



# REFRAMING FOOD HUBS

Food Hubs, Racial Equity, and Self-Determination in the South



by Dara Cooper for

**race forward** & *Csi* CENTER FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION



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SOCIAL INCLUSION

**The new Race Forward** advances racial justice through policy development, sector transformation, research, movement and capacity building, and narrative strategy. Founded in 1981, the historic Race Forward brings systemic analysis and an innovative approach to complex race issues to help people take effective action toward racial equity. Founded in 2002, the historic CSI works with community, government, and other institutions to craft and apply strategies and tools to achieve racial equity. As one organization, we are dedicated to transforming institutions and empowering community in order to move policy, culture, and narrative for racial equity.

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# Author's Note

In partnership with Center for Social Inclusion (CSI)<sup>1</sup>, a national non-profit organization whose mission is to dismantle structural inequity and create equitable outcomes for all, I had the incredible opportunity in 2015 and 2016 to spend four months in the Southern states of North Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana. While there, I spent my time researching and observing the work of various communities and individuals who are engaged in food systems work in the South that embodies racial justice and equity.

The twenty-five formal interviews I conducted throughout the six states—in addition to more than fifty conversations, numerous events and observations, and the actual experience of being and connecting in-person with the people, places, expertise, and brilliance of Southern work—provide important analyses and insights on the intersection of racial justice and food systems. These critical voices tend to be

absent or sparse in the national conversation on food systems, yet they hold key insights that would build a better food system for everyone.

Following is a very brief summary of learnings from these interviews. It is an attempt to highlight one facet of a very complicated system with deep, nuanced histories. My hope in sharing the lessons from these individuals and organizations doing incredible work throughout the South is that they will help to inform the larger field of food systems work, as well as compel future good food policy and organizing work to center racial justice and equity.

A very special thank you to the many people who opened their homes, hearts, imaginations, and brilliance to me, including:

Savi Horne of Land Loss Prevention Project  
Amber Bell of Southwest Georgia Project  
Shirley Sherrod of Southwest Georgia Project  
and New Communities

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Center for Social Inclusion (CSI) united with Race Forward under the name Race Forward.

Cynthia Hayes (may she rest in peace) of Southeast African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON)

Farmer Julius Tillery of Conservation Fund

Dorathy Barker and Phillip Barker of Olusanya Farm

Eugene Cooke and JoVonna Johnson-Cooke of Grow Where You Are

Alsie Parks of Fresh2Health

Ardis Crews and the incredible leaders of Southern Organic Female Farmers Association

Dr. Walter Hill of Tuskegee University

Lindsay Lunsford of Tulip Gardens

Tamara Jones of Evident Impact LLC (also current executive director of SAAFON)

Jason Lindsay, formerly of Conetoe Family Life Services

Jenga Mwendu of Backyard Gardeners Association

Ben Burkett of Indian Springs Farmers Cooperative

Association and Mississippi Association of Cooperatives

Cooperation Jackson core leadership and members

Tracy McCurty of Black Belt Justice Center

Eboni Alexander and Tonya Taylor of Black Family Land Trust

Jahi Ellis of Oko Sustainable Farm

Baba Gary Grant of Black Farmers Agriculturalist Association

Greta Gladney of the Renaissance Project

Dr. Monica White of Detroit Black Community Food Security Network

And I thank so many more freedom fighters, farmers, hosts, and incredible activists who helped me to connect and gain such incredible insight into the brilliant, important good food work of the South.

This report is dedicated to lifting up the powerful legacy of three incredible Black farmers and leaders who have recently become ancestors:



Cynthia Hayes  
founder of Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network (SAAFON)



Dorothy Wise  
farmer in Nash County, NC



James Tillery Sr.  
3rd generation farmer in Rich Square, NC

# Executive Summary

**R**ace is a driving factor in the social, economic, and legal systems of this country. Our food and economic systems are codified by a set of historical and contemporary policies and practices that are explicitly race based, making it impossible to achieve equity in our food system without addressing race specifically and directly.

Food hubs are one way that farmers of color are transforming the food system so that the system centers racial equity, self-determination, and dignity. In outlining the major challenges and barriers associated with operating a food hub, this paper seeks to:

- Elevate the voices of farmers of color leading food hub work;
- Surface the major challenges associated with developing and maintaining food hubs within a racial equity framework;
- Situate the roots of food hub work as much deeper, more expansive, and more socially just than popularly defined.

This paper is based off of formal interviews with more than 25 farmers and leaders of food hubs and

“Food hub or good food work is not just about local food or replacing an exploitative, unequal system with a smaller, local replicate. This work is about shifting power.”

co-ops. It includes insights from conversations and visits with more than 50 additional leaders in food systems work or related fields, as well as from attending numerous conferences and convenings in the South.

This paper is not an exhaustive overview of food hub and co-op work, rather it is intended to amplify and make visible some of the voices, concerns, histories, and work of communities of color to offer a new narrative of good food work for the broader field — one that paves a way forward that is rooted in racial equity.

“It’s not Jim Crow times, but a lot of farmers are still using practices from Jim Crow. And it’s not just the farmers, it’s [the] USDA.”

—JULIUS TILLERY  
Fifth-generation Black farmer in North Carolina

It aims to lift up a more racially inclusive narrative, history, and roots in this work in hopes of lending to much more racially just imaginations for the future of food systems work.

## History of Food Hubs and Broader Food Systems Work

It is impossible to consider racial equity without considering and understanding the dynamic and complicated history of a U.S. agricultural system birthed from exploitation, domination, and the destruction of entire populations. It is clear food systems work is about much more than food and is deeply connected to the myriad of ways communities of color experience injustice.

Historical inequities continue to be replicated today in a model described as modern-day sharecropping.

The majority of challenges and barriers faced in operating a food hub stem from “racism in the marketplace” that has led to disparities in market prices for Black vs. white producers, in addition to generational poverty that has resulted in decades of disinvestment in the community.

This history isn’t typically reflected in the mainstream narrative around food hubs, which (with few exceptions) has been dominated by white voices.

