

# **Unearthing Agricultural Legacies: Fannie Lou Hamer - Planting Roots for Black Agricultural Success Through the Freedom Farm Cooperative**

Mikayla A. Daniels<sup>1</sup>

Joy E. Morgan<sup>2</sup>

Wendy J. Wanrer<sup>3</sup>

Gary E. Moore<sup>4</sup>

## **Abstract**

*This historical research study examines the creation and purpose of the Freedom Farm Cooperative through the lived experiences of its founder, Fannie Lou Hamer. The objectives include describing who Fannie Lou Hamer was, the purpose of the Freedom Farm Cooperative, and how Fannie and the Freedom Farm initiative inspired African American contributions to agriculture. The research employs critical race theory to explore both historical and contemporary challenges faced by marginalized communities in agriculture, especially regarding how systemic racism continues to impact agricultural engagement, education, and extension programming. Born into the oppressive sharecropping system in the Mississippi Delta, Fannie's life was marked by racial injustice, poverty, and food insecurity. These hardships fueled her drive to achieve Black self-sufficiency and empowerment, separate from the unjust systems impacting her and her community. The Freedom Farm Cooperative was created as a response to these inequities, aiming to nurture a Black-led community that could meet its own needs for food, employment, education, housing, and financial support. In addition to teaching members essential skills for self-sustainability, Mrs. Hamer used this initiative to empower her community to exercise political and social freedoms as well. Through the story of the Freedom Farm Cooperative, this study seeks to inspire transformative economic and social change, offering lessons for modern extension and education efforts to increase minority participation in agriculture.*

## **Introduction**

Born into a sharecropping family in Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer's experiences with poverty and racial injustice fueled her passion for creating a self-sufficient Black community (Haskins, 1992). This drive led to the establishment of the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC), an initiative that provided food, employment, education, housing, and financial support to hundreds of families (Rubel, 1990). The FFC, though short-lived, stands as a powerful example of Black success in agriculture. Fannie's work highlights the connection between agriculture, race, and economic power, demonstrating how land ownership and agricultural knowledge can be tools for empowerment and civil rights advancement. The significance of the FFC, in the context of extension services, is underscored through Mrs. Hamer's cooperative model, which aligns with the core principles of agricultural extension. However, this initiative also illuminates the need for agricultural extension services to address critical theories in discourse to correct social and racial inequalities that are inherent in the field (Harris, 2008). This paper aims to unearth yet another marginalized

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<sup>1</sup> Mikayla A. Daniels is a doctoral student of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural and Human Science at North Carolina State University, 27695, [madanie5@ncsu.edu](mailto:madanie5@ncsu.edu). ORCID#0009-0007-6977-4222

<sup>2</sup> Joy E. Morgan is an associate professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural and Human Science at North Carolina State University, 27695, [jemorga2@ncsu.edu](mailto:jemorga2@ncsu.edu). ORCID#0000-0001-5790-7592

<sup>3</sup> Wendy J. Warner is an associate professor of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural and Human Science at North Carolina State University, 27695, [wjwarner@ncsu.edu](mailto:wjwarner@ncsu.edu). ORCID#0000-0002-7804-7138

<sup>4</sup> Gary E. Moore is a professor emeritus of Agricultural Education in the Department of Agricultural and Human Science at North Carolina State University, 27695, [gmoore@ncsu.edu](mailto:gmoore@ncsu.edu). ORCID#0009-0001-6467-7630

narrative, arguing for a more inclusive approach to agricultural education and extension that acknowledges the historically disenfranchised and works towards equitable empowerment for underserved communities. Fannie Lou's contributions are just one of many often-untold stories that have the potential to empower the Black community and reveal the true legacy of Black Americans in agriculture.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this historical research paper is to recognize African Americans' contributions to agriculture, paying homage to their heritage and labor, while challenging the limited and negative narratives that have long surrounded these contributions. This shift in perspective not only transforms how minorities view agriculture but also constructs a more positive association with the field, which is a civic duty that must be carried out accurately. Fannie Lou Hamer's story and the Freedom Farm initiative are just one of many examples of African Americans' ongoing efforts to liberate themselves from oppressive societal structures through extension-based work.

