**YEARS ACTIVE**
Founded in 2011

**GEOGRAPHY**
Minnesota | Native Nations

**BUDGET**
$1M — $4,999,999

**LEADER**
Pakou Hang



# HMONG AMERICAN FARMERS ASSOCIATION

## Growing the Future

The Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA) works to build equity in urban agricultural practices in the Twin Cities. Founded and led by Hmong farmers, HAFA is also a collective voice for the Hmong farming community and a thought leader in developing new food models and farming best practices.

"Farms should be places where people come and build on their dreams."

**Pakou Hang**
Hmong American Farmers Association

**Story by** Chanida Potter & Morgan Mercer

INNOVATION STORY Nº 3

# INNOVATION

## HMONG AMERICAN FARMERS ASSOCIATION

HAFA understands that farming is a way of life for many Hmong people. Cultural values serve as a foundation for HAFA's work to ensure economic justice for Hmong farmers.

## BREAKTHROUGH

Where other organizations might see threat and competition, HAFA sees the opportunity to work in partnership for the advancement of the field as a whole. This collaboration and HAFA's commitment to open communication make its experimental yet solutions-oriented approach more successful for the organization and its members.

## THE LONG GAME

HAFA offers all kinds of support to community farmers but also works to ensure that farmers have the training and tools to succeed on their own. From public policy to agricultural techniques, HAFA designs culturally inclusive trainings that keep farmers thinking about their long-term success.

## THE FUTURE IS TRANSPARENT

When one of their signature programs was struggling for funding, HAFA didn't just gather staff to chart a path forward. It shared the news with farmers at a meeting, gave them options for the future and laid out an inclusive decision-making process.






Everywhere you look, plants grow in different directions. Rows of vegetables, fruits and flowers run along the contours of the land.

Certain rows run east and west, while others go north and south. Some plants, such as Brussels sprouts, don't even grow in rows at all. There are vines of tomatoes planted in between shoots of basil and mint plants interspersed with kale. Every few hundred feet, the bright red pop of a tractor punctuates the green landscape. It's organized chaos.

What might look like disarray in the field is actually evidence of sophisticated sustainable farming techniques: successive planting, polycropping, intercropping and companion planting. On a 155-acre plot of land just south of St. Paul, women and men in broad-brimmed hats kneel on the dirt and dig their hands into the earth, pulling out weeds and examining individual plants for signs of damage or pests. This is the land the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA) claimed for its people. These are the fields where Hmong farmers are redefining their place in Minnesota's food system.

"Farms should be places where people come and build on their dreams. We didn't want it to just be another piece of land," says Pakou Hang, executive director of HAFA. "There is a hive of activity and a hive of learning occurring on the farm. It's a place of poetry and community building."

> "There is a hive of activity and a hive of learning occurring on the farm."
>
> **Pakou Hang**
> Hmong American Farmers Association

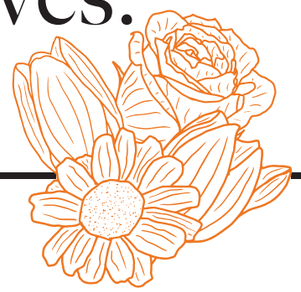
Yet even as the daughter of vegetable farmers, not even Pakou could imagine the significance the HAFA farm would eventually hold for the people who work there every day.

In 2011, Pakou received a Bush Fellowship, during which she examined the challenges and opportunities Hmong farmers face. She started interviewing farmers, and over and over again she heard about missed opportunities and dreams. About the woman who longed to grow peonies but was unable to rent land for long enough to give the flowers time to fully bloom. About the farmers who couldn't get a loan to buy a refrigerated truck so they could deliver produce to grocery stores. About the farmers who wanted to invest in perennial crops such as asparagus, rhubarb and blueberries but couldn't because they weren't able to secure long-term land leases. Hmong farmers dominated the Twin Cities farmers markets, yet at every turn they ran into barriers that held them back.