## New and Developing Food Hubs

In a food system and economy that exploits and fails people of color, co-op and food hub work has proved over time to be a useful alternative that counters barriers to entry and access while furthering goals of self-determination.

Communities, particularly in the South, have a wide array of insights and imaginative visions for alternative realities, yet too often their contributions and needs are unrecognized and their work underfunded.

Black-led organizations and institutions are working with limited budgets to fight against the systematic disenfranchisement and challenges vulnerable producers of color face. This report includes examples of food hubs, sheds, and co-ops that have led incredible work in the South in bringing food to their communities and attempting to change the food system as we know it.

For instance, the Southern Organic Female Farmers Association is one exciting formation around food systems work. Led by a group of Black women, SOFFA has already accomplished quite an amount of incredible work since it was founded in 2014. What is particularly interesting is the creativity of their vision and work.



This work of SOFFA is important because not only is it providing solutions to meet the immediate food access needs of local communities, but the organizers are also developing a nuanced strategy that includes economic development, economic empowerment, and reclaiming and building political power in Henderson, North Carolina, where it is located.

Meanwhile, Conetoe Family Life Services is playing a significant role in developing the area's food systems. CFLS operates a 27-acre farm, a roadside mobile market, a bee bus to produce honey, and a youth training program with the vision of turning the garden into a teaching hub where children can learn every aspect of production, from seed to table.

## Key Recommendations

If we want a truly transformed system — a truly just system — we must commit to divesting from our current system, naming race, and ultimately destroying what we know as a system of white supremacy that does not benefit the majority of the population.

Food hub and food systems work is often much more than just meeting market demands — it is rooted in countering dispossession, building power, reclaiming culture, improving health conditions, growing economic opportunities, and dreaming and reclaiming alternate realities.

To dismantle structural inequity and create racially equitable food outcomes for all, we must address challenges Black farmers and other farmers of color face around land security, USDA discrimination, access to capital and resources, education and training, and marketplace inequities.

We recommend the following five key strategies where we are most capable of creating racially equitable food hubs:

**Land Security:** The USDA should issue a moratorium on foreclosures of Black land.

**USDA Discrimination:** The USDA should implement more measures to greatly improve opportunities for farmers and producers of color to obtain equal access to loans, capital, and public and private resources.

**Access to Capital and Resources:** National and local philanthropy should provide resources to local leadership for convenings; Farm Bill advocacy should include a significant increase in funding opportunities for organizing and legal support needed to resist the structural barriers facing producers of color, such as property tax hikes, discrimination in USDA field offices, and more.

**Education, Certification, and Training:** There needs to be an increase in creating and investing in programs that support and train Black youth and other youth of color who are interested in farming.

**Marketplace Inequities:** The USDA should recognize and support alternative, cooperatively owned marketplaces that value micro-market farms. The USDA and investors should also expand and make more accessible resources to help farmers vulnerable to loss.

And finally, “one of the most important ways that we can create an equitable food hub system based on racial equity is to invest in cooperative ownership and collective purchasing models, specifically in and led by communities of color.”



# Introduction

**F**ood hubs have received quite a lot of buzz in local food systems work, especially over the past decade, garnering rapidly growing interest among researchers, investors, and practitioners, yet as farmer and hub operator Ben Burkett put it, “That idea, that ain’t nothing new.”

The purpose of this paper is two-fold:

- One, the paper seeks to elevate the voices of farmers of color leading food hub work and to surface some of the challenges associated with developing

“I like the idea of a food hub. Get us farmers growing, and we know we have a place that’s going to buy it. That idea, that ain’t nothing new though.”

—BEN BURKETT

Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, Indian Springs, Mississippi

and maintaining food hubs within a racial equity framework.

- Two, the paper seeks to situate the roots of food hub work as much deeper, more expansive, and more socially just than popularly defined.

The National Food Hub Collaboration defines a regional food hub as “a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demands<sup>1</sup>.” However, given the rich and diverse histories of food systems work, particularly among communities of color, we know that food hub work (also known as food sheds and co-ops) can embody deeper meanings beyond simply meeting market demands. This work is often rooted in resistance, self-determination, and, quite frankly, survival. According to scholar Dr. Monica White, “In the absence of having what we need, Black people create our own. That’s resilience. Food hubs are about bottom-up resiliency.”<sup>2</sup>

In her book on the history of African-Americans and cooperatives, Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard details a rich history during which Black communities have engaged for decades in cooperative work “in order to address market failure, asymmetric information, distrust of opportunism, excessive market power, and barriers to entry.”<sup>3</sup> In a food system and economy that exploits and fails people of color, cooperatives and food hub work have proved over time to be useful alternatives that counter barriers to entry and access

while also furthering goals of self-determination. According to Ralph Paige of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF), “We are providing an alternative to the existing system. We’re empowering people to take control over their own lives, which often forces change on the entire community ... changes that demand community institutions to be more just.”

Acknowledged by Dr. Nembhard as “the heart and soul of the current African-American cooperative movement,” since 1967, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives has created or supported more than 200 co-ops, facilitated more than \$80 million in sales through cooperatives, and assisted more than 5,000 Black farmers in saving more than 175,000 acres of Black-owned land. It currently has a membership of more than 25,000 mostly Black and low-income rural families, including many family farmers. With a clear objective to create “local food economies and systems that can sustain the communities in which our members live,” no analysis of food hubs and food systems work can exist without acknowledging the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.

“For decades, communities of color have used food hubs to serve a variety of functions, for example, using them to aggregate the yields of multiple farmers to then distribute to communities or other customers.”<sup>4</sup> However, this history isn’t typically reflected in the mainstream narrative around food hubs, which, with few exceptions, has a typically white-dominated face and voice (though a publication from PolicyLink<sup>5</sup> on food hubs and equity attempts to address this). For example, the USDA’s 92-page

1 “Regional Food Hub Resource Guide,” United States Department of Agriculture, <https://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/Regional%20Food%20Hub%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>.

2 Monica White, interviewed by Dara Cooper, 2016.

3 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).

