

Agripreneurs

A Free Range of Opportunity



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Center for Rural Entrepreneurship

energizing entrepreneurial communities

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*The Rural Policy Research Institute (RUPRI) functions as a national scientific research center, identifying and mobilizing teams of researchers and practitioners across the nation and internationally to investigate complex and emerging issues in rural and regional development. Since its founding in 1990, RUPRI's mission has been to provide independent analysis and information on the challenges, needs, and opportunities facing rural places and people. Its activities include research, policy analysis, outreach, and the development of decision support tools. These are conducted through a small core team in Missouri and Washington DC, and through three centers, **including the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship**, and a number of joint initiatives and panels located across the United States. RUPRI was created as a joint program of Iowa State University, the University of Missouri, and the University of Nebraska, and is now housed at the Harry S. Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri. To learn more about RUPRI, visit www.rupri.org.*

About This Work *This case study was prepared as part of the Center's mission to conduct applied, field-based research to enhance our learning about innovative rural entrepreneurship development efforts across the country. The authors are Karen Dabson, Senior Fellow for Active Learning, and Dr. Deborah Markley, Managing Director and Director of Research. Appreciation is given to Niel Ritchie, League of Rural Voters, and Kat Vann, The Main Street Project, for providing financial and logistical support for this work. Special thanks goes to Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, Director of the Rural Enterprise Center, for providing background materials and making himself available for interviews by phone and in person. Many thanks, too, to Jose Pacas for helping with translation. We greatly appreciate the insights shared by all of the individuals who spoke with us as part of this process. We hope that this case study provides inspiration to other rural communities and is a learning tool for the agripreneurship initiative as it moves forward. To learn more about the Center's research and case study work, contact Deb Markley at deb@e2mail.org.*

Introduction

In an exciting synthesis of opportunities, agripreneurship is being cultivated in the Southeastern region of Minnesota by the Rural Enterprise Center, a division of the Main Street Project, to demonstrate that people can be fed and lives can be changed through *beyond organic*¹ farming practices that rely on a network of cooperation. Agripreneurship is the story of intentional community collaboration that involves low income people, with a special focus on Latinos, in establishing and maintaining profitable agricultural and agriculture-related businesses that can support their families. Early agripreneurship practice seems to indicate that significant economic impact through implementation of the model may be obtainable in many rural communities. There is a rigor involved, in any case, to ensure that its chief goals – quality products, trained entrepreneurs, improved livelihoods for low income individuals and families, and sustainable partnerships – are met. The agripreneurship model growing out of Northfield and Cannon Falls, Minnesota is still young, and still innovating, but shows all the signs of a remarkable new way to achieve these goals while carving into traditional food markets and distribution.

Agripreneur Defined
*An entrepreneur whose
main business is agriculture
or agriculture-related.*

This report concentrates on aspects of the agripreneur system as an economic tool for addressing poverty. Interviews with farmers, community partners, and other stakeholders (see Appendix I) along with a review of the system and related literature and statistics, has informed this case study about the agripreneurship initiative in its early stages. The first portion of this account will provide background, key motivators and an overview of the agripreneur system. Next, a summary of key points that were heard about the model in terms of perceived and actual outcomes will be shared. Finally, there is a discussion about lessons learned and what other communities may want to consider when thinking about agripreneurship as a rural economic development practice.

Staging Ground

At first glance, Northfield, Minnesota (population 17,147) does not look like an agricultural community. Heading south an hour from Minneapolis, the highway wends through a small industrial complex, crosses the Cannon River, and arrives at Northfield's downtown. It is clear that the citizens of this small city have taken care to create a workable mix of revitalization and new construction. To the outsider's eye, pleasant streets and stores extend to right and left, old buildings are neatly preserved and used, and clean sidewalks and free parking encourage visitors. In the morning hours, there is a fair amount of bustle as people meet for breakfast, browse shops, or attend appointments with their financial advisors, lawyers, and bankers.

