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## When A Good Project Goes Awry: Community Re-Connecting With An Urban Farm

Susan L. Andreatta  
Project Green Leaf<sup>1</sup>  
Department of Anthropology  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

**ABSTRACT:** This paper reports on two years of maintaining an urban community farm in the City of Greensboro, North Carolina. Staff from Project Green Leaf (PGL) worked with a resettled Montagnard refugee community on farming for home consumption and for market. Increased participation led to an increased area of land under cultivation and abundant harvests. Farming on the community farm provided means for the resettled immigrants to express solidarity, as well as maintain social linkages, relations of power and some of their cultural heritage. Neighboring residents, who had been invited to participate, elected to harvest only rather than plant to eat or plant to sell. By the end of the season the farm underwent major transformations with a number of unintended outcomes.

After two years of working on an urban farm and selling at a farmers' market it is time for reflection. The writing of reports to those funding the project has caused me to engage in on-farm and off-farm reflections. The project, "Greensboro Community

Farm and City Market Project," which began in the winter of 2002, was designed to provide underserved members of the community an opportunity to raise agricultural products for a downtown farmers market in Greensboro, North Carolina. In addition, the urban community farm and city market was to be a means of integrating a diverse population into a local community and providing an opportunity to facilitate economic development. There was financial and in-kind support from the city and foundations as well as from local businesses, developers, established farmers, and local residents. Conceptually, this community project had great potential.

The spring of 2003 began the first year of farming and growing for home consumption and for a farmers market. The learning curve, on many fronts, carried over into the following year of farming and marketing. In 2004 new challenges were faced, making for an equally demanding year for both the farm and the farmers market participants. Therefore, the project discussed in this paper is based on the implementation of a co-educational learning opportunity among food producers and agriculture advocates who envisioned low-income residents, immigrants and resettled refugees working together on an urban farm and selling their surplus at a newly established farmers market located in the heart of a downtown area serving a diverse economic and ethnic community. The urban community farm was designed to provide residents who had the desire but lacked the resources an opportunity to farm and market, drawing primarily from the established African-American communities and the newly resettled immigrant and refugee communities.

This paper reflects on the various methods and approaches used for farming as well as sharing and marketing the harvest. However, the purpose of this paper is to reexamine the approaches taken over a 2-year period to organize an urban community farm and farmers market, and to learn from what worked well and what did not in this type of civic agriculture.

As an outsider and insider evaluating this project, questions beg to be asked. For example, was the farm in the best location, one that would meet the needs of a low-income community? Were sufficient resources made available to minimize risks that were not weather related for the participants? Could low-income households grow their own fresh produce for home consumption? Would there be an interest in growing for market to be added to the household income? Were mechanisms in place so that community relationships could form? What were some of the barriers to making an urban community farm sustainable?

## Background

Since the early 21st century there has been a surge in research efforts, publications and advocacy campaigns on combining interests in human health, environmental health as seen in alternative agriculture, and support for local farmers. Much has been written on local agriculture and food systems through direct marketing efforts (farmers markets, Community-Supported Agriculture arrangements [CSAs], u-picks, and roadside stands) (see Andreatta 2000; Andreatta and Wickcliffe 2002; DeLind 1999, 2000, 2002, Henderson and Van En 1999; Goland 2002; Goland and Bauer 2004; and Stephenson and Lev 2004 for further discussion). Additional authors and food advocates have been praising the quality and freshness of local foods as a means of supporting healthy living (Nestle 2002, 2003). Increased interests in the organic food movement among the scientific community also have identified phytonutrient quality (the health promoting, disease-preventing substances abundant in plant foods, e.g., asparagus, blueberries, broccoli, carrots, citrus, kale, and tomatoes) adding interest among health-conscious eaters.

Added to the mix of access to new information and websites are hundreds of new cookbooks that have been added to book stores and 24-hour cable food channels. Each has brought the public closer to food, ethnic cuisines, and the ease and fun of cooking with friends and family. These lists of agriculture, food types, and cooking interests are endless, but are clearly indicative of those who are in a position to make fresh farm produce a regular part of their food intake. In addition, some "neuvo-foodies" are rekindling their relationship with food as well as with their food providers: "their farmer."

The newly forged relationships among food enthusiasts that include "knowing their farmer" is a shared interest knowing where and how garden and farm items are produced. In the past decade there has been a rise in the number of farmers markets and CSA arrangements. CSA arrangements were estimated to be 50 in 1990 and have since grown to more than 1,000 (Robin van En 2006). The 1990s saw a renewed interest in farmers markets in the United States. In 1994 there were 1,755 farmers markets listed with the USDA and by 2004 there were 3,706, a 111% increase in a decade nationwide (USDA 2004). Other ways in which the public has been connecting to farmers is through agrotourism and local farm tours. In each of these examples, however, we are again speaking about members of population who are able to make a food and farm connection for themselves and their families by bringing them to farmers markets or to a farm to meet the farmers.

