moments to generate concerns you might have about the future of agri-culture. You can think about it from various dimensions: economic, social, political, environmental, health, religious/spiritual, educational, ethical, etc. Take a few moments to write down some of your concerns.

Here is a list of concerns generated by our panels:

List of Concerns

A. Health

1. Our food system is geared toward profit with minimum emphasis on nutrition.
2. There is a general lack of understanding about what constitutes healthy, nutritious food.
3. Fresh food is not accessible in many areas in the U.S. These “food deserts” are not just in inner cities, but also in rural communities.
4. We are losing knowledge about food preservation and preparation.
5. There is a sharp decline of healthcare access and quality services in rural America.
6. There are higher rates of depression and suicide in rural America.

B. Culture & Identity

1. There is a general lack of awareness about the importance of agriculture in American life. Farmers are treated like an unseen, unheard peasant class.
2. The quality of activities and exposure to cultural experiences are limited in rural communities. Rural histories and knowledge are in jeopardy of being forgotten as people move away.
3. Rural small towns are at risk of extinction as depopulation grows. Youth, along with skilled and educated residents, are leaving. There is also a loss of infrastructure ranging from schools to grocery stores to fueling stations.
4. Urban crawl, newcomers, second homers are reaching into rural America. They increase property values and the price of land. They do not maximize or even make use of good land.
5. There are racial tensions and expressions of racism in rural America. Outsiders, especially minorities, are not as welcome as we might think.
6. There is a misperception of farmers, producers, and growers as uneducated.
7. There is a “survive the day-to-day” and “do what it takes...” mentality in rural, agricultural America. There tends to be a lack of empathy for those who do not make it and a refusal to look at the root and possibly structural causes of bankruptcy. Success or failure is placed squarely on the individual.
8. “Rural vs. Urban” is an unhelpful way of thinking about the grades of distinction and diversity of communities in the U.S.

C. Finance & Economy

1. Consumer demands shape agribusiness. Demands for cheap food shape the current agricultural model. Demands for farm-to-table, organic, non-GMOs are fueling new markets. The industry must respond quickly to the demands of consumers.
2. Farms have to grow to survive. Land is expensive and hard to obtain. Profit margins are minuscule. It is a high-risk endeavor with a relatively low financial reward. In the future, few will want to assume this risk without more stability.
3. Non-traditional investors may shape the future of farming. For example, farms could go the way of wineries and be funded by wealthy investors. Cooperative systems and nonprofit involvement could also challenge the current banking model of finance.
4. Increased competition in farming may produce new models of marketing. For example, the sharing economy could connect growers to consumers with the use of smart technology. This could replace or challenge the current system of marketing.
5. Rural communities involve interdependent industries: production, healthcare, education, harvesting, technology, mechanics, work and lives of supporting spouses. These relationships are sensitive to disruptions.

D. Agriculture Community, Industry & Farming Trends

1. Micro agriculture (small, organic, niche, nonconventional) versus macro agriculture (large, conventional, industrial) creates a potentially divided agriculture community.
2. There is a very blurry line between corporate and family farms, large and small farms, and even the notion of being on the “good” or “bad” side of farming. This might cause confusion, misconceptions, defensive, or offensive reactions.
3. Outsiders or nonconventional farming practices are causing more harm than good. For example, owners of farms and land are located farther and farther away from production. This creates a series of problems: no emotional investment in the community, driven mostly by a bottom-line, general detachment, decreased sense of stewardship.
4. Innovation is not being supported or encouraged in rural communities.
5. There is both a desire for and a danger of living in accordance with the land.
6. Farming can be a traumatic experience and memory for many people. Disconnecting and divesting from farming is different from just quitting or getting fired from a job.

7. Modern farming requires a higher degree of training and expertise. The learning curve associated with modern equipment, bookkeeping, farming policies are phasing out older farmers.
8. Farming is a systemic trap. Individual farmers lack control or significant agency in the farming system.
9. The future of farming is ill prepared to adjust to water, energy, soil, and climate uncertainties. Food production is a global and systemic issue. We cannot operate in a vacuum or address systemic issues by only addressing individual parts. The system will become more volatile as population increases and energy, water, soil, climate uncertainties persist.
10. It is not possible to wipe away the current agricultural model and “go back” to small farming. There is a danger of overpromising what small or nonconventional farming can offer.
11. There are pressures to grow to survive, and this creates scenarios where neighbors have to compete for land or take over foreclosures. Competition also requires overworking the land or not always following best practices because it is not possible.
12. Crop insurance is an ethical dilemma.