What is not immediately apparent is the rich background that many of the town's residents share. Mostly Scandinavian or New Englanders by descent, a number have an attachment to the land that goes back in time, and extends up through the previous generation of farmers and

¹ Joel Salatin, Polyface Farm, Swoope, Virginia. "Beyond organic" refers to sustainable farming where the interplay between animals, pasture, and soil results in constant renewal.

ranchers. They came to the Minnesota prairie to stake their claim and begin an agrarian life, establishing Northfield as an agricultural center as early as the 1850's.² So while the city has grown, in part due to the presence of two excellent and longstanding colleges, Carleton and St. Olaf (accounting for close to 30% of the local population), its roots are in the surrounding soil.

Importantly, what is also less visible is the burgeoning Latino and Hispanic population comprising nearly 6% of all residents. While Northfield is a welcoming and tolerant community, full integration and acceptance of Latinos is still a work in progress, and many Hispanic members of the community find themselves working two to three jobs to keep home and hearth together. A higher percentage of Latinos (18%) find themselves living in poverty when compared to the 7.2% of all residents classified as under the poverty line in Northfield.³ But they share something in common with many of their Northfield neighbors – a background and sometimes, active experience in farming. Rural Enterprise Center staff reports that 70% of Latinos attending *convocatores* or town hall meetings affirmed that they either had a background, a family relation, or an interest in farming. Hailing mainly from Mexico, but also from Guatemala, Haiti, and other Central American countries, many Northfield Latinos have the drive to work at such efforts as they strive to support families here and in their home countries.

Agripreneurship is being proposed as the medium for these two distinct sides of Northfield to work together even better than they have previously to create opportunities for all low income families to achieve a quality of life that includes adequate income, home and/or business ownership, access to healthy affordable food, and stability. Farmlands on the fringes of Northfield are being developed under the agripreneur concept.

Agripreneurship – The Impetus and the System

Why Agripreneurship?

For years, Rural Enterprise Center Director Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, an agronomist, business school graduate, and farmer, has grappled with a host of compelling issues – how to provide highly nutritious affordable food to the poor; how to empower disenfranchised peoples to release their skills and talents; and how to make food production pay. A founder of one of the early fair trade companies, Peace Coffee, he has experience in community development, establishing companies and assembly plant operations in his native Guatemala, and an enduring interest in the science behind producing healthful, abundant amounts of food. Haslett-Marroquin brings a rare blend of farming and scientific skills overlaid with social and political consciousness, and the capacity to communicate with anyone who will listen about the benefits of the agripreneur system that he and his colleagues have forged in answer to these major concerns.

His combination of good science, good sense, and good intentions has attracted a wide variety of partners. In its earliest days, support from the Main Street Project and the Community Action Center of Northfield provided money and resources to develop the agripreneur initiative and get the first test sites going. Together, they have developed the Agripreneur System.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northfield,_Minnesota

³ www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Northfield-Minnesota.html

System Highlights – Theory Behind the Practice

There are two aspects to consider when looking at the Agripreneur System: the economic perspective and the human capital that can be shaped by its training model. Both center on the production of free range, beyond organic poultry and related businesses that can make low-income families self-sufficient. Years of research and discussions among experienced farmers led the agripreneur partners to chickens as the place to start. Rearing poults (baby chicks) requires relatively low initial investment, is readily manageable even for neophyte farmers, is highly adaptable to sustainable agricultural practices, and has a quick turnaround – eight weeks from chick to market distribution. Local markets are everywhere, and demand for quality poultry is as close as the farm families that work the land and nearby urban centers. The economic perspective of agripreneurship sets the stage for what the agripreneurs are trying to achieve in terms of a business approach, and the training model addresses how to capitalize on the human capacity within communities to build a system of entrepreneurs and small farms and farm-related businesses to meet or exceed these goals.

The Economics. In concept, the agripreneurship model is predicated on an economic cluster in which several poultry farms and related businesses thrive together in a symbiotic relationship where one part of the system is literally nourished by the other parts. The base of the cluster is composed of economic units which are derived from how much income a family needs to live on more than what would traditionally be counted as land under production. At its most common denominator, one entrepreneur and his/her family could raise a maximum of 4,500 chickens during an entire growing season – approximately 29 weeks in Minnesota – on one-quarter acre of land. Four acres would comprise one economic unit and as many as 72,000 birds could be raised in a season. A cluster would be made up of eight such economic units, as well as the following businesses: Poultry processing, grain production, vegetable production (market gardens), medicinal herbs, soil composting and manure fertilizer. Ken Meter, an economist with Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis, estimates that the preliminary economic impact of a cluster could be as much as \$5.6 million a year. Experts, picturing six clusters positioned around southeastern Minnesota, predict that this system, with a gross value of \$30.8 million a year, could become an indispensable factor in making the region competitive with an estimated \$250-300 million of economic impact.⁴

“The farming is simple. But the work is hard.”