The objectives include:

- 1) Who was Fannie Lou Hamer?
- 2) What was the purpose of the Freedom Farm Cooperative?
- 3) How did Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farm Cooperative reshape African Americans' contributions to agriculture?

To achieve this, a historical analysis of Fannie Lou Hamer, the Freedom Farm Cooperative, and their significance was conducted. Historical research "systematically and objectively locates, evaluates, and interprets evidence from which we can learn about the past...[for] increased understanding of the present" (Ary et al., 1985, p. 489). The goal of exploring this narrative is to inform current agricultural practices, trends, and needs while noting how this story intersects with extension work in America.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research adopts a critical lens to evaluate the historical foundations of Fannie Lou Hamer's story and the formation of the Freedom Farm Cooperative. As Delgado and Stefancic (2010) explain, critical race theory "considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourse take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious" (p. 3), recognizing race as central to the fabric of society. By confronting the racism ingrained in the core structures of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010), this framework has enabled us to examine agricultural issues within education and extension services for marginalized communities that persist due to historical traditions, practices, and injustices.

Given the Jim Crow era and the segregative context from which this account emerges, it is crucial to acknowledge and analyze how these dynamics influenced the formation of the Freedom Farm Cooperative, a radical and progressive initiative for the African American community at the time. This critical take offers insight into implications of the "legacy of slavery and segregation in the US [as it] is embedded in modern-day...systems and policies" (Masiga, 2022, para. 2), particularly within agriculture.

### **Methods**

Historical research is a process in which one seeks to understand the past through a thorough examination of accounts, evidence, and narratives (Ary et al., 1985; Haahr, n.d.). This includes analyzing various artifacts, archival data, biographies, texts, images, and more (Haahr, n.d.). Primary and secondary sources, such as biographies, speeches, personal accounts, historical literature, and textbooks, were used to understand the context of Fannie Lou Hamer's life and her Freedom Farm initiative. Using content analysis,

which aims to “systematically transform [information] into a highly organized and concise summary of the key results” (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017, para. 8), these sources were critically analyzed. This hermeneutic approach is a reflective process that required researchers to remain objective while considering the potential influence of their own backgrounds on the presentation and interpretation of findings to avoid preconceived judgments and establish a comprehensive exploration of the content and its conclusions (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

To minimize personal biases during interpretation, the primary and secondary sources were triangulated for accuracy, a research method that utilizes multiple sources to corroborate or refute data, thereby strengthening the arguments made and developing a more holistic understanding of the account (Carter et al., 2014). Through these measures, we drew important conclusions and themes that informed the objectives of the study. To further ensure the accuracy and thorough interpretation of the findings presented in this study, we committed to addressing any potential threats to validity by consulting external sources, engaging with other researchers, and maintaining an objective stance.

## Findings

### Question One - *Who was Fannie Lou Hamer?*

Fannie Lou Hamer’s story of relentless dedication to advancing the Black community through cooperative work cannot be fully appreciated without first understanding the oppressive context in which she lived and the deep passion that fueled her fight for justice. Born into a family of sharecroppers on October 6th, 1917, in Montgomery County, Mississippi, Fannie Lou was the youngest of 20 siblings (Lee, 1999). Her family relocated to Sunflower County, in the Delta of Mississippi, shortly after her birth, where they faced the brutal realities of sharecropping (Lee, 1999). In place of slavery, sharecropping was a system designed to exploit Blacks, keeping them in cycles of poverty despite their hard labor (Crozier, 2021). By the age of six, Fannie was working alongside her family in cotton fields for the next 18 years, where they harvested cotton and other cash crops (Hamlet, 1996). Fannie Lou’s early years were marked by hunger, long hours, and manipulation, where her family survived on as little as \$300 a year, though bringing in upwards of 60 bales of cotton annually (Lee, 1999).

These formative experiences instilled in Fannie a deep understanding of the structural inequities that kept many Black families in the Mississippi Delta oppressed (Lee, 1999; McCutcheon, 2020). Her firsthand experience with sharecropping laid the foundation for her activism, as she witnessed how economic and political disenfranchisement were intertwined to maintain subjugation (Lee, 1999; McCutcheon, 2020). However, in 1962, her life would take a pivotal turn and be a moment she would later call her freedom (White, 2017).