"These Hmong farmers, who were at the forefront of the local foods movement, were actually not benefiting from the movement," says Pakou. "Farmers didn't have access to lands, they didn't have access to markets and they didn't have access to capital and credit. And last, but certainly not least, they didn't have access to trainings or any of the innovative research that was happening that they could then use to improve and reflect on their own operations."

Faced with a system that wasn't designed for them, Hmong farmers created their own through HAFA. The seed for the organization started with a woman named Der Thao. She was one of the 13 Hmong farmers who attended a listening session Pakou hosted during her Fellowship. During the meeting, Der got up and said: "We have to stop waiting for others to save us. We can save ourselves." That moment was an awakening for Pakou. Five days later, she registered HAFA as a nonprofit.

> "We have to stop waiting for others to save us. We can save ourselves."
>
> **Der Thao**
> Community Elder







## CHARACTERISTIC № 1


Two of HAFA's main projects — the farm and the food hub — operate like cooperatives. For example, on the farm, Hmong people come together, pay a deposit and then get access to five- or 10-acre parcels of land. Members of the farm make decisions together based on what's best for the whole group and the long-term sustainability of the farm. The cooperative model helps farmers come together at a lower risk while still taking advantage of greater economic opportunities that arise from working together. "Culturally, we saw how these cooperatives were aligned with our own traditional practices," says Pakou. "Traditionally, Hmong people got together, even when they weren't part of the same clan. It happens in a lot of agrarian communities because it's a way for people to pool their resources to get a task done." In addition to their being resourceful, HAFA saw cooperatives as an answer to building long-term wealth and self-sufficiency among Hmong farmers. HAFA purposefully modeled those two programs as cooperatives in the hopes that one day they could be spun off from HAFA as stand-alone entities that farmers could fully own.

Today, the 155-acre HAFA farm is a home base for more than 100 Hmong farmers. On any given day, you'll see farmhands and employees collecting data in the fields, elementary-school kids touring the farm and farmers out with their children and grandchildren. "When we were looking for land, I thought of it in metrics like, 'Is this going to be economically viable?' 'Can we have enough farmers on the land?'" says Pakou. "I was looking at it from a business perspective."

But now, the farm has become something more. Before renting land from HAFA, an elder Hmong farmer used to discourage his grandkids from visiting him in his field. He was afraid the landowner would think they were too noisy or his grandkids would get hurt running into the field.

Ever since he started renting land at the HAFA farm, though, his grandkids won't stop visiting him. At least once a week during the summer, his entire family comes to the farm for lunch or dinner. "This has been the best year of farming," he told Pakou. The HAFA farm is more than just a place to grow crops. It's a place where Hmong people can invest in their farming, their families and their futures.

# THE LONG GAME

Self-sufficiency is a rallying cry at HAFA. When Pakou and her brother Janssen Hang co-founded the nonprofit in 2011, they did so with the goal that someday they would organize themselves out of a job.

That meant making sure HAFA trained its farmers and their families to help themselves, rather than just relying on the organization to fix their problems and find solutions. HAFA's approach was a departure from what Pakou saw other organizations doing at the time. Many other groups centered their organizations and staff as the problem-solvers. If a Hmong farmer wanted to write a business plan, staff from that organization would help. If a Hmong farmer needed help filling out a form, translating a document or talking to another agency, staff would step in and assist. Pakou wanted HAFA to offer that kind of help, too, but she wanted to make sure it was followed up with training that would help farmers do it on their own in the future.

"All of that is beautiful and powerful because there is a lot of love and goodwill there, but it's not sustainable. In the long run, it doesn't help the farmer," says Pakou. "We're supposed to be there to support, teach and enable so that people can help themselves."

