

# RURAL COMMUNITIES EQUITY ACTION GUIDE

Based on interviews between Mónica Maria Segura-Schwartz, Growth & Justice Policy and Julie Ristau, Main Street Project Executive Director

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## Case Study Four

### MAIN STREET PROJECT

Advancing a resilient agriculture system that heals the land, nourishes community, and prepares aspiring farmers

#### Community Equity & Inclusion Focus

Main Street Project builds social, economic, immigrant, **rural-urban equity** via re-design of a corporate agriculture system into a more sustainable, community-based farming that brings vitality to people, land, and the communities they share to meet some of our most profound challenges: delivering healthy, wholesome food, reducing chemical- and antibiotic-intensive farming, reversing environmental damage, and building rural prosperity.

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#### Summary

For more than a decade, Main Street Project has worked to create pathways out of poverty for the growing numbers of rural Latino and East African immigrants in Northfield. Many of these new residents, having been relegated to low-wage farm and food processing industry jobs, had no benefits and bleak economic futures.

Main Street Project’s 100-Acre Farm in Dakota County, MN, serves as a training incubator for aspiring farmers, a place for community building, and a research and demonstration site where they can pilot new efforts. Initially funded by the Northwest Area Foundation in 2006, Main Street Project’s mission is “Advancing a resilient agriculture system that demonstrates the power to heal our lands, nourish our communities and prepare aspiring farmers.”

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## Background

According to Executive Director Julie Ristau, there have been several efforts at cross-cultural outreach and shared storytelling in the Southern MN Region. Over the past generation, meat packing plants brought immigrants (mainly Latinos back then) to communities such as Marshall (in southwestern Minnesota) but these migrant workers did not assimilate into the community and were seen as temporary residents. When a 2008 Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid resulted in mass deportation for members of many Latino families it caused devastation in the entire community. The Main Street Project began to shift focus towards food security and developing a place where people could have meaningful work and build connections to the community.

Main Street founders believed in an ancient farming system that was good for the people, the landscape, the ecology and the economy. They saw the possibility to develop community-based, regenerative, sustainable agriculture. Immigrants had strong connections to the land and practical knowledge. They wanted to be able to raise food and be on the land. However, their work opportunities were typically (or only) in cheap food processing industries. They were poorly paid and often had no upward mobility options.

Main Street Project developed a model for immigrants aspiring to be farmers – a model that connected animals to perennial landscapes. Today, Main Street Project has their own farm where they continue to research how to deploy this farming system. Agripreneurs (families) learn how to raise their own animals for their consumption and/or business as well as learning stacking functions within a small piece of land to increase productivity and sustainability for the enterprise as well as the land and the environment.

## Process

Initially, Main Street Project responded to identified community need by developing programs to deliver more specialized agricultural training and skills to help immigrant workers increase their incomes and leverage new job opportunities. America's industrial food system is built upon a foundation of low-wage work, externalized costs, and direct federal subsidies. It is unsustainable by design and difficult for new farmers to enter. Main Street Project needed a new design and new system sustainable for people, animals, land, and communities.

For the next seven years, Main Street Project worked with immigrant aspiring agripreneurs to develop the small-scale agricultural model that connects animals to native perennial crops. Poultry, a protein source in many cultures, was chosen as the animal component. Native perennials, such as hazelnuts and elderberries, were the plant-based ingredients for early synergistic experiments.

Parallel to the agripreneur work, "Regenerative Agriculture" had emerged and Main Street Project joined this growing movement. Participants in Regenerative Agriculture expressed a desire to raise food, live on the land, and apply their practical knowledge, sustainably.

**Lesson learned: Building relationships first -- value people's knowledge -- leads to the development of innovative, culturally appropriate projects.**

"If we supplied the [chicken] coops and the technical assistance and the financing, they were able to raise their own flocks together, starting at a more entrepreneurial level. This changed quickly into more multigenerational family and cooperative work. People were successful in the training work, and we were doing great at raising poultry," explain Ristau.

Participants still faced structural barriers such as acquiring and accessing land and having transportation issues. When Ristau initially joined Main Street Project in 2015, her first task was to find land with which to develop additional paths forward. She later became acting director and in 2018, Executive Director.

