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Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture: Refugee Incubator Farm

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

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Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture: Refugee Incubator Farm

Abstract

One of our Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture, this publication is a case study of Global Greens Farm in West Des Moines, where refugees receive on-the-farm training to help them launch their own enterprises.

Disciplines

Agriculture

Success Stories in Sustainable Agriculture:

At Global Greens Farm in West Des Moines, Iowa, refugees receive on-the-farm training to help them launch their own enterprises in the future.

The Story

Twenty-one former refugees are farming at Global Greens Farm, West Des Moines, and are receiving training in production, marketing and business planning. The group, acting on advice from Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey, located the farm on land offered by Valley Church. In addition, another 150 former refugees participate in Des Moines community gardens, five of which were created as a result of interest from the refugee community.

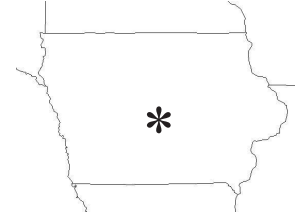
The Opportunity

Lutheran Services in Iowa (LSI) has been helping thousands of former refugees resettle in Iowa for decades. In 2010, however, it became apparent that their resources were insufficient to offer an adequate level of services to the many newly arriving former refugees. “We knew there was a need to provide longer-term support to former refugees in the areas of education and training, but didn’t know what it would look like,” says Nick Wuertz, LSI Director of Refugee Services.

Wuertz organized a group of former refugees from Burundi, Rwanda, Iraq and Burma to visit the Office of Refugee Resettlement National Consultation in Washington, D.C., where they could learn how other states were supporting past refugees. They drove to the conference together in a van. “It was their first trip out

REFUGEE INCUBATOR FARM

of Des Moines for many of them. Driving past fields they shared stories of agriculture back in their home countries and of their communities.... They asked how they could access land so they could use their [agricultural] skills.”



At the conference, the group heard from other former refugees who had benefitted from grants from the resettlement office’s Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program. The speakers “told of training programs to help former refugees start agricultural businesses. That became the theme of the trip; everyone came back excited to create something similar.”

The Strategy

Partners

After returning from the conference, the group called everyone they knew in Des Moines with an interest in sustainable agriculture and gardening to discuss creating an incubator farm for former refugees. An incubator farm offers land and technical assistance to budding farmers to prepare them to someday be an independent farmer on their own or rented land.

“The ladies are having fun growing here, it makes them happy, because they feel like they [are] back [in] their country again.”

—Mone Aye, community garden participant from Burma



Five Karen women from Burma collect produce from their community garden plots. Credit: Nicholas Wuertz

REFUGEE INCUBATOR FARM

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They began exploring garden opportunities by creating a map of Des Moines showing where former refugees live and locations of community gardens. They identified one garden with about 30 slots available. "Within a week 80 former refugees were interested in getting a plot," Wuertz says.

Connection to the Leopold Center

Seeing the high level of interest in growing food, the group realized they needed a plan. "We submitted a planning project proposal [to the Leopold Center] to learn more from some of the existing training farms that had presented at the Washington, DC, conference...to learn best practices and create a plan appropriate for our area," Wuertz says. The initial group became the planning team for the grant along with four members of four different ethnic communities: Bhutan, Burundi, and the Karen and Chin ethnic groups from Burma.

The team received a small one-year planning grant from the Leopold Center to visit three sites in Minnesota, Kansas City and Boston. All sites had a three-to five-year training process, usually starting with a quarter-acre plot and increasing in size to a two-acre maximum. Staff members provided assistance with production, marketing and business planning.

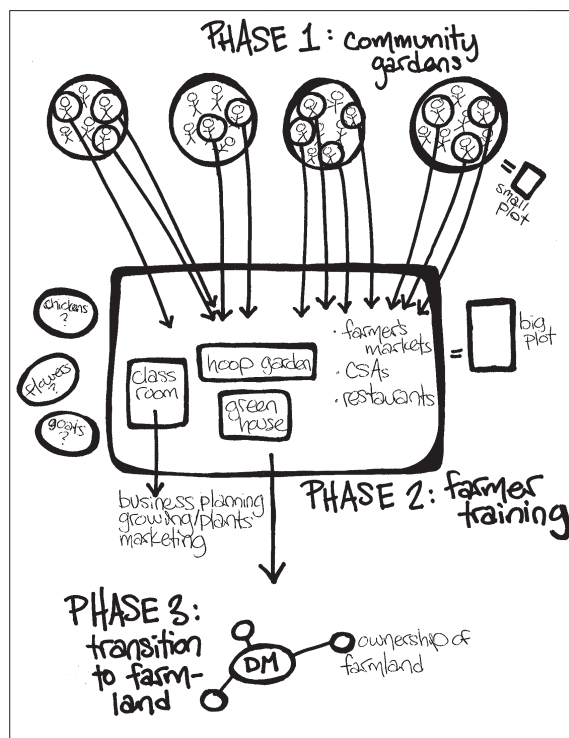
Tika Bhandari from Bhutan briefly shared about her visit to the incubator farm in Minnesota at the 2012 Practical Farmers of Iowa Annual Conference. "When I saw that farm I felt I was in Bhutan, but not... so in the future I want to have that sort of farm and become a farmer," she said.

During this planning process, they laid out a three-phase program. In phase one, they would create gardens close to concentrations of past refugees. Phase two was an incubator farm, where select community garden participants could move to a larger space and receive training over three to five years. In phase three, the farmer would transition to operate as an independent business.

Making a Difference

"We are between phases one and two," says Wuertz. "Originally we thought people from the community gardens would move into the training farm. This year is in-between, because we have slightly bigger plots and some training... This is a test year to see if farmers have the time and commitment to go further."

One success story is Ibrahim Ali of Sudan, who was already gardening on a large scale. With help from



Credit: LSI illustration by Hilary Baehr

Lutheran Services of Iowa and Plymouth Congregational Church, he expanded his garden to a half-acre, obtained insurance, and now sells at farmers markets and through the Iowa Food Coop. "This year he is starting at the Des Moines downtown farmers market," says Wuertz.

"We are on our way to creating a training farm for former refugee farmers in the Des Moines area, in large part due to the planning grant through the Leopold Center in 2011," says Wuertz. "It's been invaluable and has helped us form some good networks amongst other training farms."

Contact



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Case study by Arlene Enderton, Summer 2013

Leopold Center competitive grant M2011-13, Iowa immigrant and refugee incubator farm program