MSU CENTER FOR REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEMS

DELIVERING MORE THAN FOOD: UNDERSTANDING AND OPERATIONALIZING RACIAL EQUITY IN FOOD HUBS

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DELIVERING MORE THAN FOOD: UNDERSTANDING AND OPERATIONALIZING RACIAL EQUITY IN FOOD HUBS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Racism underlies the U.S. food system. To withstand, resist, and reshape the dominant food system, communities of color have created alternative food systems rooted in self-determination, ownership, and collective power. These systems at times have included food hubs, with business structures such as cooperatives, that break down barriers to market access.

A food hub is defined by the National Food Hub Collaboration 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 demand.”[1] Essentially, food hubs aggregate the collective power of producers to participate in markets that would otherwise be inaccessible to them individually and are designed to provide producers more power in the marketplace.

The food hub model has expanded rapidly in the 21st century.[2] Food hubs are often perceived as addressing injustices in U.S. food systems, particularly by increasing economic power of local and regional producers and bolstering local and regional supply chains. Many food hubs report having a social mission. Yet despite food hubs’ history of addressing injustices, hubs now rank addressing racial disparities lowest among their non-financial goals, according to responses from the 2017 National Food Hub Survey.[3]

Many people of color working in food systems and food hubs believe that White voices now dominate the mainstream narrative around food hubs.[4] Other social missions, including strengthening local supply chains, may often overshadow a commitment to racial equity.

Purpose

This report is a look at a how U.S.-based food hubs understand engagement in racial equity work. The sample of food hubs interviewed for this report are diverse in their structures, leadership, and missions. Through interviews with food hub managers and other roles, we identify common facilitators and inhibitors to food hubs engaging in racial equity work.

After presenting the major themes of our findings, we provide an analysis of those findings through multiple frames. We offer takeaways in the form of identifying deeper questions for food hubs, funders, and researchers about how to meaningfully support racial equity within the food system. We also offer specifics of how to operationalize some of our findings by providing a few examples of food hubs/food system organizations that have taken clear action toward achieving racial equity goals.

To find a deeper understanding on the subject of racial equity and food hubs, we clarified the following original questions to guide our work:

- How are food hubs making a difference in racial equity?
- Is racial equity an institutionalized priority for food hub work?
- What are the perceived barriers to prioritizing racial equity?
- In what ways is racial equity operationalized in policies/programs/procurement?
- Which arenas are robust in terms of racial equity work and which are not (e.g. healthy food access, contracts with producers, ownership, management and governance, employee working conditions and wages, movement building)?

Methodology

To explore the research questions above, we interviewed a total of 22 participants. We strove for a balance of participants in terms of their professional role with food hubs (e.g. food hub manager/outside expert/academic), geographic distribution, and identity (including self-identified race/ethnicity and gender).

Two interviewers conducted and recorded interviews, with the permission of interviewees, via the web-based video conferencing tool Zoom. Both interviewers took notes from the recordings as the interviews were not transcribed. Analysis relied on the interviewers' notes, with reference to the recorded interviews for clarification or direct quotes as needed. The interviewers analyzed and identified major themes separately, which they then discussed to identify agreed-upon common themes and language.

We are not exempt as academics and food system practitioners from engaging with and recreating power systems in our work. We made many changes to this project as it progressed. These changes were based on feedback — quiet and loud — from the participants we interviewed. Changes were also based on input from co-authors and from our initial advisory group, comprised of nine food hub managers, scholars, and educators of color who clarified the need for this project.

Some examples of changes we made include: adding a second interviewer; scrapping our original interview guide in favor of a more open conversation, allowing us to give ourselves over to the stories of our interviewees rather than guiding them to confirm our own preconceptions; and increasing our interview stipend from $20 to $70.

It is important to note that we did not go into this project with one singular definition of what racial equity (or inequity) meant. As a project team, we do agree that racial equity is about both processes and outcomes.[5] We also did not identify a definition of racial equity for our project participants; we left this open for participants to define for themselves.

