

Refugees, Food Insecurity, and Community Gardens

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Summary

Nearly nine in ten resettled refugee households endure food insecurity, meaning that they are without “access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.”¹ Because western New York resettles hundreds of refugees per year, many of them on Buffalo’s west side, we have a unique opportunity to combat refugee food insecurity.

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Community gardening and urban farming can provide nutritious food, and, in some cases, income, while also educating refugees about life in the U.S. and offering opportunities to meet neighbors and be active in the community. The benefits of helping refugees to garden and farm extend to the whole city: beautifying neighborhoods, combating crime, providing economic activity, and supplementing nutrition in Buffalo’s “food deserts.”

By learning from local organizations such as Grassroots Gardens, Community Action Organization, Massachusetts Avenue Project, PUSH Buffalo, and Urban Roots, and from similar initiatives

already underway throughout the nation, we can decide on policy measures that will best serve this end. These policy measures can be divided into three groups:

Land procurement/usage. Use zoning to promote gardens and farms; expand city limits on plot sizes; permit sale of produce.

Education. English language training; business skills; cultural literacy (paper work, appointments, scheduling, etc.); western crops and growing practices (raised beds, square-foot gardening, plant varieties).

Funding. CDBG funding, RAPP grants, microloan programs for purchasing equipment (bed frames, soil, fertilizer).



*PUSH Community Garden
Hampshire Street, Buffalo*

Refugee Food Insecurity in Buffalo

According to recent research, certain minority groups in Buffalo suffer from food insecurity despite having access to retail food outlets. One likely reason is that accessibility to food does not necessarily mean that the food is safe and nutritious.² Many neighborhoods are served mainly by corner shops that do not offer fresh fruit and vegetables. Lack of a car means that many families end up shopping at corner stores rather than supermarkets or farmers markets.

For refugees, the situation is worsened by lower levels of education, lack of English language skills, and cultural barriers. Refugees may miss appointments for food stamp recertification merely because they do not understand the significance of an “appointment.” Countless things, like the ability to open canned food or even to know that a picture on a can reflects the contents on the inside, may be new. Meanwhile, other truths must be *unlearned*: for example, it is not uncommon for refugees to boil perfectly safe tap water out of fear of contamination, and yet fish in local rivers without realizing that there may be the toxins in their catch.³

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The Promise of Community Gardens and Urban Farms

Community gardens and urban farms can help address these issues of refugee food insecurity. The benefits start with

fresh, healthy fruits and vegetables. Beyond nutritional advantages, refugees become more familiar with U.S. society by growing western produce, exchanging yields, and being active in their neighborhoods. Many Buffalo refugees, including a large portion of refugees from Burma, are farmers by trade or experienced gardeners, and so using their agricultural skills can be enjoyable, reassuring, and empowering. For people encountering the stresses of navigating a new city, language, and culture, the importance of these positive experiences cannot be overstated.

Gardening and farming can also aid refugee communities to form a cohesive group identity. Refugees are highly dependent on resettlement agencies, and often lack a unified voice to advocate on their behalf. Resettlement agencies are not always responsive to cultural needs, often leaving refugees hoping for some alternative to social services with greater independence, allowing them take control over their new lives.⁴ Refugee communities are extraordinarily diverse – different from each other, and containing great diversity within a single community – but a fundamental and historical practice like farming or gardening can help bring people together.⁵

Many refugees cite the secular and less structured value system of western society as a reason to eventually return, or at least send their children back to their countries of origin. Given the importance to many refugees of the family and extended family, gardening and farming can provide the opportunity to pay active respect to the land and to involve children in structured, culturally-

specific activities that cultivate the parents' desired values.⁶

Finally, these benefits extend to the Buffalo community at large. Consider Buffalo's 15,897 vacant lots.⁷

Revitalizing them into farms and gardens will beautify neighborhoods in ways that improve social atmosphere, morale, property values and safety.⁸ In Buffalo, vacant lot revitalization by groups like Massachusetts Avenue Project, Community Action Organization, PUSH, and others has dramatically improved neighborhoods. A staff member at PUSH observes that for the Burmese refugees who are gardening, their personal fulfillment radiates into the community at large, combating prejudices against refugees with their efforts to bring new beauty to the neighborhood.⁹

