Refugee Agriculture 101

Local communities and service providers might wonder who refugees are, what the resettlement process is like, and why some of them seek to farm once in the U.S. Many people understand that refugees are fleeing war or other difficult situations in their homeland, but a more comprehensive understanding of the legal designation of a refugee, what they may have experienced prior to resettlement in the U.S., and how they come to farming in the U.S. will help to tailor our services and support.

Key Terms

Farm incubator: a land based multi-grower project that provides training and technical assistance to aspiring and beginning farmers.

Farmer training programs: Educational programming, which can include group workshops, technical assistance, and field-based learning, designed to help farmers grow their businesses.

Refugee Farm Incubators: Farm incubators that specifically enroll and serve a refugee clientele. Refugee farm incubators are often but not always urban or peri-urban and are also often accompanied by training and technical assistance to assist refugee farmers in adapting to US growing and marketing conditions. Refugee farm incubators will emphasize culturally and linguistically informed services for farmers and may service refugee farmers from one or many ethnic backgrounds.

How do you become a recognized refugee?

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has defined a refugee as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence.” Refugees come from different backgrounds and represent many education levels, careers, and geographic origins. Some arrive with advanced degrees, while others have agrarian backgrounds and multiple generations of farming knowledge.

How are refugees resettled?

Once a refugee registers with UNHCR, they may be eligible for resettlement. Applicants for resettlement in the U.S. are referred to the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and complete an extensive background check and interview process that commonly takes over a year to complete.

Refugees do not have a choice about where they are resettled in the U.S. However, if they have relatives in the U.S., they may be resettled nearby.

All photographs provided by Jeri Jonise.
What do refugees do once in the U.S.?

Resettlement agencies play a vital role in helping refugees adjust, providing core services to new arrivals including help finding housing, enrolling children in school, accessing the limited benefits refugees receive in their first 6 months, and facilitating access to health care. After as little as three months, refugees must acquire work, despite how challenging this can be for those learning English for the first time. Refugees looking for work are committed to furthering their English language and literacy skills and often work and attend ESL classes at the same time.

Who are refugee farmers?

Refugees arriving from certain communities and locations bring with them the knowledge and lifestyles of generations of agriculture-based living. Many refugee families, particularly those from rural areas, were able to grow a large portion of their food and may have sold their product in informal or sometimes more formalized exchanges. Each farming community has different practices, but because many are using generations of family knowledge, they often do not include pesticides, fertilizers or other large-scale conventional agricultural practices.

How to get involved

Just as farmers are learning new skills, those who work with refugee farmers need to learn new ways to successfully work with these farmers, who may have different backgrounds than their own.

1. Organize a meeting with the program to learn more about their services and to explain or offer a training on your services.
2. Plan site visits, field days, and farm tours with refugee farm training program staff.
3. Coordinate with refugee farmer training program staff to plan refugee-appropriate tracks for existing agriculture workshops and conferences in your area.
4. Provide refugee farming programs letters of support and collaboration on grant applications.
5. Assist with searches for more land for refugee farmers and farm incubator expansions.

Refugee farmers in the US tend to come from Somalia, Burundi, Bhutan/Nepal, Rwanda, Burma, Tibet, Iraq and Sudan (among others). The farming conditions and practices in their homeland may be extremely different from here. For example, many Somali Bantu farmers used river flooding as their primary source of fertilization and irrigation.

Reflection Questions

• “If you are an agency that provides services, what type of services could you offer refugee farmers?”
• “Knowing a little more about refugee farmers, how do you think you might have to adjust to meet their needs when providing these services?”
• “If you grew up around print as a primary form of communication and knowledge, how might this influence the way you teach and communicate?”
• “How might being a native English language speaker affect your perception of those who speak other languages?”

Contact Us

[Insert your organization’s contact information here.]