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Small-farm business development incubator for refugee farmers

Abstract

Beginning farmers who also are recent U.S. immigrants face a steeper learning curve due to language and cultural challenges. This project devised training and marketing education programs for these new farmers, while making accommodations for the unique challenges they face in establishing their operations.

Keywords

Business management distribution and marketing, Community-based food systems, Farmer profitability enterprise budgets, Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines

Agribusiness | Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Human and Clinical Nutrition | Human Geography | Marketing



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Abstract: Beginning farmers who also are recent U.S. immigrants face a steeper learning curve due to language and cultural challenges. This project devised training and marketing education programs for these new farmers, while making accommodations for the unique challenges they face in establishing their operations.

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Budget:
\$28,176 for year one

Q What are the best practices for marketing tools, training and strategies for a farm incubator program serving refugee farmers?

A Providing farmers with a wide variety of marketing opportunities was important in helping them to decide which strategies were best-suited to their skills and abilities. Helping farmers understand the unique challenges and opportunities of each market as well as evaluating the resource inputs and outputs of each is important in helping them decide on the best marketing strategies for their businesses.



MARKETING

Background

Many members of the state's most recent refugee groups have spent the majority of their lives farming and have expressed a strong desire to continue farming in Iowa. Lutheran Services in Iowa's (LSI) Global Greens Program has been working to offer opportunities for individuals to become re-engaged in agriculture in their new communities. A network of gardens has been established in Des Moines neighborhoods where many families are concentrated. These gardens offer access to land where individuals can grow food for their family's own consumption. Additionally, the Global Greens Farm has been established in West Des Moines to provide access to larger plots of land, shared infrastructure, and training for individuals who are more interested in farming for an income.

This project focused on developing the appropriate marketing tools, training and strategies best suited for this type of incubator farm and the beginning farmers it serves. The project objectives were to:

1. Provide training and exposure for a minimum of two marketing options for 8 to 12 Advanced Market Farmers (AMFs) as they explore which marketing avenue is best suited to their skills, abilities and business development needs.
2. Offer training on proper recordkeeping to establish a baseline on first-year profits.
3. Help each participant establish a savings account and develop a pattern of saving at least 20 percent of the profits to be utilized for expenses in subsequent years of training.

Approach and methods

The Global Greens Farm provides 50 x 50 ft. plots of land for 18 Beginning Market Farmers who would like to pursue business development through field-based trainings and marketing opportunities. Additionally, LSI has identified a group of eight Advanced Market Farmers (AMFs) who have previously grown produce on 50 x



Weeding at Global Greens Farm.

50 ft. plots and have decided that they would like to pursue further business development. Beginning in 2014, these Advanced Market Farmers began the first year of a three- to five-year process of incubating a farm business at the Global Greens Farm. Participation in the program provides the Advanced Market Farmers access to a quarter-acre of land at the Global Greens Farm, classroom and field-based training on all aspects of small farm business development, and one-on-one market development strategies for launching their farm businesses onto owned or rented land at the conclusion of the multi-year program. The eight AMFs originally farmed in their home countries of Burundi, Bhutan, Burma and Rwanda.

Results and discussion

LSI fostered the AMFs initial experiences in selling through farmer's markets, an online marketing cooperative, after-service church markets, and limited wholesale accounts. LSI provided training and assistance with recordkeeping tools and met with farmers monthly to track income and expenses and establish baselines for sales as well as expense totals in all marketing areas. Among the AMFs, the average net income earned from the season was just under \$602. The top performing AMF netted \$5,775 and the lowest net by an AMF was a loss of \$781. (Some of the variations were related to which markets growers participated in as well as their family size and how much produce they consumed at home.)

LSI also worked with all of the farmers to enroll in Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI)'s Savings Incentive Program through which the farmers establish regular savings that will be matched up to \$2,400 after a two-year period. Farmers are also matched with a farm mentor who will help them develop their business plan and provide another source of mentorship and support beyond LSI's program.

