

Karen Refugee Farm

Refugee Resource and Research Institute of Indiana of Indianapolis, Indiana received \$22,000 to provide Karen refugees with farm tools and other equipment, translation services, promotional supplies and other materials to assist them with selling produce at farmers markets, restaurants, and supermarkets in the area.

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Final Report

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Name of Recipient: Refugee Resource and
Research Institute of Indiana, Inc.

Title of Project: Karen Farm Project

Grant Number: G-0932 IN 221 2009

Location: Indianapolis, IN.

Contact Name/ Tel. Maria D. Beltran-Figueroa
(317) 332-2658

Summary. The two-year grant from FMPP/USDA has been a great help in sustaining the Karen Farm Project. There have been challenges along the way but since it is a pilot project, there were a lot of lessons learned that have made some very positive impact on the Karen refugee community in Indianapolis, Refugee Resource, Waterman Farm Market and community and urban gardening/farming.

The Karen Farm Project started getting more attention when it got a grant from the FMPP/USDA because it somehow gained a stamp of approval and endorsement from a government agency. The community and other organizations started looking at it differently. They started to see it as a project with business potential that would help the Karen and other refugee groups as “legal immigrants.”

With the change in attitude and reception of the community to the project, more organizations and churches have offered to host more farm/ garden project. Refugee Resource has entered into agreements with some. With additional land, more Karen refugees and other refugee groups and some immigrants are now able to participate.

As a result of the Karen Farm Project, there are now five refugee urban farms in Indianapolis that were established through Refugee Resource.

With the FMPP grant, Refugee Resource was able to purchase farm tools and equipments and marketing materials. These tools and equipments have enabled us to provide assistance with starting the farms and gardens.

Challenges and Solutions:

- **Marketing.** There was a slow understanding and acceptance of marketing the produce to the public. Coming from the refugee camps where the Karen participants have lived for a long time did not have a concept of marketing outside the community resulting in non participation in these traditional outlets. It was learned later that the farmers preferred to sell the produce to their own community and to other refugee groups that live in their apartment complex. Having known this, Refugee Resource discussed with them if they would set up a Farmers' Market in the Apartment complex. The property management allowed a tent to be set up near the Leasing Office where the farmers set up a market.
- **Resistance from some members of the local community.** The Watermans who host the project have lost some of their most loyal customers because these customers did not like the idea that "outsiders and illegal immigrants" were working in the farm of an established business that has been a presence in their life for over a hundred years. There was no solution to this but the farm owners stood by their decision to make land available to the Karen refugees.
- **Moving.** Some of the farmers eventually moved to other areas of Indianapolis making it very difficult for them to travel to the farm. The farm leader took it upon himself to increase the number of days and hours he worked in the farm until other farmers took over the plots/rows of those who left.
- **Transportation.** It was a big challenge on the first year. A partnership with the Central Indiana Taxi Operators Association was a pleasant solution. The trips to the farm were scheduled and the schedule was given to the president of the taxi association. The other solution was that a budget was allocated to them to find somebody from their community who has a car to provide them ride to the farm. The farmers gave the car owner gas money to take them and pick them up.
- **Weather.** There were months when planting was delayed because of a lot of rain. There were also periods when long stretches of heat almost dried out the vegetables. These factors were beyond the control of the farmers and the farm owners. When rain drowned some of the vegetables, the farmers just planted new seed and new seedlings to replace the lost crops.
- **Language Barrier.** It was learned that some of the farmers actually spoke English but were not confident enough to do so. ESL classes were provided to the young adult farm participants and Refugee Resource partnered with the members of the community who spoke English who could be the bridge(s) between the farmers and the farm owners. Four years into the project, the farmers are now comfortable to ask questions, discuss issues pertaining to the farm and make polite conversation with the farm owners. It is now at a point where the farm owner does not have to go through an interpreter to talk with the farmers.