Nevertheless not all households are able to meet farmers or find themselves at farmers markets. For example, the southeastern part of the United States has the highest rate of food insecurity in the nation. On average 12.4% were food insecure, followed by the west (12.1%), midwest (9.6%) and northeast (9.2%) (Nord et al. 2003). Among the southern states, North Carolina has an average of 12.3% of households reporting food insecurity, placing it above the national average of 11% (Nord et al. 2003). According to the Food Insecurity Institute,

North Carolina previously had been ranked 30th with a food insecurity rate of 10% in a study conducted between 1998 and 2000 (Sullivan and Choi 2002). Since 2000, food insecurity rates have increased and North Carolina is now in the top 15 states experiencing the worst rates of food insecurity in the United States (Nord et al. 2003).

Urban households that are economically challenged need not and should not be left out of the discussion on access to fresh produce and farm visits. Low-income households, including newly resettled refugees<sup>2</sup> and immigrants who often are economically challenged, bring with them food traditions and customs as well as a range of food access and food preference issues that need to be part of the new locally driven agrofood systems.

Gardening projects in Atlanta, Berkeley, Maryland and New York City have indicated that community garden plots can generate an income if planted and harvested accordingly. These urban garden projects often operated by local food banks have created an alternative means of obtaining food assistance other than through food stamp programs. Further interest connecting people to farms and gardens is seen in farm-to-school lunch programs and farm-apprentice opportunities.

From the wide range of opportunities amidst enabling a form of reconnecting with farmers, farms and fresh produce it is apparent that a new agrofood movement is upon us, that of civic agriculture. Combining interest in farming, human and environmental health, civic agriculture has been popularized by long-time agriculture and food advocates DeLind (2002) and Lyson (2004). "The term 'civic' agriculture frames a collection of food and farming enterprises that addresses the needs of local growers, consumers, rural economies and communities of place" (DeLind 2002:217). As DeLind points out, civic agriculture both guides and legitimates a diverse and growing body of creative, socioeconomic relationships around food and agriculture: farmers markets, CSAs, co-ops, and community

gardens among them (DeLind 2002). As DeLind so eloquently states:

Civic agriculture scans from the ground-up, attending to less standardized, more direct and self-reliant approaches to food production, distribution and consumption. Equally important it also widens the scope of ag-related concerns. Civic agriculture moves away from a strictly mechanistic focus on production and economic efficiency and toward food and farming systems responsive to particular ecological and socioeconomic context (DeLind 2002: 217).

An emphasis on civic agriculture has been aimed at the “relocalization” of food and farming and thus has promoted “a regional-based economic activity with the primary objective of improving farmer income and community revitalization” (DeLind 2002: 218).

DeLind (2002) warns, however, that civic agriculture must motivate and be more than another economically driven approach to an agrofood system. She places her emphasis on space, specifically a location of the garden and farm, and using the soil’s productive abilities as a co-educational opportunity for new and old citizens, for new and old farmers and market gardeners to share. Together the benefit in civic agriculture is in a symbiotic relationship where the emphasis is on people, farm or garden, and stewardship of the earth. Mutually sharing in the work as well as in the understanding of production and consumption could lead to relationships built around food and agriculture that are not motivated by profit.

### **Project Location**

The demographics for the City of Greensboro lent themselves to supporting a multicultural urban community farm and city farmers market. In 2002 the total population living

in Greensboro, including the designated downtown area and immediate surrounding area, was 65,926, and the total number of employees working in the same designated area was 97,422. The area known as the heart or the center city of Greensboro's central business district was where approximately 300 people resided and 21,000 people were employed (City of Greensboro 2001). Greensboro's population is diverse, with an African-American population at 37% (Greensboro North Carolina 2001). In addition, the number of immigrants and refugees arriving and making the city and surrounding area their home are increasing. According to a recent report, 60,000 new North Carolinians have arrived in the last two decades (Center for New North Carolinians 2005). The steady flow of immigrants and refugees are from various parts of the world, including Southeast Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and Latin America. Overall, the county's Asian population nearly tripled in the 1990s, and its Latino/Hispanic population grew by 454%, compared with the county's overall growth of 21% (Center for New North Carolinians 2005).