One Example: Hampshire Street

PUSH is currently running at least five community gardens, one of which – on Hampshire Street – is gardened mainly by refugees. Behind the locked, wooden fence one finds 15 plots of 8 by 16 feet, each displaying yields in abundance, including tomatoes, onions, eggplant, cilantro, and even corn. The majority of the gardeners are Burmese, and the garden is their safe haven, a place to employ their skills in leisurely, almost therapeutic activity, and a place for the kids to be supervised outdoors. It is a likely step toward earning their much-deserved respect from the neighborhood and feeling integrated in their community.¹⁰

PUSH's success is a function of several things they learned from their first garden, which is on 19th Street. While

the 19th Street garden remains active and successful, an early attempt to dedicate the garden to refugee gardeners did not pan out, and it is currently being gardened by other neighbors. On Hampshire Street, PUSH first canvassed the neighbors to get a sense of what the community most wanted for their vacant lots – beauty gardens, produce, a playground, or something else. Receiving much enthusiasm for a crop-growing garden, PUSH had to decide who was to get a highly-prized plot of soil. Charging a small fee for the plots inspired much greater interest than giving the land away for free, as PUSH had done on 19th Street.

Other important points included the owner's proximity to the garden; privacy and security; size of the plots; proper landscaping and general preparation to increase yields; and, perhaps most importantly, a respected leader in the gardener community who can communicate important matters from PUSH to the gardeners.



*PUSH Community Garden
92 19th Street, Buffalo*

Policy Recommendations: Examples

“Urban farming” refers to larger scale operations, generally requiring at least an acre of land, in which the farmer offers the produce for sale (either as a non-profit or a for-profit operation). Other cities have embraced urban farming and have set precedents for best practices of policy design.

Seattle is often singled out as a leader in refugee-oriented gardening and farming. The ten-acre Burst Farmers Refugee Project in south Seattle, in just its second year, is very successful – providing refugees with an opportunity to become financially secure, acquire assets, and integrate within the larger community.¹¹ The city has played a formative role, including its “Year of Urban Agriculture” initiative in 2010. This initiative focused the city in various ways, including using more land for growing food; raising plot size limits (to 4000 square feet); providing composting; and allowing revenue to be generated from these farms and encouraging sales with “farm-to-market” programs.¹²

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Much of this policy redesign has been replicated successfully in other cities, often with financial and technical assistance from the Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program (RAPP).¹³ In

Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel is supporting larger plot sizes for community gardens and the permission to sell produce, all of which works in tandem with an \$80,000 RAPP grant. Upon visiting a RAPP grant-supported farm in San Diego, Michelle Obama proclaimed, “It’s a model for the nation, for the world.”¹⁴ In San Diego, one of the major expenses for urban farms – compost – is offset by city policy that enlists trucks to recycle discarded food from restaurants. For more examples of farm-friendly policies, Michael Raleigh’s policy brief, “How City Hall can Foster an Urban Farming Revolution in Buffalo,” offers much information.¹⁵

Beyond the infrastructure of the farm itself, policies must address the need for education if refugees are to become functioning entrepreneurs. The Urban Agriculture Program in St. Louis outlines its three-year program as follows. Beginning in year-one with English language training (focusing on relevant terminology), and classes on the basics of finances (e.g., making change), by the second year the refugees are already seeking business apprenticeships. In their final year the refugees are able to lease or even buy their own plots of land, and the program ensures that lack of a credit history is not insurmountable.¹⁶

Experts note, however, that many refugees have much different learning styles, and some prefer to simply farm without being extensively educated at all. To aid this type of farmer, Seattle Tilth created ALBA, a program which connects refugee farmers with business people who are willing to sell their produce at market on their behalf.¹⁷