For the individual farmer whose work is integrated with other agripreneur businesses, the income yield could range from 20-30% of gross retail sales, and 15% of wholesale. Maximum potential earnings could be near the \$38,000 mark, well above the target low income family's current earning power.

From the human resource viewpoint, the beauty of the economic side is that low income agripreneurs would realize short-term, tangible benefits from participation in a cluster. Their investment of time and energy would be paid out in earned income and nourishing chickens and other foods with which to feed their families. By virtue of participating in the system, the agripreneur would contribute to the larger scale of the effort, making it feasible for an

⁴ Meter, K. *Agriculture System Preliminary Economic Impact Estimates for Free Range Poultry at 6 Strategically Distributed Economic Clusters in Southern MN*, Minneapolis, MN: Crossroad Resource Center, 2009

estimated 150 other agripreneurs and 200-plus employees to make a living, feed their households, and sustain the effort over time.

The Training. The Rural Enterprise Center has recently received a donation of land to construct its proposed Agripreneur Training Center. The Training Center would incorporate the components of the economic model described above into specialized small farm training units that potential farmers may elect to pursue. The core of the training center would be to learn by doing, enhancing the skill sets that low income residents may already possess.

In reality, many of the elements of the Agripreneur Training Center have been operating for the past few years as part of the discovery phase of a three-phase training operation. When fully implemented, the three phases would include:

1 - Discovery – System partners put together the community support infrastructure necessary to undergird the overall effort and provide experiential learning for would-be agripreneurs in community market gardens and small livestock farms. The experiential setting allows staff, partners, and the farmers themselves, to screen participants for those who appear to have the drive and skill sets to move onto actual farm production.

2 - Development – Screened entrepreneurs elect one or more specialized small farm experiences (see chart below) to gain experience and income. In all, there are 12 levels of opportunity, answering to a range of interests and affinity for budding entrepreneurs, while fulfilling the promise of a symbiotically-related food production system.

Phase 2 – Development Specialized Small Farm Training Units ⁵		
Pastured Range Poultry	Range Poultry with Perennials 1	Range Poultry with Perennials 2
Small Grains 1	Small Grains 2	Medicinal & Cooking Herbs
Market Gardens for Value-Added Processing	Market Gardens for Direct Sale	Vegetable CSA
Pastured Range Pigs	Soil Farming	Range Turkeys or Other Livestock

3 – Launch – Agripreneurs move on to farm ownership, rental or other options where they become part of a network of farming support systems that help with start-up, business management, infrastructure, access to financing, processing, and distribution, which may include direct sales on-site, at drop sites, via a network, or on-line. While not on the chart

⁵ Excerpt from *Model for Training Successful Agripreneurs*, © 2008 Main Street Project

above, agripreneurs may also participate in poultry processing and distribution businesses as a separate or related business venture to the type of farming that they elect.

System Progress – Putting the Elements into Place

Phase 1 Activity. Already, a wealth of activity has been invested in Phase 1 activities, and the results are beginning to materialize. The initiative’s founders, spearheaded by Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, have made hundreds of contacts in the greater Northfield area and its surrounding counties, speaking at civic events and churches, holding town hall meetings for local residents, and forging partnerships with local farmers, investors, bankers, social entrepreneurs, colleges, and nonprofit organizations. Work was done not only to inform others about the power of agripreneurship, but to plumb for resources, collaborations, and financial support.

*“I met a man today
who is going to change
Northfield.”*

Numerous connections were solidified and resources have poured in – everything from loaned or donated land to farm equipment to operational support. Farmers and business people have pitched in to mentor program participants, provide advice, assist in identifying financial resources, research production methods and test feed options, construct buildings, and aid in the distribution of processed chickens. Students from the colleges have run tests on the farms and coordinated the community garden effort.