After attending a Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) meeting, where she was educated on her voting rights as a Black American, Fannie Lou Hamer was among the first to volunteer to register (Hamlet, 1962; Lee, 1999). However, Fannie’s attempts to register were met with fierce retaliation (PBS, n.d.). Upon learning about Mrs. Hamer’s intent to register to vote, W. D. Marlow, the plantation owner for whom she worked, demanded she withdraw her name from the volunteer list or face termination and eviction from her home (Hamer, 1964/2022; PBS, n.d.), amongst other threats to seize her vehicle and furniture (Lee, 1999). Lee (1999) describes the encounter, noting Marlow’s comment:

*“...tell me whether you going back and withdraw your registration [application] or you going [to] have to leave here. We’re not going to have this in Mississippi, and you will have to withdraw. I am looking for an answer...if you don’t withdraw you will have to leave here” (p.33).*

However, Mrs. Hamer was set in her decision, “Mr. Marlow, I didn’t go to Indianola to register for you. I went down there to register for myself” (Rubel, 1990, p. 56). This moment highlighted for Fannie Lou the extreme lengths to which White landowners and authorities would go to maintain control over Black lives, threatening their homes and livelihoods if they dared exercise their rights (Lee, 1999). The cruel structure of the sharecropping system was now directly linked to White political tyranny. Whites would weaponize food, shelter, and safety to dissuade African Americans from voting (White, 2017). Displacement from homes, job terminations, and deprivation of basic necessities were all tools used to keep Black communities in a state of inferiority and economic dependency (White, 2017). Recognizing this, Fannie Lou Hamer came to comprehend that “land is key” and that it was “tied to voter registration” (White, 2017, p. 24). With land came food and shelter, and with those essentials came autonomy, and autonomy meant power (White, 2017). In Mrs. Hamers' words, “If you give a hungry man food, he will eat it. [But] if you give him land, he will grow his own food” (as cited in Rubel, 1990, p. 120).

Fannie had envisioned more for the Black community, and with this realization, she was driven to establish the FFC. Her vision for Freedom Farms was radical—it directly challenged systemic foundations of Black oppression, empowering people to take control of their own futures. Although initially driven by political advocacy and voting rights, the cooperative went beyond this and offered a means to reclaim dignity and agency through agriculture—a field to which Blacks have long had personal rights and ties (Crozier, 2021).

### **Question Two - What was the purpose of the *Freedom Farm Cooperative*?**

In Sunflower County, impoverished Black families faced an array of systemically racist obstacles, such as inadequate housing conditions, unsafe work environments, and even health issues like malnutrition, diabetes, and hypertension, which were often so problematic that many of the prescriptions written by physicians were for food rather than medicine (White, 2017). A defining moment came after a friend and mother came to Fannie Lou just days after losing her 18-year-old son, who “was never able to walk because he never had bones strong enough to walk on” (Lee, 1999, p. 147). Mrs. Hamer herself had faced similar challenges, with her own daughter often hospitalized due to malnutrition (Lee, 1999). These experiences drove her vision for an “agricultural mecca for Blacks” that would allow the community to feed itself continuously rather than relying on temporary provisions or discriminatory White aid that never came or never lasted (Lee, 1999, p. 153).

The Freedom Farm Cooperative, also known as the “co-op,” stemmed from the plight—exacerbated by systemic racism—of both Hamer and her local community (Smith II, 2019; White, 2017). It was established in 1969 and offered membership for a dollar a month, which many of the members could not afford; however, this did not deny any the opportunity to reap its benefits, as the co-op served “500 paying and 1,250 non-paying members” (Lee, 1999, p.156; Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021). In all its nobility, the FFC was a truly cooperative program that stood to mobilize marginalized communities through food, finance, housing, and education.

Freedom Farms acquired over 640 acres in the Mississippi Delta (Lee, 1999). The FFC would own nearly \$300,000 worth of land and about another \$65,500 worth of farming equipment and machinery (Lee, 1999). One of Fannie’s first projects with the purchased land included the Pig Bank. This initiative was started with the donation of 50 pigs total—45 pregnant sows and 5 boars (Hamlet, 1996)—from the National Council of Negro Women (Lee, 1999). The idea was to breed the pigs so each family could produce a litter (usually between 9 and 12 piglets) before slaughter (Hamlet, 1996). Afterward, families would then pay two piglets forward to replenish the communal “bank,” ensuring continued investment in community self-sufficiency (Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021). The Pig Bank went from supplying 135 families with pigs in the first year of operation to 300 families by the third, with a yield of upwards of 3,000 new pigs (Lee, 1999). “Bacon, sausage, hog head cheese, pigs’ feet, chitterlings, and other southern delicacies” were among

food items that were able to feed families (White, 2017, p. 28). Over time, over 865 families would be beneficiaries of the much-needed food and supplemental income (White, 2017).