4 See more in *Collective Courage* by Dr. Gordon Nembhard as well as the essay “The Deep Roots of Our Land-Based Heritage: Cultural, Social, Political, and Environmental Implications” by Dr. Baba Owusu Bandele in *Land and Power: Sustainable Agriculture and African Americans*, among other resources.

5 “Equitable Development Toolkit: Equitable Food Hubs,” PolicyLink, [http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/equitable-food-hubs\\_o.pdf](http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/equitable-food-hubs_o.pdf).

“Regional Food Hub Resource Guide”<sup>6</sup> defines and offers examples of food hubs and features the history and notable work of a North Carolina food hub, Eastern Carolina Organics. However, at the time the guide was written, less than 40 miles away from Eastern Carolina Organics was Operation Spring Plant, a food hub that had been operated by Black farmers Phillip and Dorathy Barker since the 1980s. There was no mention of Operation Spring Plant in the USDA’s guide. There was also no mention of FSC/LAF.

For the purposes of this project, racial justice and equity mean making Black, Indigenous, and other people of color’s<sup>7</sup> work and insights visible while identifying opportunities to increase their power and agency within the food system. This means that food hub or good food work is not just about local food or replacing an exploitative, unequal system with a smaller, local replicate. This work is about shifting power. Communities most impacted by structural racial inequity understand very intimately how the mainstream industrial food system is exploitative, unfair, and discriminatory and how it yields overwhelmingly destructive and unhealthy results that disproportionately impact communities of color.

We have concrete examples we can look to in history and even today to see how race explicitly impacts our food and economic system and thus the socio-economic conditions of communities of color in this country. Consider the occupation and domination of land and assaults against Indigenous people in this country, the enslavement and attempted dehumanization of Africans, separate and unequal Jim Crow laws, banks redlining and discriminating

“Food hub or good food work is not just about local food or replacing an exploitative, unequal system with a smaller, local replicate. This work is about shifting power.”

against Black and Brown communities and even the ways in which labor laws were designed to specifically exclude Black (and now Black and Brown) labor via the exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers from any workplace protection or fair wages. All of these policies and laws were designed from an explicitly race-based process with the creation of a power structure rooted in white supremacy and anti-Blackness. These policies and laws, or in some cases, the legacy and after effects, continue today.

Today we know that about one in four Black households (26 percent) face hunger compared to approximately one in ten (11 percent) of white households nationally. We also know that workers continue to be exploited within our food system. According to Race Forward, “Eighty-six percent of food workers surveyed by the Food Chain Workers Alliance earn poverty wages; only 13.5 percent make a living wage.”<sup>8</sup>

Race continues to be a driving factor in the social, economic, and legal systems of this country. Given our food and economic systems are codified by a set of historical and contemporary policies and practices that are explicitly race based, no equity can be achieved without addressing race specifically and directly.

Racial equity necessitates a process to challenge laws and practices that are racialized. It is about naming

6 “Regional Food Hub Resource Guide.”

7 Note: Due to the network and leads of the researcher, in addition to the demographics of the Southern states where interviews occurred, this report primarily interviewed Black producers. It is important that Brown and Indigenous producers are also interviewed and highlighted.

8 “Good Food and Good Jobs for All,” Race Forward, <https://www.raceforward.org/research/reports/good-food-and-good-jobs-all>.

and challenging the unfair assumptions that relegate Black and Brown communities to inferior positioning, limited resources, and restricted power while white communities continue to benefit from unearned resources, privileges, and power.

If we want a truly transformed system—a truly just system—we have to be committed to divesting from our current system, naming race, and ultimately destroying what we know as a system of white supremacy that certainly does not benefit the majority of the population.

Food hubs, cooperatives, and other forms of good food systems infrastructure work have played a key role in the construction of alternative systems where communities most impacted are not at the mercy of other decision-makers rooted in an unfair economy, but are the decision-makers. They have allowed communities most impacted by structural racial inequity to imagine and then create new ways to feed their families and meet the demands of their communities. Today, they have the potential to transform not only our food systems, but the socioeconomic conditions of communities everywhere, particularly those most impacted.

For this project, racial equity means supporting the systems around food access that are developed and led by communities of color. It does not mean thinking of communities of color solely as recipients of service. It does not mean white-dominated organizations and institutions making decisions and only consulting with communities of color or engaging when a majority-white leadership is in need of diversifying. Racial equity means identifying, understanding, making visible, supporting, and lifting up the work of people and communities who understand the fallacy of whiteness as supremacy and lifting up those who lead from an inclusive or community self-determining framework.

“It’s not Jim Crow times, but a lot of farmers are still using practices from Jim Crow. And it’s not just the farmers, it’s [the] USDA. It took the [Pigford] settlement to change that. A lot of farmers don’t want to take any loans out of USDA.”

—JULIUS TILLERY,

Fifth-generation Black farmer  
Durham, North Carolina

Racial equity in food hub work does not only mean having people of color in leadership roles. The structure and staffing of the hub should also be based on principles of racial equity, meaning that the food hub should serve as a reflection of a deeper concern about the situational, economic, health, positional and political power of the larger communities who have been historically disenfranchised. According to farmer and cooperative movement leader Ben Burkett, “You always gotta be trying to help somebody, bring them out of chains. You can’t always be worried about yourself.” Without fail, every individual interviewed for this project saw the connection between their food systems work and larger systems and had a clear understanding of the need to build or shift power.

# Methodology

This project is based off of formal interviews with more than twenty-five farmers and leaders of hubs and cooperatives. It also includes insights from conversations and visits with more than fifty additional leaders in food systems work or related fields, as well as lessons gleaned from attending numerous conferences and convenings in the South, including the Professional Agriculture Workers Conference, the Southwest Georgia Project food hub meeting, UN Human Rights Working Group hearings at Cooperation Jackson's Lumumba Center, and more.

