“A DREAM THAT HAS BECOME REAL”
An Evaluation of Rainbow Community Garden
Revisioning the Manitoba Harvest is a project of Food Matters Manitoba funded by Heifer International Canada to foster a localized food system. One component of this project, in partnership with newcomer and indigenous communities throughout Manitoba, is to develop community-based agricultural initiatives designed to promote traditional agricultural skills, adapt existing (newcomer) food production knowledge to the Canadian context, and pilot potential income-generating activities.
Introduction

Since it began in 2008, Rainbow Community Garden, operated by the Immigrants Integration and Farming Worker Community Co-op (IIFC), has grown quickly from only a handful of participants to over 120 families. Throughout this growth, Food Matters Manitoba has funded IIFC through two Heifer International (now Heifer International Canada) funded projects including currently through the Revisioning the Manitoba Harvest (RVMH) project.

Rainbow Gardeners come from countries around the world (see page 3), creating a vibrant, multicultural garden atmosphere that brings people together through gardening. Most gardeners live in downtown Winnipeg, although there are gardeners living in other parts of the city as well. The largest garden site is at the University of Manitoba, while there is a smaller location in St Vital. Even though IIFC has grown substantially in recent years, there is still far more demand for plots than the IIFC can provide, demonstrating significant interest among newcomers in food production.

One of the goals of RVMH is to evaluate its funded projects. This will enable Food Matters Manitoba to document projects, learn from promising practices, identify challenges to improve project delivery, and better articulate project successes with Heifer International Canada and other potential funders and donors. Throughout the evaluation process we also hope to build community capacity for evaluation, by involving community members as much as possible through the various stages of the evaluation. As described below, this evaluation incorporated participatory evaluation methodologies as gardeners were involved in developing the evaluation questions, facilitating the evaluation focus groups, translating focus group results, and helping interpret the findings.

Process

In spring 2012 a group of gardeners from Rainbow Community Garden met to develop the evaluation questions. The goal of this exercise was that the evaluation questions that would be asked of gardeners would be information that the gardeners themselves wanted to know. A few weeks later, a larger group of gardeners (approximately 30) gathered at Knox United Church using these questions as a guide for four focus groups. Three of these focus groups were held in Nepalese, and one was held in English, French, and Nepalese. Gardeners themselves posed the questions and led the focus groups. Earlier, a focus group had been held with 20 gardeners at IIFC’s St Vital location in the fall of 2011. Since similar questions were asked during both sessions, this data has been included where applicable. While some gardeners were the same at both focus group events, at least 40 different gardeners were represented between these two focus group events.
Focus groups were recorded and results were transcribed and translated later (translation was provided by one of the gardeners). A group of gardeners provided feedback regarding the evaluation findings and helped with data interpretation during a session at the garden and the evaluation was shared with other gardeners for further feedback.

The key questions identified by the gardeners were:

- What has been positive for you in participating in the Rainbow Garden?
- Has there been an economic benefit for you in participating in Rainbow Garden?
  - How much were you spending on food before? How much do you save during the growing season?
- How has participation in the garden changed how you eat?
  - How often did you cook vegetables or leaves before? How much during the growing season?
- Has there been a social benefit for you in participating in Rainbow Garden?
  - What effect has it had on your children?
  - Are there other ways it has helped you socially?
- What could be done to improve the garden?

These questions were seen of particular interest to the gardeners and were also beneficial to Food Matters Manitoba as we look to better understand the benefits that projects such as Rainbow Garden provide for participants.

Rainbow Garden participants come from around the world, including: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burundi, Canada, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, China, Congo-Brazzaville, DR Congo, Haiti, Iraq, Jamaica, Kenya, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Thailand, Togo, and Uganda.
What has been positive for you?

When asked an open-ended question about the benefits of participating in the Rainbow Garden, gardeners came up with several reasons why they enjoyed participating in the gardens. Several of these benefits will be explored further in subsequent sections. The primary benefits of the garden were identified as:

Produce: Gardeners expressed excitement that they could get food from their gardens rather than purchasing it from the store, including vegetables from their home countries that are not readily available in Canada. They were excited to have fresh foods and to know how the food had been grown. Some commented that purchasing foods they are familiar with is expensive because they are imported. Despite the high price, the quality of imported vegetables was reported to be quite low. With access to the garden, gardeners and their families have access to large amounts of produce and do not need to rely on low quality, high priced imported foods. A gardener said, “it’s great to have stuff that is not in Canadian culture. They don’t have black eyed beans, they don’t have the leaves. Well, we gather them, we collect them and we cook them.”