Specific agripreneur activities began in a small way with six families planting and tending community gardens in 2007. In 2009, that number grew to 75 families, primarily Latinos, who are cultivating 105 plots, with 150 plots planned for 2010. They are realizing a triple bottom line from their efforts:

1. **Social and economic benefits.** Economically-challenged agripreneurs are providing their families nutritious, fresh food that is affordable. Latinos and Anglos are working side by side and getting to know each other as people.
2. **Net income.** They are selling their produce at the farmer’s market, and in 2009, for the first time, a St. Paul soup company has expressed interest in purchasing vegetables.
3. **Sustainability.** Agripreneurs are learning and embracing sustainable farming methods, and becoming players in the cyclicity of the agripreneurship system.

Of note, the community gardens have served as a way to provide entrepreneurial experience for low-income Latino families. Some are now managing more than one garden plot, and a few have moved on to market gardening – planting several acres of vegetables for retail.

*“It is critical that we
work in cycles, and
avoid thinking in linear
ways.”*

In the past two years, a few gardeners became involved in raising poultry on an experimental basis. They continued their gardening efforts at the same time. Most have become members of the Hillside Farmers Cooperative, hopefully the first of many poultry-raising co-ops to be formed. The co-ops will build toward becoming clusters. This year, some individuals in this small group of early agripreneurs realized take-home earnings. In one case, earnings equaled an increase of 50% over the income that was being brought in from other jobs. The net for one agripreneur was

about \$7,200, but the way he translated the real value of the experience was in terms of becoming an owner and a decision-maker.

*“I like being a partner – to work freely – to go here and there
– without having a manager looking over my shoulder.”*

So far, two full-fledged poultry operations have been constructed and have been used as beta test sites. Coops are constructed to allow chickens maximum access to pasture, sunlight and feed, but offer safe confinement at night. Some chicken foraging has been structured around perennial fruit and nut trees providing yet another source of feed for the hungry birds, and weeding and fertilizer for the young trees. Chickens are rotated, and areas where nitrogen-loaded chicken manure has been deposited are treated with grass hay to stimulate a nitrogen to carbon ratio that balances the soil's nutrition, and attracts worms – all part of a healthy micro-biological infrastructure. As time moves on, fresh green sprouts of grass surface from the soil, and the pasture is re-born, again and again. The birds grow strong and healthy in this clean, natural setting. The current agripreneurs involved have developed their own rigorous code of standards for producing poultry in this manner – predominantly for quality assurance – but also to be able to study various aspects of the operation as they experiment with feed, a new winter operation, and other variables.

Outcomes and Observations

*“I hope we'll use the
training center to train
not only farmers –
but to train us all in food-
related opportunities.”*

The agripreneur initiative is about to embark on Phase 2 with some of its initial entrepreneurs, and is poised to build and open the doors to its training center. The leadership team is on the cusp of shifting the work to full throttle. The pioneers of this work have attained some impact and learned some lessons that will guide them as they continue to shape the next phase. Stakeholders interviewed cited some general and specific outcomes, and also shared their thoughts on what has been learned as of this time.

Outcomes

In a progress report prepared for the community in November 2009, partners involved in the agripreneur system delineated the following outcomes, which are of some significance considering the young age of the initiative. The data underscore the intense infrastructure-building effort that has been underway and demonstrate how immigrant families are truly being helped.

- 3,000 supporters have been identified, with Latinos comprising 1,000 of them – 500 are from Northfield alone.
- 105 garden plots were under cultivation in 2009, representing 75 families, 45 of whom are Latino.
- Soluppa Soup Company in Minneapolis has expressed serious interest in buying vegetables.

- The first fully integrated food and agriculture system was developed by bringing one experimental farm to full production and another to near system readiness.
- 12,200 chickens were raised in the last two years utilizing “beyond organic” methods.
- 185 people have become regular direct purchasers of the poultry produced in Northfield and Cannon Falls.
- About 600 acres of land have been secured for developing additional poultry operations and for building and implementing the training center.
- An ambitious educational and marketing effort has been underway and includes 36 presentations, 10 site visits to the poultry farms, and conversations with hundreds of individuals.
- The Hillside Farmers Cooperative was legally framed in 2009, and is still formulating its operation. However, its early members are producing free-range poultry and other naturally grown farm products. Importantly, it also connects Latino immigrants with established farmers who provide mentorship to the novice farmers.
- A distribution system has been identified in cooperation with Thousand Hills Cattle. As well, individual drop sites have been established in the Twin Cities metro area.
- An experimental mobile poultry processing system was developed in 2009, with plans to bring it into full swing in 2010. It should be noted that many believe poultry processing must become an integral part of the agripreneur system. Processors of small animals are becoming rare – profit margins are slim to none – and processing can become a bottleneck for local producers.