This project is not meant to be an exhaustive overview of food hub and co-op work. Rather, it is intended to amplify and make visible some of the voices, concerns, histories, and work of communities of color in order to offer a new narrative of good food work for the broader field, one that points toward a way

forward that is rooted in racial equity. It is intended to lift up a more racially inclusive narrative, history, and roots in this work in hopes of lending to much more racially just collective imaginations for the future of food systems work.

Following are examples of food hubs, sheds and co-ops that have led incredible work in the South bringing food to their communities and attempting to change the food system as we know it.



# History of Food Hubs and Broader Food Systems Work

“We called it vegetable packing sheds. The hub is usually attached to that shed, where they do the actual work.”

—PHILLIP BARKER, OLUSANYA FARM  
Oxford, North Carolina

## Dorathy and Phillip Barker, Operation Spring Plant

North Carolina dairy farmers Dorathy and Phillip Barker began running their food hub Operation Spring Plant in the early 1980s, well before any national attention on food hubs. According to Mr. Barker, they didn't call it a food hub at the time, but that's exactly what it was. Working with about ten mostly Black farmers within a 50-mile radius, Operation Spring Plant aggregated, processed, packaged, graded, and distributed those farmers' goods daily to customers that included grocery stores, hotels, roadside vendors, the local school system, and other vendors. The Barkers operated the food packing shed in Faison, North Carolina, where they said the highest concentration of Black farmers existed. They operated until 2009, when “business started to dwindle,” and then moved the operation to Oxford, North Carolina, where they currently farm

The area, according to the Barkers, was a major tobacco area. They were able to convince farmers to certify organic and shift away from tobacco production. Early on, the Barkers understood the potential economic benefits of the local and organic food markets

and convinced and helped to train Black farmers to become certified, showing them the economic advantage of organic food production versus tobacco production.

The Barkers explained some of the major challenges and barriers they faced in operating a food hub, namely the uniformity required from markets and what they described as “racism in the marketplace,” which led to disparities in market prices for Black producers when compared to white producers. They also explained the difficulty of meeting market demands. Phillip Barker said:

“Our organization tried to provide the training in terms of grading, washing, and processing necessary to move products in the mainstream market, but we found a lot of that was a difficult process. When you're selling to grocery stores, they don't care if it's ten farms. Everything has to be uniform. It has to look pretty much the same.”

To compound matters, meeting market demands often meant that growers connected to the hub might end up with a loss, due to rejection of the farmers' produce. According to Mr. Barker:



“So either you lose money at redoing it because you can’t take the risk of sending it (away). But we found we created a problem with the growers, because now you have to throw some of their product away, and that reduces what they were looking for.”

The Barkers’ food hub work in eastern North Carolina ended two years ago, but they are currently involved in reinvigorating the work with a focus on the Rocky Mount area. “The opportunity now lies in Rocky Mount. It would be very good if we were able to come around that [area] and make it happen. If we stay scattered, we aren’t going to accomplish anything,” Mr. Barker said.

Today, the Barkers continue to farm on 350 acres of land and own twenty acres. They originally owned 300 acres, but due to issues with tax increases and a lack of assistance from the USDA Farm Services Administration, they were forced to sell 280 acres. They also were not included in the Pigford lawsuit even though, according to the Barkers, they had been discriminated against by the USDA. They explained

“Land is power, because years ago we used that land during the civil rights era to free our people from jail. During the civil rights era, we used our land as collateral. So land is power.”

—DORATHY BARKER

there are many Black farmers who were left out of the suit, which charged that the USDA was systematically discriminating against Black farmers. Additionally, they raised the concern that the land lost due to the USDA’s systematic discrimination against Black farmers was never recovered via the Pigford settlement.

The Barkers continue to advocate for the ability of Black farmers to retain their land as an essential

## Black Farmers Discrimination Lawsuit Against The USDA

In the face of the drastic decline in the number of Black farmers and increasing land loss, Black farmer advocacy groups such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Black Farmers Agriculturalist Association, and Land Loss Prevention Project organized to protest the USDA’s role in actively discriminating against Black farmers. A class action lawsuit, *Pigford v. Glickman*, was filed, and it ultimately proved successful, as the USDA was found to be systematically discriminating against Black farmers by denying

them aid, disaster relief, and other resources. The lawsuit was settled in 1999. However, due to challenges such as lack of outreach and time limits on claims processing, advocacy groups pushed for what became known as *Pigford II*, which resulted in a \$1.25 billion settlement for Black farmers. Many challenges remain (discussed throughout this paper), but the victory of proving institutionalized racism in a major federal agency was and continues to be monumental.

## Ben Burkett, Indian Springs Farmers Cooperative Association and Mississippi Association of Cooperatives

Another example of food hub work in the South with a decades-long history is that of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and one member particular—the Indian Springs Farmer Association of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives. According to fourth-generation Black farmer Ben Burkett, local farmers have been “food hubbing” dating back to 1973, when they started working with farmers in Mississippi and several other states to distribute produce to local communities as well as churches in Chicago, Illinois. As Mr. Burkett put it:

“The food hub is the go-to word here lately in the last four or five years. We had all these co-ops here in Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama [in the 1970s]. We would load a truck—about 30,000 pounds—and take it to Chicago. We were food hubbing but didn’t know that. We were doing ours through the churches. It’s still going on today.”

In 1981, the Mississippi Indian Springs Farmers Cooperative Association was formerly established. Located in Petal, Mississippi, the cooperative aggregates, processes, and distributes produce from more than thirty farmers in the area. Indian Springs does not call itself a food hub, but it certainly has been functioning as one for decades. They, like the Barkers, also have called it a packing shed in the past, and they own trucks in addition to cooler space, washing tubs, sorting tables, and other equipment to process produce from the farmers.

According to Mr. Burkett, education and training, particularly around business and financial management, is critical for sustaining hubs and cooperatives. “You gotta have a sharp mind. A lot of our co-ops fail because we build a business like this here, and nobody can really manage it. So, [to solve this] the Federation [of Southern Cooperatives] had several schools for co-



op management,” he said. Mr. Burkett also advocates for training facilities for farmers. “The state needs to have state-run facilities for small farmers to come use,” he said. “It’s not a one in the state.”