Health: Many gardeners saw the vegetables that they grew in the garden as contributing to their health. “We can work in groups in the garden and our family is happy because those who are sick can stay healthy by working in the garden,” one said. They also highlighted how healthy food contributed to their diet. “Fresh and fine green leaves from the garden is good for our health,” another gardener reported. One even talked about how a gardener with diabetes was able to better deal with her diabetes as a result of participating in the garden and another talked about how gardening was helping reduce his blood pressure.

Exercise: In addition to providing a healthy source of food, gardeners highlighted the exercise they get participating in the gardening as a benefit from the Rainbow Garden. A gardener commented that, “by doing this gardening we have enough vegetables to eat and have great exercise for our body.” It was identified that the garden provided a free source of recreation, creating opportunities for physical exercise and activity. As one gardener put it, “without this [garden], I would have just stayed at home watching TV.” Gardeners said that this exercise reduced stress and improved mental health.

Friendship: Social friendships and meeting people from other countries were highlighted by some of the evaluation participants (see also Social Benefits section below). One of the participants commented that, “the things that are interesting are to meet different nations who gather there, especially [at] potlucks. The kids come out and play together. It is really good. It is really good to have the opportunity to meet the different races and different families. I can’t wait to be going there this summer.” Others said they had learned from the agricultural techniques of others and had felt free to talk with “many people from different countries.” In short, one gardener described the garden community as a “family...there are different people and different languages but we are a family here.”
Overall, participants indicated that there were many benefits to participating in the garden. They gave thanks to the garden coordinators and funders for their efforts to improve the garden. Many gardeners indicated that they had been farmers in their home country. Agricultural production is what they know how to do. Yet they had not anticipated having the opportunity to grow food here in Canada. In the words of one gardener, “it was a dream that has become real” to get a chance to participate in the Rainbow Garden.

**Economic Savings:**
Gardeners reported that there had been an economic benefit for them from participating in the garden, primarily by reducing the amount of money they were spending buying vegetables from stores. Gardeners reported saving between $50 and $150 per month during the growing season. Assuming a peak growing season of three months, and approximately eighty gardening families in 2011, this is a total economic contribution of $24,000 to these families. Several gardeners, though, said that they preserved some of their produce, extending financial savings beyond peak agricultural months.

In discussions about their participation in the garden, gardeners indicated that access to the garden reduced their need to purchase produce from stores. Another reported that “before the growing season the green vegetables in the market [are] very expensive so you spend quite a bit on that and that limits my participation in going to buy green vegetables in the store. But during the growing season you find that you eat a lot of green vegetables because it is available, we do it ourselves and we exchange with the other participants in the garden and we find to be eating a lot during the growing season.” Beyond what people grow themselves, gardeners suggested that people shared produce with each other. One gardener said, “I didn’t have to buy tomatoes because we share. All different people gardening they share with you if you meet in the same place and the same time you can pick up some stuff.”

Participations in the St Vital focus group mentioned selling a small portion of their produce at the Central Park Market. The value of the produce was not identified. It was also unclear how many gardeners participated in the market. Participants in the spring 2012 focus groups did not mention involvement in the market and the Central Park market did not operate in the summer of 2012. Selling surplus vegetables at the market, however, is another way that garden can contribute economically to the livelihood of gardeners.

**Healthy Diets:**
Participation in the garden enabled gardeners to significantly increase the amount of fresh vegetables in their diet. When asked how the garden affected their vegetable consumption, all respondents to the question indicated that vegetable consumption increased during the growing season. A gardener said that, “during the summer I cooked them all the time. We enjoy them in summer time. It's a short time, but we have
these greens often.” Another reported that “we cook more. We cook more than in winter because we don’t have them in winter.” A third commented that “when you buy you only get a little bit, but here I have a lot.” The garden was, therefore, seen as a way to increase the consumption of healthy foods by making them more available to gardeners and their families.

Participation in the garden facilitated increased vegetable consumption because they were more affordable than purchasing foods from the store. One gardener commented that “in previous years we used to buy vegetables that are very expensive and we did not eat enough but now we can get enough vegetables from the garden.” Others said that because they did not need to buy vegetables they were able to eat more vegetables during the growing season. The result is that people had more access to green vegetables which makes them “very energetic by eating those vegetables because they are fresh and enough for their family.”

Growing food in the garden has helped improve the health of gardeners’ diets. For example, fresh mustard leaf is a variety of vegetable that gardeners were very interested in eating because they could not find it in Canadian stores. Gardeners are able to grow two crops of leaves in a season, providing fresh food for their family in summer as well as leaves to store for the winter. Alternatively, gardening has introduced people to new healthy foods. One gardener reported that “at first, we didn’t know how to take salad. We learned this from gardening.” Events like the community feast have created opportunities for gardeners to share recipes and dishes from around the world.