Among the African-American, Hispanic immigrant and Southeast Asian refugee residents of Greensboro are people with a desire to grow fresh produce. Many have a history in agriculture but simply lack sufficient land and resources. As previously mentioned, some of these residents are newcomers to Greensboro, such as immigrants and refugees, who may bring with them years of agricultural experience from their country of origin. There are also younger and older generations without the background in farming or gardening who are eager to acquire such skills, given the opportunity. In line with civic agriculture, creating a community urban farm may help to provide low-income households with access to their own fresh produce and also provide an opportunity, for those able and interested, to market their surplus harvest for added home income. While many of Greensboro's residents have benefited from development projects in the past, others,

particularly those living in low-income neighborhoods composed of various minority and ethnic groups, have not. These communities face problems typical of all low-income neighborhoods across the U.S.: high crime rates, drug abuse, unemployment, teen pregnancy, and lack of community organization. In addition, newly settled immigrant and refugee residents face issues of acculturation and participation in the community. As a way to address some of these problems, cities across the country have turned to community garden and farming programs (see *From the Ground Up* 2004, and *The Council on the Environment of New York City* 2002). These established programs across the country provide incentives, as well as models, for the "Greensboro Community Farm and City Market" project.

Therefore, Project Green Leaf (PGL) staff believed there would be a desire to produce fresh produce for many of the resettled immigrants who were from rural backgrounds. With this information in hand we moved forward in securing funding, land and community support for the community farm.

## Methods

### Site Selections

The location for the urban farm and farmers market was carefully selected. The City of Greensboro, through the Department of Housing and Community Development, provided a flat vacant lot of 1.5 acres for the community farm located about two miles from the city center. In addition, the farm was located behind a gas station with a convenience store attached. The farm was located near low-income residents, immigrants and resettled refugees who were residing in several apartment complexes and single-family homes. The



site selection for the farm was arranged to reduce distance as an obvious barrier to anyone's participation in the community farm. The particular area where the farm was located had lost its only grocery store nearly 2 years prior to this project. The city, therefore, considered this particular vacant lot suitable farm land, especially since it was readily accessible to members of the community who might want to grow fresh produce. The vacant lot was leased to UNCG-PGL on a year-to-year agreement beginning in 2003. The lease was renewed in 2004 enabling participants and the community to benefit from 2 years for growing produce at the urban farm and selling some of the harvest at a farmers market.

For several years city planners, established farmers, and various food advocates (including the author of this paper) served on committees to plan a mid-week farmers market for the Center City residents and its employees. The downtown area did not have a place to purchase fresh produce other than at local restaurants. In 2003 the idea for a farmers market was agreed upon. In its first year (2003) the farmers market was temporarily located on an exposed asphalt parking lot. Although planners had known this location was to be temporary, what no one knew was that the temporary location would last for the entire first year's growing season. However, by the second year developers purchased land in the heart of the city to make a "Center City Park," which featured the farmers market as one of its weekly attractions.

One of the city's independent developing groups purchased 15 10' x 10' canopy tents for events held at the Center City Park. Farmers and craft vendors were able to use these tents, shading or shielding their products. This same developing group also invested in advertising the Center City Park and the future farmers market long before the community farm project had seeds in the ground. To provide additional assistance for this new market established farmers<sup>3</sup> were contacted, offering them the new weekly location to sell their products at as well. It

was thought that the established farmers would provide fresh produce for the market earlier than those participating in the community farm. In the end the established farmers did carry the market in both seasons (2003 and 2004). However, before we get too far into marketing, let us return to converting the vacant lot into a farm.

### Land Preparation

Preparing the land was the first step in converting the vacant lot into a functioning place to grow fresh produce. PGL staff assumed the responsibility for securing funding and in-kind donations to prepare the land. In the first year (2003) the field was cleared, tilled and fertilized. Six standing irrigation pipes were installed for participants to water their crops by attaching garden hoses or filling watering cans. The standing pipes were laid out in the field in such a way that no one plot user had to travel very far to carry water. Soon afterwards (2003) 53 squares were marked out and staked with string into 20' x 20' plots. In the second year of production (2004) only 50 plots were marked out for use. Three plots in the middle were no longer used, for they retained too much water when the heavy rains came. It was joked that those plots would have been better suited for growing wetland rice.

### Farm Participant Selection

When this project commenced in 2003, 15 focus groups were held within the neighborhoods surrounding the farm to recruit participants and to identify how the farming opportunity might best assist them, as well as to get input as to what they would be interesting in growing, participant's level of experience in growing and marketing and additional

needs they might have while participating. Encouraging participants to grow products that were of interest to them was expressed during the meetings when seed selection from picture catalogues was discussed. Information about consumer interests for different products was provided. Participants were responsible for the maintenance and production of their own farm plots throughout the growing season.