## WealthWorks Capitals

Wealth Works Framework elements at play (working towards eventual systems change towards an equitable economic ecosystem):



**Individual Capital** – skills & physical & mental healthiness of the Latino and East African immigrants



**Social Capital** – farmers, visitors, residents, community organizers bonding & bridging; farm place as community connector and builder



**Intellectual Capital** – innovation, creativity, imagination



**Natural Capital** – array of environmental resources (air, water, land, flora, fauna) on display aspiring farmers learn the craft



**Built Capital** – transportation and communications infrastructure, water, farm place as shared infrastructure and shared responsibility



**Political Capital** – shift in how farming is seen, as entrepreneurial, as sustainable, with a shift in multicultural appreciation, increasing voice, access, inclusion in decision-making of traditionally underrepresented community members



**Financial Capital** – community wealth-building, investment in the business operations and land, purchase of inputs and resulting new sources of income and tax revenues that are locally-based.



**Cultural Capital** – changing dynamics, knowledge of who is known and what heritages are valued, collaboration across races, ethnicities, generations



"When I came in 2015, she says, "We began the process of acquiring a demonstration and training farm so that people could work together and advance beyond the basic training. We still have a strong training component at the farm, but we are also working hard to break through some of the obstacles in land access and financing. And the farm itself is great place for the community to come together. We have a land share program which means that with very little, people can access a plot of land and work together in community growing things. We also expanded into vegetable production and then other ways that we can provide food security."

"We call it a hundred acres of innovation."

Ristau brought in an evaluator with experience in community organizing and in using qualitative data. Community engagement has always been a fundamental part of the Main Street Project. Throughout their evaluation, using social network analysis, they envisioned positions for people from their targeted communities as "Community Connectors". Rocky Casillas, a Community Outreach & Extension Education/Community Connector, has been a key link with aspiring farmers from marginalized communities. Through this new community connector, Latinos gradually acquired more leadership within the organization and started making changes. Main Street Project used evaluation results to improve upon and evolve their initiatives. Today Main Street Project employs an East African community connector as well as East African Agripreneurs. This is a highly technical program and represents a massive group/collective effort.

**Lesson learned: Seek technical assistance. Built on your own evaluation. Collaborative effort = shared responsibility and shared benefits.**

