

# Promoting Community Food Security and Empowerment among Somali Bantu Refugees: A Case for Community Kitchen Gardens

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**Abstract**—African refugees are among the fastest-growing populations in the United States and nearly half of these refugees come from Somalia, many of whom are Somali Bantus, the most marginalized group in Somali society. Yet limited research is available on Somali Bantu refugees. In this paper, Empowerment Theory is used to guide an in-depth exploration of the potential benefits of using community kitchen gardens to increase community food security among Somali Bantu refugees. In addition, recommendations for future research, policy and practice are offered following existing scholarly and grey source literature guidelines as informed by an Empowerment perspective to best meet the needs of this under-researched and underserved yet growing population.

**Keywords**—Community kitchen gardens, food insecurity, refugees, Somali Bantu.

## I. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

**A**FRICAN refugees and immigrants are among the fastest-growing populations in the United States, with nearly half coming from Somalia [1]. Moreover, our Somali population is continuing to grow and sustained political unrest in Somalia will likely result in further growth [2]. Though limited research exists on the Somali population in the United States, many of these refugees and immigrants are Somali Bantus, the most marginalized group in Somali society [3].

The Somali Bantu population is made up of individuals who are indigenous to Somalia as well as those who were brought to the country as slaves 200 years ago from foreign tribes who spoke the Bantu language and eventually became a part of Somali society [4]. They have experienced extreme persecution and as such, have lacked education and political representation in Somalia [4]. Further, it is the Bantu group who descended from slaves, primarily from Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi [5], known as Mushungulis (meaning individuals from two places, or slaves), who eventually fled to Kenya and were resettled in the United States [6].

Beyond facing continued discrimination due to being viewed by dominant Somali clans as inferior owing to their descent from slaves, members of this Somali Bantu group are regarded as visually distinct from dominant Somali clans owing to generalizations of having fuller lips, flatter noses, and kinky hair [6]. Further, although like members of

dominant clans, the majority of the Somali Bantu are Muslim, they are more liberal in their practice of Islam than dominant Somali groups, as women are permitted to work in fields and are not required to wear hijabs (or traditional head coverings worn by Muslim women to protect their modesty) [7]. In addition, it is important to note that the Somali Bantu are considered members of tribes, or as members of groups that share the same heritage, cultural norms, language and name, as opposed to members of clans, or classes within tribes that are linked through a shared ancestor (with Darod and Irir being the two dominant clans in Somalia, which include several clans and sub-clans that are linked to them) [6].

Discriminatory labor laws and the recruitment of the Somali Bantu into the farming industry resulted in the Bantu being severely exploited throughout the Italian colonial rule over the Somalia even after they were freed from slavery [4]. Moreover this oppression continued following the country's independence in 1960, as for example, the Somali Bantu were forced to serve in the Somali military for combat against Ethiopia in the 1970s and 1980s [4].

Today, the Somali Bantu are still regarded as foreigners in the country and many have fled to nearby refugee camps, where they remain indefinitely in hopes of resettlement [4]. This is due to the exacerbation of long-standing discrimination against the Somali Bantu as well as threats to their rights and safety [4] following the civil war during the 1980s that eventually resulted in the government's collapse by 1991 [8]. Because the Somali Bantu are not linked to any of the long established clans in Somalia, they were not offered the protection that dominant clans could provide, thus in addition to already facing open discrimination, the Bantu were robbed, sexually assaulted and killed throughout the war [4].

Consequently, many of the Somali Bantu fled to a refugee camp provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Dadaab, Kenya [8], where they continued to face severe discrimination and violence [5]. For example, prior to a firewood collection program funded by the United States, refugee women were routinely sexually assaulted when gathering firewood after reportedly being asked about their specific clan affiliation, putting Bantu women at a particular risk for such assaults without the protection of such clan affiliations [5]. Still in spite of facing ongoing violence in the Dadaab refugee camp, the Bantu, known for being particularly resilient and motivated to adapt to new surroundings [9] created a place for themselves in small-scale farming work, maintaining a tree nursery at one

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camp and growing food for local markets within and outside the camp [5].

The Somali Bantu remained in the refugee camp in Dadaab in hopes of resettlement in Tanzania from 1994, and later in hopes of resettling in Mozambique prior to consideration for resettlement in the United States in 1999 [4]. In 2002, more than 12,000 Somali Bantu were placed in the Kukuma refugee camp in the northwest region of Kenya for interviews with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service [5]. Resettlement efforts were eventually successful in 2003, when Somali Bantu refugees began their transition to life in the United States, resulting in them being the largest African population in number approved for non-forced relocation into the United States as an oppressed non-dominant group [4].