Policy Recommendations: For Buffalo

Many of the reservations about urban farming and community gardens are ungrounded. For example, fears about the farms being vandalized or about attracting unwanted animal life, while understandable, are often exaggerated.¹⁸

In Buffalo, the City’s land leasing agreements generally prevent lessees from selling their yield. If the reason for this ban is a fear of soil contamination creating unsafe produce, this could be addressed by requiring that the soil be tested or that the farmer use raised beds, as many or most urban farmers and gardeners in Buffalo do already.¹⁹

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Another barrier is zoning. Buffalo’s code currently does not have a category for urban farms or community gardens, making their legal status less than clear. The fact that Buffalo is currently updating its zoning code and turning it into a “Green Code” offers the perfect opportunity to zone in such a way not merely as to tolerate, but as to promote farms and gardens.

Once the land is secured, much landscaping needs to be done to prepare unkempt lots for cultivation. This requires funding through grants, loans, and other means. A basic “cleaning and greening” of a vacant lot, including adding a simple wooden fence, costs an average of \$1,250 in Philadelphia’s “Clean and Green” program. Doing raised beds, buying seeds and tools, and maintaining the gardens adds more costs,

but, even so, community gardening remains one of the cheapest possible ways to turn eyesores to assets in a city with a steeply declined population. The City’s Community Development Block Grant funds are a natural choice for this type of program.

These policy measures would be an important step toward combating depression and loneliness, and positively integrating refugees into this new movement in the country – not to mention the immediate health benefits of remedying deficiencies in their diet.

And refugees are only one of many groups of people who benefit from these initiatives. Farms and gardens offer something for everyone, from the elderly – a safe and leisurely recreation – to young children – exposure to the natural world and healthy eating habits. Neighborhoods, especially those in dilapidated areas, can have their vacant lots beautified and transformed, gain economic opportunities, and find nutritional provisions to fight against food deserts. Beyond caring for and empowering our underserved refugee community, urban farming and community gardening initiatives can help revitalize vacant and impoverished communities throughout Buffalo.²⁰

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- ¹ Hadley et al. (2010). Difficulty in the Food Environment and the Experience of Food Insecurity among Refugees... *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 49:390-407.
- ² Raja et al (2008). Beyond Food Deserts... *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 27:469.
- ³ Conversation with Eva Hasett, Executive Director International Institute of Buffalo.
- ⁴ Conversation with Lamis Al Shamaileh, Hispanics United of Buffalo.
- ⁵ Conversation with Dr. Scheider, University at Buffalo.
- ⁶ Conversation with Stephanie Italiano, Jericho Road.
- ⁷ Partnership for the Public Good, "The City of Buffalo's Abandoned Housing Crisis," August 8, 2011, available at <http://www.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Abandoned-Housing-Crisis.pdf>
- ⁸ See Chris Szczygiel, "Greening Buffalo's Vacant Lots," July 5, 2011, available at <http://www.ppgbuffalo.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/green-lots-policy-brief.pdf>.
- ⁹ Conversation with Sean Ryan. PUSH Buffalo
- ¹⁰ Conversation with Joshua Smith, PUSH Buffalo.
- ¹¹ Follow the Burst Farmer's Blog here: <http://burstfarmers.wordpress.com/>.
- ¹² Conversation with Eddie Hill, Seattle Tilth (<http://seattletilth.org/>).
- ¹³ For more information on the RAPP grant opportunity, see <http://www.grants.gov/search/search.do?mode=VIEW&oppId=54864>.
- ¹⁴ See http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ref_agr_partnership_prg.htm.
- ¹⁵ Available at www.ppgbuffalo.org.
- ¹⁶ See <http://blog.sustainablog.org/blog-action-day-st-louis-urban-farm-provides-fresh-food-and-economic-empowerment/>.
- ¹⁷ Conversation with Eddie Hill.
- ¹⁸ Conversation with Caesandra Seawell, LiveWell Youth Coordinator.
- ¹⁹ Conversation with Linda Reiter, Grass Roots Gardens.
- ²⁰ Conversation with Larry Laverentz, RAPP Program Manager.
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