E. Land & Environment

1. There is a lack of available land and ethical dilemmas associated with buying available land. There is less care and stewardship for the land. There are economic pressures not to care for the land.
2. The current agricultural system is not environmentally sustainable and may not be sustainable on other levels: family, community, globally.
3. Land inheritance can be a problem as older farmers try to pass on farms to multiple inheritors.
4. What is the role of land grant institutions in this discussion? Are land grant institutions an ally, an enemy, or something else? How so?
5. Mineral and water rights will increasingly affect land value. What else may affect land value?
6. The current system is driven by short-term land management strategies that have the effect of burning out the land.
7. The movement or transportation of food is an environmental problem.

F. Governance

1. Constituents make contrasting policy demands while lobbyists have too much power of persuasion over policy-making.
2. There is much misinformation that is informing constituents, lobbyists, and policy makers.
3. There is too much regulation. Regulation hinders

commerce. Farmers should have more say over what they produce and sale.

4. There is not enough regulation. There should be stronger regulations about the use of antibiotics, pesticides, fertilizers, genetic engineering, and better labeling practices to inform consumers.
5. There is a lack of long-term thinking and planning within Department of Agriculture and other governing bodies.
6. Change is very slow. There are many outdated farming programs and subsidies.
7. Agriculture legislation is politicized. For example, the Farm Bill is loaded with non-farm issues.
8. Food production and access may become an international and human security concern.
9. Food production, storage, and consumption may further shift global power dynamics.
10. The global south is socially constructed as recipients of food, knowledge, and Western expertise, while the global north is socially constructed as the givers of food, technology, and modernity.
11. We do not have strong leaders or activists for rural America and farming culture. People are filling agricultural leadership positions without first-hand experiences in rural America or on farms.
12. We do not have a good system or approach for implementing change on a large scale.
13. Governing problems are being addressed with technocratic solutions.
14. The agricultural and food industries require the exploited labor of migrant workers to thrive or survive.
15. There is no clear national understanding or strategy for food production; what are we producing and why are we producing it?

G. Technology & Research

1. Machinery and irrigation will play a greater role in agriculture in the future. Like other industries, increased and smart automation will replace jobs.
2. There is a growing technological divide between rural and urban America.
3. There is not enough support for quality, unbiased, publically accessible research.
4. Conflicting research creates more problems than it solves.
5. Quality research is not affecting change in practices or decision-making.
6. Big data will impact agriculture.

Activity: Which of these concerns did your group mention? Which of these concerns trouble you the most or stand out as pressing? What is missing? What would you add to this list?

Imagining Policy Possibilities

Now what? What can we do about these concerns? What sort of policies might address these concerns?

In this discussion guide, we invite you to continue this conversation. We are going to move beyond our concerns to imagine various kinds of policies and actions that might address the list of concerns we generated. Some of these policies will focus on environmental sustainability while others will be informed by values such as public health, nutrition, efficiency, competition, labor, self-sufficiency, social justice, and democratic practice. The policy possibilities are not designed to embrace any particular political perspective nor do they advocate any particular political agenda. On the contrary, this guidebook offers contrasting policy possibilities to help explore the complexities of the topics from multiple perspectives.

You do not have to like all of these policy ideas. In fact, it is better if you don't. As you read through these policy descriptions, you may want to reflect on why a particular idea is appealing and why another is not. What does this say about your own assumptions, values, experiences, or biases? One of the goals of this discussion guide is to help us explore our own thoughts while engaging with others in civil discussions.

Activity: If you are new to civil, exploratory discussions, then we recommend trying out these basic practices in your discussion:

- 1) Practice saying, "Yes, and..." Try to build on one another's ideas as they come up rather than criticizing them right away;
- 2) Practice generosity of spirit. Help each other think through ideas. Help each other explore ideas even if you disagree with them;
- 3) Be bold and go deep. Don't worry if an idea is unrealistic or won't meet approval. Sometimes innovative ideas seem crazy at first because they go beyond current conventions.



Why should we do this? Well, we believe that it is essential for the health of any democracy to support citizens in exploratory and collaborative discussions. We must not only react to national issues as they emerge; we must also anticipate issues on the horizon and cultivate a culture of communication that enables us to talk with one another before we reach a point of crisis. And don't worry, if you don't see a policy idea that resonates with you or addresses your own concerns, there will be an opportunity to create your own policy idea. We'll walk you through that process as well.