Direct findings

We describe the practices and circumstances that participants said pushed food hubs forward along a continuum of being unengaged with, to aware of, to actively operationalizing racial equity. We call the practices and circumstances that encouraged positive motion along that continuum "facilitators." These facilitators are what came up in our interviews and are not an exhaustive list of what can positively influence this work.

Overview of Facilitators for Advancing Racial Equity Work

THEME	FACILITATORS
Organizational history	Meaningful engagement of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)[6] in: founding mission, initial planning, partnership formation, definition of racial equity work
Leadership, staffing, and organizational culture	Recruitment, hiring, and retention practices; leadership pipeline; decision making structures; feedback structures; inclusivity of organizational culture
Financial structure	Access to external funding for mission work; BIPOC ownership (individual or collective)
Inter-organizational dynamics	Context of racial power dynamics; trust between organizations; history between organizations; personal dedication to mission in partner organization staff
Meaningful engagement	Internal vs. external incentives for mission work; geographic demographics; depth of relationship with suppliers, staff, and customers; attention to labor conditions

Multi-frame analysis

Food hubs are one small window into the enormous and layered topic of racial equity work in the food system. Because of the enormity of this topic, we did not want to oversimplify analysis of our findings. We identified multiple frameworks that feel relevant to this work to add richness to what we heard in the interviews, including:

Food sovereignty

Food sovereignty holds ownership and control of all aspects of the food system as central elements to progress toward racial equity. Through the lens of food sovereignty, food hubs make progress toward racial equity when they go beyond thinking of Black, Indigenous and/or People of Color (BIPOC)[7] as recipients of programming and service to attempting to make significant shifts in control and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and financial benefit of food hub work.

In many ways, the roots of food hubs are aligned with food sovereignty. Food hubs have been a powerful avenue to self-determination, where barriers to market entry and food access are broken down by farmers of color uniting forces. Food hubs can make progress toward racial equity through a food sovereignty approach by focusing on equitable control and ownership of outcomes and processes. Cooperatively owned food hubs with strong participation/ownership from employees of color, including those with Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOP),[8] offer a promising route to progress as seen through a food sovereignty lens.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how a person's identities (including but not limited to race/ethnicity, gender, class, faith, body size, sexuality, and ability) combine to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege.[9] Food hubs can begin to make progress toward racial equity through an intersectional lens by considering how other identities might intersect with race/ethnicity to pose unique challenges to equity.

Food hubs can consider who they are lifting up via their supply chains, leadership, ownership, and distribution networks from an intersectional perspective. For example, in addition to ensuring the hiring of a given percentage of womxn[10] and a given percentage of BIPOC on staff, food hubs might start by looking at how many womxn of color specifically are employed and are given leadership or decision-making opportunities.

Resilience

Food hubs' racial equity work is resilient if they maintain progress toward the goal of racial equity, "despite disturbances and shocks."[11] There are many challenges to the resilience of racial equity work for food hubs, including external factors like persistence of systemic racism; interorganizational dynamics; and economic forces, such as shifting priorities of funders, cycles of grant funding, and changing values of individual and institutional customers.

Internal challenges include leadership and staff turnover if an organization's dedication to racial equity work rests on the shoulders of individuals, rather than the organization as a whole. Internal challenges may also include mission drift and organizational culture.

Food hubs whose racial equity work is more resilient tend to have an original mission (written or not) involving progress toward racial equity, early and meaningful involvement of BIPOC in the formation of the hub, personal motivation and commitment by leadership, leadership pipelines for BIPOC, an organizational culture that retains staff of color, financial structures that provide ownership opportunities for BIPOC, and a foundation of trust with other partner organizations.

Universalism

A universalist perspective assumes that there are fundamental truths that have universal applicability. White supremacy perpetuates a universalist perspective via the assumption that White beliefs, values, and ways of being apply to everyone else. A universalist perspective devalues the beliefs, perspectives, and lived experiences of BIPOC.

