

6-2022

Cultivating Healthy Communities: Refugee Urban Farmers in Providence, RI: Report No. 2 of Land Conservation and Inequality Series

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JUNE 2022

CULTIVATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES: REFUGEE URBAN FARMERS IN PROVIDENCE, RI

REPORT NO. 2 OF LAND CONSERVATION & INEQUALITY SERIES



Photo Credit: John Taylor, URI

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OVERVIEW

Urban farming programs for refugees have become more common across the U.S. (Jean, 2015). Access to agricultural space, whether community gardens or market farms, can lead to improved health for those who have faced forced displacement, violence, and difficulties associated with resettlement. Community gardens in particular offer a range of benefits to refugees, including improvements to physical and mental health, food security, and social support (e.g., Malberg Dyg, 2020). Community gardens also provide refugees with opportunities for economic development (e.g., Banulescu-Bogdan, 2020).

However, access to agricultural space in a dense urban area is challenging, particularly for groups from marginalized backgrounds, such as refugees. To better meet the needs of refugee farmers in urban areas, it is critical to identify the barriers that impede access to agricultural space. This report explains the challenges and needs related to farmland access among a group of refugees in Providence, Rhode Island.

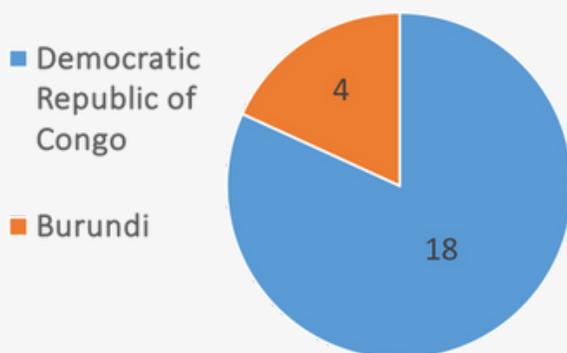
This report comes from a larger study investigating inequality and environmental justice in the context of farm and open space conservation. *Distributional Impacts of Farm and Open Space Conservation* is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (NIFA Award No. 2018-67024-27695). Principal investigator is Corey Lang in the Department of Environmental & Natural Resource Economics at the University of Rhode Island, with co-investigator Amy Ando in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign, and co-investigator Julie C. Keller in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at the University of Rhode Island.

SAMPLE IN BRIEF

Data from this report come from 4 focus groups held in Providence, Rhode Island in 2019 and 2021 with a total of 22 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi. Two focus groups were held with participants proficient in English, and two focus groups were held with Swahili speakers with the assistance of a community translator. Refugees aged 50 and above made up a significant proportion of the sample, at roughly 55%. Most participants were women, at roughly 77% of the sample, and most were Congolese (see figure below). Length of time in the U.S. ranged from one to 13 years. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report for confidentiality. See notes for more detail on methods.

Note: The findings in this report are not generalizable and thus should not be interpreted as representative of all refugees in Providence or Rhode Island.

Participant Country of Origin



BACKGROUND

In FY 2020, the largest group of refugee arrivals to the U.S. were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Among refugees resettled in Rhode Island from FY 2010 to FY 2020, Congolese refugees were the largest group (MPI, 2021). Refugees from neighboring Burundi have also resettled in Rhode Island in recent years.

Participants in focus groups described a shared common culture and tradition of farming. In the DRC and Burundi, women often farmed together, growing foods such as cassava, beans, rice, corn, bananas, tomatoes, eggplant, and amaranth. Daughters accompanied mothers to the farm, and women from the village worked together to grow and harvest food. Men were more likely to engage in different types of work, such as cutting down trees and grass to clear the land for agricultural use.

In refugee camps, participants often had access to large plots where they grew vegetables to supplement the small quantity of food provided by the United Nations. Refugees often exchanged items from the UN with the surrounding community to access farmland.

Compared with the ease of accessing land in refugee camps and in their home countries, participants found it difficult to find adequate farmland in Rhode Island.

FARMLAND ACCESS FOR REFUGEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Focus group participants indicated that access to farmland in the place of resettlement is critical for many reasons. Access to land for gardening can help refugees adjust to life in a new country, heal psychological wounds associated with violence and displacement, and provide families with fresh, nutritious, and culturally significant foods. Farmland was explained as a core need, critical to maintaining health and establishing a shared sense of place in their new home.

