

New American Farming in Maine

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Over the course of the 2018-2019 academic year, Madeline King '19 and I conducted a collaborative research project that incorporated elements of community outreach, field work, and policy research. With the guidance of our faculty advisor, Shana Starobin, we worked with various members of the New American farmer community in Maine as well as with a variety of different stakeholders and agricultural service providers in the area. We began our research with the following questions in mind: what brings these individuals to farming? How do they interact with their own communities and communities throughout Maine? How do Maine agricultural policies support or hinder these individuals? How can Maine agricultural policies better meet the needs of this population? Our primary research goal for the project was to better understand the role of Maine state policy in shaping the lives of New American/refugee farmers in order to outline suggestions for future policy or community projects.

The first phase of our project in the fall involved collecting background research and gathering as much field data as possible. We conducted our interviews as we worked alongside farmers, learning their stories and hearing their concerns. All of the farmers we spoke with were beginning farmers, and all of the New American farmers were involved with either Cultivating Community or the Somali-Bantu Community Association (SBCA). The Cultivating Community farmer training program aims to arm participants with the technical and business skills needed to one day own their own farms. SBCA is a community-run organization that aids Somali-Bantu refugees in navigating the various social services available to them. Additionally, the program operates a small subsistence and wholesale farm. During the winter and spring, we shifted our focus to meeting and speaking with service providers, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the Maine food scene. Maddy, Professor Starobin, and I met almost weekly throughout the year to touch base and discuss our findings, and by April we were ready to present separate memos to Congresswoman Chellie Pingree and the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA).

Over the course of our research, we concluded that while farmers across the country struggle with economic insecurity and land access issues, underlying racism and linguistic discrimination further complicate refugee farmers' ability to access safe, tenable farmland. Refugee-specific programs like NASAP in Maine and New Hampshire provide refugee farmers with the necessary basic resources to contribute socially and economically to their communities, but staff shortages and outdated, culturally inappropriate educational materials hinder farmers from reaching their full potential. Programs such as these require increased funding in order to adequately tackle issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. To combat the inequity apparent in the recipients of beginning farmer resources, we proposed the creation of a national program specifically targeted toward refugee farmers' entry into outside markets. We also found that language barriers, preliteracy, and a general lack of insider connections prevent New American farmers from learning about and accessing the abundant resources available for beginning farmers in Maine despite their tremendous drive to become independent farm owners. To combat this issue of accessibility, we proposed that MOFGA both hire an expert in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, ideally a member of the New American community, and advertise the organization's services and educational offerings in culturally relevant spaces.

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Faculty Mentor: Shana Starobin

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