Mr. Burkett also noted racial disparities in investment into food hubs. Recently, a food hub in Mississippi with white leadership received a large sum of money from the state. Mr. Burkett reflected, “We probably couldn’t have gotten that much money.” He also explained how historical inequities continue to be replicated today in a model that he described as modern-day sharecropping: “Some models I see in the state for this work are lending people twenty acres to grow vegetables on, but it sounds like sharecropping. Staying on somebody else’s farm, you get everything you need from them, and at the end of the year you settle up. That sounds like sharecropping to me.” At the end of the day, Mr. Burkett explained, the ownership structure is still the same.

Four decades into farming, food hub, and cooperative work, Mr. Burkett has considerable insight into measures for success. He advocates for collective ownership to address equity issues as well as ensure the success of the operations. “To me, a real food hub would be owned by the people who are benefiting from it. That’s why most things fail. They don’t have the buy-in of the people,” he said.

### **Dr. Walter Hill, Dean of Tuskegee University College of Agriculture**

Dr. Walter Hill of Tuskegee University also questions the notions of individualism and ownership and raised the issue of who benefits from food hubs:

“I don’t prefer the word ‘food hub.’ From what I’ve heard and seen of them ... who owns the hub? The models I’ve seen have not been predominately for the underserved.”

Dr. Hill advocates for investing in cluster-based work (or cooperative work) among Black farmers doing food systems work. Tuskegee is working with approximately fifteen farmers to establish cluster models where their main goal is to “see farmers make an actual profit.” According to Dr. Hill, the majority of Black farmers don’t currently turn a profit. Tuskegee University has thus been coordinating a group of these farmers to source to commercial businesses such as Walmart (one of the few major buyer options in the region) in order to increase the sales opportunity for farmers in the area. They helped the fifteen farmers they work with become GAP-certified, at the time almost doubling the number of all farmers in Alabama with this certification. However, numerous challenges have surfaced. Dr. Hill relayed that uniformity and rejection of entire truckloads due to one undesirable item in a bushel or case—similar to the Barkers’ experience—is one of several challenges of sourcing to commercial markets.

Like many of the interviewees, however, Dr. Hill believes food hub work is more than about food or profit alone. Dr. Hill believes food systems work is also, or should be, spiritual in nature and cautioned against opportunism and individualism in this work. As he put it: “Leadership should not be selfish. We get too many at the top that end up selling us out. Somehow, everyone wants their own. The problem is that everyone wants their own and can never come together to fight for something together. And that’s a spiritual piece, to understand we need each other.”

Dr. Hill went on to explain, “It takes a village for a farmer to succeed.” He advocates for a holistic approach to help farmers succeed. The village, according to Dr. Hill, includes marketing, financing, distribution means, markets, land security, and labor, among other supports needed in order to be successful. Dr. Hill relayed his work of making Farm Services Administration (FSA) loans more accessible by requiring less paperwork to apply for smaller loans than bigger loans. Yet according to Dr. Hill, even with loans, farmers still “can’t afford irrigation or equipment. You have to look at the whole picture. It’s gotta be holistic, everything from insurance, marketing, to irrigation.”

Finally, Dr. Hill challenges advocates’ usage of the term “socially disadvantaged,” preferring instead the term “historically disadvantaged” since, he argues, we have to be specific around race. He also advocates for increased funding to support community-based groups and land-grant institutions. As Dr. Owusu Bandele, a scholar and co-founder of Southern African American Farming Organic Network, wrote in *Land and Power*, “[D]espite their gross underfunding as compared with the predominantly white 1862 land-grant universities, these universities have been at the forefront of initiatives to improve the quality of life of rural citizens.”

# Changing the Game: New and Developing Food Hubs

“The food hub ... I refer to this as a game changer.”

—SHIRLEY SHERROD  
New Communities and Southwest Georgia Project  
Albany, Georgia

In the national food hub landscape, an important body of work to watch and support is that of New Communities and the Southwest Georgia Project (SWGP), who are about to launch a new food hub at a Winn Dixie grocery store that they were gifted. New Communities and SWGP are in the thick of organizing farmers and producers as they raise funds to build out the new hub.

According to Mrs. Sherrod, this hub is a “game changer.” She explained the potential and significance of the hub:

“We have so many small farmers who haven’t had too many options for the land that they own. It will really mean folks can grow and know that there is a place to take it. It’s a place to bring people together. We haven’t had something like this since the civil rights movement where people have a place to work on something together.”

The history of New Communities is incredibly important to note. The first community land trust in the country, New Communities was born out of violent attacks against Black people who were working to build power and register Black people to vote during the civil rights movement. Black people faced

a tremendous amount of violence, including the destruction or loss of homes and land as a result of participating in or even affiliating with voter registration and civil rights movement work. Black farmers, many whose deeds were in jeopardy for simply offering their homes as meeting places, were particularly vulnerable as well.

In response to the loss of homes and the fragile economic condition of Black farmers, a planning committee of civil rights organizations throughout the South (including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives) met and, as Mrs. Sherrod wrote in her book *The Courage to Hope*, created an “organizational plan that involved individual homestead leases and cooperative farming leases. We decided to call it New Communities, as a symbol of a brighter future.”

The white-led violence and discrimination Black people faced, however, never dissipated. According to Mrs. Sherrod, “Once white people realized we had the land, they started shooting at our buildings. I mean, we went through so much during our time up there. We even caught a white couple stealing our hogs!” By 1980, after repeated droughts and active discrimination on the part of the USDA Farmers Home



“You have to be patient. But you can’t give up. Had we given up, we wouldn’t have this property here at New Communities, because we lost everything we had in 1985. We could have dispersed and gone on with our lives, but we didn’t give up.”