Food hubs can avoid a universalist approach to their racial equity work by working to build systems and structures that allow diverse voices to be heard, valued, and directly influence decisions. Food hub leadership can consider their assumptions about the communities they are serving and what those communities need and want. A commitment to open dialogue with stakeholders that goes beyond the beginning phase of building a hub is critical. Fostering a culture of welcomed feedback from organizations and individuals in the supply chain, on staff, and in distribution networks about what is working and what is not is a great step in recognizing the pluralism of perspectives on "good food" and racial equity.

Operationalizing equity

As the review team discussed the findings from the interviews, it became clear that one of the most direct ways to frame what it means for food hubs to operationalize racial equity is to provide examples of what they are doing. This report shares several examples of how food hub/food system organizations operationalize equity and food justice in their work.

Recommendations for food hubs

- Review the report: "Racial Equity Implementation Guide for Food Hubs: A framework for translating value into organizational action."[12] Reflect on how the Racial Equity Implementation Guide Principles can be applied to the various core areas of your food hub operations.
- Visit with managers of other food hubs who have operationalized equity into their operations. What are they doing that you can apply to your food hub operation?

Recommendations for food hub stakeholders

Funders

- Consider who is gatekeeping funds and power in the organizations you fund and the partners of the organizations you fund.
- Perform an analysis of which partners are receiving funding in your network based on race of leadership or management, organization size, and whom they serve.
- Are there other organizations who have a long-standing commitment to racial equity that you could fund that are run by BIPOC?
- For White-led organizations that you fund, balance your expectations for a change over time in racial demographics of the organization. Consider whether that organization is willing to do its own work to understand how and why it has failed BIPOC in their program efforts, and through their organizational culture.
- Encourage inclusion of metrics for racial equity that are driven by grantees, not by your organization or consultants you hire.
- Invest in diverse arenas for racial equity work spanning the supply to demand chain. If your primary focus is healthy food access, for example, how are you also promoting wealth creation and ownership of aspects of the supply chain?
- Consider what kind of evaluation you ask for. Does it encourage box checking or meaningful inclusion? Consider the different systems of oppression that might pose barriers for organizations to report on metrics.
- Move from service-based project models for healthy food access to food sovereignty models for building ownership, power, and control within the community.

Academics

- Consider your role in how you frame your research and outreach strategies and theories of change. Does your need to be the expert get in the way of shifting course for the better?
- Examine the research questions you are asking. Are they universalist by nature?
- The gatekeeping of funds happens not only around equity work in food hubs, but more broadly in research and outreach work on social determinants of health. Consider how those dynamics are at play in your own work and collaborations.
- Create methods or research that capture a breadth of evidence for racial equity work, even when not explicitly stated or captured.
- Create space for your definition of racial equity to expand to a plurality of definitions.
- When you write grants to do research and outreach in communities, make sure that the community-based organizations have commensurate financial resources and power in making project decisions.

Nonprofits

- Create space for your organization's definition of racial equity to expand to a plurality of definitions.

- Is the way you and your partners address racial equity advancing a White-based universalist perspective?
- Open a dialogue about demographics/race of partners in your network.
- Is there any work done in your organization that could be better done by folks working directly in communities, and do you have adequate sources to support their work?
- Consider using a multi-frame analysis/perspective when doing organizational work on equity.
- Include organizations led by BIPOC as partners in grant proposals and share those resources in an equitable way that builds their capacity and recognition for the work.

Food hub customers (food retailers, food service managers, restaurant managers/chefs, consumers)

- Research and operationalize best practices on equitable procurement.
- Create a demand for racially equitable practices, including fair labor practices.
- Organize with others and leverage your buying power to create demand for racial equity practices in your local food hub.
- Create material to share stories about successes or wins in advancing racial equity work.

