

## **BUILDING JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES BY SUPPORTING LOCAL INSTITUTIONS AND MAGNIFYING THEIR IMPACT**

Southeast Asia Resource Action Center  
Washington, DC

*"A community is only as powerful as its institutions."*

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**SUMMARY:** Over the course of 20 years, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) has woven together a powerful network focused on **refugee and immigration policy and practice**. Based in Washington, D.C. and directed by former Hmong refugee, KaYing Yang, SEARAC arose from the political upheaval throughout Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War. It offers **technical assistance** and coordinates **action on a wider scale** with a national network of 182 mutual assistance associations and spiritual organizations. SEARAC builds the capacity of these grassroots groups to deliver services and strengthen their communities while serving as effective conduits for political advocacy. SEARAC's strategies include the following:

- **Support a Natural Network:** The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center helps locally based mutual assistance associations to build their capacity and magnify their clout and influence. It has enabled groups, even those with deep histories of division and warfare to see that there is power in pulling together. A deep appreciation for the work of the mutual assistance associations drives SEARAC's efforts.
- **Pursue a Fundamental Vision:** SEARAC sees itself as part of a broader movement that encourages the United States to be its "best self," says KaYing Yang, not only welcoming immigrants as part of its heritage, but truly valuing the experiences, perspectives, and skills they bring. SEARAC has moved beyond its Southeast Asian roots and now collaborates closely with Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Pan African, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Caribbean-focused organizations.
- **Act on Two Tracks:** SEARAC provides a forum for the full range of interests of Southeast Asians living in the U.S. while also specifically promoting their community and economic development. Its recent activities address systemic changes. Policy accomplishments include implementation of the Hmong Naturalization Law of 2000 and collaborating with the U.S. Department of Justice on its Limited English Proficiency guidelines.

- **Cultivate New Leaders:** SEARAC challenges and also capitalizes on traditional concepts of leadership within the Southeast Asian community, bringing young people and women into leadership roles. Each year, SEARAC gathers fifty community leaders for four days of discussion about their communities. Topics include instruction in how the U.S. government works and strategic communications training. The trainings culminate when the trainees meet with government officials. According to KaYing Yang, “We need to identify more leaders, to grow leaders, and encourage them to lift their voices. That’s the essence of social justice.”

In the following case example, KaYing Yang and her colleagues describe SEARAC’s remarkable evolution:

## **THE POWER OF DIVERSE VOICES**

### **Southeast Asia Resource Action Center**

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#### **Echoes of Crisis**

**I**t was in the late 1970s that KaYing Yang says she discovered the activist in herself. "I was living in Wisconsin and the news was reporting about refugees. And I would rush to the television to learn because I knew they were talking about me and my history. The Vietnamese were coming. The Cambodians. They were refugees. At that time, I was nine or ten and I was thinking, 'That's me.' Too young to change my situation, but old enough to feel compassion, that's when I realized I had a larger goal."

KaYing's metamorphosis from Hmong refugee to executive director of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, echoed a pattern that had its roots in the political upheaval throughout Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War. In Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam political conflict and power struggles had led to the wholesale displacement and purging of hundreds of thousands of political and ethnic refugees. Many were killed, many were relegated to prison and work camps, hundreds of thousands fled to far-flung refugee camps, including off the coast of Hong Kong.

The late 1970s were years of great peril and uncertainty for the people of Southeast Asia. The "Vietnam War," the "Killing Fields," and countless journeys across the Mekong River only begin to point to the trials of that decade. Refugees entered the United States in great numbers from this region for the first time in search of safety and freedom, often through refugee camps in Thailand and other Asian countries. It was in this environment that SEARAC was formed, in 1979, to serve the pressing needs of those refugees. At that time, SEARAC was called the Indochina Refugee Action Center and then the Indochina Resource Action Center (IRAC). The final name change – to SEARAC – was made to leave behind the colonialist connotations of the word "Indochina."

Today, SEARAC is recognized as one of the most comprehensive and reliable sources of information on immigration and immigration policy in the country, and is frequently contacted by policy makers interested in analysis of the effects of local, state, federal, and foreign policy on immigrant communities. It is so widely recognized today that it has moved beyond its Southeast Asian roots and now collaborates closely with Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (APIA), Pan African, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Caribbean-focused organizations.

As SEARAC has evolved, it has taken on a multi-layered mission. Its work includes connecting local immigration activist groups to national organizations and to key policy makers, working to heighten the visibility of its constituent communities with the APIA community and immigrant communities more broadly, and building the capacity of grassroots groups to deliver services while serving as an effective conduit for political advocacy more generally.

