

## **Cornell Cooperative Extension supports Diverse Refugee Communities in New York Agriculture**

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### **Joint – Public Hearing: Diversifying Agriculture and Addressing Food Justice alongside Continuing Inequalities on our Food Systems, April 13, 2021**

Refugees from throughout the world come to New York each year, and Cornell Cooperative Extension is proud to support their entry and contribution to society. Over the last 10 years New York State has received nearly 36,000 refugees from over 65 countries with Africa and East Asia contributing the majority of these new Americans<sup>1</sup>. These diverse groups are making their new homes in Erie, Monroe, Oneida, Onondaga Counties, as well as New York City.

Today's refugees follow the American tradition of flight from persecution with the hope for a life of respect and dignity. In their new home state refugees are recognized as contributors to increased housing stock value, the preservation of manufacturing jobs, creation of new businesses and reversing the trend of population loss in upstate cities<sup>2</sup>.

Agriculture has been adopted by refugee resettlement organizations as a method to introduce language, job and social skills to these populations. Agriculture also contributes to refugees' well-being as a therapeutic activity with the opportunity to produce culturally relevant, fresh, healthy food. This fresh food is not only consumed by the refugee farmers, but often sold in food-insecure portions of New York cities.

Our partner organizations such as Providence Farm Collective, Mohawk Valley Resource Center ('The Center'), RISE and the International Rescue Committee facilitate farming opportunities in both urban and rural settings. Cornell Cooperative Extension is able to contribute to these efforts with our depth of knowledge in the agricultural sciences. We work directly with the refugee populations by developing educational programs around business planning, crop and pest management, food safety and marketing. We work one-on-one and conduct workshops throughout the year at these farms, often with the support of translators.

As an example, the Cornell Vegetable Program has worked with Journey's End urban farm in Buffalo for the past decade. These farmers come from many countries including Nepal, Congo and Afghanistan. In one of our projects, yield of fresh fruits and vegetables increased by 48%; with an equivalent increase in revenue for the refugee farm. Participants in this program benefited by developing job skills and a sense of integration and ownership. To quote farmer Bir Rai "The goal of every human being in this world is to eat...When I came here [the farm] provided me some training...I am able to make some money, which is good."<sup>3</sup>

In order to continue this type of success for our new neighbors, there are several opportunities for support.

- **Translation services.** As many refugees are still learning English, translation services are critical for successful on-farm trainings. Funding to support the presence of proficient translators can make farming more inclusive.

- **Access to working capital.** Agriculture can be a capital intensive business, and refugees have not had the opportunity to establish credit history, and may not understand North American lending practices.
- **Access to viable farmland.** Land is the most expensive asset for farmers, and the basis for a successful business. In several cases in upstate NY, generous rural landowners have facilitated refugee farming on idle land. Programs to connect these populations could increase the diversity of our farmer population.
- **Transportation.** As these aspiring farmers integrate into our State, they often seek larger agricultural spaces, which are found in rural areas. Refugees are officially settled in urban spaces, often without sufficient resources to obtain and operate a vehicle. Transportation is a common barrier to rural farm access.
- **Education.** For all farmers, agriculture too often operates on tight margins. These aspiring refugee farmers require educational support on successful farming practices, including soil and pest management, business and marketing skills and food safety.

With New York harbor the home of the Statue of Liberty, it is an honor to continue the role of welcoming refugees to our country. New York's vast potential as a supplier of healthy food to our growing markets creates an opportunity for refugees to participate in our economy and contribute to the diversity of our industry. Cornell Cooperative Extension thanks our partners and the refugees for this collaboration.

#### Citations

1. Refugee Processing Center <https://www.wrapsnet.org/archives/>
2. New American Economy Research Fund <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/new-americans-in-buffalo-and-syracuse/>
3. Cornell Vegetable Program 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter report 2019. [https://rvpadmin.cce.cornell.edu/pdf/impact\\_ny/pdf98\\_pdf.pdf](https://rvpadmin.cce.cornell.edu/pdf/impact_ny/pdf98_pdf.pdf)