—SHIRLEY SHERROD

Administration, New Communities faced foreclosure. However, the work and legacy of New Communities continued, and eventually, the organization along with Shirley and Charles Sherrod won \$13 million as part of the Pigford lawsuit settlement. Today, New Communities has used part of the settlement money to purchase a 1,600-acre former plantation that they have named Resora, reclaiming the vision of New Communities as “a farming collective that struggling Black farmers could join to pool their efforts for the common good.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to Resora, the Sherrods also are involved in the Southwest Georgia Project, where they have begun planning for a food hub initiative at a donated grocery store to provide collective resources and opportunities for Black farmers in the area.

According to SWGP project director Amber Bell, “We’ve labeled it a food hub, but we feel it has the opportunity to be a cultural hub and an economic hub and a hub of revitalization for the community.”

<sup>1</sup> Shirley Sherrod, *The Courage to Hope: How I Stood Up to the Politics of Fear* (New York: Atria Books, 2012).

Ms. Bell shared her belief that food policy work needs to be more inclusive of folks from the South as well as rural areas. She also pinpointed some obstacles that make it challenging for Black farmers to operate, including the Food Safety Modernization Act, which requires more paperwork of farmers and thus makes operations more costly, as well as local licensure regulations that are slowly but surely, in her words, “smothering” the production of farmers.

Some of their needs for the launching of the food hub include:

\$1.5 million in renovation costs and \$250,000 in equipment costs; Training a revolving loan fund for farmers; and Technical support, including sharing software and programs used for food hubs and farmers.

In a message to young organizers, Mrs. Sherrod said, “Everything can’t happen quickly. You have to be patient. But you can’t give up. Had we given up, we wouldn’t have this property here at New Communities, because we lost everything we had in 1985. We could have dispersed and gone on with our lives, but we didn’t give up.”



## Southern Organic Female Farmers Association

One of the most exciting formations around food systems work—the Southern Organizing Female Farmers Association—is located in Henderson, North Carolina, and is led by a group of Black women who founded it in 2014. SOFFA has already accomplished quite an incredible amount of work. The association is comprised of nine active members, five of whom were interviewed for this project: former Chicago school teacher-turned-farmer Ardis Crews, farmer and horticulture therapist Rosetta Brodie Thorpe, farmer and prison ministry director Delilah Marrow, hay farmer Delores Talley, and newly elected city councilwoman Marion Brodie Williams.

What is particularly interesting is the nuance and creativity of their vision and work. They have es-

tablished and advocate for a recognition of what they term “micro-market” farms, smaller farms that wouldn’t be called urban farms because they are in a rural area. They have been working in Henderson to “transition from gardens to micro-market farms,” and the work looked impressive. The farms they’ve developed have become known as FOGS, or farm-owned garden stands (also called farm-owned grocery stores). Nine micro-market farming members in the community have all been GAP-certified and are working on organic certification. Throughout the community, there are FOGS banners outside of neighborhood gardens advertising that community residents can come and purchase locally grown food. Neighbors and visitors can use their EBT and debit cards at each stand, making it more convenient for residents to walk up to the farm-owned grocery store and purchase freshly harvested produce right from the garden.



“This work of SOFFA is important because not only is it providing solutions to meet the immediate food access needs of local communities, but the organizers are also developing a nuanced strategy that includes economic development, economic empowerment, and reclaiming and building political power in Henderson.”

The micro markets and local farms feed into a newly established system that the women later realized technically qualified as a food hub. They started in one garden and then linked the gardens of friends and family members. They then expanded into aggregating food from local farmers and micro markets to sell at farmers markets, local schools, local restaurants, and a local food hub, Foodshare, in Durham. Although a small operation, their work is quickly expanding—they have two greenhouses and a commercial-sized cooler, and last year, they also began grading the food they aggregate. One of their members is the director of a prison ministry, and she is expanding their work by going into prisons and by creating economic and career opportunities for people who are formerly incarcerated.

This work of SOFFA is important because not only is it providing solutions to meet the immediate food access needs of local communities, but the organizers are also developing a nuanced strategy that includes economic development, economic empowerment, and reclaiming and building political power in Henderson. One of its founding members and board president, Marion Brodie Williams (the owner of Brodie Farm), recently won a local election for city councilwoman. According to SOFFA members, Vance County has a majority-Black population and is one of the poorest counties in the state, with a 32 percent unemployment rate. Councilwoman Williams sees her work in the city council as a means to turn areas that have suffered from disinvestment into thriving communities. She noted that 51 percent of the empty lots in Henderson are owned by the city government and says Henderson “should be the food hub of North Carolina.”



## Conetoe Family Life Services

Nominated for a CNN Heroes award, Conetoe Family Life Services (CFLS) has been garnering quite a bit of national attention. While not technically a food hub, CFLS plays a significant role in developing the area's food systems. They operate a local 27-acre farm, a roadside mobile market, and a bee bus, and they are also noted for their youth training program.

Former farm coordinator Jason Lindsey outlined some of the biggest challenges in the area, the largest of which is generational poverty that's directly related to decades of disinvestment in the community:

"This is a very rural area, and in many rural areas, it has stopped in time. Conetoe is the epitome of it. When you get here, there're a lot of things that still

exist here that people don't think exist anymore, [like] the model of the home in which it's almost Third World in some cases when you see how the people live. Do they have indoor plumbing, do they have running water? So we really have to step back and begin to deal with the issues that really should have been dealt with a long time ago. And before you can move forward, this has to be reconciled. From one generation to another, we find consistency, and for too many in Conetoe this consistency is poverty."

According to Mr. Lindsay, "We are working on turning the garden into [a] teaching hub. We are working to process honey on site and package and label (produce) on site. We want children to know every aspect of production, from seed to table."





“Black land loss is Black wealth loss. My family has done well in agriculture. Not ‘well’ as in ‘rich,’ but agriculture has been a backbone in terms of giving us purpose.”

—JULIUS TILLERY

He further explained their vision, saying, “One day, a distribution company is going to call Conetoe Family Life Center for some honey, and he’s going to do his whole business transaction with a 12-year-old. Mark my word.”

