

# Leveling the Fields

## *Creating Farming Opportunities for Black People, Indigenous People, and Other People of Color*

### HIGHLIGHTS

*Farming offers a powerful path to build community wealth and resilience to challenges such as water pollution, droughts and floods, and lack of access to healthy food. However, US agriculture—particularly the pursuit of sustainable agriculture—is rife with obstacles for Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC), including immigrants, migrants, and refugees. These obstacles include difficulty securing capital, credit, land, infrastructure, and information. For these groups, such challenges are compounded by longstanding structural and institutional racism. We review opportunities for governments, the private sector, philanthropies, and others to contribute to simultaneously building socioeconomic equity and sustainability in US food systems. To begin overcoming the history of racist policies and exclusion, it is our primary recommendation that solutions be developed by and with—rather than for—Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color.*

The socioeconomic status of communities of Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color (BIPOC) reflects a long history of theft and loss of land and capital, justified by racist ideologies and often perpetrated by official government policies (Deloria 1969; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Horst and Marion 2018; Touzeau 2019; Wilkins 2007). Even though BIPOC represent nearly one-quarter of the US population, they operate less than 5 percent of the nation's declining number of farms, and cultivate less than 1 percent of its farmland (Census Bureau 2019; USDA 2019). In contrast, a majority of the estimated 2.4 million farmworkers in the United States are people of color who do not own or operate farms of their own (Ferguson, Dahl, and DeLonge 2019; Hernandez and Gabbard 2018; Smolski 2019). Farmer and farmworker populations across the nation are diverse and include immigrants, migrants, and refugees and their descendants from all over the world, often from agricultural backgrounds, and each with distinct skills, knowledge, histories, and lived experiences (Berlow 2017; HAFA 2019; Singh 2018).

Longstanding structural and institutional racism has excluded BIPOC from access to land, financial resources, information, political standing, and educational and professional trajectories, which limits their ability to shape the food system. Such exclusion has prevented truly sustainable food systems from being established,\* and created enormous barriers for communities seeking to maintain or revive culturally appropriate foodways and to live in balance with their ecosystems. Strengthening support for BIPOC within the agriculture sector, on the other hand, can establish paths toward long-term prosperity while helping to secure the future of sustainable and resilient food systems (Carlisle et al. 2019; HEAL Food Alliance 2018).

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Pat Crenshaw on the 120-acre ranch that her father purchased in 1945, and that she now owns and operates in Slick, Oklahoma. For many BIPOC farmers, longstanding structural and institutional racism has excluded them from maintaining or establishing farms. Removing discriminatory barriers and supporting BIPOC leadership in sustainable and community-driven farming will advance the equity and resilience of the nation's food systems.

Here, we describe how public policies and societal structures have excluded BIPOC from farming opportunities and from shaping the priorities of agricultural research, and review key actions that can be taken at multiple levels to address this situation. In particular, we highlight broad actions that can be taken by governments, the private sector, and philanthropies—historically white institutions that have benefited from appropriated wealth and have the power and responsibility to address past harms. Different communities have unique challenges rooted in their histories and lived experiences, and action is urgently needed to implement context-specific solutions developed by and with diverse BIPOC communities.

## Building Land Accessibility and Security

Colonization, racist laws and policies, state-sanctioned land grabs, and other actions have eroded or directly prevented land security and access for many BIPOC. For example, “heirs’ property” (land that was passed down without a will, leaving the current owner(s) without a clear title) makes it harder for farmers to access resources such as credit and farm services and leaves them vulnerable to involuntary sale or seizure of their property. Heirs’ property makes up from 41 percent to more than 60 percent of Black-owned land in

*Immigrant and refugee farmers often bring deep agricultural knowledge and skill, but struggle to access land to farm in their new country.*

the United States and is a leading contributor to involuntary land loss among Black farmers (DeCaille 2018; Johnson Gaither 2016; Newkirk 2019). For immigrant and refugee farming families—who often bring a wealth of agricultural knowledge and skill—economic and institutional barriers make accessing land in their new country a struggle (HAFA 2019). Institutions can contribute to improving land accessibility and security in several ways:

- **Grants, subsidies, and incentives** from government and philanthropy can be developed and expanded to make it easier for BIPOC to rent, finance, and own land. These should include mechanisms facilitating land ownership



*Mai Houa Yang, a Hmong farmer, harvests peanuts at the farm she owns with her husband, Vue Her. Yang and Her grow specialty and traditional produce in Singer, California, using sustainable practices they have adopted with support from a number of USDA programs. Strengthening access for BIPOC farmers can establish paths toward long-term prosperity while helping to secure the future of sustainable and resilient food systems.*

transitions to BIPOC, as well as reparations to return appropriated land and to reverse land grabs (e.g., South Dakota State University’s Wokini Initiative; Lee and Keys 2013).