In working towards its multi-layered mission, SEARAC has also helped do two other fundamental things: It has set itself up as an organization that has challenged and also capitalized on traditional concepts of leadership within the Southeast Asian American community, bringing in younger activists and women in leadership roles. At the same time, SEARAC has helped bolster the whole concept of volunteerism in the name of larger social justice causes—something that was historically taken for granted within many ethnic groups.

Even more fundamentally, notes KaYing, SEARAC has worked to remind the United States of its own democratic principles, helping the country to live up to those principles. Americans are taught from an early age that the U.S. is a country of immigrants through vivid stories of earlier waves of immigrants and their positive contributions, KaYing says. Yet, current portrayals of immigrants are often negative, casting them as strange, threatening and insular. Which is why SEARAC sees itself as part of a broader movement that encourages the United States to be its "best self," says KaYing, not only welcoming immigrants as part of its heritage, but also truly valuing the experiences, perspectives, and skills they bring. SEARAC, she says, holds the U.S. accountable to its own self-image.

In doing so, SEARAC contributes to the recognition and legitimacy of immigrant groups and immigrant leaders more broadly. Their extensive relationships with other groups, the expertise they offer, their linking of local to national, and their effective advocacy, all help to re-cast the way immigrant communities and their leaders are viewed not only by policy makers, but also by the general public.

### **Supporting a Natural Network**

Before SEARAC could ever get to the point where it was part of a broad effort in support of immigrants and immigrant rights, it had its own hurdles to overcome. The first significant question facing SEARAC, was how—and whether—an organization could actually pull communities together that had historically been defined by fierce national—even tribal—loyalties, communities that had every reason to be suspicious of both outsiders and outside intervention. The second question was how such a group might evolve as the crises in Southeast Asia abated, and the needs of new generations of immigrants and refugees from increasingly diverse backgrounds shifted from acute to more chronic.

That challenge would set the tone for more than 20 years of remarkable evolution and growth of an organization that has done what many thought would be impossible: bridge national, tribal, ethnic and generational divides to weave together a powerful network. This network focuses on the broader interests and needs of immigrants and refugees; interests and needs that sometimes demand fast action and other times require a longer view.

None of what SEARAC has been able to accomplish occurred easily or overnight. Early on, the group focused its efforts on building the voice of Southeast Asians in the U.S. Rather than build an organization from scratch, though, SEARAC activists realized that there were already dozens of community-based groups throughout the U.S. These groups already had the potential to provide the foundation for a network of grassroots activism that could be focused both on offering immediate and direct assistance to refugees, but also on broader issues and policies related to refugees and immigration across the country.

Working together with others concerned with the needs of the refugees, SEARAC prioritized the support of organizations that would represent Southeast Asian communities in America. These groups were quite appropriately called “mutual assistance associations” (MAAs) and supplied community-based voices that SEARAC envisioned for Southeast Asian Americans. These groups were locally based and managed by and for each ethnic group. Refugees were settled around the nation in varying numbers and concentrations, and each community had differing abilities to respond to their presence. MAAs provided a model that other refugees and ethnic groups followed. MAAs link newcomers with government and other broader American service providers, bridging the language and cultural barriers that otherwise isolate their communities. Moreover, MAAs promote the increased civic involvement of their constituents, building empowered American communities through voter registration, citizenship and other activities.

From the start, SEARAC recognized that helping refugees and immigrants develop the capacity to help themselves would be the only way to really build a strong, resilient, vibrant domestic settlement effort. In a 1979 MAA survey, the report concluded, "An investment in the future of self-help is the finest tradition of this country's historic response to all refugee and immigrant groups. It is only within a refugee's own ethnic community that lasting, long-range services can lead to successful socio-cultural transition and economic self-sufficiency within the pluralistic American society. Therefore, it is essential—as well as cost effective—that the potential contribution and resettlement roles of the MAAs be nurtured and developed."

Through the provision of grants, training, and technical assistance, SEARAC continues to focus much of its work on strengthening MAAs, which, in turn, continue to strengthen their communities. Recently SEARAC has also begun to work with religious institutions such as temples and churches that provide social services to their communities. In 2005, SEARAC is providing \$360,000 in social service and organizational development funding to eighteen of those organizations in six states. SEARAC's leaders hope to expand their grantmaking to other states in the future.

SEARAC now works with a national network of 182 MAAs and religious organizations that provide social services, with combined annual budgets totaling over \$75 million.

SEARAC's support of community organizational development extends beyond even local-level grassroots groups such as MAAs, as important as they are. SEARAC has contributed significantly to the development of the Cambodian American National Council (CANC), Hmong National Development, Inc. (HND), the Laotian American National Alliance (LANA), and the National Alliance of Vietnamese Service Agencies (NAVASA), all of which are national network organizations for their communities. SEARAC continues to collaborate with all of those groups and to help establish others, for example the first comprehensive national scholarship organization for diverse Asian and Pacific Islander Americans: the Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF).