Some gardeners reported that they kept their vegetables into the winter, changing their diet beyond the growing season. Both freezing and drying were reported as methods of preservation. One gardener said that “you save [the vegetables]. Some, I saved them. Like I put them in the freezer and I cooked them in the winter time. They don’t have them in the stores.” Another one said, “I stopped buying from the store. I had squash till the first week of February.” This both improved access to healthy foods and reduced the cost of purchasing vegetables from the store.

While not a health benefit per se, many reported the good taste of the vegetables they produced as a reason why they enjoyed gardening. Vegetables from the store, they said, did not taste as good as the vegetables they could grow in the garden. Gardeners talked about the excitement of eating fresh vegetables. Some identified that eating vegetables grown organically was important to them as well as knowing where and how the vegetables had been produced.

**Improved Mental Health:**

Beyond the health benefits of eating produce from the garden, gardeners cited improved mental health as a key benefit of participating in the garden. One of the garden organizers, and a newcomer himself, said, “before newcomers arrive here they are euphoric...when you hear you are going to Canada, it seems like a paradise and you will get everything you want. When you get here, the first three months, six months, with the small money the government is providing, it is a honeymoon. However, after six months reality sets in. The person cannot get a job. Parents don’t know where to take their kids. They stay inside. That is where the stress begins. When they get here (to the garden), some of them spend eight hours or ten hours here. Even if we don’t consider the crops they get, the exercise is there.”
Gardeners echoed this comment. One said, “sometimes I’m worried about everything here. We are new here and have to think about how to do everything. But here, I can just garden.” Another said that the garden is “the only place that I feel happy.”

The garden has enabled people to participate in activities they knew and missed from their home countries. Some gardeners reported that farming had been their work in their home country and they were eager to do that job again. As one gardener said, “we come with some skill, but it doesn’t tally with what is here.” However, many were farmers in their home countries and “may not have bookish knowledge but have hand knowledge.” The garden gives people a chance to put these practical skills to use, doing what they do best, and are able to work at something they find rewarding. One gardener commented that “we are happy to be able to do something, we are happy to use the techniques we have learned for generations.”

Building Community:
Rainbow Garden’s social aspect was seen as very significant for some participants. One said that “I think that the first thing that is positive about Rainbow Garden is bringing people together, people from different backgrounds, different cultures coming together and doing a thing that they love which is gardening.” The garden is in many ways a community of mutual sharing and support. For example, gardeners take care of each other’s plots and help out with garden community events.

Since there are newcomers from many countries participating in the Rainbow Garden the multicultural aspect of the garden was highlighted by several gardeners. Gardeners talked about “getting different ideas when sharing with other people who are from different countries and ... sharing happiness and cooperating with all.” The gardeners also said that the garden provided them with a chance to meet people from around the world and also to meet Canadians. Gardeners have had a chance to share and learn from other ways of gardening and to share foods from their countries with other garden participants. It was reported that gardeners “have a chance to interact with other people from different countries and share their food from home with those people and have delicious food among all people in the garden.” Another said that, “it was very positive to see every culture, different cultures trying to grow what they know and incorporating that into the Canadian culture.”

Gardeners also said that they had made new friends by participating in the garden. They had a chance to meet and talk with people while they were gardening. This provided an important opportunity for people to make connections with others and exposed people to a variety of cultures.

Finally, gardeners talked about how the garden was a way for them to learn English. Since there are newcomers from several countries who participate in the garden, English is the language used to communicate. This provides a safe place to try English as everyone else is learning too. It was reported that “even though they don’t have any English they say ‘hello’ to everyone and they get practice from that.”
Children:

Gardeners were very happy that their children had a chance to participate in the Rainbow Garden. They reported that many children were involved in the gardening. It was, one said, “a beginning, a first step, for our children.” Another said that “we found them so happy being part of agriculture. They are excited to have an opportunity to be exposed to gardening.” Participants indicated that it was important to them that they were able to pass down agricultural knowledge to their children. It was said that children were learning about what the source of their food is, what the plants look like as they grow, and to enjoy the fresh vegetables from the garden. Others appreciated that the area around the garden provided a place for their children to play. Parents even mentioned appreciated having children come to the campus of the university and “think this is the place they would like to come [for school].”

Improvements:

While gardeners were very positive about their experiences at the garden, they did make some suggestions about what could be improved.

*Water:* The most common concern indicated by gardeners was a lack of access to water. This is a major challenge for the garden. There is no readily available water source. Water tanks are occasionally filled by the University of Manitoba, but there are often water shortages, particularly in hot weather.

The gardeners indicated that there was not enough water and that people often had to either wait for access to water or that there was no water when gardeners arrived to garden. Also, gardeners located further from the water barrels have to carry their water a long distance. As one said “we need a long hose that can reach far... Like other people at the back have to carry the water and that’s not a good idea. They will be tired. The whole day they go there they carry every time...[if we had a long hose] we can just pull it out there and water and bring it back for other people.”