Conclusions

In the first year of implementing many of these strategies, LSI found key elements that are important to consider for individuals or programs engaged in helping refugee farmers start small farm businesses:

- Study the whole farmer when evaluating marketing opportunities. Language proficiency, personality type, time availability, transportation resources, support from family and friends, and general economic and social stability all are important factors to take into account.
- Language and cultural considerations should be evaluated throughout the process and should influence all aspects of training and communication. Providing interpretation for participants and staff to ensure two-way communication is critical to the success of the program. Training materials and presentations should be prepared with recognition of participants' limited literacy skills. Development of the farmers' English language skills also should be a key element of the training curriculum.
- Sheltered marketing opportunities can provide good opportunities for beginning



Selling produce.

farmers to learn about markets, but farmers should not become reliant on these artificial situations.

- Exposure to market opportunities and experiences is important in helping beginning farmers discern which marketing strategies are best suited to their skills and abilities. Providing experience on all marketing opportunities at appropriate scales is difficult to accomplish in a single year and requires a multi-year process.
- Explore ethnic market opportunities and build upon the strengths of a farmer's existing network and sales strategies within their own ethnic communities.
- Regular monitoring of record keeping is important to help farmers use the tools that are provided and ensure that accurate records are kept throughout the season.

Impact of results

The eight AMFs each received training and experience selling their produce in at least two different types of markets. They also received training on recordkeeping tools and met with the Farm Marketing Specialist on a monthly basis to keep track of income and expenses related to their farming enterprise. While LSI did not strictly monitor 20 percent grower savings as it originally planned, each of the participants will be setting aside savings on a regular basis and those funds will be matched and reinvested in their business. At the start of the project two of the eight growers were participating in a matched savings program through PFI's Savings Incentive Program. By the end of the project all eight growers were participating in this matched savings goal with a plan to make regular savings deposits that will be matched (up to \$2,400) for further investment in their farm businesses.

As a result of the project there are beginning farmers who previously lacked land, market, and training access who are now contributing to the availability of sustainably grown produce in their local communities. They also enhance the agricultural diversity of Iowa produce offerings by growing many of their native vegetable varieties. The project offers a model for assisting farmers with limited English proficiency to establish and grow their farming enterprises in communities throughout the state by providing tools and market strategies that have proved useful in the Des Moines area.

Education and outreach

Publications

The Global Greens program received media attention from several outlets such as the *Des Moines Register*, National Public Radio, and the Associated Press. LSI Global Greens Farmers Market was publicized in these articles:

- *Des Moines Register*, "Global Greens Farmers Market in Des Moines," 8-2014, <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/picture-gallery/money/agriculture/2014/08/27/11-photos-global-greens-farmers-market-in-des-moines/14678519/>
- *Des Moines Register*, "Harvest of Change", 9-2014, <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/longform/money/agriculture/2014/09/04/harvest-of-change-virtual-farm-day-3/15110421/>

- An AP Story featured Global Greens and quotes about the program from Ron Munia at the Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Refugees settle in thanks to small farm plots, 9-27-2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/dc77e20b44534de5b9b029f-968cb21c4/refugees-settle-thanks-small-farm-plots>
- *dsm Magazine*, “Global Greens,” 5-2014, <http://www.dsmmagazine.com/2014/05/29/global-greens/>

The local Hunger in the Heartland group is in the process of publishing a book highlighting various issues and initiatives surrounding hunger in which Global Greens farmers are interviewed and highlighted. (<http://www.endhungerintheheartland.com/>) LSI provided many tours of the farm to local funders and their stakeholders over the summer. The program hosted a May 2014 visit from Norah Deluhery who is the USDA’s Director of the Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Outreach

In July 2014 LSI sponsored a Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) Field Day at the Global Greens Farm. More than 80 PFI members and staff attended and listened to a presentation by several of the AMFs on their beginning farming businesses as well as a presentation from LSI staff on the incubation efforts of LSI’s Global Greens Program.

Leveraged funds

Since being awarded this grant from the Leopold Center, LSI’s Global Greens Program was able to renew funding through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (\$85,000/yr.), the United Way of Central Iowa (\$40,000), and the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship’s Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (\$24,000).

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