#### *A. Transition to Life in the United States*

While limited information is available on the Somali Bantu [5], as the focus of most available research on Somalis has been on the majority Somali group [10] by 2004, an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 Somali Bantu refugees have been resettled into the United States [11]. Yet due in part to a pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment at the time the Somali Bantu began arriving to the United States as well as fears of Islamic terrorism, Somali Bantu refugees have been provided substantially less support than refugees who arrived earlier in the United States, such as the Hmong [4]. For instance, when the Hmong arrived from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s, refugees received up to three years of federal aid, yet as Coughlin et al. (2016) report, “the Somali Bantu have been expected to be ‘entirely self-sufficient’ within eight months of their arrival in the US” (p. 127). After this time, they are no longer able to receive \$230 per month per person from the federal Refugee Cash Assistance Program, which is overseen by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement [12]. Further, in moving forward, the U.S. government does little to assess how these refugees continue to progress after losing access to Refugee Cash Assistance Program funds following their initial eight months in the United States [12].

#### *B. Moving Toward Self-Sufficiency*

The eight month time limit on aid from the Refugee Cash Assistance Program and limited government follow up beyond this period are particularly problematic, as prior to relying on the UNHCR for food and shelter in refugee camps, most Bantu refugees have largely been subsistence farmers with little experience navigating a cash economy [12]. To add to matters, many Bantu are illiterate (both in their native language of Maay Maay and in English) and are inexperienced in the American workforce [12]. Thus as they learn to pay bills with the limited income earned from the low wage jobs made available to them that they struggle to maintain, many Somali Bantu refugees report that they are financially unable to feed their families [4]. In fact, food has been identified as one of the most profound adjustments to resettlement in the United States for Somali immigrants, who have trouble accessing healthy, culturally appropriate food they know how to prepare in the stores they frequent to purchase food once

they are resettled in the United States [13]. In other words, in addition to not having enough money for an adequate amount of food, they are largely unfamiliar with the food available to them, even when initially receiving financial support from the federal government to purchase it [13]. However available research has shown that many of those who do receive food stamps complain of their food stamps not lasting throughout the month [4]. Thus it follows that while limited research is available on Somali refugees [2], such studies have shown that they are disproportionately food insecure [3], [14].

#### *C. Bantu Community Food Insecurity in the United States*

As Hamm and Bellows explain, “community food security is a condition in which all community residents obtain safe, culturally appropriate, nutritionally sound diets through an economically and environmentally sustainable food system that promotes community self-reliance and social justice” [15, p.37]. In contrast, according to Remley et al., food insecurity can be described as “the uncertainty of adequate resources to provide nutritious food for all family members in socially acceptable ways” [16, p.120]. In dire cases, this can lead to hunger, or an uncomfortable or physically or mentally agonizing sensation resulting from food deprivation [17]. Further, as Kaiser explains, food insecurity is linked to health problems, cognitive and emotional development issues, depression, obesity, and ongoing health issues related to obesity, such as “higher rates of depression, anxiety, atherosclerosis, hypertension, limited mobility, work impairment, low self-esteem, and discrimination,” [18, p.64]. However few studies explore this issue as it is experienced among Somali refugees in the United States or potential solutions to food insecurity among this growing population [14].

#### *D. Increasing Food Security through Community Gardens*

The limited available research that exists which explores potential solutions to food insecurity among Somali Bantu refugees has demonstrated that community gardens can assist with their resettlement and recovery from trauma [13], [19], [20]. For example, community gardens can remind Somali Bantu refugees of gardens from their previous homes in Somalia and in Kenyan refugee camps in addition to offering physical and mental health benefits as well as supplemental food [13], [19], [20] as noted by Somali Bantu refugees in New York [19] and in Boise, Idaho [20]. Community gardens can be described as publicly available outdoor growing spaces often arranged for community food production [21].

Importantly, Lutz et al. maintain that the “injustice of hunger and food insecurity” (p. 1) can be addressed by increasing access to safe, healthy culturally appropriate food “through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice” (p. 2) by implementing community garden-based interventions [22]. Further, research suggests that community gardens can serve as an important aspect of refugee food environments by addressing cost and access to transportation to obtain healthy food [23]. In fact, in Franklin Pasture Urban Orchard, a community garden in

Lewiston, Maine where 60% of the 115 participating families in 2013 identified as Somali or Somali Bantu, all participants shared appreciation for the support and space to cultivate “much needed fresh vegetables” for themselves and their families [13]. In fact, participants in this study noted that community gardens offer a safe space to learn to grow food as well as to communicate and build rapport with the larger surrounding community [13].