Let's get started. Here is a preview of the policy ideas that our groups came up with:

Summary Table of Contents

	Description	Motivations	Implementations	Pages
Policy A. We Are One Ecosystem	Recognize the interconnections of life-supporting systems.	Concerns for biodiversity and sustainability.	Rely on environmental science and strong ethical approaches.	8-9
Policy B. Embrace Efficiency	Adopt efficiency principles and match production to need.	Farming needs to adapt and adopt new technologies.	Embrace innovation and deregulate where needed.	10-11
Policy C. Rural Renaissance	Prioritize rural area revitalization.	Rural places and rural practices have value.	Connect rural places to one another and to urban areas.	12-13
Policy D. Food Matters!	Organize food policy around nutrition and public health.	Feeding our population and promoting health.	Recognize a right to adequate nutrition and source food locally.	14-15
Policy E. Democracy Through Farming	Restore traditions of grassroots democracy.	Concerns about lack of meaningful participation.	Emphasize cooperative models and farmer representation in governance.	16-17
Policy F. Create Your Own Policy	Identify an approach to your concern.	What is behind your concern?	What types of policy actions would address your concerns?	18-19



We Are One Ecosystem



What if... human beings could coexist with all other life on the planet through practices of sustainability or even reciprocity?

In other words, what if humans actually give back to the earth as much as they take from it? Imagine a future where humans are not driven to dominate, control, or exploit the planet for immediate gain. Rather, humans coexist in balance with the land, water, air, and other living creatures—now and in the future. This practice would be most profound in industries such as agriculture, where humans intimately work with the natural environment and are motivated by an intense sense of stewardship of the land and the natural water cycles and climate needed to cultivate the land. Some might describe such a shift in practices as a “game-changer” that challenges fundamental assumptions about how societies and economies are organized. Others might feel that such new operating principles are simply necessary adjustments to prevent humans from overwhelming the natural systems needed to sustain life on Earth.

This policy idea grows from a deep-rooted understanding of interconnectedness in the natural world. The roots of this interconnectedness might be found in spiritual practice, secular ethics, scientific understanding, or a combination of all. To advance this idea, you will probably want to build relationships with nature that do not separate people from the environment or place them over or above it. For example, this policy would require farmers, consumers, corporations, and governments to take notice of what they use from the planet and require them to give back, practice reciprocity, or adjust their practices to achieve environmental balance. This policy idea requires discussants to practice systems thinking or the examination of linkages and interactions between the elements that compose the entire interdependent system.

What could this policy look like? You might select or combine some of the following ideas:

- Investing in research that focuses on the bio/chemical/geo limits that the Earth can absorb. Determine these limits and work within these parameters to develop long-term agricultural policies and practices.
- Creating legislation that protects rights beyond just human rights. Rivers, water reserves, stretches of land, and livestock should also have rights that will be protected within the judicial system.
- Creating incentive structures that reward agricultural practices that advance not just sustainability but reciprocity. This would mean that we would have to give back the resources that were taken during the agricultural process, such as replenishing water aquifers or resupplying the soil with nutrients.
- Mediating difficult change through strong and informed leadership, such as requiring positions like the secretary of agriculture (and those serving under) to be people with practical agricultural experience and embrace the values associated with this policy idea.
- Supporting farmers as they move away from unsustainable agricultural practices denoted by high-intensity farming, year-round yields, deep investment, and low-profit margins.
- Experimenting with alternative and smaller scaled farms located in non-traditional farming spaces, such as urban farming, permaculture, perennial farming.
- Learning from other individuals, corporations, and countries about sustainable and reciprocal farming practices. For example, supporting farmer exchange programs and global extension programs designed to promote environmental best practices in agriculture.
- Educating consumers about the environmental costs of agriculture. Creating incentives for consumers to support sustainable farming practices.



This policy idea is not for everyone. The **values** associated with this policy include sustainability, environmentalism, accountability, and ethical relationships. What other values might be associated with this policy idea?

What Would Success Look Like?

- Restoration of degraded ecosystems and protection of fragile environments.
- Preservation of biodiversity and genetic heritage.
- Establishment of a “land ethic” that serves as a guide for policy development and governance decisions.
- How would you measure the success of this policy idea?

Next Steps. If this policy idea resonates with you and you want to learn more, check out:

- **The Land Institute:** landinstitute.org
- **Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education:** sare.org
- **Permaculture Research Institute:** permaculturenews.org

Embrace Efficiency



What if...we created an agricultural system that was so efficient it would require fewer farmers and produce enough food and products to satisfy global need?

The forces that push agriculture production toward further consolidation are hard to resist in an economic sector that is extremely price-sensitive, requires considerable capital investment, and demands integration of production, processing, and transport. While there may well be sound conservation and cultural reasons to encourage small-scale farming at the margins of industrialized agriculture, there is no escaping the conclusion that large urbanized populations are more easily fed through modern farming practices that embrace mechanization, digital tools, price competition, and scientific advancement.