Local, state, and federal government officials

- Create space for your organization’s definition of racial equity to expand to a plurality of definitions.
- Create infrastructure that supports local control over the food system.
- Create a plan of operations that prioritizes/conserves racial equity work under differing levels of organizational financial health. This can help maintain racial equity work even under tight margins.
- Help create a new or empower an existing food policy council to have significant BIPOC membership and leadership that represents the community’s population.

Questions for future research

- How can the facilitators represented in this report be operationalized as metrics for accountability?
- How can we measure the resilience of hubs’ work toward racial equity? For hubs that are not for-profit, what meaningful metrics can avoid box checking while also producing accountability?
- To what extent are we advancing food sovereignty through food hubs and other food system projects and/or interventions in communities?
- What is the extent of private and collective ownership of hubs by BIPOC, and to what degree is that approach addressing inequities?
- How can healthy food incentive programs and models incorporate food sovereignty as a primary goal?
- How do we operationalize a non-universalist research and outreach approach to racial equity work?
- How do we recognize the pluralism of views and definitions of racial equity, while also finding and creating working definitions or guidelines, such as found in the report led by Tamara Jones,[13] that are useful and applicable?

Concluding thoughts

Food hubs are one small window into how the food system interacts with racialized systems of power. Food hubs can play a part in dismantling those systems. Food hubs exist on a continuum of engagement with and operationalization of racially equitable practices. The definition of progress in this work can be viewed from several theoretical frames and is conceived of differently by hubs.

Our interviewees shared freely about what inhibits or facilitates their engagement in this work. We have highlighted facilitators throughout the report. Our hope is that our findings are useful not only for food hubs but also for those who study them and provide technical and financial assistance to them. All these parties play a part and are accountable in advancing progress toward a racially equitable food system.

PROLOGUE

It is summer of 2020 as we wrap up the writing of this report, and the world has changed dramatically since our project began a year ago. This is a project that seeks further understanding of how the food system — food hubs, specifically — engages with systems of power created by a racial caste system in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic shines a spotlight on the relationships between public health, the food system, and racial/ethnic inequities.

Long-standing inequities are being forced into public view, as economic and health disparities by race, ethnicity, and immigration status only widen:

- Black, Indigenous and/or People of Color (BIPOC)[14] are infected with and die from COVID-19 at disproportionate rates, compared to White people. These disparities stem from living conditions (including disproportionate numbers of BIPOC in prisons and jails), working conditions and pre-existing disparities in co-morbidities and access to care that create higher risk when infected with COVID-19.[15] Native American reservations, initially created to force tribal nations off of valuable agricultural land, have been especially hard hit by the virus. Tribal nations face additional bureaucratic delays in applying for and receiving federal emergency funds.[16]
- Work circumstances and labor policies are an important risk factor for COVID-19. Many essential workers who continue to work outside the home are in the food and agriculture sectors, and many of those workers are BIPOC. For example, approximately 17% of total U.S. employment is Hispanic, but 53% of agricultural workers are Hispanic.[17] A lack of paid sick leave granted to workers in food and farming industries exacerbates the risk to essential workers, since they are more likely to work when sick. This then increases exposure for other workers.
- Rampant outbreaks in U.S. meat packing plants have resulted in thousands of sick workers and dozens of deaths. The majority of meat packing plant workers are BIPOC and about half of them are immigrants.[18] While it is clear that these outbreaks stem from working conditions, including close quarters and long hours, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar blamed workers for spreading disease because of their “home and social” behavior.[19]
- Restaurants and bars account for an enormous number of COVID-related job losses nationwide, putting many workers in those establishments in dire economic straits. Undocumented workers are particularly hard hit because despite being a backbone of the hospitality industry, they qualify for little government assistance. The federal economic stimulus bills are explicit in their omission of undocumented people and additionally leave out immigrants who qualify for other government benefits.[20] California is a notable exception in providing undocumented workers support.[21]
- The need for food assistance to already underserved communities nationwide grew in the spring of 2020 at unfathomable rates. Decreased donations from grocery stores coupled with mounting economic devastation created incredible pressure on charitable food distributors to provide sustenance to additional people who can no longer pay for food.[22] School cafeteria workers have become visibly essential, as they have continued to ensure that students and their families do not go hungry.[23] Some food hubs have stepped in to provide key emergency food distribution, preventing both food waste and hunger at a moment’s notice.[24]