Observations

Beyond this litany of accomplishments, those interviewed provided insights about outcomes that they felt might be less measurable but equally meaningful.

- There is general and genuine excitement about the agripreneur model. Even though all of its elements and effects may not yet be widely known, people cite its power as an **economic model that can change lives and communities**. Partners to this initiative cite the positive impact that agripreneur staff is having on young people through their work in the local school system. By example, several interviewees commented on the improved graduation rates of Latino students.

“It transforms kids from desperation to hope.”
- Others love the model because it takes a **fully-integrated approach** to working with a community and its challenges. As one source put it, *“This plan addresses poverty at the root level, providing systemic change to a broken system.”* When individuals and families are empowered, then fresh leadership can emerge, and *“people on the periphery”* of a local economy are able to pursue a food-related business of their own. The region has witnessed an increase in civic engagement, according to some.
- The introduction of the agripreneur system has **created a rich community discussion**. While the whole concept can be somewhat mind-boggling in its complexity, it has opened up doors of communication between many different sectors, from the poorest Latino worker to the vice president of a local bank, from university student to long-time farmer. The agripreneur initiative is being discussed at churches,

at the local Rotary meetings, and at city hall. People are coming together in joint interest to tackle the economic and social issues of their community.

“Everything is working the way we thought it would. We’re producing a good product – our chickens are different. They’re healthy.”

- **The value of the food and the value of local production and distribution** were mentioned by many. Farmers were proud to be growing delicious and nutritious organic vegetables and beyond organic poultry for local consumption. Consumers of the chicken and vegetables were happy in the knowledge that their families were being well-nourished. Others felt that the agripreneur system has been a re-education about consumption, reminding residents that there

are real health benefits from eating well, and surpassing reasons for buying locally, in terms of re-circulating cash within the local economy and avoiding the financial and energy costs of buying food far afield.

- For farmers and low income members of the community, this value has been brought home in a personal way. They have learned more about cultivation, processing and distribution, and some have **earned more income** than before. Making several thousand more dollars in a year has helped a few farmers engaged in the poultry operations feed their families with natural, healthy foods, pay their bills, and clear a margin for either investing in next year’s production or sending money back home to support family members in other countries. As one farmer shared, *“It’s a system that makes sense.”*
- Finally, many are enthused about the agripreneur system as an opportunity that not only works on a family level, but **can transform the way food production takes place** in Minnesota, and perhaps, in the nation. The concept offers the means to re-learn about food and farming in a systemic way for everyone. Families can access it, and the model gives the farmers the *“economic wherewithal to survive”* and grow. This system gives them stronger economic ties to the work they are doing, and *“puts producers in a position to own more of the value chain”*. On a broader level, some believe agripreneurship has created a prototype that will be able to break into traditional markets, especially if processing systems are part of the package.

For Other Communities – Lessons Learned

A number of recurrent themes emerged from the stakeholder interviews that can provide insights for those considering adopting an agripreneur approach in their communities. What was heard about the model sends an over-riding message of hope, but also has implications for what contributors thought could work even better.

Lessons – What’s Working Well

A Sense of Hope and Community. The agripreneur system imbues a sense of hope – in farmers, residents, and communities alike. For individuals, it is the realization that the hard work that they are used to putting in coupled with ownership and/or partnership can actually

result in an improved quality of life for them and their families. Participant-owners and partners can earn money and put good nourishing food on the table. They are learning new skills in business development and refining old skills in agricultural practice that they can build upon to further their career and life goals.

For rural communities and their residents, agripreneurship offers potential answers to difficult questions they face, such as how to encourage greater integration and participation of immigrant groups, like Latinos, and how to tap local assets to create economic opportunities for low income residents. Agripreneurship can provide either supplemental or full-time income to raise the economic levels of families, and the experiment so far has provided a venue for Latinos and whites to labor side by side on work meaningful to both. In a natural way, the project has promoted greater understanding between different sectors of the community.