## Conclusion

Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer’s work with Freedom Farm is another body of work that is critical to include when understanding the rich, diverse histories of local food systems work, and in particular the history of cooperatives and food hubs. In a brutally violent context where Black people and allies were mobilizing within the Black freedom struggle, Fannie Lou Hamer and her affiliates recognized the need for collectively pooling resources to meet the needs of communities unable to feed themselves. In addition to their infamous civil rights work around voting rights and launching the Mississippi Freedom Party to gain political power, Fannie Lou Hamer and her comrades started the cooperative Freedom Farm in 1969 to solve survival needs and generate economic opportunities for Black people who were systematically marginalized. Freedom Farm met all of the conventional definitions of food hubs, as it served the functions of aggregating, distributing, processing, and packaging foods. According to Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhard in her book *Collective Courage*, Freedom Farm “was generating ... food and lots of it. It was

feeding people who previously starved in one of the richest agricultural [areas] in the world.”<sup>1</sup>

But Fannie Lou Hamer was clear about the deeper purpose of food systems work and the expansive possibilities of collective ownership, and she made clear that Black communities needed to be who benefited. “The concept of total individual ownership of huge acreages of land by individuals is at the base of our struggle for survival,”<sup>2</sup> she stated. She also states, “Cooperative ownership of land opens the door to many opportunities for group development rather than create monopolies that monopolize the resources of a community.” Cooperatives, according to Dr. Nembhard, “address such issues as community control in the face of transnational corporate concentration and expansion; the pooling of resources and profit sharing in communities where capital is scarce and incomes low; and increased productivity and improved working conditions in industries where work conditions may be poor and wages and benefits usually low.”

1 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014)

2 *Ibid.*

“The industrial food system as we know it today is the child of the plantation system of agriculture. They are both built upon exploited labor, dispossession, and exploitation of land from Indigenous peoples, the destruction of rural culture and land, consolidation of power and land in the ruling classes, and the forced migration of peoples.”

—BLAIN SNIPSTAL  
Farmer and activist

It is clear that food systems work is about so much more than food and is deeply connected to the myriad ways that communities of color experience injustice. A quote from Beatriz Beckford, a national organizer with the National Black Food and Justice Alliance, illuminates this point:

“As food justice activists and organizers, we have to make the connection between food justice and a whole host of issues—that food, land, and the exploitation of Black bodies intersect with [each other] in highly sophisticated and systematic ways each and every day. We must be unapologetic in charging the current food system in its engagement in modern-day lynching that mirrors Jim Crow policies and posturing that marginalizes Black communities from any semblance of food sovereignty, self-determination, and land.”

In other words, it is impossible to consider racial equity without considering and understanding the dynamic and complicated history of a U.S. agricultur-

al system birthed from exploitation, domination, and the destruction of entire populations. Communities, particularly in the South, have a wide array of insights and imaginative visions for alternative realities, yet too often their contributions and needs are unrecognized and their work underfunded.

Food hub and good food systems work is often much more than just meeting market demands—it’s rooted in countering dispossession, building power, reclaiming culture, improving health conditions, growing economic opportunities, and dreaming and reclaiming alternate realities. It is about meeting immediate needs that the larger food system ignores and about contributing to the well-being of vulnerable communities, including communities of color. Documenting the voices and analyses of our predecessors as well as current food hub and food systems leaders is important work. Understanding the need to work toward a different system rooted in self-determination and actively heeding their insight on how to do so is even more so important.

# Summary of Recommendations

Following is a summary of the broader themes that consistently surfaced during the interviews on the greatest challenges and opportunities for food systems work and racial equity in the South. Farmers and advocates stressed that for Black farmers and other farmers of color to thrive, we must address challenges they face around land security, USDA discrimination, market place inequities, certifications, and access to capital. Solutions to these concerns must be found if we are to create racially equitable food hubs.

## Challenges and Recommendations

### Land:

According to farmer and hub operator Ben Burkett, “We need major land reform.” For farmers and hub/co-op operators, the security of their land was one of the greatest challenges, and it was raised repeatedly during the interviews. In particular, interviewees were concerned about access, preservation, reparations, and the means to protect, increase, or recover land unjustly lost, stolen, or at-risk.

### A Note on the Limitations of the Pigford v. Glickman Lawsuit Settlement for Black Farmers

According to Savi Horne of the Land Loss Prevention Project, “There are still a substantial number of Black farmers facing foreclosure. And there’s a real situation where a lot of households got slammed with a lot of debt [coming out of the recession]. For some of the farmers that didn’t get into Pigford, their debt burden is still increasing because of the interest on these loans.” For Horne, there is much more beyond Pigford that needs to be done to support Black farmers. Shirley Sherrod of the Southwest Georgia Project and New Communities agrees. In a 2011 interview on the “Another View” audio podcast, she said this about Pigford: “It’s a good gesture and will hopefully save some farmers, but it was not nearly enough to deal with discrimination that has gone on for decades, since the beginning of the department, really.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Shirley Sherrod, Another View podcast, January 28, 2011.

**Challenge:** Land loss continues to be one of the most prevalent issues facing Black farmers, producers, and hubs.

**Recommendation:** The USDA should issue a moratorium on foreclosures of Black land. Also, a national trust or community-based organization that absorbs Black farm land (so that farm land isn't permanently lost) needs to be created, identified, and resourced. As Savi Horne relayed in an interview, community land trusts would allow "the existing farmer [to] take over management of the farm so that the farm is not lost to the community or even to the farmer. And the farmer would have access."

**Challenge:** Many Black farmers were not included in the Pigford settlement, yet continue to have underlying civil rights issues. An added challenge is that many of their claims are time-barred.

**Recommendation:** Legal processes (including statute of limitations issues) should not get in the way of making it right for these families to address past wrongs. The USDA should revisit and consider amending legal processes such as statute of limitation that limit families' ability to pursue past wrongs.

### **USDA Discrimination:**

**Challenge:** According to one interviewee, the "subjectivity used by some USDA employees to interpret USDA farm bill policy" is a major issue that results in racial disparities and discrimination. Many of those interviewed shared how each county has its own interpretation of how specific policies are implemented, despite the fact that the farm bill is a national bill.