COVID-19 has posed real challenges to small- and medium-scale food producers. These challenges have highlighted the need for resilient models for aggregation and distribution such as food hubs. Various wholesale markets that often provide food producers financial stability have disappeared overnight, including restaurants and institutions. These disappearing markets are devastating to producers, most of whom already operate with very thin margins, especially as they are forced to take on additional costs to comply with emerging safety protocols. The majority of agricultural government stimulus funds have not gone to small- and medium-scale producers.[25]

Layered on top of the historic and current food system racial disparities made starkly evident by the COVID-19 pandemic, the racist killings and attacks on Black Americans and the protests and demonstrations that have followed are focusing our nation’s attention on the historic, ongoing, and systemic anti-Black racism that is embedded within our country and institutions, including our food system.[26] Within this context, we believe that the findings of this report are more relevant than ever.

As we find our way forward from a global pandemic and heightened awareness of systemic racism, there is renewed appreciation of the intersections between food, health, and equity. With this renewed awareness comes an opportunity to address these intersections consciously and dedicate more energy to creating a food system that authentically values labor, shares profits, stewards our natural resources, and nourishes us all.

There is no doubt that our food system plays a major role in challenging or enforcing systems of power in this country. Alternative models like food hubs can play a role in creating a food system that is resilient both in terms of its functional supply chains and in its resistance to fostering a racial caste system. While we found that food hubs vary in their engagement and approaches to racial equity work, there are some powerful examples of hubs that deeply integrate a racial equity mission into their work. Our report highlights a few of these examples and speaks to how food hubs create resilient strategies for racial equity work.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Racism underlies the U.S. food system. To begin with, White settlers, supported and encouraged by their local/state and federal government, stole land from hundreds of tribal nations. The land given by the U.S. government to agricultural land-grant universities represents violently ceded stolen wealth from those tribes.[27] Systems of slavery and then Jim Crow created and maintained racial and ethnic caste systems that were — and continue to be — key to U.S. agricultural viability. The agricultural labor supply to this day comes from our country's most disenfranchised populations. Our food system rests on the backs of undocumented workers in farming and food service sectors who are categorically denied basic labor rights.

The racial/ethnic caste systems in the U.S. has squarely relied on, yet made invisible, the contributions from Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC).[28] Institutional racism in U.S. governments has continued to concentrate power in a "White" privileged minority, while dispossessing others of land ownership and means of production. For example, African-Americans at one time owned 16 million acres of farmland. Because of Jim Crow and obstructionist policies of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), African-American farmers owned only 2 million acres by 1997.[29] Owners and operators in the food system are overwhelmingly White, while farm and food workers are overwhelmingly not.

Understanding racism as central to the foundation of the U.S. food system facilitates our understanding of why the benefits and harms of the system are inequitably enjoyed and suffered.[30] Untenable labor conditions, labor abuses, environmental harms, and diet-related diseases are disproportionately suffered by BIPOC individuals and communities. Understanding racism as central to our food system also illuminates why many of the food movement's alternatives to the dominant system seem to perpetuate inequities in who benefits from those alternatives. Racism remains a driving factor in our food system and food movements in the U.S. For hundreds of references on structural racism in the U.S. food system, refer to the Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems' publication, *An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System*.[31]

To withstand, resist, and reshape the dominant food system, communities of color have created alternative food systems rooted in self-determination, ownership, and collective power. These systems at times have taken the form of cooperatives or food hubs that break down barriers to market access. A food hub is defined by the National Food Hub Collaboration as a "businesses 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 demand."[32]