Upon learning of the farming and marketing opportunity, each of the participants and their families had self-selected to participate in the "Greensboro Community Farm and City Market" project. In year one (2003) eight African-American households from the neighborhood surrounding the farm and 27 members from the resettled Montagnard refugee community commenced hand digging raised beds on the farm. Montagnards are originally from the Central Highlands of Vietnam. There are 3,000 Montagnards in Greensboro, some of whom have been here since 1986 and others who arrived in 2001 (Shoaf 2004). Among the Montagnards who participated were 15 Rade-speaking elders who elected to farm together on three plots. The elders averaged 60 years of age and have been living in Greensboro for well over a decade. A second group of resettled Montagnard refugees who participated in the project were three Bonong-speaking households who arrived in 2001. These more recent Montagnard refugees farmed a total of five plots, two households with two plots and one household with one plot. They averaged 30 years of age and had been in Greensboro less than 2 years when this project commenced.

In year two (2004), focus groups were held at public libraries, neighborhood association meetings and other facilities that conducted classes for English as a Second Languages (ESL). Working with the Montagnard elders and those arriving in 2001, both groups who participated in the previous year's farming experience facilitated recruitment for the 2004 season. In fact, it was at the ESL class where the two of the women from the 2001 arrivals attended classes where a number of

new participants were signed up. The testimonials from the previous year's participants paved the way for others to follow. Flyers were also put up in the neighborhood of the urban farm and presentations were made to community groups. A total of 11 meetings were held to recruit new farmers. By late May all the available 50 plots were assigned for the 2004 growing season. A total of 35 Montagnard families and two African-American families from the neighborhood signed up, along with a diverse ESL class of 10 international women. From this self-selection process it was apparent a community need was being met, especially with such an increase in participation from the previous year.

### Materials Provided

The grants obtained for funding the urban community farm enabled us to provide participants with start-up materials for each growing season. Individuals or those who wanted to work together selected their plot(s) to work. According to the farm rules, participants could have up to two plots for a single family and up to four if several families were coming together to work together on their plots. Those who farmed the previous year were given first choice to hold on to the plots from the year before or relocate for the following season.

The project purchased shovels, hoes, composts, stakes, fencing and a number of other items to be shared by the participants. In addition, all participants received a watering can, trowel, seeds and transplants for their plot(s). Many of the seed packets ordered by staff were selected from seed catalogues by participants. Items were selected based on participant's home consumption interests and what might sell at a farmers market. Those with two plots received nearly twice as many seeds and transplants. Some of the seeds in the packets included various pole and bush bean varieties, cucumbers, herbs, melons, and

squash varieties. Some of the transplants included multiple varieties of eggplant, herbs, sweet and hot peppers, and tomatoes. Transplants were purchased from local established farmers who also sold at local farmers markets. In both the first and second year of operation local farmers donated some transplants to the project. In the second year 1,500 transplants were donated to the community farm project by a single farming family whose son and nephew had been in the special forces while serving in Viet Nam. Both men had returned home safely. The time for this donation was perfect given the increased number of participants and land under cultivation.

### **On-Farm Observations**

Visiting and working on the farm on a regular basis provided both insider and outsider perspectives on the seasonality of production and its distribution. Regular participation on the farm enabled staff to offer assistance in farm and crop management. Staff varied when they arrived on the farm to help participants; sometimes they were present during the early mornings, evenings and weekends. Participants farmed when it was cool, and when they had more time to farm such as evenings and weekends after work. Staff assisted participants in digging raised beds, watering, weeding, and obtaining pick-up loads of compost. Each growing season brought with it heavy rains and high humidity, heat and protracted dry spells.

The first planting (2003) season began with 23 of the 50 20' x 20' plots being farmed. However, by the end of the season, only 17 plots were attended to and some not all that regularly. Eight neighborhood household members who lived close enough to walk across the street to partake in the farm activities, started the project, yet none harvested what they had planted. We have no explanation for why they stopped coming. What is curious

is that a lot of their time was invested in hand digging the plots and planting seeds and transplants, and that to abruptly stop could be due to any number of personal issues.

The more regular participants were the Montagnard elders, who tended three plots, and three newly arrived younger Montagnard women and their families, who tended five plots. The elders expanded to the abandoned plots enabling them to add to their harvest. The elders referred to themselves as farmers, yet felt working on just these few plots was "just exercise." The plots, therefore, were maintained by resettled Montagnard refugee families. These participants were able to feed their own families, share with friends, and feed those who purchased from them at the Center City Farmers Market.