Amara, a refugee from the DRC in her 50s, described the multiple benefits associated with farming: "It's also like a kind of therapy. For those who have mental health problems, for those that have been in a refugee camp for a long time. We left everything in our country. Most of the women were violated...We had bad experiences in our country. Most of us are traumatized. So we need something that can make us busy." Working the land together offered women in particular a sense of purpose, healing, and community.

LAND-RELATED NEEDS

For refugees in focus groups, land was key to immigrant incorporation, mental health, and physical health. Yet, in a dense urban environment, finding adequate farmland was difficult. Some refugees leased land through a local land trust or other non-profit organizations. But compared to the land they were accustomed to farming in their home countries and at refugee camps, these plots were not sufficient. Participants also described other barriers to farming.

Common needs across focus groups:

- **Size & Availability:** Community garden plots are too small & in high demand
- **Financial:** Difficulties paying seasonal plot fees & market registration fees
- **Transportation:** Many refugees do not have driver's licenses, so close proximity is key
- **Seeds:** Need for free or affordable seeds to grow traditional foods from Africa
- **Storage:** Refrigeration needed to reduce waste and sell more produce
- **Interpreters:** For translating the needs of the community
- **Education:** Techniques for growing traditional crops in Rhode Island
- **Social Capital:** Connections to other non-profit organizations, government agencies, and universities needed to improve farmland access



WE KNOW THE IMPORTANCE OF FARMING. ALL THE TIME WHEN WE GO TO THE DOCTOR, AT THE HOSPITAL OR AT THE CLINIC, THEY ENCOURAGE US TO EAT OUR TRADITIONAL FOOD BECAUSE THEY SAY IT IS HEALTHIER. IF WE GET THAT OPPORTUNITY TO GROW THOSE KINDS OF FOODS... THAT WILL BE GREAT FOR US...

-GEORGE



FARMING CHALLENGES RELATED TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic brought additional challenges to refugee urban farmers. Some community gardens were closed in 2020. When they re-opened, social distancing, masking, and other restrictions made it difficult for refugee farmers to maintain their plots. One farmer explained, "They say you have to limit your exit to go out every time. So there was no possibility of going and watering the vegetables, and that's why we can see when the harvest was really low." Health restrictions in place to protect farmers complicated refugees' access to fresh, nutritious, and culturally significant food.

Refugees also described losing family members and friends to the pandemic. One farmer described the fear she experienced: "This year when we started farming, I can see some of the plots that are empty. I don't know if the person who [was] using it, if they passed away, or if they [are] still alive. We don't know. So those are things that [make us] afraid." The sense of community that refugee urban farmers had cultivated was disrupted by the fear and uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

KEY TAKE-AWAY POINTS

- Land for farming is critical to refugee health and wellbeing.
- Farming unlocks **multiple health benefits** for refugees, such as improved diet, social support, and overall mental health.
- Access to farmland is important for **economic development** in refugee communities.
- There is a **strong demand for farmland** among refugees in Providence, RI, despite the extensive network of community gardens and farms in the area.
- Refugees find it **difficult to access large plots** that will meet their farming needs.
- **Transportation and financial barriers** make it difficult to access farmland.
- Additional resources, such as **interpreters, refrigerated storage, improved market access**, and **seeds for growing African foods**, would enhance the success of refugee farmers.
- Garden access was **restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic**, with negative effects on refugee urban farmers.



Photo Credit: John Taylor, URI

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to Women's Refugee Care in Providence, RI for their assistance with this study. Thank you to Veronica Dumas for her transcription work.

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- Data analysis consisted of manual transcription by a research assistant and automatic transcription using Otter.ai, followed by manual coding using Dedoose to identify themes in the data.

SUGGESTED CITATION FOR THIS REPORT

Keller, Julie C., Blake Harrison, and Corey Lang. 2022. Report No. 2: Cultivating Healthy Communities: Refugee Urban Farmers in Providence, RI. Land Conservation and Inequality Series. University of Rhode Island.

Photo Credit, Page 1 and Page 4: John Taylor, University of Rhode Island