Essentially, food hubs (sometimes referred to as food sheds and co-ops) harness and aggregate the collective power of producers to participate in markets that would otherwise be inaccessible to them individually and are designed to garner them more power in the marketplace. To learn more about how communities of color, specifically African-American farmers in the southeastern United States, have created food hubs to address racial inequity in the food system, please refer to Dara Cooper's report for Race Forward and the Center for Social Inclusion, *Reframing Food Hubs: Food Hubs, Racial Equity, and Self-Determination in the South*.[33]

Although small-scale agricultural producers have long come together to strengthen their collective market participation, food hubs have been growing in number and attention in recent years. The food hub model has expanded rapidly in the 21st century.[34] Food hubs are often perceived as addressing injustices in U.S. food systems, particularly by increasing economic power of small- and mid-size producers and bolstering local and regional supply chains.

Many food hubs report having a social mission. Yet despite food hubs' anti-racist history, hubs now rank addressing racial disparities lowest among their non-financial goals, according to the 2017 National Food Hub Survey.[35] White voices now dominate the mainstream narrative around food hubs.[36] Other social missions, including strengthening local supply chains, often overshadow a commitment to racial equity. Tamara Jones and her co-authors state the risk of food hubs overlooking racial equity in their missions in their 2018 report, *A Racial Equity Implementation Guide for Food Hubs: A Framework for Translating Value into Organizational Action*:[37]

> Understanding the work of food hubs as primarily engaged in growing local supply chains, without a focus on racial equity, leaves the door open to recreating the injustices of the mainstream food system, albeit on a geographically intimate scale. Left unchecked, food systems based on industrialized agriculture mirror the inequities and racialized concentration of wealth and power that degrade our communities. (p.7)

The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) participated in an insightful conversation with Tamara Jones on this subject in 2018. This conversation served as a catalyst for rethinking how the national food hub survey could further inform how food hubs were operationalizing equity in their work. To build on that conversation, CRFS and the Wallace Center held a discussion with nine food hub managers, scholars, and educators of color in November 2018. The purpose of that session was to discuss how CRFS and the Wallace Center might adjust questions on the national food hub survey to better ascertain to what extent food hubs are making progress on racial equity in their own businesses and in the communities they provide services to.

The feedback from that discussion was wide ranging and frank. It was clear that more work needed to be done to deepen understanding of the food hubs' relationships to racial equity work. With this feedback in mind, CRFS and the Wallace Center wished to go beyond adding a few questions regarding racial equity to the (quantitative) national food hub survey. This qualitative interview project was born to further the understanding of racial equity work among food hubs.

Methodology

This project evolved to focus on how food hubs engage with systems of power created by a racial/ethnic caste system. We are not exempt as academics and food system practitioners from engaging with and recreating those power systems in our work. This section presents our methodology as originally intended, as well as how our methodology evolved and why.

We made many changes to this project as it progressed. These changes were based on feedback — quiet and loud — from the participants we interviewed. We decided early on that this project would be more aligned with our values and our own imperfect striving for racially equitable practices if we let ourselves to be redirected when needed. A few months into this work, we began to see this project as having two narratives running parallel. The first was the findings of the answers to our original project questions (below). The other was about the project itself — the feedback we received, where we had to pivot, what we felt positive about, and what we would do differently next time.

The lived experiences and scholarly lenses each of the co-authors brings to this project are inextricable from the shape and content of this report. Our seven-person project team represents different lenses and life experiences. Each of us has written a reflection in our own unique voice in the epilogue of this report. Here we will briefly describe the lens of the two lead authors for this report, who also are the lead interviewers and analyzers.

Sarah Rodman-Alvarez, PhD, MPH identifies as White and uses the pronouns she/her/hers. Sarah grew up middle class in Los Angeles, where she currently lives, but has also lived in Chicago, New York, and Baltimore. Sarah's work throughout her career has focused mainly on social determinants of health. Specifically, she has studied and worked as a "pracademic" in the U.S. food system through the frames of public health, social justice, and policy. Much of her work has focused on labor rights in the food system, or lack thereof.