Another large undertaking of the FFC was the use of land to provide nutritious vegetables for families to consume (Smith II, 2019). Acres of land would be set aside for community gardens that grew “kale, okra, tomatoes, string beans, turnips, corn, sweet potatoes, and more” (White, 2017, p. 27). The FFC even acquired land for a “catfish cooperative” and livestock grazing (Smith II, 2019; White, 2017, p. 27). Along with this, the FFC would obtain much of its income from the cash crops grown, including cotton, soybeans, and wheat (White, 2017). The FFC was a strategy implemented to benefit displaced and unemployed farmworkers and community members (Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021), so beyond food, the FFC aided in providing housing, education, and financial assistance.

White (2017) explains that during a period when many Black families in Sunflower County were living in poor conditions without basic amenities, the Freedom Farm Cooperative played a key role by purchasing land for housing developments and assisting families in securing mortgages. The FFC also established the Delta Housing Development Corporation. This project supported the community and built homes equipped with modern necessities such as electricity and indoor plumbing, providing more adequate and humane housing accommodations for the masses.

The cooperative also prioritized education, launching one of the state’s earliest Head Start programs, which became a major source of employment in the county (Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021). Head Start offered early education, healthcare, and nutrition services to Black children and their families (White, 2017). In addition to Head Start, the FFC provided hands-on vocational training, where members learned valuable skills like construction, sewing, and food preservation. Through efforts aimed at creating work for the Black Ruleville community in agriculture, educational services, and practical skill building, the Freedom Farms Co-op was able to financially assist many of its members (White, 2017). However, regardless of its numerous achievements in alleviating poverty and emancipating Black communities, the FFC encountered serious difficulties in the early 1970s that ultimately led to its closure (Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021).

In 1972, a severe drought devastated the cash crops vital to the cooperative’s operations (White, 2017). This was compounded by a national economic downturn, which led to a sharp decline in donor contributions. With fewer donations, failed crops, and increased attention on social services due to environmental disasters, the FFC struggled to maintain the support of remaining donors, pay its seasonal workers, cover loans, and meet other financial obligations (Lee, 1999; Smith II, 2019; White, 2017). While the cooperative had proven the effectiveness of collective action, maintaining such a large-scale initiative required significant funding and infrastructure (Lee, 1999). By 1974, the FFC was forced to shut down (White, 2017). Though Freedom Farms was unable to achieve long-term sustainability, its impact on the community was profound during its years of operation. It provided food, housing, and jobs for hundreds of Black families and illustrated the power of grassroots efforts in confronting economic and racial inequalities (Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021).

Despite its closure, the FFC left a lasting legacy, serving as a model for future initiatives focused on creating self-sufficient agrarian communities (Tobacco Farm Life Museum, 2021). Mrs. Hamer’s philosophy, centered on Black land ownership, used agriculture to promote autonomy and challenge the narrative that, though deeply tied to the legacies of slavery and sharecropping, agriculture was essential for Black American emancipation and liberation (Crozier, 2021). Fannie Lou Hamer redefined agriculture as a tool for reclaiming agency and dignity (White, 2017).

**Question Three - *How did Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farm Cooperative reshape African Americans' contributions to agriculture?***

Fannie Lou Hamer recognized that political power alone could not fully address the deep-rooted systemic oppression facing Black Americans (McCutcheon, 2020). While she was a powerful force in the civil rights movement and an advocate for voting rights, Mrs. Hamer also understood that access to the ballot box did not automatically translate into food or economic security. Her vision for the FFC extended beyond temporary relief—it was about building tools for security in a way that empowered Blacks to take control of their futures (Smith II, 2019). With this in mind, she envisioned the FFC as a transformative solution to economic and agricultural disenfranchisement in order to build long-term independence and community resilience through land ownership, food sovereignty, and cooperative economics.