- **Legal aid** can be offered by institutions to help BIPOC access and retain land. For example, grants from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) could fund law schools to offer legal clinics providing free or low-cost, culturally competent legal services tailored to BIPOC farmers. Given evidence of ongoing discrimination, the USDA should also require an independent review of drivers and preventive measures prior to foreclosures of BIPOC-owned farmland (Cowan and Feder 2013; Keepseagle v. Vilsack; Rosenberg and Stucki 2019). And government and philanthropy should fund increased legal support for the formation of cooperative ownership structures that help BIPOC access and retain farmland (Calo and De Master 2017; Gies 2018; Taylor 2018).
- **Alternative land-holding and tenure systems** such as community land trusts and conservation easements should prioritize land transfer and holding for BIPOC (Ruhf, Cosgrove, and Eliot 2012; SELC 2018). Govern-



## Conservation easements and community land trusts should prioritize land transfer and holding for BIPOC farmers.

ment and philanthropic programs are needed to help BIPOC explore alternative land rental and ownership options such as ground leases, lease-to-buy options, co-operatives, and agricultural conservation easement programs (Weaver, Kalbacker, and Bardot Lewis 2012). For example, the Hmong American Farmers Association in Minnesota and the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association in California are “incubator farms” that lease land to immigrants and refugees. Combined with community support and capacity-building, such programs enable these farmers to build businesses and contribute to the local economy (Garrigues 2014; HAFA 2019).

- **Reforming heirs’ property laws** can protect landowners from involuntary land loss (Mitchell 2016). The USDA must implement the planned changes in the 2018 farm bill to expand and standardize the types of documentation that can be used by heirs’ property owners to qualify for USDA credit and conservation program eligibility (DeCaille 2018).

### Improving Access to Financial Resources

Structural racism has excluded BIPOC from the means of building wealth, creating wage and wealth gaps that put multiple generations at a disadvantage and undermine the resilience of these communities (Sullivan et al. 2015; Patten 2016). Black and indigenous farmers in particular have lower net cash incomes and fewer direct-to-consumer sales compared with their white counterparts, and they receive a disproportionately small share of USDA loans (Cowan and Feder 2013; Feder and Cowan 2013; GAO 2019a; GAO 2019b; Keepseagle v. Vilsack; USDA 2019). Several opportunities exist to support BIPOC farmers, particularly those practicing community-based, sustainable agriculture, in achieving financial security and resilience, for example:

- **Financial support** must be expanded for BIPOC farmers and their networks, including within key USDA programs that offer technical assistance (for example, the Conservation Stewardship Program) and grants for capacity building, such as the Farming Opportunities

Training and Outreach program, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program, and the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program. Barriers to participation should be identified and eliminated, such as by recognizing traditional best management practices and ecological knowledge in the evaluation of applications and proposals, and extending full access to programs to tribal agencies (Hipp and Duren 2017). Philanthropies can fill crucial gaps by offering multiyear grants for general operating support, funds for grants requiring a match, and grants for grassroots organizations.

- **Improved access to loans** is needed for BIPOC, including low-interest loans and microloans, as well as loans not requiring collateral. The USDA’s Farm Service Agency launched a microloan program in 2013 to better meet the needs of underserved farmers (FSA 2019; Tulman et al. 2016), but the annual funding limit must be raised (NSAC 2019).



Bobby Wilson (left) established a five-acre farm outside Atlanta, Georgia, to provide affordable food for nearby low-income communities. USDA conservationist Shemekia Mosley (right) and others worked with Wilson to provide community education and assistance. Government and philanthropic programs can help farmers of color build for long-term success.

- **Financial safety nets**, such as insurance and relief programs, should be strengthened for BIPOC farmers and farmworkers. Since the USDA does not currently publish rates and utilization of federal crop insurance or disaster payments across racial and ethnic groups, transparency is needed to help guide improvements.
- **Legal protections for farmworkers** are needed to secure their rights, such as unionization, protection from retaliation and wage theft, and the establishment of viable paths to citizenship and legal standing (Costa 2018).
- **Fair, sustainable markets** that support BIPOC and reward social and ecological well-being must be fostered. Direct marketing, farm-to-institution arrangements, food hubs, and market diversification can raise BIPOC incomes and financial viability and can be strengthened through grants, initiatives, and institutional procurement commitments that are inclusive of and accessible to these communities (Cooper 2018; Hand 2010; Key 2016). Developing markets for ethnic specialty crops and culturally relevant fruits and vegetables can leverage the skills of immigrant and refugee farmers, helping them thrive while also contributing to local economies (WF 2019).