“Poverty drains resources from families. Agripreneurship helps them build resources.”

Elements of Long Term Sustainability. Communities need to understand that embarking on an agripreneur process is a long term proposition, and it will take time to build. The experience in Northfield so far suggests that, properly established, an agripreneur system, by virtue of its standards and all of its integrated parts, can become self-perpetuating. It promotes sustainable farming practices that can have widespread effects for communities in terms of economic growth, increased civic engagement, heightened social capital, and a better blend of resources.

Part of why it can be successful is that this agripreneur system takes an appreciative approach. It seeks to build on the assets of a community and upon the people who inhabit it – evaluating the strengths of these assets and deploying them accordingly. Every player, no matter what his/her income level or background, is recognized for the positives that she or he can bring to building a better system.

Vision and Leadership. To launch a vigorous agripreneur initiative requires leadership by one or two individuals or by a group that can act as a steering committee. This southern Minnesota case illustrates that the leadership must be driven by someone with clear vision, a broad understanding of the issues, the technology or access to technology to resolve system challenges, and exemplary communications skills. The agripreneur system is about entrepreneurial, innovative farming, but it is equally about relationships and maintaining vital community support and ties that need to be in place to nurture every aspect of the effort.

“If there were people that would want to learn, I would be willing to teach the world [this system].”

A Supportive Community. Part of the massive marketing effort undertaken for this initiative was to educate and inform, but it was also intended to interest and attract a wide spectrum of assets and partnerships within the communities in which it farms. A supportive community is essential to this work. In the traditional sense, the community can provide monetary and volunteer support. Unusually, with the agripreneur system, the Northfield and Cannon Falls communities have gone far beyond these roles. They have allotted acreage for vegetable and chicken farming, helped secure equipment, provided advice and counsel in the development of the idea, assisted with distribution opportunities, and on behalf of the colleges, provided

student interns to help with a variety of substantive tasks, such as soil sampling, biomass testing, and community engagement. Other farmers in the two communities have joined forces with agripreneurs to assist with production, and provide mentorship.

Sometimes the supportive community may reach beyond the confines of a few towns. The leaders behind this initiative also rallied support from statewide organizations to assist with economic forecasting and product and process testing. Communities undertaking agripreneur initiatives should be prepared to steadily and continuously market and build partnerships with their surrounding regions and communities.

A Potential Source of Regional Competitiveness. With an eye to both its missionary and business goals, the agripreneur team realizes that regional competitiveness can only be achieved with a fully integrated system. And that system must have standards for food

“This could be really big. It could change the way we see farming – as stewards of the land – and the way we eat.”

production if it is ever to compete in the marketplace. The integrated system of agripreneurs ultimately will be clusters of economic units as described earlier that are situated in a grid of strategic locations around southern Minnesota. Essentially, as those new units conduct chicken production operations in the same way, achieving similar projected high levels of production to the Northfield example, then an estimated 3.4 million birds can be grown, processed and distributed each year, contributing about \$13.9 million in sales

to the regional economy. With farm-related businesses wrapped into the cluster, millions of dollars of effect could be realized across the region.⁶

Lessons Learned – Making The System Better

Without exception, people interviewed applauded the agripreneur initiative for its achievements to date and its potential. But in response to a question about lessons learned from the initiative up to now, respondents provided thoughtful suggestions for going forward.

Simplify the complex. The agripreneurs system, on paper and in practice, is a complicated inter-weaving of variable parts that is difficult for the average listener to grasp. Several of those interviewed suggested that breaking the concept down into “digestible” segments that they can relate to on a more personal level may prove beneficial in bringing more people on board sooner. Giving potential partners pieces that they can get their arms around is important. Because people care, and also because they can become impatient with theoretical concepts, sharing the human side of this system with early success stories – small victories achieved on the ground – can be vital to attracting the community support discussed above.

Likewise, being as specific as possible about what is being requested of partners and stakeholders will give them some more exact measure of how they might invest or help. People valued that the concept has been well-envisioned and deliberate, and that not all of the details can be sorted out

⁶ Meter, K. *Agriculture System Preliminary Economic Impact Estimates for Free Range Poultry at 6 Strategically Distributed Economic Clusters in Southern MN*, Minneapolis: Crossroads Resource Center, 2009

and vetted at any one time. But simplicity – and setting goals as benchmarks and returning to them to measure progress - was promoted none-the-less.