By establishing the FFC in Sunflower County, Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer directly addressed the structural inequalities that had historically excluded Black Americans from owning land and profiting from agriculture. The cooperative purchased land and allowed members—many of whom were sharecroppers or displaced from their homes due to political activism—to grow food for themselves and their communities (Lee, 1999; McCutcheon, 2020; Smith II, 2019; White, 2017). Through this, the FFC not only helped reduce hunger but also served as a powerful symbol of both self-determination and communal agency. Members worked together to raise crops, construct homes, and establish a sewing cooperative, illustrating the potential of shared resources and democratic decision-making in resisting economic and social exploitation.

Moreover, the FFC challenged the notion that agriculture was a point of subjugation for Black Americans. Mrs. Hamer reimagined farming as a pathway to liberation, reclaiming agricultural labor as a source of dignity, self-sufficiency, and resilience. Her work offered a powerful counter-narrative to the plantation legacy that had long shaped perceptions of Southern agriculture and the role of Black people within it. Through the FFC, Fannie Lou Hamer reframed African American agricultural contributions, not solely as forced and exploitative labor tied to poverty, but now as intentional, empowering, and economically generative efforts rooted in Black American activism, advancement, and collective strength (Crozier, 2021).

Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy through the Freedom Farm Cooperative continues to inspire modern movements for food justice and Black land ownership, such as the National Black Food and Justice Alliance and the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust. Fannie's work serves as both a blueprint and a cautionary tale. Today, many Black-led agricultural endeavors still contend with barriers to land access, limited funding, and systemic disinvestment of rural Black communities (Lima, 2021). To honor Fannie Lou's vision, institutions and policymakers should provide tangible resources such as land grants, long-term funding, and policy reforms that empower marginalized communities to build resilient, self-determined food systems. Nonetheless, Mrs. Hamer's vision endures as a testament to the potential of combining agricultural practice with civil rights advocacy to create equitable and sustainable futures for downtrodden communities.

More than just a farm, the cooperative became a model for collective action, as members pooled resources, produced food, and built homes together. This cooperative approach directly challenged the systemic racism that perpetuated Black oppression in Sunflower County and offered an alternative path to freedom through agriculture (McCutcheon, 2020; Smith II, 2019). While Fannie Lou Hamer's work with the FFC stands as a powerful example of the strength of grassroots organizations and education, her legacy serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle to build systems in agriculture that uplift and sustain marginalized groups (Crozier, 2021).

## Conclusion

Mrs. Hamer centered agriculture in her efforts to establish self-actualized Black communities, recognizing the land as both a material and figurative foundation for liberation (Crozier, 2021). The Freedom Farm Cooperative exemplified this vision by integrating community education, resource sharing, and self-sufficiency—core principles that also define agricultural extension (Lee, 1999). In congruence with formal extension services, which aim to provide technical support, knowledge dissemination, and practical assistance to farmers and communities (USDA NIFA, n.d.), the FFC taught vocational skills, organized farming efforts, and created educational programming tailored to local needs. Much like modern extension programs, the cooperative empowered its community by reclaiming Black land ownership and agrarian knowledge to support local Black economies. Yet, Fannie’s approach extended beyond agricultural productivity as it was a deliberate response to the structural inequities that limited Black access to land, education, and opportunity.

This alignment between the FFC and agricultural extension highlights a shared commitment to community education but also emphasizes a critical divergence in purpose and audience. Traditional extension services have historically prioritized White rural landowners while systemically neglecting or excluding Black communities (Harris, 2008). In contrast, Hamer’s grassroots extension model was intentionally inclusive and radically progressive, where she prioritized the most economically and socially marginalized populations, illustrating that agricultural programs and cooperatives could serve as tools of justice rather than just a mechanism for economic output. In doing so, her work redefined what extension could be: community-driven, culturally relevant, and grounded in liberation and equity.

