New American Farming in Maine

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Over the course of this past year, Hannah Karlan '19 and I conducted a collaborative research project with the support of our advisor, Shana Starobin, looking into the barriers that New American farmers in Maine face at both the state and local levels. The main research questions we addressed are: 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 goal was to assess New American farmers' access to resources provided by the government and local service providers in order to offer suggestions for how to make the local agriculture scene in Maine more equitable.

During the fall semester, we focused on conducting preliminary research along with interviews of beginning farmers in Maine. We connected with both New American farmers and other beginning farmers in the state to hear their personal stories, learn about the barriers they face, and assess their knowledge of available agricultural resources at the state and local levels. All of the New American farmers we interviewed were associated with either Cultivating Community, a non-profit that runs a farmer training program for New American farmers, or the Somali-Bantu Community Association (SBCA), an organization run by the Somali-Bantu community in Lewiston, whose members have the opportunity to subsistence farm as well as sell their produce to various markets. The other beginning farmer interviewed began his own farm a few years ago, in partnership with three other beginning farmers. During the spring semester, we shifted our focus to interviewing government officials and agriculture service providers in the state in order to understand the beginning farmer resources they offer and how they conduct outreach for their programs. Specifically, we interviewed representatives of Congresswoman Chellie Pingree, the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), and the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, among others. The final phase of our project consisted of writing policy memos to Congresswoman Chellie Pingree of Maine and MOFGA.

Throughout the course of our research, we identified four main barriers that New American farmers face when accessing agricultural resources: 1) economic insecurity, 2) language barriers, 3) lack of inside connections, and 4) cultural accessibility gaps. Although many farmers in Maine face economic insecurity, this issue is compounded for New American farmers by the other barriers listed. Many New American farmers in the state are preliterate and do not speak English. This inhibits them from learning about, and accessing, both markets and resources to help them build towards their goals. Adding to this problem is a lack of inside connections. As newly arrived people to the United States, New American farmers do not have the inside connections with others in the farming community that can prove incredibly valuable when trying to access resources. Lastly, New American farmers face numerous cultural differences upon moving to Maine. Most New American farmers in the state identify as Somali-Bantu, for example, and abide by Sharia law, which prohibits them from taking out loans or obtaining a credit card. This makes leasing land, applying for grants, and beginning a business especially difficult.

With all of these barriers in mind, we suggested that Congresswoman Chellie Pingree help create a national program specifically targeted at aiding New American farmers' entry into outside markets and consult an expert in diversity, equity, and inclusion to advise the House Agriculture Committee before the passage of new bills. Additionally, we proposed that MOFGA also 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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