To prepare farmers for a day when HAFA no longer exists, the organization builds specific requirements into its programming to increase the control, agency and self-determination of farmers. Take the microloan program HAFA lobbied the Minnesota Department of Agriculture to create. When farmers save $2,000 of their own funds, HAFA matches that money dollar for dollar so farmers have $4,000 to leverage for a microloan. In order to get those matching funds, HAFA requires farmers to attend financial counseling meetings, write a business plan and work through training modules such as HAFA's Break-Even Analysis, which helps farmers determine the true cost of production to ensure they're selling their produce for a price that turns a profit. To empower farming families through that process, HAFA makes it mandatory that farmers bring someone from their family who can speak, write and read English to every meeting.

"We do this because HAFA can't always be the person who is there interpreting for farmers during the business training sessions. We can't be the person who is actually doing the calculations with them for the Break-Even Analysis," says Pakou. "We can help them and support them, but there has to be a sustainable path in their family. This is where we bring in the second generation of potential farmers."





CHARACTERISTIC №2


The organizational culture at HAFA promotes learning and reflection that lead to innovative project ideas — such as the community-supported agriculture (CSA) boxes HAFA began providing for formerly incarcerated women in 2016, which it paired with financial coaching and job training from the Eastside Financial Center (EFC), or the Southeast Asia-specific vegetable boxes it put together for 10 Karen refugee families that same year. The second staff meeting of every month is dedicated to a deep dive into a specific topic. HAFA assigns staff members readings ahead of time and invites guest speakers to share their perspectives. In addition, HAFA kicks off staff meetings after an event or activity with a reflection exercise in which employees debrief what went well and what could be improved. Each September, HAFA compiles everything its staff has learned over the past year during an intensive review and planning process. Staff members start by looking through their calendars from the previous year and making chronological lists of what they did and when. Once they gather that information, there's a weeklong "brain dump" in November during which the entire HAFA office shuts down and staff members use their lists as a guide to create or update organizational how-to documents that guide work in the future.


LOCALLY GROWN PRODUCE


HAFA FARM

> “We can help them and support them, but there has to be a sustainable path in their family.”
>
> **Pakou Hang**
> Hmong American Farmers Association

That’s also why HAFA bakes in a strong advocacy component to its work. The organization registers farmers to vote, takes them to the polls on Election Day and even brings them to the Capitol to listen to testimony hearings on laws, such as United States Department of Agriculture policies, that impact their livelihoods. HAFA doesn’t tell farmers who or what to vote for, but it does instill in them an urgency to stay politically active since agriculture is a sector largely influenced by public policy decisions. “You have to be a contributing member,” says Pakou. “You have to be a voter or you’re going to lose some of your credibility when we’re talking to these policymakers about HAFA programs or setting aside money for land conservation.”

The idea of self-sufficiency isn’t just a concept HAFA preaches to its farmers but one the organization embeds into its internal structure, too. When HAFA first launched, it hired several university researchers and other experts to run agriculture trainings.

Most of those people didn’t come from a Hmong background. To make the trainings more culturally relevant, and to make the organization more self-sufficient, HAFA had both staff and Hmong community members attend the trainings to learn the material. Then, it had those people revamp the trainings — weaving in their own personal experience and translating the content into Hmong. “We were so wedded to this idea of training young people in our community that by the end, all of our staffers were the ones actually doing the trainings, not the white experts,” says Pakou. By the end of its first year, HAFA had not only transformed the trainings into culturally relevant modules but also cut its budget in half for outside consultants and contractors.





# THE FUTURE IS TRANSPARENT

At a recent HAFA meeting, farmers sat in a semicircle around Pakou, each giving her a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down to indicate how the season was going for them.

Pakou spoke in Hmong and continued the meeting by clicking through a PowerPoint presentation to a slide that outlined the main topic for the evening: the future of the HAFA Food Hub. Before HAFA, many Hmong farmers sold their produce exclusively to local farmers markets, but the HAFA Food Hub changed that by aggregating produce from HAFA members so they could compete for larger contracts and sell to schools, retailers and other institutions.

Tonight, Pakou wanted to be transparent with members. The organization was struggling to finance the food hub, and HAFA wasn’t sure what that meant for the sustainability of the program in the long run. Pakou led attendees through a quick exercise to remind people how HAFA had gotten to this moment. She asked the farmers around her, “Auntie, do you remember this time?” or “Uncle, do you remember this time?”