Gevorgyan and Mosinyan (2024) argue that history’s existence is dependent on its recognition, a concept that demands agricultural institutions to actively engage with the histories that have long been overlooked, particularly regarding Black and African American heritage. Recognizing that history plays a vital role in challenging dominant perceptions of agriculture (Atkins, 2013). Black and African American experiences must be acknowledged and made visible to secure their rightful place and influence within the field. As Crozier (2021) asserts, “to care for the totality of creation, one must first properly acknowledge and affirm the human...and the relationship to the land” (pp. 102-103). This quote accentuates the idea that justice and sustainability in agriculture are rooted in a holistic view that affirms human dignity and reclaims relationships with the land that have been severed by oppression. This perspective aligns with the foundational mission of Extension services, which is to serve the broader public through education, support, and empowerment.

However, such service must begin by recognizing not only the narratives that have been historically marginalized but also the power and possibility embedded in positive, resilient stories of Black agrarian engagement. These experiences, though often erased or sidelined, hold the potential to empower and reconnect Black communities to agriculture. The systematic exclusion of these narratives has long contributed to a culture of dissuasion and disengagement, creating distance between Black communities and agricultural spaces. Therefore, structural integration, through deliberate actions that embed Black agricultural knowledge and history into the very foundation of extension work, must take place. This includes developing curricula and programming that highlight Black agrarian contributions, hiring more Black extension professionals, establishing long-term partnerships with Black-led organizations, offering culturally relevant agricultural education in historically underserved communities, and creating leadership pipelines that reflect the demographics of those being served. Without these intentional shifts, Extension risks reinforcing disparities it claims to address.

Such disparities include the fact that Black individuals account for less than 1.5 percent of the nearly three and a half million agricultural workers (USDA NASS, 2024); the limited access urban youth have to agricultural programs, which in turn limits the development of positive attitudes, interest, and

involvement in agricultural professions and curricula (Jean-Philippe et al., 2017; Young & Jones, 2017); “the [continued] trajectory of Black land loss well into the twenty-first century” (Darity & Mullen, 2022, p. 209); and the persistent distorted perceptions among African Americans that associate agriculture primarily with slavery rather than with emancipatory empowerment—a misconception fueled in part by the lack of education surrounding positive Black historical narratives in agriculture (Smith II, 2019; Smith, 2007; Atkins, 2013). If Extension is to fulfill its stated mission to “respond to local needs, build trust, and engage effectively with [all] citizens” (USDA NIFA, n.d., para. 6), it must actively address these social injustices and their roots in erasure, exclusion, and neglect. This includes not only reaching those traditionally served by Extension but also intentionally re-engaging with Black communities who were historically entrenched in agriculture yet forcibly disconnected from its practices, knowledge, and opportunities (Harris, 2008). Addressing these disparities demands a reimagining of how agriculture is taught and represented, not only within Black communities but also within traditional agricultural classrooms, professions, and spaces.

Efforts must include integrating Black agricultural history into educational curricula, developing youth leadership programs centered on land stewardship, and establishing visibility of Cooperative Extension within urban and suburban communities. Equally critical is offering mental, financial, and legal support for Black landowners and farmers. These efforts are essential not only to reverse land loss but also to rebuild trust in agricultural institutions and prevent the looming extinction of Black agricultural professionals (Lima, 2021).

The narrative of the FFC and Fannie Lou Hamer is just one of many that demand agriculture be viewed through a critical lens to explore the true depth of ongoing problems and actualize meaningful solutions. Critical Race Theory offers an avenue by which this may be achieved by first understanding “...white supremacy and its subordination of people of color” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xii). Historically, the connection between race and agriculture has been the basis for how extension policies and services have operated (Harris, 2008). This foundation was made to marginalize and “exclude” African Americans as they were thought to have “no proper role in scientific agriculture” (Harris, 2008, p. 194). While attempts to rectify such issues have been made through integration and legislation, they remain still as just that...attempts (Harris, 2008). This paper explored the legacy of FFC to inspire modern agricultural extension services to expand their focus on equity and community-driven development, particularly among historically marginalized and currently under-prioritized Black American populations (Young & Jones, 2017). Critical frameworks such as CRT can further guide how extension addresses these longstanding inequalities by pushing institutions to question who benefits from their services and who remains excluded. Applying CRT to agricultural policy and extension work would involve re-assessing funding distribution, land grant university partnerships, and curriculum development through racially equitable lenses. In doing so, Cooperative Extension programs can shift from being passive distributors of knowledge to active agents of racially just agricultural change.