One said that approximately half the time that they visited the garden they returned home without doing anything because there was no water for them to use when they got there. This was particularly frustrating because they had spent a bus ticket to get there (see below). Others said that they are happy to receive seeds and seedlings, but sometimes when they planted their gardens they did not have enough water to water them so they just dried up. To ensure that gardeners are able to produce food it is essential that gardeners have better and more consistent access to water.

*Location and Transportation:* Several gardeners indicated that the University of Manitoba was located far from their homes. This made accessing the garden difficult. As one said, “the garden area is quite far from our home and most of the people do not have cars and they have problems regarding
bus passes.” The location of the garden makes it difficult for many gardeners to access the garden easily. Conversely, there is no land available for a garden of the scale of Rainbow Garden in downtown Winnipeg closer to the homes of many of the gardeners.

Transportation was the second most commonly expressed concern identified by garden. As one gardener said, “a lot of people don’t have means to come to the university where the garden is and they rely on friends to give them rides when they’re available. But half the time when some people want to go there they can’t go. They can’t make it, which makes the garden much neglected. But let’s say there was a means of transportation, let’s say three times a week or bus tickets people can go there on their own times and water their garden. But without that it is very hard.”

Many gardeners indicated that they could not afford bus passes. Throughout the focus groups, several people indicated that if funding was available for bus tickets or bus passes it would greatly increase their ability to access the garden.

Agricultural Supplies: One of the focus groups focused extensively on the types of agricultural equipment available. Gardeners suggested that the tools found in Canada were fine, but they were not used to using them. It was suggested that if gardeners had the equipment they knew from their host country they would better be able to care for their garden.

Late Starts: Several gardeners expressed concern about the late start that they had in 2011. It was hoped that plots and agricultural equipment could be provided earlier. One said that “the gardening area is very nice but we need to be able to start gardening earlier to get more produce.” Similar comments were echoed at the St Vital focus group. Since that was a new garden in 2011 it did not begin until July, two months after the growing season began.

Size: Some gardeners said that it would be nice to have more space – either to provide more plots to enable more people to garden or to increase the size of the plots for existing gardeners. It was hoped that, with a larger plot, gardeners would be able to grow more food to produce vegetables to feed their family. Additionally, there is need for more garden plots to meet the large demand for garden plots.

Evaluation Process Learnings
This was the first evaluation conducted as part of Revisioning the Manitoba Harvest. The primary challenge faced in this evaluation was that most of the focus groups were conducted in Nepalese and then needed to be translated. Originally, all focus groups were to be conducted in English but because a large number of people attended the session who did not speak English, it was decided to do most of the focus groups in Nepalese. This caused delays as we tried to find a translator who was able to complete the translation for the honorarium we were able to offer. Holding focus groups in Nepalese, however, provided some advantages as people were likely far more comfortable speaking in their first language. Several gardeners speak very little English and this enabled them to participate more fully in the evaluation. In the future, however, it is recommended that if focus groups are conducted in a language other than English, that they be translated immediately at the focus group rather than after the fact. In a similar situation, each group could have a facilitator who is able to ask questions and translate answers into English and a note taker to record the answers. This would reduce post-evaluation delays and costs for translation services.

In reviewing the focus group answers it seemed like respondents were more comfortable answering some kinds of questions than others. People talked a lot about how they enjoyed eating fresh foods, the types of foods that they grew, and health and social
benefits. Participants seemed less comfortable talking about more quantifiable components of the questions such as economic savings or increases in vegetable consumption during the growing season. In general, answers tended to be quite brief and there was little conversation within focus groups. Perhaps the questions could have undergone further testing or the focus group format was unfamiliar for participants. It would be important to consider evaluation methodology prior to future evaluations at Rainbow Garden, particularly if quantifiable data is being sought.

Conclusions
This evaluation has demonstrated that the Rainbow Garden provide many perceived benefits to gardeners. Gardeners see economic, health, social, and psychological benefits to garden participation. They appreciated access to foods that they know and the ability to use their skills. However, there are some challenges for the garden to address in coming years. These include providing adequate water and infrastructure for gardeners, addressing the challenge of transporting gardeners to plots that are far from most of the gardeners’ homes and finding space for the growing number of newcomers who want to participate in the garden. Given the location and restrictions of the land currently used for gardening, it is unclear how these challenges will be addressed. Nevertheless, the gardens continue to bloom despite these challenges because of the significant benefits that gardeners enjoy as they adapt their agricultural knowledge to the Canadian context, providing healthy food for themselves and their families, and learning from a community of growers from around the world.