To assist the elderly Montagnards who were without transportation and only those who lived not in walking distance to the farm, the project rented a university van to bring them to the farm and to the farmers market. The Montagnard participants were also able to come out to water their plots in the evenings when their family members returned home from work with their cars. Regular access to transportation and time to farm were key factors in the success of the farm.

Water management and weeding were critical to plot success. Given the unusually wet growing season for 2003, plots were farmed from late May through October. All the new farmers relied on raised beds to farm. Drainage ditches and trenches were dug between plots to help drain the water more rapidly. As the crops matured, arrangements were made to provide transportation to the farmers market. Having access to a truck was critical to loading the harvested food items as well as bringing other items necessary for selling at the farmers market. Therefore, subsidizing transportation for the Montagnards to get to the farm and market by using my truck to haul the fresh produce and marketing equipment ensured the farm was managed and the harvest-surplus made

it to market. Further discussion on the market follows in a succeeding section of this paper.

After year one, there were no formal follow-up interviews with any of the individual participants. During the first year and also into the second season, we attended the neighborhood meetings and provided regular updates on the farm's progress. We did a winter kick-off slide show at a community meeting with the intention of recruiting more people from the neighborhood to participate in the project. The slide show illustrated what people had accomplished the previous year and was an opportunity for others to participate in the upcoming season. In the end these meetings did not keep people coming to work on the farm, but may have contributed to others visiting and harvesting from the farm.

We also held a meeting at the end of the year at a senior center, where the Montagnard elders regularly met. Their minister, who served as their interpreter, translated the end-of-the-year slide show for us, which depicted many of the elders working on the farm all season. We had more conversations with the Montagnards because they came to the farm in groups and their minister spoke with us regularly. He wanted this farm to succeed for he realized and communicated their food and economic needs to us.

In 2004 word of mouth expedited the recruiting process for participating in the community farm, especially among the refugee families and neighboring community members. By May all 50 20' X 20' plots were claimed. Families received seeds they had selected and staff had ordered from catalogues as well as transplants purchased and donated by local farmers. Nearly 100 people in all were participating on the farm, a dramatic increase from the previous year. It was common to see children roaming the plots, digging, watering, planting and harvesting, depending on their ages. Sometimes the younger children played in the water while the older ones worked alongside their parents and grandparents.

A major change in the second year's farming strategy was to eliminate the transportation provided by the project. The cost of transportation provided the previous year made it impossible for the project to offer weekly transportation. In fact, the community farm project was no longer in a financial position to provide transportation as no new funding was obtained. On occasion a staff person did pickup several participants, but this had to be stopped given other logistical concerns. Refugee sponsors also provided some transportation to the farm in the beginning of the planting season (May-June). Other families with their own transportation made their own arrangements and often carpooled. The minister from a Montagnard church rented a van to provide transportation for the elderly Montagnard participants who were housebound while their children were at work. Overall, however, for the 2004 season, transportation was sporadic, unsystematic and challenging to figure out when participants were able to get out to water, weed and harvest. Gas prices also reached \$1.90 a gallon (up from \$1.25 earlier in the spring), adding an expense for participants.

A broader sense of community interest in the farm developed in the second year. Several local farmers provided assistance with this project by donating transplants and their time for market and crop consultations. Refugee family sponsors<sup>4</sup> of the Montagnards also donated their time by coming to the farm, digging alongside participants to help in planting the seeds and transplants, driving participants to the farm or market and purchasing fresh produce from them at the local market. Some sponsors purchased additional tools, seeds and transplants for the participants to be used at the farm.

For several months, April through early June, the farm hummed with activity. People were sharing rides and resources. By early June, soon after the distribution of the seeds and transplants, many of the plots were personalized with incredibly elaborate wooden structures to support the plants. Rows of tripods (three wooden poles tied and staked together)



were used to support beans and cucumbers. Overhead trellises were used to support many types of squash plants and other climbing crop varieties while beneath the trellises other crops were established such as edible greens and herbs. Herbs and other edible greens were planted from seed and transplants the participants introduced to the farm. By the end of July nearly every assigned plot was filled with rows of stakes and a trellis or two. Obviously, a considerable amount of time, labor and resources went into constructing these wooden structures. As the season rolled on and the vines crept up over and around the wooden structures, the once-vacant lot became engulfed as a polycultured field with sun-tolerant plants exposed and sun-intolerant plants under the trellises. The participants had engineered a means of multi-cropping in a small space, and their experience in farming clearly was demonstrated and inspired others to follow.