This policy idea is motivated by the desire to become extremely efficient in agriculture. Efficiency will lead to lower costs, less waste, better management of time and resources, mechanization that increases safety and decreases the need for unskilled labor, as well as a system that frees individuals from the drudgery of farm

life. Proven business strategies that draw upon best practices and continuous quality improvement will be applied to agriculture. In addition, technology and scientific advancements, which include but are not limited to genetic modification, will make crops more reliable, abundant, and easier to take to market.

What could this policy look like? You might select or combine some of the following ideas:

- Support and incentivize the consolidation of farmlands nationally (and even internationally). Discourage the breaking up of large tracts of prime farming land and create new incentives to aggregate small tracts of individually held small plots into larger production units.
- Embrace “smart farming.” Distribute digital tools and data science to better preserve natural resources like water, land, and energy.

Train older farmers and support smaller farms to acquire these tools.

- Mediate better relationships between large corporations, farmers, and consumers. Create a space or forum to share information and mitigate concerns.
- Create “agricultural zones” that replicate the efficiency of other industrial models, such as oil refineries. Carefully and ethically relocate traditional farming communities or allow them to naturally decline. By not needing to sustain families and communities in these spaces, we can create a more efficient food system.
- Support precision farming so that farmers can produce more with less. For example, new fertilizer spreaders have precision weighing instruments to adjust quantity and direction of spread. New farm equipment can help to conserve water, fertilizer, and fuel.
- Develop urban farming capable of high yield/low resource consumption locally available and sourced to high-density populations. It would include hydroponic and other techniques and technologies to source fresh foods without requiring massive land areas and resources. It would revitalize and repurpose post-industrial spaces for food production.
- Modernize agriculture by abandoning marginal lands, halting development on prime soils, and integrating production, processing, and transport closer to consumers.
- Educate consumers about the safety and benefits of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and how precision plant breeding can create drought, disease, insect, and weed-resistant traits in plants.

This policy idea is not for everyone. The **values** associated with this policy include competition, market rationality, efficiency, affordability, and technology. What other values might be associated with this policy idea?



What would success look like?

- Wages and benefits would likely increase in agricultural work and management and status of such activities would be enhanced.
- Food production would increase while consumer costs would decrease.
- Decreased use of natural resources such as water, land, and energy.
- Focus on research and development would contribute to a cycle of innovation and frequent “breakthroughs.”
- How would you measure the success of this policy idea?

Next Steps. If this policy idea resonates with you and you want to learn more, check out:

- **What is Modern Agriculture?:** monsanto.com/innovations/modern-agriculture
- **Genetically Modified Organisms:** gmoanswers.com
- **Precision Agriculture:** precisionag.com

Rural Renaissance



What if...we could reinvigorate rural, small towns around the United States?

Instead of people leaving the countryside for urban centers, we witness the movement of people, businesses, and innovation to rural small towns. Fueled by promises of 21st-century connectivity, people choose to stay, return, or relocate to small towns where they are able to achieve a greater sense of belonging but still feel culturally, socially, and professionally satisfied and economically secure.

In this section, we are going to imagine a set of policy ideas that is motivated by the belief that there is something special about rural small towns and that these spaces need to be nurtured and supported. These communities are more than economic units. They are places that provide safe, secure, and meaningful lives for those who choose to live in them. We will explore not just ways to preserve rural America, but also reimagine rural American towns of the future.

What could this policy look like? You might select or combine some of the following ideas:

- Connecting rural small towns with urban centers. For example, build high-speed transit systems that connect small towns to the services, amenities, and employment opportunities associated with urban centers. In addition, embrace virtual connectivity by investing in Wi-Fi access and taking advantage of virtual health-care services, educational programs, telecommuting opportunities, etc.
- Developing strategies for survival and growth that span multiple small towns. No small town is an island. Instead of competing for revenue, create structures, and incentives for small towns to work together for long-term viability. For example, build “agri-hoods” to combine community-supported agriculture and residential living. Learn from the success stories.
- Reimagining how to fund small towns. For example, supplement or replace local tax system

with participatory budgeting experiments. Create a system that allows citizens to redistribute their taxes to the small towns of their choice.