The attendees started telling the story of the organization, up until the meeting that night. When they got to the present, Pakou laid out the current challenge with the food hub. Point by point, she walked attendees through an expense analysis to show farmers how HAFA calculated the current deficit of the food hub and what projections looked like going forward. Then, HAFA opened the meeting for discussion, asking members what they thought about the information and whether they agreed with the report HAFA had created. For Pakou, that level of transparency is what it looks like to lead an organization driven by the community.

“It’s a deliberative democracy. It’s predicated on discussions and responses. It’s predicated on information,” says Pakou. “It’s based on the belief that people who don’t speak English are still smart people. That even though they’ve never gone to school, they can still read an expense report and come to the conclusion, ‘Wow, we have to do something. We’re bleeding money.’”

Once HAFA presented its financial analysis, it shared three possibilities with farmers for the future of the food hub that seemed realistic based on the data

the organization had gathered. The first option was to let farmers break off from the hub and go on their own, negotiating their own prices and creating their own invoices like they had watched HAFA model to them over the last few years. Second, farmers could continue working with the HAFA Food Hub but sunset the program in two years. Last, HAFA suggested members could form a new cooperative with Latino and immigrant farmers to continue the work in a more financially sustainable manner.

While HAFA shared its ideas for the future, it didn't ask members to make a decision that night. Instead, it told them: "We're only planting the seed right now. These are serious issues that have to do with not only you but your family and your business. These are not decisions you can make in one meeting or overnight." HAFA continued by laying out the plan for what was to come: one-on-one meetings with each food hub member, then another large group gathering several months later where people could share thoughts once they had time to think and reflect.

HAFA closed the meeting with a quick survey, asking attendees to raise their hands to show which of the three options most interested them. The organization had farmers raise their hands not only so farmers in attendance could see what others were thinking but so HAFA knew what kind of information to follow up on with each participant. Demographically, there was a split in the room. Many of the older farmers were interested in the option to stay with HAFA, while younger farmers felt energized to go off on their own or start something new.

"I thought, 'This is it. HAFA is doing exactly what we're supposed to be doing,'" says Pakou. "We're going to walk in solidarity with our older farmers and help them dignify the last years of their labor so that they can retire with a nest. For our younger farmers, we're going to propel them into the future with this shared cooperative that's going to be even bigger than what HAFA is doing alone. I remember thinking in that meeting, this is exactly why HAFA was created."

> "I remember thinking in that meeting, this is exactly why HAFA was created."
>
> **Pakou Hang**
> Hmong American Farmers Association





## CHARACTERISTIC №3


When the MDA started the microloan program for immigrant farmers, HAFA realized people weren't taking advantage of it because to qualify they needed a business plan and a Schedule F tax form, which most didn't have. To remedy the problem, HAFA partnered with the Eastside Financial Center so farmers could get access to financial counseling sessions and one-on-one meetings where they could learn how to write a business plan and pull together financial statements. HAFA also set up trainings for Hmong tax preparers, many of whom weren't helping farmers file Schedule F tax forms because they weren't aware the form existed either. On top of that, HAFA created a matched savings program so farmers could qualify for an extra $2,000 prior to applying for a loan. The organization made that choice knowing Hmong people often have a deep aversion to accumulating debt (in Laos, you can actually have your children taken away if you don't repay money you owe), which often prevents Hmong farmers from being able to afford larger purchases, such as agricultural equipment. The matched savings program encourages HAFA members to take advantage of the MDA microloan program while also reducing the amount of debt risk (and stress) farmers have to take on in order to buy a tractor or truck to expand their business to the next level.

PAKOU HANG


FRESH PRODUCE

HAFA FARM

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

HAFA TEAM MEMBER

HAFA FARMER

FARMERS MARKET

HAFA FARMER

HAFA OFFICE

FARMLAND