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Small-farm business development incubator for refugee farmers

Abstract:

Central Iowa refugees with farming backgrounds were engaged in a variety of activities to help them become farmers in Iowa. Beginning with work in community gardens, the project began to help these aspiring farmers to learn about markets, production, and the realities of farm business planning in preparation for graduating them to their own farming operations.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$28,000 for year one
\$28,000 for year two

Q How could Lutheran Services in Iowa create, implement and improve upon their Global Greens incubator training program?

A They focused on increasing farmer profitability, and helping farmers establish independent businesses, and find greater integration and peer networks.

Background

Iowa has become home for a number of recently resettled refugees who were farmers, hailing from the rural areas and farming communities of Burma, Burundi, Rwanda and Bhutan. They farmed sustainably in their home countries and asked for assistance in adapting their farming experience and knowledge to Iowa.

Over the last six years, Lutheran Services in Iowa (LSI) has worked with many community partners, volunteers, and individuals from the refugee community to help make their desire to return to caring for the land a reality. In 2011, LSI received a Leopold Center grant for work on the “Iowa Immigrant and Refugee Incubator Program.” This planning effort focused on creating a model for training refugee and immigrant growers to utilize their existing farming experience to establish successful small farm businesses in the Des Moines area.

Phase 2 of that model is covered in this project. It sets up a training farm program with larger plots of land and intensive support and training for farmers with at least one year of community garden experience. They will develop viable small-market businesses over a three- to five-year period through gradual exposure to farm operating costs and procedures.

This project focused on three main objectives in training the refugee participants:

- 1) increased profitability,
- 2) establishment of independent businesses, and
- 3) greater integration and peer networks for refugee beginning farmers.

Approach and methods

Organizers met the project objectives through a variety of classroom and in-field trainings, field day visits, and one-on-one technical assistance addressing the areas of production, markets, and business planning. Strategies and activities focused on practical skills, networking with beginning farmer programs that already existed, and exposure to various outside resources. Participants learned about farmer income and recordkeeping, and practices to increase their knowledge and skills. Some participated in the Practical Farmers of Iowa Savings Incentive Program (SIP) to help create their



MARKETING



Congera Alex, originally from Burundi, transplants his crops in early spring.

own businesses plans and others established relationships with mentors outside LSI.

Results and discussion

During the 2016 growing season, LSI connected more than 200 families to community garden plots around the Des Moines community. In 2013, LSI identified a site for the incubator training farm in Phase 2. This site has been developed into Global Greens Farm and serves as the central location for business development support for 23 farming families. Additionally, LSI has identified 2- to 3-acre land sites for three additional transitioning farmers who are moving off the training farm and on to operating their own farming businesses.

Using the conservative calculations of 1 square foot of land equaling 0.5 pounds of produce and \$1 of sales equaling 1 pound of produce, LSI estimates the following amounts of produce making their way into the diets of the central Iowa community through the Global Greens Program.

Total amounts for 2016 community gardens, Global Greens Farm, and satellite sites:

- square feet of land used for growing = 436,660 sq. ft. (10 acres)
- pounds of produce grown in community gardens = 31,930 lbs.
- pounds of produce grown by market farmers = 186,400 lbs.
- pounds to markets = 66,160 lbs.
- pounds for donation and home consumption = 152,170 lbs.

Conclusions

LSI noted key elements to consider in helping refugee farmers start small farm businesses:

- Offering farmers a variety of market choices, including both direct-to-consumer and aggregated options, to help determine what markets suit them and what is feasible for their families.
- While three farming families are in the process of transitioning onto alternative land options over a 3-year period, it is notable that this is not a truly independent transition, but rather a new phase of support.
- Language and cultural barriers still present obstacles for farmer connections with outside parties who are willing to help. There is a significant amount of relationship-building and in-person time spent among staff, farmers and other networks.
- Training must continue to be adapted to farmers' needs and levels of experience. Educational experiences also must be geared to serve the participants in the most culturally and linguistically accessible manner possible.

Impact of results

The creation of the LSI Global Greens Farmers Market in 2014 has helped contribute to community well-being at a physical and social level. It provided a space that supports social interactions between populations that otherwise might not have the chance to meet, and increased the availability and access to nutritious food among the



Global Greens farmers bring with them diverse farming backgrounds and traditional crops from the countries of Burundi, Burma, Rwanda and Bhutan.

refugee population, the Drake neighborhood and central Iowans in general. The Market, located in the Refugee Connection Center parking lot, has a wide range of customers and accommodates the use of SNAP and DUFEB, WIC and Senior Market vouchers to purchase produce. Similar projects both in Iowa and through the NIFTI network can learn from the LSI toolkit to inform the growth of their projects.

Access to land, training and technical assistance impacts the health and quality of life for the refugee population in multiple ways:

- It increases physical health through exercise opportunities.
- It enhances nutritional health for families by allowing them to grow their own fruits and vegetables that they can consume at home, share, and sell to others in their community.
- The various market outlets allow for increased community and social health through interactions with neighbors and the larger public.
- It positively affects individuals' purposes by allowing this traumatized population to be able to return to doing something safe and familiar. Many gardeners said: "working in the dirt provides therapy for the soul."
- Access to land promotes financial health through the opportunity to sell produce and reinvest that money in both personal and business goals.

Education and outreach

A variety of activities and coverage emerged from the project:

- *dsm Magazine* wrote about the market: <http://www.dsmmagazine.com/2014/05/29/global-greens/>
- The local Hunger in the Heartland group published a book highlighting various issues and initiatives surrounding hunger in which Global Greens farmers are interviewed: <http://www.endhungerintheheartland.com/>
- LSI created and published "The Dirt," a weekly e-newsletter to share photos, program highlights, upcoming events, a list of produce available at the market, and recipes. Issues are archived at: <http://us2.campaign-archive1.com/home/?u=1bbad0e0368b62446fe979dd&id=e048251486>
- In September 2015, Urban Ambassadors honored LSI's Global Greens as Partner of the Year. Urban Ambassadors is a volunteer-led, community driven nonprofit whose mission is to "plant the seeds of sustainability for a greener greater Des Moines." The award highlights an organization that shows strong support for community-building, sustainability projects. <http://www.urbanambassadors.org/news/2015/10/1/thanks-for-friend-raising>
- Global Greens received the Iowa Agriculture Leader Service Award in March 2016 from Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey.
- Landowners Robert and Susan Fleming, who rent land to Alex and Chantal's Heritage Produce Farm, received Practical Farmers of Iowa's 2017 Landowner of the Year award for their land practices and their partnership with Alex and his family: <http://www.practicalfarmers.org/news-events/newsroom/news-release-archive/22018/>

- Simon's Plant Collaboration Farm was highlighted at this year's EMPOWER luncheon, LSI's annual refugee services fundraiser. This video highlights their family's path to citizenship and the story of their farm:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sM3m-DuwaQ&feature=youtu.be>
- LSI and Namaste Gardens were the subject of a story by the local TV channel WHO-13 News: <http://whotv.com/2016/05/25/farm-allows-refugees-to-get-back-to-roots-while-growing-business/>
- Each year of the project, LSI hosted a Global Greens Farm potluck event/tour. In 2015, 35 people attended. The 2016 event attracted more than 120 people. Farmers were able to host stations around the farm to teach visitors about their crops and culture.

Leveraged funds

Other financial supporters of the Global Greens program include the United Way of Central Iowa, North Central Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE), Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS), Wellmark, Farm Service Agency, and the USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program. LSI also is currently charging a 23 percent margin on the Global Greens CSA in order to cover staff administration and marketing costs. This income is being reinvested into the Global Greens program.

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