- Establishing national standards or rights that would ultimately benefit rural small towns such as universal health care and education or an assured basic income.
- Anticipating the changing trends in the U.S. population and adjusting the focus of small towns to fit these trends. For example, the U.S. population is growing older. Recreate small towns into “care towns” or villages for the aging population. Or, as more people work from home, redesign “telecommuting towns” to fit the needs of this growing class. Support innovative towns to attract younger residents.
- Creating a Rural Opportunity Zone. Towns in need of professionals could use this fund to recruit residents by being empowered to forgive student loans, subsidize housing, create apprenticeship programs, or support technology.
- Intentionally diversify rural America. Create a set of incentives and structures of support for the relocation of underrepresented groups to rural America. This can include, but is not limited to, global refugees.
- Creating opportunities for relationships between rural and urban communities that include cultural and learning exchanges, marketing arrangements, and sharing of technical expertise.
- Seeking new financing models. Non-traditional investors may shape the future of small towns. For example, farms could go the way of wineries and be funded by wealthy investors. Cooperative systems and nonprofit involvement could also challenge the current banking model of finance.
- Properly grieve for dying communities and towns. Celebrate how identity is linked to and associated with place. Celebrate and grieve appropriately for natural life cycles, including the inevitable death of some towns.



This policy idea is not for everyone. The **values** associated with this policy include community, slow living, belonging, human-scale development, and grassroots democracy. What other values might be associated with this policy idea?

What Would Success Look Like?

- Reversal of population outflow, particularly among young people and creative classes.
- Reinvigorated rural civil society institutions, such as cooperatives, libraries, churches, youth leadership organizations, school boards, etc.
- Increased living standards in small rural communities.

Next Steps: If this policy idea resonates with you and you want to learn more, check out:

- **Rural networks:**
innserendipity.com/ruralren/rrhome.html
- **Community development:**
cfra.org/community-development
- **Rural Grocery Store Initiative:**
ruralgrocery.org

Food Matters!



What if...our food production and supply were guided by principles of nutrition and a strong sense of responsibility to public health?

What if we had a clear national understanding and strategy for food production based on nutrition? Growers, producers, farmers, corporations, and governments would work together to provide nutritious food for the American and global populations. Agricultural decisions would be based on public health, food security, and humanitarian relief needs rather than profit margins or supplying the greatest amount of food at the lowest possible cost. What if only nutritious food were available? What if access to nutritious food was regarded as a fundamental human right? What if some kinds of foods were no longer considered commodities but provided to everyone for free?

In this section, we are going to feed our imagination with a set of policy ideas that grow from a desire to nurture our national and international populations with healthy, nutritious food rather than food products that have minimal nutritional value. Moreover, we are going to imagine agricultural practices that promote public health and food

security for all. These policy ideas might require us to imagine agriculture as a public service in addition to a private, for-profit enterprise.

What could this policy look like? You might select or combine some of the following ideas:

- Creating a national food policy that prioritizes nutrition above all other factors, including corporate or private interests.
- Recognizing food and adequate nutrition as human rights.
- Reforming the role of lobbyists in sectors that relate to basic human rights, like food consumption, healthcare, water, etc.
- Removing subsidies or changing how they are decided and distributed.
- Supporting food sovereignty movements, which would include independence from monopolistic forces, protection of common rights to genetic heritage, and fair return.

- Supporting traditional, pre-industrial, indigenous, and alternative modes of agriculture on a small scale.
- Encouraging every citizen to be a farmer on a scale that works with his or her life. There are health benefits to working with the soil. Everyday citizens can learn about nutrition by growing food and supporting small-scale farms, community gardens, or backyard gardens.
- Supporting educational programs within and outside of formal structures of education that teach citizens to grow, prepare, and preserve food.
- Decommodify food. Create a system that supports the free distribution of food, including rights to grow and/or gather foods on public lands.
- Banning or labeling “food” that has negative nutritional value.

This policy idea is not for everyone. The **values** associated with this policy include: public health, human dignity, nutrition, food justice, and equity. What other values might be associated with this policy idea?



What Would Success Look Like?

- Farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture memberships, consumer cooperatives, buying clubs, and community gardening would provide an enlarging share of the U.S. diet.
- The concept of a “food commons,” with widespread acceptance of a shared responsibility to feed all of us, would become the main driver of food policy.
- Open public spaces would be planted with productive perennials that would yield fruit, nuts, and other edibles for neighborhoods.
- Food pantries, schools, and grocery stores would be stocked with healthy items purchased from producers.
- Reduction of diet-related disease.

Next Steps: If this policy idea resonates with you and you want to learn more, check out:

- Rural Health Information Hub: ruralhealthinfo.org
- Food Tank: foodtank.com
- Feeding America: feedingamerica.org
- Civil Eats: civileats.com

Democracy Through Farming & Rural Life



What if... farmers and others in rural communities had more influence over the decisions that impact their lives?