Currently pursuing her Master's in Public Health at UC Berkeley, Roxana Rodriguez is informed by her experiences as an urban, low-income, Xicana from a mixed citizenship-status household. Her research focuses on improving adverse health outcomes that are rooted in systems of oppression and inequality through the lenses of intersectionality, social justice, and public health. Roxana holds a BA in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Biology from Williams College.

Our identities and those of the other five members of the project team, inform our design and analysis of this report. Writing from each of our own unique lenses, and bringing our whole selves to this project, is both enriching and critical. It informs the power dynamics between us and our interviewees, impacting what is and is not shared with us. It also affects our dynamics as co-authors because we share disparities in power based on race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and age.

Original methodology

To find a deeper understanding on the subject of racial equity and food hubs, we clarified the following original questions to guide our work:

- How are food hubs making a difference in racial equity?
- Is racial equity an institutionalized priority for food hub work?
- What are the perceived barriers to prioritizing racial equity?
- In what ways is racial equity operationalized to policies/programs/procurement?
- Which arenas are robust in terms of racial equity work and which are not (e.g. healthy food access; contracts with producers; ownership; management and governance; employee working conditions and wages; movement building)?

We identified participants via suggestions from the BIPOC food hub leaders who gave us initial input in 2018, from the Center for Regional Food Systems and Wallace Center staff, from funders of food hub work, and from suggestions by participants themselves in interviews. Additionally, CRFS worked with the Wallace Center to include an option for food hubs that were taking the quantitative National Food Hub Survey to select whether they would be willing to participate in qualitative interviews for this project.

We reached out to potential participants via email and/or phone, and we originally offered them $20 for their participation in a 30-60-minute interview. We strove for a balance of participants, in terms of their professional role with food hubs (e.g. food hub manager/outside expert/academic), geographic distribution, and identity (including self-identified race/ethnicity and gender). Given the scale and scope of this project, however, the balance of interviewees was far from an exact science. Those that participated were self-selecting and highly based on suggestions made by the BIPOC food hub leaders noted in the previous paragraph.

To address the questions listed above, we developed a semi-structured interview guide. The original guide was based on early conversations with the advisory group of the nine food hub managers, scholars, and educators of color who originally clarified the need for this project. They gave input on questions to ask and subjects to raise. Additionally, the interview guide was informed by Tamara Jones et. al's report, *A Racial Equity Implementation Guide: A Framework for Translating Value into Organizational Action*.[38] The guide asked specific questions about different areas of operation in each food hub. It was designed for answers to be comparable across interviews.

It is important to note that we did not go into this project with one singular definition of what racial equity (or inequity) meant. As a project team, we do agree that racial equity is about both processes and outcomes.[39] We also did not identify a definition for our project participants; we left this open for project participants to define for themselves.

Evolution of methodology

The first changes to our methodology were based on input from our advisory group. Specifically, the group suggested that we include a second interviewer on the project, who was an interviewer of color, in order to diversify the perspective of the interview listeners. Roxana Rodriguez was contracted as a second interviewer shortly thereafter. The group also made several suggestions about particular subjects to prioritize in our interviews. Critically, the group asked that we pay special attention to how our participants conceived of the relationship between pursuing racial equity work and pursuing profitability.

We conducted and recorded interviews, with the permission of interviewees, via Zoom — a web-based videoconferencing tool. Both Sarah Rodman-Alvarez and Roxana Rodriguez conducted the majority of interviews, but a few were conducted by Sarah Rodman-Alvarez alone. For those interviews with only one interviewer (Sarah), the second interviewer (Roxana) would listen to a recording of the interview. Both interviewers took notes from the recordings as the interviews were not transcribed. Analysis relied on the interviewers' notes, with reference to the recorded interviews for clarification or direct quotes as needed. The interviewers analyzed and identified major themes separately, which they then discussed to identify agreed upon common themes and language.