### **Action on Two Tracks**

As SEARAC evolved through the 1980s, it settled on a two-track approach, according to its website: 1) "To provide a forum in which the needs and interests of Southeast Asians living in the United States can be voiced, enhanced and promoted;" and 2) "To serve as a resource center which promotes community development and economic advancement among Southeast Asian-Americans."

One significant early success centered on contribution to the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. SEARAC worked with other organizations and advocates in Congress to pass this Act, which established federal structures to deliver services needed by refugees to achieve self-sufficiency. The Act remains in effect today and established the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) under the Department of Health and Human Services to coordinate the resettlement process. The very term "refugee" was regularized in American usage by the Act. SEARAC played a central role in setting up the system for receiving refugees into the U.S., consequently affecting those coming from Europe, Africa and the Americas as well as Asia.

SEARAC was part of other political victories in the 1980s, including mobilizing the Southeast Asian community behind the Refugee Assistance Extension Act of 1985, which specifically stated that one of its criterion for awarding reception and placement grants would be "cooperation with refugee mutual assistance associations."

Those victories have brought roughly 1.5 million Southeast Asian refugees to the United States from the 1970s to the 1990s. Now the communities include at least two million members who are becoming more important to the broader American economy and culture than ever before. From the beginning, SEARAC viewed giving strength to the voices of the refugees themselves as essential to survival in the United States. And their needs as refugees were pressing indeed. Many came with few, if any, belongings, few marketable job skills, and the trauma of family loss and war, as well as the physical distress of the refugee experience.

Asian Pacific Americans are the nation's fastest growing racial group and Southeast Asian Americans are the fastest growing populations within the larger group. Most have been in the U.S. for fewer than thirty years and are foreign born. The stereotype of Asian Pacific Americans, that of a "model minority" that is academically and economically successful with few social problems, is especially misleading, particularly if applied to Southeast Asian Americans. In fact, many Southeast Asian Americans continue to be marginalized in terms of economic status, health and education. For example, 43% of Cambodians and 65% of Hmong in the U.S. live in poverty. Vietnamese women are five times more likely than European American to suffer from cervical cancer; and 20% of those who languish in Immigration detention are of Southeast Asian descent. The three ethnic groups with the highest poverty rates in California, the state with the largest Southeast Asian population, are Southeast Asian.

Despite these needs, many Southeast Asian Americans have achieved success and built strong families that are helping to revitalize many economically distressed areas. For example, many own small businesses or have been successful with high technology initiatives. Due to the disparity within the community, however, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans need strong and stable community organizations to meet rapidly changing needs.

From 1997 to 2004, KaYing's leadership and her dedicated and tireless staff initiated forward-looking programs built on the success and assets of the Southeast Asian American community unlike the past where programs grew out of the refugee crisis. SEARAC's recent activities attempt to create systemic changes and are the result of a collective vision based on the future of the Southeast Asian community living in the U.S. and their contribution to the global community.

The Successful New Americans Project (SNAP), is one example of the direct capacity-building help that SEARAC offers to MAAs, and it is a good example of connecting local groups to a larger national cause. As part of the SNAP push, SEARAC works with local groups to build their own organizational capacity for action, including helping with specific training and technical assistance needs (like strengthening boards of directors, handling internal fiscal issues and improving internal communication). SEARAC also has staff on the ground working with local groups to bring them greater local recognition by, for example, testifying at Town Hall meetings around the country as part of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Recognizing that churches and temples have long played a central role in providing services to immigrants and refugees, SEARAC has also recently launched its Values Empowerment Resources and Betterment (VERB) Fund, which so far has provided money to more than a dozen communities to help coordinate the activities of faith-based organizations and MAAs. The VERB fund aims to boost cooperation among MAAs representing different ethnicities.

SEARAC works with individuals in addition to organizations. While much of SEARAC's work can seem abstract, its annual "leadership-advocacy trainings" held in Washington, D.C., are concrete and vibrant examples of empowerment in action. Each year, SEARAC gathers together approximately fifty community leaders and advocates for four days of discussion about their communities; instruction in how

the U.S. Government works in general, as well as how it is working on the issues that matter most to Southeast Asian Americans; as well as strategic communications training. The trainings culminate when the trainees meet with their Members of Congress and officials of the President's Administration to educate them about their communities.

SEARAC is also working with the National Conference of State Legislatures on its "Building the New American Community" program, a three-city demonstration project aimed at helping immigrant communities build economic self-sufficiency through business and workforce development and training. The training and the networking that SEARAC does can have significant impact on larger policy issues, particularly at the federal level. The implementation of the Hmong Naturalization Act of 2000, was the result of a strong coordinated push among SEARAC partner organizations. SEARAC in collaboration with other civil rights organizations has recently finished working with the U.S. Justice Department on its Limited English Proficiency guidelines. Furthermore, the group is engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency about environmental justice and the impact of environmental issues and development projects on predominantly Asian Americans and Pacific Islander communities in the U.S.