There is great potential for direct, democratic decision-making in American small towns. Small towns operate on a scale that could allow for individuals to have a say in how local governance works. However, farmers and individuals in rural communities often feel at the mercy of distant bureaucracies, large corporations, or the cultural expectation of being self-reliant. In a different time, rural communities were often wellsprings of grass-roots democracy. What if modern participatory and deliberative practices could restore this tradition? What if these practices and this tradition could be exported to the rest of the country or world?

In this section, we are going to imagine a set of policy ideas that are designed to promote more democratic procedures and governance in the agricultural sector, as well as employ farming strategies, values, and ways of life to nurture democracy in the broader communities. These policies would

need to address both how government regulates agricultural practices and how farmers are compensated for their efforts.

What could this policy look like? You might select or combine some of the following ideas:

- Diversify farming and rural America. Promote programs that support under-represented groups to enter the agricultural industry: women, minorities, younger farmers, etc. Offer more voice and representation to farmworkers and seasonal laborers.
- Realign incentives to favor cooperative models, democratically run conservancies, and land trusts.
- Create standby mechanisms that either support prices or preserve production capacity so that the number of farmers does not decline further and may even increase.

- Revive the farmer discussion movement (circa 1930s) and promote civic learning in rural communities about social, political, and economic issues facing rural communities.
- Bring together rural and urban citizens to work through regional and state issues, through representative educational decision-making processes (e.g., citizen jury processes or participatory budgeting).
- Elect, rather than appoint, state agricultural secretaries, commissioners, and boards.
- Provide for farmer representation on public bodies that deal with agriculture issues and on private boards of large producers, processors, and trade bodies.
- Increased competition in farming may produce new models of marketing or going to market. For example, the sharing economy could connect growers to consumers with the use of smart technology. This could replace or challenge the current system of marketing.

This policy idea is not for everyone. The **values** associated with this policy include: democratic participation, accountability, individual liberty, and fairness. What other values might be associated with this policy idea?

What would success look like?

- Specially chartered rural zones could adopt bioregional governance that reflects their shared soil and watershed characteristics rather than arbitrary political jurisdictions.
- Rural economics would switch to a “value-added” model rather than extraction of raw materials and commodities.
- Governance bodies dealing with agriculture, including public and corporate institutions, would include producer and rural community representatives and would require opportunities for public input prior to all significant decisions.



- Greater understanding and knowledge of complex public issues, as well as understanding the place of rural Americans in broader American and global cultural and political contexts.

Next Steps: If this policy idea resonates with you and you want to learn more, check out:

- **Participatory Budgeting Project:** participatorybudgeting.org
- **The Berry Center:** berrycenter.org
- **Smart Growth:** smartgrowthamerica.org
- **Citizen Juries:** participedia.net/en/methods/citizens-jury

Create Your Own Policy



What if....

In this section, you are going to imagine an alternative future together. Be bold. Be creative. Dream big.

- Is there a cluster of concerns this guide does not address? What are they?
- Take a moment to write down your thoughts and share them with your group.
- How might you frame these concerns in a few words?
- If these concerns were addressed, how might we reimagine a future vision for agri-culture?
- Begin your statement with “What if...” and describe your future vision.

What could this possibility look like? Some possible features include...

In this section, you are going to contemplate what your vision looks like “on the ground.”

- How will it be implemented?
- What sort of policies can make it come to life?
- Identify some of your biggest concerns from the last section.
- How might you address these concerns? What sort of policies (incentives, regulations, education, shaping of civil norms) might help you to address these concerns?
- How might these general policies be implemented? What would they look like in everyday life?

What would success look like?

In this section, you will think about how to measure or evaluate your policy ideas.

- How would you know if your policies were working?
- How would you know if you were moving closer to your “What if…” vision?
- What sort of signals would indicate progress?
- Try to list at least three examples of visible success.

Next Steps

In this section, you will encourage others to go deeper and continue this work by exploring who or what is working in this area and suggest how others might get involved.

- Who or what is doing work in this area?
- What is the best way of learning more about this topic?
- How do we communicate with others about these ideas?

Activity: Share with us your policy idea! Please send us your ideas, general feedback, and inquiries to office@interactivityfoundation.org, subject line: Agriculture.

Thank you and keep discussing!



A part of the Rural Young People's Group in Cerro Gordo County, Iowa. This group usually has 30 to 40 in attendance and use the informal discussion method. They are seated in a circle around the room as shown in this picture.