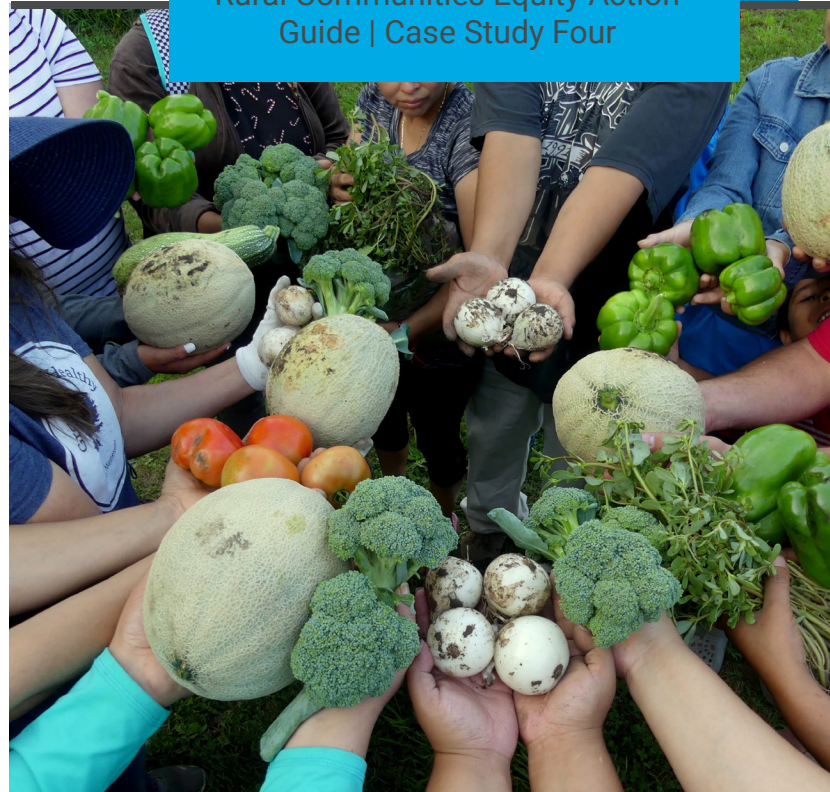
## Results

The organization's diverse board and staff works as a collegial team in a horizontal structure; staff are community connectors who work with new communities and individuals. Main Street Project's evaluation process is extensive and based on storytelling and story sharing facilitated by the organization's four community connectors.

"There was very extensive social design behind this project."



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"We have East African, Latino and White beginner farmers working here," says Ristau. "When visitors come, they are amazed to see such diversity of people and environment in one place. Public access is important to help people be able to imagine and be inspired. In the first two to three years of operation, we had almost 1,500 people come visit."

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The project also features ecological design. "This is a different kind of agriculture...it is meant to heal and restore the soil." In 2016, they acquired degraded corn-on-corn farmland. They are restoring it to health by keeping the soil covered, planting perennials, cleaning up waterways, and restoring/adding wetlands. Farmers are also working to improve production and developing markets for elderflowers and hazelnuts and conducting on-farm research to improve the profitability of poultry.



The Main Street Project embodies equitable and inclusive economics, changing the market paradigm to build real local wealth and food security in the community. Main Street provides bilingual training in poultry-centered perennial agriculture, agricultural methods and processes. They developed a bilingual (Spanish) farm business curriculum accessible to students with low literacy levels to support and form sustainable Agripreneurs. Chicken raised in the training program are then sold through the CSA (community supported agriculture). Local multigenerational families use garden plots to grow their own food for home consumption and/or for sale. Main Street Project also provides low-cost perennials from their nurseries to area farmers and they share their farm equipment with their neighbors.

This model contrasts with the larger agricultural system built on commodification and extracting wealth from communities. "Large-scale agriculture is consolidated and provides money for very few," Ristau explains.

"Main Street works towards policies that help advance healthy food access for all people. We build urban-rural partnerships with an equity lens through our work with Twin Cities local food security groups. Our farmland ownership structure is a national model. We have partnered with Dakota County, MN, to test a pilot easement program that will keep marginal lands in active perennial agricultural production," says Ristau.

Main Street Project has identified structural barriers to their transformational work, at national and state levels. Farmers encounter institutionalized inflexibility in everything from financing to infrastructure. Immigrant aspiring farmers hit roadblocks to access financing and other resources. "This is a very large problem," says Ristau. "We work with other organizations advocating and developing systems where individual farmers can secure land and financing....We just started a local Agrarian Commons with partner organization such as Compeer, Iroquois Valley Farmland REIT and Shared Capital Cooperative, and Latino Economic Development Center" to mention few.

**Lesson learned: Larger issues require larger coalitions. Mainstreet has found allies to work towards these structural barriers at state and national level.**

## Reflections

Ristau says the Main Street models of perennial agriculture and livestock are replicable in theory, but it remains to be seen whether it is possible to make farmland accessible to immigrant farmers in small parcels. She and her team are experimenting with "stacked functions," a permaculture term on which every element in a design performs more than one function, to make it possible to make a living off a small area of land.

"Frankly, a lot of our immigrant farmers know how to do that. They just have not had access to land. But take five acres of land. In our model, you could raise three flocks of poultry per year on an acre and a half and sell them on the market. At the same time, you can grow garlic and black beans and elderberries, which has a lucrative

market lately." Stacking functions means a new farmer could earn a livelihood.

There is no clear pathway for immigrant farmers to be landed in this country. Ristau and her team are building a work-around of the system by hosting and incubating a local Agrarian Commons an affiliate of a national Agrarian Trust. Eventually, they hope to figure out how to move farmland parcels into a trust that can then be leased to any kind of farmer for the long term.

NOTE: Main Street Project is currently in the process of changing their name that will potentially be released by the end of this year. **Watch for it!**



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