As the season got hotter and wetter, then drier, the farm changed. Only one of the African-American participants semi-maintained her plot. Her initial dedication for her first time planting was extraordinary, but she stopped coming and never harvested. The ESL class and some of the Montagnard refugee families also stopped attending. By August only three Montagnard families harvested from their plots as well as the elders who farmed five plots together. However, the elders were less regular about coming out and their church van was not always available to bring them to the farm. Watering became an issue for them; sometimes they watered and sometimes we watered. In the end the farm and crops suffered.

The younger Montagnard women who farmed the previous year with the project were also the ones that maintained their plots in the second year. They had sold at the farmers market several times in 2003, but were not interested in selling in 2004, for they obtained factory jobs and worked the night shift. Their harvest was primarily for family and friends with whom

they shared their harvest. Moreover, it was these households that introduced new food crops into the farm. They were frequently seen harvesting interesting greens around dinner time. One of the women always brought her three children with her allowing them to water and harvest. All the children knew the dialect words for their greens, but we never did find out if there was an English equivalent.

### **Farmers Market Observations**

In 2003 the Montagnard participants had sufficient surplus harvest that they were able to get to the farmers market seven consecutive times during the summer months. In addition to the fresh produce they sold, the participants also sold their traditional weavings, made the local papers and became regulars at a local farmers market. The established farmers helped out by sharing scales to weigh the produce and by offering suggestions for displaying the produce. On one market day an elderly women who had seen the article on the Montagnards and learned of their role in the community farm, came to visit with the elders. She presented them with a hand tool she could no longer use as she had retired into an apartment and no longer gardened. Clearly the community farm and market project had achieved a number of civic agriculture accomplishments during its first year.

As previously mentioned there were two women who sold at the farmers market in 2003. Because the mid-week market day fell on the day they had ESL class. They cut class to come to market. While at market they learned to weigh the produce and determined the price of some items by unit weight, they became efficient at making change, and engaged in small talk about who they were and about the traditional weavings they brought to sell. By the end of the day both women felt they had mastered greeting customers, shared who they were and

sold some fresh produce and a number of finely woven purses. After their first market day's success, a PGL staff person took the two women to a local bank to assist them in opening a bank account. This was done so that they could receive checks for the sale of their weavings. As one of the woman said after earning her first \$100.00 at the market, "now I can provide for my family too." The following week an article was written on the farm and its participants featuring the Montagnards, their history and their involvement in the community farm and market project (Ahearn 2003). The article drew attention to the Montagnards and helped to bring more people to the Center City Market.

The Montagnard elders who came to market had a different experience than the younger Montagnard women who were actively trying to learn English. The elders who were 60 years and older (and many in their 70s), were not conversant in English. They were master farmers and might have been superb marketers if they could communicate using their native languages. However, the elders who came would stay at the market, but were less willing to practice their English. Staff practiced some words and exchanged some words, but it never went beyond creating a mental word list. Staff essentially sold on their behalf, including their weavings. Yet each week they came, the public purchased their harvest and their weavings.

During the 2003 season the farmers market was located in a parking lot near an active but temporary bus terminus. The proximity to the bus terminus brought a wide range of people to the market. Selling at the bus stop brought people, not farmers. In the months of May-June while the summer was still relatively cool, 10 to 15 farmers and vendors (sellers of craft and prepared food) came to the market weekly. As the summer temperatures rose and the asphalt got hotter the market lost vendors, farmers and customers. Worse yet, the temporary bus terminus was relocated to the newly

renovated bus depot. The consumer traffic of bus transfers, city employees and city residents dropped off dramatically. On the last day the Montagnards chose to market, there were only five farmers, a cake lady and a local paper selling subscriptions.

In 2004 the farmers market had its new venue located at the newly constructed Center City Park in the heart of the downtown business district on a vacant lot. It was indeed a park with grass, saplings, sitting areas and a stone walking path that encircled the entire park. Each week, even before the Montagnards sold there, vendors and farmers were relocated from one side of the park to another. The park managers didn't quite know where everyone should be selling their goods. In addition, farmers were being blamed for the trodden grass and filled garbage cans. Public officials ignored the fact that the city had organized beach parties and other weekly musical events at the park and that also attracted several thousand people and their garbage.

In 2004 the Montagnard elders were the only ones who were interested and able to go to the farmers market. They managed to get there only three times during the 2004 season compared to the combined efforts in the previous season. Among the Montagnards participating in the community farm project there were many families farming with their children, many who were teenagers. These teenagers could have assisted at the market, for most of the children were bilingual speakers. On the last day the elders came to the farmers market, they brought with them a young teen who served as a translator for us and her family. She helped in selling the produce and weavings. In addition, she learned greetings as people walked by the farm stand, practiced her mathematical skills (weighing and pricing of fresh produce) and learned some things about buying and selling at the market. She claimed she wanted to come again the following week, for marketing was fun. She also commented that she was 12 years old and too young for

a summer part-time job. Unfortunately all good things come to an end at some point.