- Tool Maintenance. It took a while before the farmers were able to finally get the motorized tools up to performance. The year after the tools were purchased, they needed some repair and tune-up to get them to function again. It turns out, they were not properly stored. The head farmer was given another orientation and training on equipment maintenance. After the initial tune up and repairs, there has not been a single report on equipment breakage or malfunction.
- Finance. It was a challenge to limit the spending within the scope of the budget requested. On some instances that we absolutely needed to do so, Refugee Resource wrote letters and made phone calls to individuals, churches and organizations to solicit for monetary donations or services to supplement the grant.

Gains

- Continued use of a farm for a vulnerable group. Without the FMPP, the Karen Farm Project will not be able to last as it has. Refugee Resource will forever be grateful for the opportunities and possibilities that this grant has given to the Karen community in Indianapolis. The farm has given them a place where they can escape the harsh realities of resettlement, alienation and trauma. It is a place where they are reconnected to their agricultural heritage while having access to fresh, healthy food that they are familiar with. Waterman Farm Market will continue making land available to the Karen indefinitely.
- Exposure to the business side of farming. The farmers were given an exposure and an experience in marketing their crops. Although they first resisted selling to the local community, they made sure that they have an understanding of using the farm as a source of income. They were able to develop their own market and were able to generate income enough to be able to buy freezers to store vegetables that are staples of the Burmese diet. This way, they are able to sell even during winter until the next planting season.
- Equipment/Tools Acquisition. Refugee Resource is very grateful indeed that they were able to acquire farm tools/equipments for the Karen Farm Project and now other farm projects as well. This is a lot of help for those who have just begun farming until they can buy their own and hopefully have their own plots.
- Additional farm lands. After the Karen Farm Project was made known to the public and after it was revealed that FMPP/USDA has generously provided funding, many more organizations have agreed to make their lands available for refugee farms/gardens. There are now five refugee urban farms in Indianapolis that Refugee Resource is involved with over 120 families from different refugee groups.

- **Public Awareness.** The general public has become receptive of the contributions of the refugee community in Indianapolis. They have also been made aware of the diversity of farming and food cultures prompting them to visit the different refugee farms and buying vegetables that are not familiar to them. There has also been an acknowledgement of the positive impact of the Karen Farm Project because we have been invited to present to a lot of occasions and events that have something to do with food, nutrition, cuisine, mental health and environmental education.
- **Ownership and Independence.** The Karen farmers now only very rarely consult with Refugee Resource regarding the farm and farm issues. They have a comfortable working relationship with the farm owner and they now go directly to them when there are concerns and issues that they need to address. They have also become de facto consultants to other refugees participating in different farm projects.
- **Partnership and Collaboration.** We have created partnerships and collaboration with local farmers and growers in different areas like marketing, events that promote healthy, fresh, local and ethically produced food.

Future Plans

- **Manager and Coordinator.** With more farms that are being established with other refugee groups, the most practical thing to plan is to hire a farm manager and a farm coordinator. We believe that there is a strong need to manage the farms to expand and strengthen marketing. The farm coordinator who will provide support to the farms in designing a cohesive marketing and production plan for all the farm projects.
- **Fund Raising.** With the suggestion of the refugees themselves, we are celebrating Harvest Festival for the first time. In collaboration with other organizations, the festival will raise funds to continue running the farms in addition to writing grants and solicitation letters. The objective is to raise as much funds as we can as seed money to use in the farms path to become self sufficient.
- **More Equipments.** As we continue to expand, more equipments are needed. Refugee Resource will continue to write grants to be used in acquiring more equipments to make the work faster and efficient in order to get better yield and to be able to take advantage of the inconsistency of the weather during planting season.
- **A permanent place of business.** It has been expressed by the Karen leaders that a permanent place of business where they can sell all their produce including traditional arts and crafts is something they would want to do as soon as they are capable. Refugee Resource envisions the place as a hub and a landmark of

Indianapolis that reflects the diversity of cultures and people who have made Indianapolis their home.

Acknowledgement

Refugee Resource extends its deepest gratitude to FMPP and its staff for their gracious acceptance and endorsement of the Karen Farm Project.

We are also very grateful to the Waterman family for making land available to the Karen. They have given the Karen farmers the opportunity to get reconnected to a very crucial part of their identity that they once lost when they fled Burma.

We also give thanks to all the organizations and individuals that have provided material and other kinds of support to the Karen Farm Project.