## Advancing the Quality and Equity of Infrastructure and Information

BIPOC have less access to, ownership of, and control over several key resources related to infrastructure and information that are pivotal in establishing successful, resilient, and sustainable farms. For example, fewer BIPOC farmers have access to internet service relative to white farmers (USDA 2019). Also, public research institutions have not served BIPOC equitably and have, in some cases, been used as mechanisms for exclusion (Ammons et al. 2018; Lee and Ahtone 2020; Lee and Keys 2013). Immigrant and refugee farmers experience numerous obstacles to enter into farming in the United States, including language and cultural barriers (McColl 2014). Institutions should support strengthening BIPOC resources through the following:

- **Infrastructure investments** from philanthropy, government, and the private sector—such as targeted grants and incentives—are needed to fund BIPOC-led improvements on farms (such as washing, packing, storage and processing facilities) and in communities (funding such things as internet access, kitchen equipment in school cafeterias to



Organic farmer Don Bustos (right) and USDA coordinator Sharon Nance inspect lettuce near Española, New Mexico—a rural area whose family farmers have historically been displaced by development and large-scale farming. Farms in the region are increasingly competing successfully for grants and loans to establish thriving small-scale businesses. Such support must be available to more BIPOC farmers and their communities.

Bob Nichols/USDA





Ross Racine (center), a Montana farmer and former executive director of the Intertribal Agriculture Council, attends a White House meeting focused on strengthening rural communities and economies. Agricultural policies and programs must be developed not only with the participation of BIPOC farmers, but with their leadership as well.

enable local sourcing from BIPOC farmers, and affordable housing to support BIPOC farmworkers and farmers).

- **Technical assistance and outreach** must serve BIPOC farmers, including by recognizing traditional ecological knowledge and management as best practices. Government and philanthropic organizations should invest in community programs offering materials in multiple languages and formats, providing translation assistance, and streamlining paperwork (Scherer n.d.). Such programs should hire linguistically and culturally competent community representatives and service providers (e.g., lenders, insurance agents, extension agents, educators), particularly BIPOC and including migrants and refugee farmers and farmworkers.
- **Research and education**—public, private, and philanthropic—should include and engage directly with BIPOC farmers and communities. For example, land-grant institutions should be accountable to a revitalized public mission supporting such work, including sharing resources with community-based organizations. Additional resources should be directed to the 1890 land-grant institutions (Historically Black Colleges and Universities), the 1994 land-grant institutions (the Tribal Colleges and Universities), and the Hispanic-Serving Agricultural Col-

leges and Universities to ensure they have the same services and support as the land-grant institutions originally chartered in 1862 (Lee and Keys 2013).

## Securing Representation and Leadership across Food Systems

Public, private, and philanthropic institutions should all take steps to foster leadership of BIPOC in decisionmaking venues.

- **Communications platforms**—public, private, and philanthropic—must be leveraged to elevate the voices of BIPOC farmers and communities (see Civil Eats 2019).
- **Participation of BIPOC in decisionmaking venues**, such as grant panels, advisory boards, committees, and conferences, should be actively sought and fairly compensated. Federal advisory committees, such as the Native American Farmers and Ranchers Federal Advisory Committee, should be consistently consulted and respected. Institutions should proactively support BIPOC who lack adequate resources to travel to decisionmaking spaces or to participate remotely, and should offer similar support for decisionmakers to visit BIPOC farmers in their communities.

# Institutions can help create opportunities for people of color in farming that will pave the way toward long-term prosperity and sustainability, firmly rooted in the farmers' lived experiences and leadership.

- BIPOC leadership should be developed and fostered throughout the food system. **Leadership development programs** are needed that recognize and support the value systems and leadership models of BIPOC communities. The HEAL Food Alliance School of Political Leadership offers a strong model. Institutions should also shape their recruitment and hiring processes to effectively reach BIPOC.

## Addressing Injustice and Increasing Food System Resilience Go Hand in Hand

A truly sustainable food system must be both science-based and equitable. Removing discriminatory barriers to BIPOC farmers and their networks, and supporting their leadership in sustainable and community-driven farming, will advance the equity and resilience of the nation's food systems (Carlisle et al. 2019; HEAL Food Alliance 2018). Furthermore, prioritizing programs and initiatives aimed at achieving food sovereignty can fill crucial gaps in BIPOC communities' knowledge and capacity, and deepen their own resilience. Also needed are continual learning and cultural shifts within institutions that have benefited from centuries of discrimination.

A number of initiatives are already taking such steps, including Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Land Stewardship Project's Land Policy and American Indian Sovereignty program. Legislation recently passed in California (CA AB 1348, 2018) and Illinois (505 ILCS 72, 2018) institutionalizes equity within farm programs. And at the federal level, Representative Sheila Lee (TX-18) has sponsored legislation to establish an African American Reparations Commission (HR 40).

More such initiatives, developed by and in partnership with BIPOC, are urgently needed (Hipp and Duren 2017; Peniman 2017). Public, private, and philanthropic institutions all have a role in creating opportunities for BIPOC in farming that will pave the way toward long-term prosperity and sustainability, and that are firmly rooted in the lived experiences and leadership of Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color.

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## ENDNOTE

- \* Sustainable food systems, by definition, are environmentally, economically, and socially viable, and "enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole" (DeLonge et al. 2020; NARETPA 1997).

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HEAL is a multi-sector, multi-racial coalition building collective power to transform our food and farm systems. We are led by our member organizations, and strive to amplify the experience and expertise of frontline communities who are most burdened by the disparities of our current systems. Together, we are developing solutions to drive change.

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