## II. EMPOWERMENT THEORY

Empowerment theory has been used to address community food insecurity and limited agency among refugee families through eliciting their perspectives to promote influence over their food environment, which refugees are seldom afforded [24]. Empowerment can be described as a community-based process that involves mutual respect, critical thought and group sharing to promote access to and influence over resources that are not equally shared with vulnerable groups [25]. This results in more democratic communal participation as well as in an in-depth understanding of the community [25]. The process of community empowerment has been used to inform empowerment theory, which recognizes community members as experts of their environments while exploring key challenges within them in order to uncover solutions to the barriers they identify, underscoring their ability to navigate such identified challenges [24].

It is important to note that when using this framework, the purpose of empowerment is not to teach participants new information, but to support them, which begins by first learning what they already know [24]. This involves eliciting their perceptions of barriers to potential solutions to problems identified within their community and working to understand these barriers so awareness can be raised in order to overcome them and ideal solutions can be pursued. Thus not only has empowerment theory been used to address limited agency among refugee populations as they are disproportionately vulnerable, particularly to issues of food insecurity [24], but it also supports the promotion of greater wellness and social justice by facilitating social change through working to address structural barriers to individual and community agency [26]. For these reasons, in accordance with available research recommendations for working with vulnerable nondominant groups [24], [26], [27] and in consideration of the need to address the problem of community food insecurity among the Somali Bantu, this framework will be used to explore the potential benefits of community kitchen gardens (or community gardens that involve a cooking component) as a means to promote community food security among Bantu refugees.

## III. POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY KITCHEN GARDENS FOR BANTU REFUGEES

When community gardens are used to increase food security, Bidwell recommends “approaches should be multi-pronged and linked together,” such as through “community gardens/community kitchens” [28, p.21]. Various definitions

of community kitchens can be found within the limited existing peer-reviewed and grey source literature on community kitchens as well as by agencies and organizations involved with community kitchens [29]. In general, community kitchens are spaces used more often for the preparation of food but also to teach cooking skills, to address social isolation and to promote greater health [29].

All community kitchens involve individuals working together to prepare food [29]. Moreover in addition to demonstrating that community gardens can address refugee food insecurity [23], research has shown that community kitchen participation can also lead to positive impacts on food security [30]-[32] in addition to healthier eating [30], [33], [34]. Further, community kitchens have yielded other important benefits, such as social wellness, community learning [30], [35], [36], stress reduction [31], improved physical health [33] and mental health [28], [35], [37], [38], decreased dependence on charitable food resources [31], increased social and cultural integration [39] and importantly, community empowerment [30].

While limited research exists on interventions involving both a community garden and a cooking component, such studies suggest that community kitchen gardens, or community garden interventions with a cooking component that emphasize the cultivation and consumption of fruits and vegetables [35] have resulted in an increased willingness to sample new food [40], [41], greater nutritional proficiency [41], and more frequent cooking [40]-[42]. Additional benefits cited in available grey source literature on community kitchen gardens include the provision of opportunities for refugees to decrease isolation through cultivating social supports, to practice speaking English, to share meals, and to provide greater potential for self-sufficiency and integration [43].

Available scholarly research and grey source literature has demonstrated that Somali Bantu refugees do enjoy cooking together and have found communal cooking interventions to be beneficial [13], [44], [45] as prior to resettlement, the majority of the Somali Bantu are not familiar with most food sold in U.S. supermarkets or with American kitchens, as many have not been accustomed to using stoves before moving to the United States [46]. For this reason, Kaaley Ila Kari (which means Come Cook with Me in English), a community cooking intervention, was established by St Mary’s Nutrition Center in Lewiston, Maine to provide nutritional education within the local general Somali and Somali Bantu communities [13]. This involved nutrition staff at the center training Somali and Somali Bantu women as nutrition aids to offer peer education through ongoing community cooking workshops that have served over 200 participants by 2014. In response to this intervention, one participant was in tears upon learning to cook sukuma wiki (a traditional Somali dish consisting of braised collard greens), as having access to the collard greens and learning to prepare them led to greater confidence in his ability to meet the needs of his family, which consisted of his wife, who had become disabled, and their 11 children [13]. Further, 100% of the 77 general Somali and Somali Bantu participants indicated high satisfaction rates with this course

during the 2016 fiscal year [45]. As Maine SNAP-Ed has reported, one participant in these community cooking classes even went so far as to share that “[Kaaley Ila Kari] is more than just a class, it is saving lives” [45, p.5].