Continuously educate. Utilizing this approach, be sure to plan an ongoing program of education and marketing in order to attract new players (farmers, gardeners, investors, and partners), and to remind veteran stakeholders of the mission and goals of agripreneurship and the need for continuing support. As well, there will always be newcomers to the effort who will want to learn what agripreneurship is and how they can become involved. Be wary though of too many partners – they require management, and strong coordination must be an element for ongoing progress.

Create a development plan. Resources, like land and adequate capital for agripreneur efforts, can be challenging to raise. An agripreneurship initiative should have a business plan that includes a specific plan for how to develop resources. Educated stakeholders can help craft an action plan with this purpose in mind.

Diversify leadership. More often than not, persons interviewed identified this initiative as Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, not agripreneurship. He has been a gifted leader central to the initiative, but not every community may have a similar individual. Respondents suggested that leadership should be centered in more than one person for success, and for succession. The agripreneur system is about joint ownership – much of its work is based on cooperative ventures of one structure or another. For true success and longevity, leadership with all its glory and tribulation should be a team effort. Many people should be able to tell the agripreneur story as well as run the farms, read the financials and make management decisions. Management should be vertically integrated so that multiple problems can be solved at the same time by the group. Such a team will guarantee long life for the initiative as team leaders come and go over time.

“Agripreneurship is really about communities and relationships – there are many paths to building community, and this is one that will have a great return on investment if it can get past a critical growth point.”

Understand the community context. In many ways, agripreneurship has been put forth as a production system that is aimed at building opportunities for immigrants and refugees – specifically, in this case, for low income Latino families. But these populations may frequently require more than financial income to establish themselves. Recognizing the special needs of these groups in respect to legal status, lack of equal opportunities, racial profiling, and community attitudes should be considered, understood, and ameliorated as part of operating a successful system. Finding the right partners to assist with these specialized situations will be essential.

Northfield has been an important learning laboratory for the agripreneurship work. Its cultural assets are enormous, and its community ethic is one of helping people succeed. It was the community’s concern about how to better live and work together with newcomer Latinos and others that helped pave the way for the agripreneurship effort. Northfield may be exceptional in this regard, and other communities will have to assess their assets and their attitudes as they make plans to become “agripreneurial.”

Provide a guide for other communities. If one goal of this initiative is to foster the development of clusters throughout the southern Minnesota region, the steps to implement such an initiative need to be outlined and shared with other interested communities. Capturing the lessons learned and the operational guidelines for building agripreneurship systems in other parts of the region is a necessary next step for the initiative. It is possible that this responsibility would best be assumed by one of the partners to this effort, leaving the core staff with time to continue developing the model and to innovate where needed.



Concluding Thoughts

The agripreneurship initiative in Northfield and Cannon Falls Minnesota is a promising approach to providing accessible *“tools and resources for [immigrants] to use the talents they bring to begin a new life and build a business for themselves so they become self-sufficient and fully engaged members of the community.”* It has the potential to serve as a model for other rural people and places. While still early in its evolution, the initiative has built significant infrastructure to support the effort – in terms of social capital, partnerships, networks, and land – and achieved modest initial outcomes related to poultry production, business development, and improved livelihoods for some of its low income farmers. The effort has begun to change the way in which Anglo and Latino community members engage with each other, and to alter perceptions about the importance of sustainable local food production. Most importantly, the agripreneurship initiative has laid a solid foundation of cooperation between leadership, partners, and champions who, with their resources, will move this work forward in the future.

Appendix I – Stakeholders Interviewed

Pam Bishop, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation
Jim Blaha, Community Action Center of Northfield
Juan Carlos, Agripreneur Participant
Greg Carlson, Carlson Capital Management
Todd Churchill, Thousand Hills Cattle Company
Kristine Estenson, St. Olaf Center for Experiential Learning
Rick Estenson, First National Bank of Northfield
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Ken Meter, Crossroads Resource Center
Jose Pacas, Rural Enterprise Center
Kate Parrish, AURI
Todd Prink, Cannon Falls Farmer and Farming Mentor
Niel Ritchie, League of Rural Voters
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