How to Use this Guide

Before You Start: Defining Your “Community”

- There are multiple spaces where this guide can be used. Some might find it to be a useful tool in a classroom environment or a more non-formal educational setting. Others may see a shared meal with friends, colleagues, neighbors, or even just acquaintances as the best way to have a discussion. In whatever space you choose, the steps described below give a roadmap for how to organize a discussion and, importantly, how to have civil discourse with a group of diverse people. However you define your “community,” consider the implications for such a wide-ranging and impactful topic.
- When considering how to use this guide, think about who might be involved in the discussion. Are there members of your community with stated views on some of the topics described who might benefit from being in a conversation with others? Who are “quiet” members of your community who could contribute significantly to a conversation, but who might be hesitant to be involved?

Step One: Getting Started and Setting Up

- Create an invitation for six to eight people. There are all kinds of ways to bring people together for discussion. You can host a “Dinner Discussion Party” or organize a “Public Policy Potluck” with your neighbors. You could put a new twist on game night by introducing “Family and Friends Discussion Night.” You could even create a monthly “Discussion Club” (like a book club for public affairs) or propose “Alternative Happy Hour” with colleagues.
- Pick a good location. Find a relatively quiet place where everyone can sit together around a table or be in a living room type setting. It is important that people can see and hear one another.
- Having food and refreshments at these gatherings helps to create an atmosphere of sharing. Decide what sort of refreshments you would like to provide and what, if anything, you’d like your guests to bring.
- Select a discussion topic that you would like to discuss. For a list of IF Discussion Guidebooks, go to our website at www.interactivityfoundation.org. Download the discussion guidebook and make copies for your guests or encourage your guests to review the discussion guidebook prior to the gathering. Or just introduce the topic prior to the event.

Step Two: Introduce the Topic and Each Other

- If you and your guests are new to one another, spend 10-20 minutes introducing everyone. Try tying the introductions to the topic. For example, if you are discussing the Freshwater for the Future report, then you might want to ask everyone to introduce him or herself by sharing a favorite childhood memory about water.
- Introduce the purpose of the discussion:
 - » We are not here to debate, argue, or push any particular agenda.
 - » We are here to help each other explore different perspectives beyond our own.
 - » We are here to help each other stretch our thinking to explore alternative approaches to complex social topics.
 - » The goal isn’t to agree on a solution.
 - » The goal is to open up new possibilities and new ways of looking at things.
- Introduce discussion guidelines:
 - » To get things started, you can propose some basic ground rules, such as talking in turn, making sure everyone participates, and trying not to dominate the conversation.
 - » Practice saying, “Yes, and…” Try to build on each other’s ideas as they come up rather than evaluating or criticizing them right away.
 - » Be yourself—and be someone else. Share what you think, then use your imagination to think beyond yourself. Imagine someone from another walk of life. What would they add?
 - » Be generous of spirit. Help each other to think through ideas. Focus on exploring the content of ideas rather than the people who introduce them. Help each other explore ideas even if you disagree with them.
 - » Be bold and go deep. Bring up ideas regardless of whether you think they might meet approval or regardless of whether you think it might work out (“That’s so crazy, it just might work!”).
- Put aside the guidebook and spend some time as a group exploring the topic:
 - » What are some of the different perspectives they have on the topic?
 - » Beyond their own perspectives, what are other aspects of the topic that the group can think up?

In what other ways might we face public choices about this topic in the future?

- » Once you've explored the topic as a group, compare the concerns you came up with to those explored in the IF guidebook.

Step Three: Discuss the Policy Possibilities

- Each IF guidebook includes a range of contrasting big-picture ideas for how our society might approach some complex topic. Each discussion guide has a summary of all the possibilities. Try starting with a short “lightning round” discussion as an overview. This gives everyone a sense of the range of ideas coming up.
- Select the top two or three policy ideas that you would like to discuss with your group (the first few tend to go slower). There is no need to go in order in the discussion guide and no need to rush. Once you discuss these policy ideas, you can allow your guests to select the next policy possibility.
- Try to understand each policy possibility (even if it's not to your, or the group's, liking). What does the policy mean? What does it propose to do? What motivates it? What concerns is it trying to address? What beliefs or values motivate it? What is its goal?
- Imagine its consequences. What would the world be like if we handled things this way? Try to imagine who might benefit—and who might be harmed. Who (or what kinds of people) would really like (or dislike) this policy approach? Why?
- What are some different ways that the policy possibility could be implemented?

Tips for The Host: As the host, you'll play the role of facilitator. Your goal is to encourage exploratory discussion around the chosen topic. You are not here to “lead” the discussion or to tell the group what to think. You're not supposed to be an expert on the topic. Your job is to help a conversation unfold that allows everyone to stretch his or her mind in a welcoming environment. Some tips:

- Keep the discussion on track and remind everyone to follow the discussion ground rules.
- Be prepared. It's good to have few questions prepared to get the discussion rolling and to introduce when there is a lull. Try to avoid yes/no questions. The guidebook will give you ideas for good questions to ask.
- Discourage participants from dominating the discussion. You can sit next to an overzealous participant and gently remind him or her that others want to talk as well.