### **Recommendations**

The enduring legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Farm Cooperative offers not just historical insight but a visionary framework for present-day agricultural reform. As modern extension services grapple with the persistent racial and structural inequities in agriculture, there is a critical need to redefine outreach and education models that genuinely serve all communities. Drawing from the lessons of the FFC and the ongoing challenges faced by Black communities, several ideas emerge for improving agricultural extension.

One of the most essential steps is to center marginalized histories and voices within extension programming. For too long, Black and other historically disempowered communities have had their contributions to agriculture ignored or actively erased. Recognizing and teaching Black agrarian history is

not merely symbolic. It reshapes how communities see their place in agriculture and expands the narrative of who holds knowledge and expertise in the field. For example, land-grant universities could integrate curricula that explore the work of Black agricultural figures like Fannie Lou Hamer, George Washington Carver, and Thomas M. Campbell into 4-H youth programs, community workshops, and continuing education for adults. These narratives could serve as tools of empowerment and as a foundation for new forms of Black agricultural identity and involvement.

Equally important is the investment in community-driven and culturally relevant outreach. Just as the FFC operated through grassroots organizing, extension programs must *listen to* and *create with* the communities they serve. For instance, extension personnel could host regular community forums in predominantly Black towns and spaces, inviting churches, local nonprofits, and local leaders to identify needs and design programming together. Programs might include oral history storytelling events or community land use ideation/planning workshops.

More recommendations concern expanding urban agriculture and youth access. Given that urban youth, particularly in Black and Brown communities, are often excluded from traditional agricultural pathways, extension services must commit to producing opportunities in urban contexts. This includes incorporating Black agricultural contributions, stories, and opportunities into public school curricula, offering youth-led urban garden initiatives, and supporting and advertising mentorship programs such as MANRRS in urban spaces. A strong example would be an urban extension initiative creating a youth program, opportunity, or experience, such as providing summer internships on urban farms, offering stipends to aid with summer school garden development, or even helping plan community events that blend food justice with Black agrarian history at its core. These efforts would not only increase agricultural literacy but also rebuild cultural and career connections that Black urban youth could benefit from.

Structural barriers such as land access and ownership must also be addressed. The historical dispossession of Black landowners continues to affect generational wealth, individual wealth attainment, food sovereignty, and Black farmers' agricultural livelihoods. Extension programs have an opportunity, and responsibility, to support land retention and reclamation through education and legal aid partnerships. Partnering with organizations like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Northeast Farmers of Color Land Trust to host legal clinics, offer inheritance planning workshops, or provide sessions on USDA loan applications are all practical and relevant ways to engage and educate Black individuals involved in agriculture. These services would empower families to keep land in their hands and help others preserve Black-owned land for future generations.

Mrs. Hamer's belief in shared ownership and mutual aid as political resistance and economic development remains a powerful model for today. Extension services can support Black-led farming cooperatives by offering technical assistance, grant-writing aid, and marketing strategies that uplift the collective rather than individual prosperity. Cooperative Extension programs could support and partner with community-supported agriculture models, Black community co-ops, and markets. This builds community resilience and ensures that the benefits of agriculture are equitably felt across communities.

To measure the effectiveness of these efforts, evaluation should go beyond counting attendance or tracking program completion. They should ask deeper questions, such as: Who is being served? Who is being excluded? And why? Analyzing participation data through both qualitative and quantitative methods should consider factors such as race, income, funding access, and geography to help uncover disparities in access, participation, and impact. Federal and state governments should invest in research that examines not only the impact of these programs but also the consequences of inaction on marginalized stakeholders and communities.

None of these efforts will be successful without institutional and organizational backing. Grassroots movements like Fannie Lou Hamer's may collapse under the weight of a lack of funding and support. Extension systems should advocate for policy changes that prioritize historically underserved communities and allocate resources accordingly. This could include creating positions specifically dedicated to equity and inclusion in Extension offices, forming community advisory boards made up of historically marginalized groups, and lobbying state and federal governments for designated equity funding within extension-based and grassroots programming.

Fannie Lou Hamer's vision challenges us to think beyond technical solutions and toward systemic transformation. While the change will not be easy, who said the work of Extension was? We must continually reorient to learn from past failures and share future successes. These recommendations are only the beginning of the necessary steps toward building a truly cooperative system.

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