It was déjà vu. During the initial weeks of the market when it was cool (May and June), residents and business employees wandered over to the market exploring the new curiosity. By early August the public stopped coming. Farmers and vendors repositioned themselves on the stone pathway to bring the market to the public. They placed their tables along the edge of the park much closer to the sidewalk used by pedestrians who were observed leaving their offices on their lunch break or going for a stroll. All attempts at drawing the public in were in vain. Established farmers who were once earning \$800 or more at this mid-week market in the spring and early summer dropped down to \$70 a week. On the last day the Montagnard elders were at market (in early August) with a beautiful table of fresh produce to sell, they sold one purse to a Viet Nam veteran and \$25 in produce. The remaining food went home with them.

### **Discussion: Idealism and Reality**

In both situations, the community farm and the farmers market, there was a high level of participation at the beginning and then it waned as the season rolled on. If one was to speculate as to what transpired on the farm one could generate quite a long list as to why participants stopped farming. Likewise, if one were to speculate as to why consumers flocked to the market in the beginning (May) and faded by August one would have an equally long list of possibilities. It is worth noting a few reasons as to why the decline in participation transpired in both contexts.

The ideal vision of the farm and farmers market was for a diverse population of growers (low-income, newly settled, refugees, gardeners, farmers and non-farmers) to work together

with the project coordinators, local extension agents and the larger community of Greensboro. It was thought that people with a wide range of farm experience and those with some would come together, farm, share labor and knowledge, share food and recipes, market together and build community around this urban community farm and newly established farmers market located less than two miles from the farm. On paper, and in each seasonal beginning, there was civic agriculture in praxis, but finally the farm and the market succumbed.

Given the dramatic increase in the number of participants and land put under cultivation in year two, production was up substantially from the previous year. However, even with the increase in yields, the loss of fresh produce was also high. A considerable amount of the harvest was lost to rodents. Hundreds of almost ripened fruits were found to have holes burrowed in them.

By early July a number of plants were observed to be suffering. The unusually wet and hot season created an environment for fungi that attacked a number of plants. Three blights were confirmed by two local extension agents. Throughout the field insects attacked the cucumbers and other plants. These environmental challenges, in addition to the human ones, could have added to the decline in farm maintenance. However, all the above losses are an expected part of farming.

Nevertheless a new problem presented itself during the second year that was not apparent in the first year's growing season. The crops that did well despite the insects, fungi or other natural phenomena faced another intruder. The expansion of the area under cultivation (from 17 to 50 plots) drew attention to itself. As a result, nonparticipants, specifically the very residents we had invited to participate at the monthly community meetings, stole the ripe produce on a regular basis. Trespassers were caught with their plastic bags filled with fresh produce by the PGL staff and Montagnards. When we organized harvest days to prepare for market we would often come

to a field stripped clean of its near ripe and ripened produce, leaving participants with nothing for home consumption or to sell at the market. A food need was obviously being met, but not in the spirit or the vision of civic agriculture.

The participants who had worked many hours on their farms were not pleased with this new challenge. This negative experience influenced others to discontinue participation on the farm. Most of the Montagnard families who were frequently stolen from stopped tending to their plots. It was later learned that the Montagnards were not interested in farming in this location the following year (2005). According to their minister, they did not feel "respected." Hence, a good project went awry.

### **Other Reflections**

After two years of visiting neighborhood association meetings, specifically to invite residents to participate in the farm project, it remains unclear as to what more could be done to encourage and sustain neighborhood participation. For those who initially started out, project staff helped dig raised beds, plant and water, and provided planting instruction. However, none of the neighborhood participants completed a season, grew to sell or harvested for home consumption. Those plots started were abandoned by early summer in each year.

Working with the refugee families in Guilford County has its challenges, language being only one of them. Transportation was a bigger issue for the resettled refugee population as it related to this project. Most refugees are without transportation and are dependent on other family members or friends for getting around. Generally those family members who are employed are the ones who use the vehicles to get to work, leaving others at home and without transportation to come to the farm or market.

In 2003 PGL's project manager picked up 8 to 16 people weekly and sometimes twice weekly to work on the farm. However, in 2004 staff was advised by a funding program officer not to provide transportation, given the expense it added to the overall project. In fact, it was suggested that staff provide the refugees bus schedules so that they could take the bus to the farm and farmers market. It was observed that without regular transportation, attendance at both the farm and the market suffered.