- Encourage quiet participants to talk more. You can do this by making eye contact and even asking direct questions. However, try to be subtle when you move participants in and out of the center of the discussion.
- Try to keep the discussion at a big-picture level. Keep the focus on the gist of a policy idea, not haggling over the wording or over one specific way the policy idea might be implemented.
- Encourage participants to explore different dimensions of the policy area—cultural, moral, economic, environmental, etc. How might a policy impact the social fabric or our sense of self? What might be its moral, legal, or economic implications?
- Allow the discussion to unfold. Don't rush it. Once it is going, allow it to run its course and intervene only when necessary.

Tips for the Guests: As participants, your role is really to help each other to have a good exploratory discussion. Try to help your host by helping each other to explore alternative ideas in a generous and cooperative way. A few tips that will help you elevate your discussion include:

- Learn from the ideas and opinions of others. This involves listening. Try not to be the person that dominates the discussion. Enthusiasm is great, but be sure to keep a space open for all people to talk.
- Revisit your own assumptions, ideas, and opinions. Be willing to revise your own thinking about a topic. Don't set out to persuade others.
- Ask questions to draw out others' thinking and to check whether you understand them.
- Try to find the grains of truth in the arguments of others, especially if you do not agree with them.
- Practice the “Yes, and” approach. Instead of rejecting an idea, try to build on it even if you disagree with it. Think of being “additive” rather than “subtractive.”
- Be imaginative or playful rather than critical or defensive in your contributions to the discussion (remember, it's about exploring the content of different ideas, not about evaluating people).
- Try role-playing in the discussion. Pretend like you are someone else and make a sincere effort to represent the views of this type of person. Who is missing from your group? What different perspective would that person add to your group?
- Have fun. Discussion is a great way to connect with other people and to stretch your mind. Enjoy yourself!



Photo Credits

Cover Image	Holden Blanco '17/Haverford College (Left) Tyler McEntee on Unsplash (Right)
Page 2	Brandon Chase Goldsmith
Page 4-5	Brandon Chase Goldsmith
Page 6	Brandon Chase Goldsmith
Page 7	Donna Weikert
Page 8	Aaron Burden on Unsplash
Page 9	The Land Institute
Page 10	Peter Gonzalez on Unsplash
Page 11	Brandon Chase Goldsmith
Page 12	Álvaro Serrano on Unsplash
Page 13	Unsplash (Bottom Left) Jason Banks
Page 14	Anne Preble on Unsplash
Page 15	Eric Hartman (Bottom Left) Chuttersnap on Unsplash (Top Right)
Page 16	Jason Banks
Page 17	Brandon Chase Goldsmith (Top) The Land Institute (Below)
Page 18	Brandon Chase Goldsmith
Page 19	Reproduced from Paul C. Taff, "Report Discussion Groups: State of Iowa, 1935," Box 4, Entry 34, Record Group 16, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
Page 20-21	on Unsplash
Back Cover	Jason Banks

Other Publications of the Interactivity Foundation

IF Discussion Guidebooks

- The Future of the Arts and Society
- What Might Childhood Look Like in the Future?
- Global Responsibility for Children
- Future Possibilities for Civil Rights Policy
- The Human Impact on Climate Change
- Crime and Punishment
- The Future of K-12 Education
- The Future of Employment
- The Future of Energy
- The Future of the Family
- Freshwater for the Future
- Food: What Might be for Dinner
- Helping America Talk
- Helping Out: Humanitarian Policy for Global Security
- The Future of Higher Education
- Invention, Innovation, and Intellectual Property
- Human Migration
- The Future Mobility of People, Products, and Ideas
- Shaping Our Towns and Cities
- Tomorrow's News
- The United States' Democratic Promise
- U.S. National Security & Defense Policy

Other IF Publications:

- The Guidebook for Student Facilitated Discussions in Online Classrooms (student and teacher editions) (2015)
- Let's Talk Politics: Restoring Civility Through Exploratory Discussion (2013)
- Julius "Jay" Stern: A Biography (2010)
- Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process (2nd ed. 2009)
- Facilitation Guidebook for Small Group Citizen Discussions (2nd ed. 2009)
- Support Materials for the IF Discussion Process (2009)
- Teaching Tips (2009)
- Guidebook for Student-Centered Classroom Discussions (2008)
- Public Discussion as the Exploration and Development of Contrasting Conceptual Possibilities (2008)
- Facilitation Guidebook (2005)