**Recommendation:** The USDA should implement more measures to greatly improve opportunities for farmers and producers of color to obtain equal access to loans, capital, and both public and private resources.

### **Access to Capital and Resources:**

**Challenge:** One interviewee relayed that farmers of color are not privy to the resources, capital, and discounted materials that white farmers have access to.

**Recommendations:** There is a need to convene networks and deepen relationships in the South in order to enhance business opportunities for producers, grow investments, enhance collective financing opportunities, and share strategies and best practices. National and local philanthropy should provide resources to local leadership for convenings. One interviewee suggested creating a communications network to monitor the auctioning of land with the goal of ensuring that farmers of color are informed of opportunities.

**Challenge:** Due to institutionalized discrimination at the USDA as well as in the market place, farmers of color need an incredible amount of legal support and protection against assaults, unjust rate increases, and legal claims.

**Recommendation:** Farm Bill advocacy should include a significant increase in funding opportunities for organizing and legal support needed to resist the structural barriers facing producers of color, such as property tax hikes, discrimination in USDA field offices, and more.

**Recommendation:** Black-led organizations and institutions such as the Land Loss Prevention Project, Federation of Southern Cooperatives/LAF, Southern African American Organic Network, Tuskegee University and 1890 land-grant Institutions, Black Family Land Trust, and others are working with very limited budgets to fight against the systemic disenfranchisement and challenges that vulnerable producers of color face. Public and foundation investment in institutions and organizations working to protect land owned or stewarded by people of color; farmers of color; and hubs, co-ops, and distributors should be increased.

“To me, a real food hub would be owned by the people who are benefiting from it. That’s why most things fail. They don’t have the buy-in of the people.”

—BEN BURKETT

### **Education, Certification, and Training:**

**Challenge:** Many Black farmers are aging and will soon retire. Interviewees expressed concern about the feasibility of farming as a viable livelihood for future generations of Black farmers.

**Recommendation:** There needs to be an increase in creating and investing in programs that support and train Black youth and other youth of color who are interested in farming.

**Recommendation:** Many of the organizations and institutions mentioned in this report are also leading training programs on organic certification, business management, co-op development, and other key topics, and they are often severely underfunded. We need increased resources for educational initiatives and training for producers, especially for institutions with Black leadership. The USDA is one institution that could provide increased resources for this work.

**Challenge:** There is a lack of farmer training programs and teaching about agriculture in public schools. (To note, several of the interviewees were operating some form of farm-to-school program on their own, without funding).

**Recommendation:** The USDA and U.S. Department of Education should collaborate to provide resources and funding for agricultural education in public school programs.

**Challenge:** Most relayed the process of obtaining certification is too expensive and cumbersome. As

one interviewee put it, “I believe that these policies are written in such a way to ensure that small farmers [and] producers cannot participate. I certainly understand food safety issues, but when they become onerous, who is that policy really serving?”

**Recommendation:** The USDA should decrease barriers to obtaining certifications (FSMA and GAP certifications specifically) for farmers and producers of color.

**Challenge:** As younger generations increasingly choose to pursue careers other than farming, depriving many family farms of much-needed labor, owners are struggling to pay fair wages for farm labor due to a lack of adequate resources.

**Recommendations:** Farm workers are still excluded from labor laws and need to be included in state and federal labor laws. At the same time, there should be subsidies for farmers to pay fair wages to workers along the food chain.

### **Marketplace Inequities:**

**Challenge:** Buyers in the current marketplace (i.e., grocers, corporations, etc.) have unrealistic requirements around procurement that pose major challenges for farmers. One example is the demand for unnatural uniformity in produce, which leads to buyers rejecting entire truckloads based on random inspections. Farmers create entire farm plans around these business agreements, only to have them rejected. This results in a major financial loss for farmers who are already vulnerable.

**Recommendation:** The USDA should recognize and support alternative, cooperatively owned marketplaces that value micro-market farms. The USDA and investors should also expand and make more accessible resources to help farmers vulnerable to loss.

**Final Overall Recommendation:**

One of the most important ways that we can create an equitable food hub system based on racial equity is to invest in cooperative ownership and collective purchasing models, specifically in and led by communities of color.

# About the Author



Based in Atlanta, GA, Dara Cooper is a national organizer with the National Black Food and Justice Alliance (NBFJA), an alliance of Black led organizations working towards national Black food sovereignty and land justice.

NBFJA currently has member organizations representing hundreds of urban and rural farmers, organizers, and land stewards based in all regions of the U.S. NBFJA members have worked together over the past few years to build an intergenerational, urban/rural alliance of organizations to map, assess, train, and deepen the organizing, legal, and advocacy work protecting Black land and work towards food sovereignty.

She is also an anchor team member of the HEAL (Health Environment Agriculture and Labor) Food Alliance, a cross sector alliance of organizations working to deeply transform our unjust food system.

Dara serves on the leadership team for the Movement for Black Lives' policy table, working to link the struggle against mass police and state violence with environmental, health and nutritional violence against Black people. In August 2016, the Movement for Black Lives' policy table introduced a Vision for Black Lives policy document providing a comprehensive set of policy demands from more than 50 contributing organizations.

Dara is the former director of the WK Kellogg funded NYC Food and Fitness Partnership in Brooklyn, New York, where she worked on creating and strengthening farmers markets for Black farmers, developing community planning process for a community based local food hub, and creating a farm to headstart program in Brooklyn partnering with Corbin Hill Food Project, a local food hub. Prior to this work, Dara led the launch and expansion of Fresh Moves (Chicago), an award winning mobile produce market with community health programming, which quickly became a nationally recognized model for healthy food distribution and community based self-determination and empowerment.

A former Uganda Bold Food Fellow (exchange program between professionals in the U.S. and East Africa), Kalamazoo Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership Food Justice Fellow, and a National Alliance Against Racist Political Repression Human Rights Awardee, she believes deeply in the quote from Assata Shakur: "Imperialism is an international system of oppression and, we, as revolutionaries, have to be internationalists to defeat it."

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