### **Community Building or Something Else?**

In the end, the urban community farm and farmers market project had a number of logistical obstacles, many of them bigger than the scope of the project. Nevertheless, it was felt that this project had been a positive attempt toward building community through civic agriculture. The farm itself had beautified an otherwise vacant lot and there had been support from the wider community. Participants included various age groups and ethnicities resulting in increased, but limited, interactions and learning opportunities among different groups.

The project had enabled the Montagnards to retain some of their culture through agriculture and food, and to share with other community members their farming practices and food preparation traditions. The Montagnard refugees reminded staff frequently that "they are farmers." This project, therefore, enabled them to use their skills and knowledge in their new home. In 2003 at the end of the year meeting held at the Senior Center, the Montagnard minister translated for PGL staff. In his closing remarks of this particular meeting he said: "Now Greensboro thinks of us as good immigrants. They see us and they buy our things." They were becoming less invisible to the community. In 2004 we were reminded that those who stole vegetables also benefited, for they were eating fresh produce.



It would be difficult to provide an exact number for all those who benefited in the project. In the first year, for example, transplants were purchased from different local farmers who sold at farmers markets. Participants were growing food for home consumption as well as to sell at a local farmers market, which provided an opportunity to earn some added income. Moreover, their presence at the farmers market with their fresh produce and traditional weavings made a public statement; they were no longer hidden in their community. Recall that a number of the resettled Montagnard refugees working on this project had been residing in Greensboro for over a decade and they now number over 3,000 residents in the county.

In year one (2003), the farm fed more than 35 participants, their families and friends, as well as those who purchased from the participants at the farmers market. In year two (2004) the farm had the potential to feed close to 100 people within the households participating, in addition to friends, those who purchased from the Montagnards at the market, as well as those who stole from the farm. In the end it is difficult to know how many people benefited from the farm.

An intended benefit was enhancing family solidarity as parents passed on their agricultural traditions to their children and grandchildren. In 2004 more young children and teenagers were observed participating on the farm. The youth served as translators for their parents and grandparents as well as farm workers on the farmer. The youth were observed planting, harvesting, watering, weeding, and having fun on the farm. (See images on the PGL website <http://greenleaf.uncg.edu>.) Families were able to bring transplants or seeds from food varieties that were traditional to them; their children learned how to grow and harvest these items. When parents were asked for an English equivalent, none were known by the Montagnards, established farmer and extension agents who visited the farm. For these families the farm served as a way of preserving their culture and food traditions.

## Suggestions

A number of suggestions are offered for others wanting to attempt an urban community farm among low-income or resettled refugees. Considering where the farm was located, we needed to have greater neighborhood participation in the project from seed to table. There was evidence of others from the neighborhood stealing from the hard work of those who chose to work the land. When considering land use for future farms, other factors need to be incorporated into site selection and not just the availability of a vacant lot.

Given the participants who self-selected, transportation was key to enabling participants from a refugee community to participate on this farm project. However, in the second year of operation when there was no regular means of transportation available, participation waned. It is recommended that making some form of appropriate transportation available is necessary when reaching out to low-income and resettled refugee populations. A bus schedule is not a solution.

Another suggestion offered is related to encouraging the youth to help translate for their parents and grandparents on the farm and at a market. If young teens could view farming as a viable occupation, where they knew they could grow enough to sell at market and to make decent wages while practicing their English, it might provide a greater chance for a sustainable farm.

Lastly, the final act was to write a grant on behalf of the resettled Montagnard refugee community, one large enough for them to attempt to secure new farm land and equipment. After two years, the elders learned they can farm in this part of the world and want to do so. For them this project was a means for an aging population to add food to the family table and income to the family purse. Although it was also their "exercise" as they farmed on a small scale, they have a history of farming. Farming was a way for them to preserve some

of their cultural traditions by relying on practices familiar to them; they were trying to preserve their culture through food and farming.

Given the outcome of the last season and the desire on the part of both Montagnard groups not to farm in the past two year's location, there will not be a third year of the community farm.

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### NOTES

- 1 Project Green Leaf, established in 2001, is located at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Its mission is to provide support for local agriculture and food systems through grants, education and local projects. Project Green Leaf is staffed by 2-4 paid part-time employees, depending on the project and its corresponding funding.
- 2 A refugee is defined as someone residing in a country other than his or her place of birth who was forced to leave due to human rights violations against him or her (Potocky 2002:4).
- 3 "Established farmers" refers to farmers who have experience growing for local farmers markets.
- 4 "Sponsor" refers to a person (or church group) who is sponsoring a refugee. Each sponsor takes on a different level of responsibility with respect to a refugee or refugee family and for varying degrees of time (weekly, monthly holidays only, in time of crisis, etc.). Sponsors were not asked to be volunteers in this project.

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