Other SEARAC initiatives in recent years have included helping coordinate the screening and placement of nearly 1,000 Kosovar refugees in 1999. More broadly, SEARAC has helped shape and implement policies in a wide range of specific areas from census, to hate crimes, to English as a second language.

Most recently, SEARAC was very successful at rallying support to mobilize against deportation policies. This effort led to increased awareness of the harmful aspects of immigration laws, a widespread educational campaign around immigrant rights, and a catalyst for grassroots organizing among SEARAC communities nationally.

### **"We're Bigger When We Come Together"**

As the refugee crises in Vietnam and Cambodia abated it would not have been surprising to see an organization like SEARAC find itself devoid of direction, searching for a new mission. But in its initial and fundamental commitment to supporting other community groups, SEARAC had established a powerful core purpose: acting as the focus for mobilizing and coordinating action on a wider scale, and offering technical assistance to the ground-level groups in the field that are doing so much of the front-line work on immigration and resettlement. As long as there were individuals and community groups working on immigration and refugee issues at the local level, there would be a natural need for some broader network through which to build their capacity and magnify their clout.

But as much as SEARAC has evolved, working within a coalition of such diversity is always a challenge, points out SEARAC program director Sophy Pich. Southeast Asian countries have had a history of conflict among one another. "It can be difficult because, for example, the Lao community and the Vietnamese have had a history of warfare dating back to the 1960s. So there's this friction within those communities already. Bringing it from their homeland to here." The most powerful message that SEARAC has been able to convey is that there is power in pulling together. "We've realized that alone—Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia—we're small," says Pich; "we're bigger when we come together."

Simultaneously, it is a challenge to know where the role of the coalition and the community group meets and where it separates. "You have to make sure that you're not stepping on toes; that local groups don't see us as competition," says Yael Flusberg, a consultant to SEARAC.

In walking that line, SEARAC has been able to convince a remarkable galaxy of local groups that SEARAC's role is not to usurp, but to supplement and support. Still, says Max Niedzwiecki, director of program and resources development, the relationship is always bubbling. "It's not like we just go to communities and say, 'Okay, what do you want?' And then we just do whatever people tell us. And it's not as if we say, 'This is what you should want,' and we force it down their throats. We challenge each other and that's good. The MAAs are not shy about saying, 'You should be doing better at this or that.' And we're not shy about relating to the MAAs in the same way. It can be tense, but we think that sort of mutual challenging is healthy; it helps keep one another accountable."

Clearly though, what drives SEARAC is a deep appreciation for the job that its constituent MAAs are doing on the front line. "I often quote one of my mentors," says KaYing, "'A community is only as powerful as its institutions.' So if you have no institutions, what does that say about a community?"

In that regard, says KaYing, SEARAC understands its current role in serving as a resource center and clearinghouse for information on immigration, but also to help local groups establish themselves as influential within their own communities and in a broader context.

### **Widening the Weave by Grooming New Leaders**

The clearest testimony to the critical role that SEARAC plays in U.S. immigration, refugee and social justice affairs, though, is the fact that new immigrant groups are now joining the SEARAC coalition. Bosnian, Haitian, Somali, Ethiopian and Iraqi groups—all representing constituencies with all too familiar parallel experiences—have come to SEARAC for technical assistance and advice. As the oldest such organization, says KaYing, SEARAC is in a strong position to share lessons and strategies with colleagues.

Still, widening the weave comes with complications. "It's a challenge," says Ben de Guzman, with the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium. "How do you take these models of coalitions or of infrastructure that we're building and create a vision of social change that can accommodate a burgeoning number of groups? How do we all work together?"

KaYing says SEARAC has worked especially hard to communicate that all immigrant groups are working the same issues in the same arena, and that while cooperation may not come naturally all the time, it is a primary goal worth striving for. The notion that it is not a zero-sum game in which there are winners and losers is critical to the new style of leadership that SEARAC is trying to bring to the field.

Making that point has been exactly what SEARAC has proved so adept at doing. One of the most obvious answers to the question of how to pull such diverse groups together, says KaYing, is to embrace new groups and groom new leaders. "I think in the past you've too often seen a 'one group, one leader' model. That's not good enough. We need to identify more leaders, to grow leaders and encourage them to lift their voices. That's the essence of social justice. You don't speak for others, you let others speak for themselves."

In that way, says one activist, SEARAC has become "a strong and steady container that can hold many viewpoints, many people and many organizations." SEARAC has helped keep the country focused on one of its core values, says KaYing: that America is a nation of immigrants built on the premise that everyone who arrives here should have the opportunity to make a fresh start.

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