

Sowing Seeds of Opportunity: A convergence of agriculture and acculturation for refugees in Atlanta



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ABSTRACT

In 2015, there were 60 million people displaced by conflict and persecution. With refugees and asylees arriving *en masse* in foreign receiving countries, it is critical that host nations utilize methods of resettlement and integration that are both beneficial and sensitive to the needs of these vulnerable populations. This study documents an innovative win-win approach to community integration that benefits both hosts and refugees alike. Qualitative data was collected through ten sessions of participant and direct observation on community farms and seven semi-structured interviews with program management and refugees to answer the question, what opportunities for these refugee growers is this project providing. Descriptive, exploratory research with the organization Global Growers demonstrated how refugee farmers presented with agricultural opportunities generated financial and food sustainability (i.e., improved livelihood) and improved their overall level of community integration (i.e., effective acculturation). The denouement of this research details one effective intervention toward refugee resettlement beneficial to all stakeholders. Using familiar lifestyles and communal programming smoothed refugee integration and improved overall livelihood and quality of life. Similar programs should validate this effective resettlement and acculturation approach sensitive to the diverse needs of these vulnerable populations.

Key Themes

**Agriculture Opportunity
Acculturation Community**

METHODOLOGY

This study relied on access to refugee populations through the cooperation of the organization Global Growers. Working with an administrator responsible for establishing communal gardens and providing technical assistance yielded an outlet to gather qualitative data at five farm sites in the Clarkson and Decatur areas using the following methods:

•Participatory Observation

This form of data collection involved the researcher's willingness to engage with refugee growers in agriculturally-related activities. Some of these laborious tasks included digging work spaces alongside raised garden beds and constructing a storage hut made from bamboo (Figure 1). Participatory observation allowed conversations to occur between the researcher and grower including short lessons to learn the refugee's native language. This made room for a fluid development of positive rapport through the use of the researcher's reciprocal actions to help with the farm's maintenance. A field notebook was used to record the data and experiences gathered from these events.

•Non-participatory Observation

Farms are spatially vast sites that make non-participatory observation both simple and effective because there is always an action or task taking place. The researcher was able to observe many daily operations conducted by refugee growers (Figure 4). Some observations featured Global Growers administrators providing assistance and advice to enhance the growers success (Figure 3). One challenge identified early on dealt with the language barrier separating the subject field and the researcher. To address this issue, the researcher made observations from a distance then later used the "fact checking" strategy during the participatory observation phase to confirm or change previous notions and ideas.

•Semi-structured Interviews

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with Global Grower administrators and refugee farmers to help understand the opportunities available and how they related to acculturation in a new cultural atmosphere. Participants involved with interviews signed consent forms that allowed for the use of a recording device. All participants were over the age of 18 and affiliated with Global Growers in some manner. Interviews averaged between 15 and 20 minutes in length. The language barrier was yet again a challenge for the researcher but slow and clear English pronunciations aided refugee growers in providing coherent and relevant responses to questions.

RESULTS



Figure 1: Michael and Winston constructing a storage hut using a bamboo frame, what they described as "Pre-Georgia Tech[nology]"



Figure 2: Bamboo Creek Farm, Stone Mountain, GA

The methodology for this research project yielded qualitative data that suggests the program formulated by Global Growers addresses specific needs and opportunities for local refugee populations. It is effective and beneficial for both participating parties, the refugees and the local community. Refugee growers who supplied data for this research project conveyed satisfaction from the opportunity to farm in their new home. Each grower mentioned that farming was a major part of their culture and lifestyle in their homeland. In one way, the chance to farm in a new home can be viewed as the preservation of their culture and way of life for these refugees.

Each farm site visited during the research process was noted for its specific function. Of the farms visited, three could be considered "commercial use" in that they supply vegetables and crops to restaurants and markets in the area. Bamboo Creek Farm (Figure 2) is an example of a farm used commercially. This provides an additional form of monetary income for the refugee growers. Two farms are family farms or kitchen gardens. At these farms, plots are divided and assigned to refugee families who have the opportunity to grow food they can consume at home. This improves the overall livelihood of refugees by both sustaining a food supply despite any financial difficulties and creating a sense of community through the cultural practice of agriculture.



Figure 3: Global Growers administrator Simon counsels Mae on reducing the amount of compost used



Figure 4: Mae harvesting Swiss Chard

CONCLUSIONS

In the year 2015, there was a total of 60 million individuals displaced by various forms of conflict and persecution in their native homeland and from that numerical value, 10 million refugees are a result of the Syrian crisis alone (Betts and Collier, 2015). It is more relevant now than ever that methods and strategies must be adopted by host nations in order to facilitate the arrival and successful resettlement of refugees.

The qualitative data collected from this research project confirmed that the specific program utilized by Global Growers is both effective and appropriate. Each refugee the researcher conversed with expressed the notion that farming was an important part of the lifestyle and culture in their homeland. Opportunities provided for the refugees to farm in the United States, whether for commercial or personal use, improved their overall livelihoods by generating either financial support or food sustainability.

Aside from the obvious benefits to the refugees, the research yielded data that strongly suggests a deeper role played by Global Growers in facilitating refugees to the area. Initializing agricultural opportunities for refugees provides an excellent foundation for community integration. Whereas normally these refugees and asylees may be seen as outsiders to their newly relocated city or town, they now are participating in events and actions that contribute to the overall success and well-being of the community as a whole.

The models and programs used by Global Growers is one of many validated strategies that allow for an effective acculturation process for refugees received by host nations. Countries should avoid using less effective methods such as the establishment of refugee camps notorious for creating a stagnant environment that keeps refugees alive, but does not provide a living (Oka, 2014). Creative and beneficial alternatives sensitive to refugee wants and needs will ultimately lead to a smoother acculturation process for this vulnerable population while simultaneously aiding in the improvement of overall livelihood and wellbeing.

"It's a lot of knowledge [working with Global Growers] and you know how the different technique and different method and how we use and what we use is very, very effective for me to growing."

-Winston, grower from Burma

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