#### IV. DISCUSSION

While available peer-reviewed and grey source literature suggests that Somali Bantu refugees enjoy gardening together to increase their access to healthy culturally appropriate food [5], [13], [19], [20], [44] in addition to cooking together [13], [44], [45], no scholarly literature and little grey source literature [44] discusses or explores the development of community gardens with a cooking component, or kitchen gardens, for Somali Bantu refugees as a means to increase their access to such food. Thus this remains a key gap in available research as discussed in available research [14] and as demonstrated by the limited existing literature in this area. To address this gap in existing scholarly and grey source literature, future research is needed to explore whether Somali Bantu community members find community kitchen gardens to be a feasible, desirable and culturally appropriate means of addressing community food insecurity. In addition, an exploration of existing and potential barriers to the development of community kitchen gardens for the Somali Bantu, why any such identified barriers may exist, how similar barriers have been addressed and how they can potentially be addressed in the future may be useful. Such efforts could expand on existing qualitative studies that have explored community garden development barriers for the general population in Gainesville, FL [47] as well as in Winnipeg, Canada [48] in a meaningful way that is tailored to meet the needs of the Somali Bantu community. This is important, as barriers to the development of community gardens with a cooking component, or kitchen gardens, have not been explored, let alone to meet the needs of the Somali Bantu, although research has demonstrated that community cooking [13], [45] and gardening interventions can help address issues with transition and community food insecurity, which have been reported among this population [19], [20].

Existing barriers may include land use policy related issues, such as the need for vacant land to be made available or a need for funding and/or water for the development and maintenance of community kitchen gardens [49]. Other policy related barriers to consider may be a need for incentive programs for apartment complexes to include community garden spaces and/or the need for greater support for or the expansion of joint-use gardening agreements [50], however other potential barriers may exist and should be explored. Beyond this, an in-depth theoretical understanding of existing and potential solutions to addressing food insecurity among this growing yet vulnerable and under-researched population would be helpful to inform future practice, policy and research with Somali Bantu refugees. In addition, this may inform work with other refugee populations, as a conceptual exploration of community food insecurity among Bantu refugees may in turn assist with explaining issues of community food insecurity among other refugee groups. Further, as the IOM reports,

“Somali Bantus need to be considered and [analyzed] as a unique refugee population” and as such, “Bantu-specific resettlement strategies should be planned and implemented in order to enable this unique refugee group to achieve self-sufficiency and local integration,” [6, p.6]. This may involve added planning efforts when placing and welcoming Bantu refugees with a particular focus on their identified needs [6]. Such efforts may include advocacy and funding for programs that offer Somali Bantu refugees opportunities to grow and cook food together. This could ease transition experiences for the Bantu through promoting long-term self-sufficiency by increasing new social supports in addition to a space for practicing and sharing skills for growing food with the greater community. Potential results may then involve the exchange of recipes and valuable information between Somali Bantu refugees and the surrounding community, decreased stigma due to more frequent opportunities for social interaction with them as well as a space to practice and enhance English language skills.

In any case, the input of Bantu refugees should be welcomed and incorporated throughout the development and implementation of future resettlement programs designed to assist them in their transition into the United States [20]. More specifically, as demonstrated throughout a case study conducted with this unique population [20], Bantu refugees should be able to share their experiences with accessing food in the United States as well as what they believe may hinder or help them in this effort. Such information could have the potential to direct future programs and interventions while promoting community empowerment among the Bantu population. Moreover, as Johnson et al. note, “a better understanding of their situation may be applicable to future similarly disadvantaged refugee... populations,” [2, p.S230].

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in consideration of the vulnerability of the Somali Bantu and their struggle with community food insecurity as refugees in the United States., a strengths-based, culturally appropriate solution is needed to promote greater community food security and empowerment among this population to help them best achieve self-sufficiency. Community kitchen gardens may be a particularly ideal solution, as available research suggests that community cooking interventions [13], [45] and community gardening can be used to effectively address community food insecurity while promoting a smoother transition to life in the United States for Somali Bantu refugees [19]. However several gaps remain in available research on this topic, as limited information is available on the needs of Somali refugees [14], particularly within the Bantu community [5], [10]. Thus further research is needed on their needs as well as on the strengths and limitations of community kitchen gardens for this underserved refugee population to inform practice and policy in order to better meet the needs of this unique and growing refugee group within and beyond the United States.

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