As we began to interview participants, we could see that the interview guide needed to evolve. While no one expressed it explicitly, it was clear that the structured nature of the guide made the interview feel evaluative, rather than collaborative. By asking questions about how hubs were operationalizing racial equity work in different, specific parts of their operations, the interviews began to feel like a checklist of what hubs were doing "right" and "wrong." This was not our intention.

We saw that the semi-structured interview guide was resulting in us controlling the narrative of food hubs and other experts. What we wanted, instead, was for them to control their own narrative around racial equity work. We scrapped most of the interview guide and instead used some early open-ended questions to get our conversations going. We also used general probes to make sure we covered some prescient topics that were prioritized by our 2018 advisory group. This change allowed for interviews that were more free-flowing and emergent in their topics.

We sacrificed comparability of interviews for authenticity and richer data. Later, we came to understand our adjusted approach as more aligned with narrative ethics. Broadly, narrative ethics recognizes that people are the authors of their own life stories and that ethics can and should be derived from individuals' stories (e.g. nuanced descriptions of how a person characterizes their identity) rather than preconceived principles (e.g. categories of identity like race and gender). Practicing narrative ethics as researchers allows us to give ourselves over to the stories of our interviewees, rather than guiding them to confirm our own preconceptions.[40]

We made the decision to increase our stipend for participants based on very explicit feedback from an expert whose participation we were seeking on the project. We had initially chosen the $20 stipend amount based on what was available in the budget of our grant. We wanted to offer the same amount to all participants, equitably. As someone with more knowledge than most people on the subject of our interviews, we were eager to have this specific expert's participation. After a few attempts to solicit their involvement, we received an email back stating that the $20 stipend amount was insulting. This feedback gave us pause. Ultimately, that expert did not participate in the project. However, the Center for Regional Food Systems did find other monies to increase the stipend to $70, which was then offered, including retroactively, to all project participants.

In the end, we strove to come closer to paying our participants as we might pay professional consultants. This is a larger issue about how researchers value people's time and how much participants need in order to feel valued. There are several resources on this particular issue in research that we welcome you to explore.[41] [42]

As a project team, we also had a lively discussion about how we did — and should have — identified the participants in our analysis. If a participant did not naturally identify their race or gender throughout an interview, we asked them to at the end of the interview. When discussing whether to add these identifiers to quotes in this report, some review team members voiced that asking participants to identify themselves in specific ways did not allow them to tell their own story of their identity, an approach more aligned with narrative ethics.

Walking the line between ensuring that a project is representative of different stakeholders, while also allowing for organic expression of identity is something to consider deeply when planning future projects. Ultimately, we have chosen to identify quotes in this report using identifiers we did ask for (professional role, race/ethnicity, gender).

Participant demographics

We interviewed a total of 22 participants. Fourteen participants were food hub managers/leaders, one participant was a funder, and seven were academic or consultant experts on food hubs. Nine participants identified as BIPOC, while 13 identified as White. Nine participants were located in the Midwest, while four were in the Southeast, four were in the Northeast, and five were in the western United States.

Five food hubs were traditional nonprofits, four were for-profit, four used a hybrid model, and three were either completely or partially worker-owned. Hybrid models combined financial structures, like including a business chapter alongside a nonprofit. There was a fairly even distribution of food hubs that were in operation for less than five years, between 5-10 years, and longer than 10 years.

Scope of work

This report is a look at how a sampling of U.S. food hubs that are diverse in their financial structures, leadership, and missions understand food hubs' engagement in racial equity work. We identify common facilitators and inhibitors to food hubs engaging in racial equity work that we heard throughout the interviews. After presenting the major themes of our findings, we offer an analysis of those findings through multiple theoretical frames.

We endeavor to not oversimplify our analysis or conclusions. This is a small project about a highly complex, layered subject matter. While remaining concise, we try to do the subject's complexity justice by viewing it through multiple perspectives. We offer takeaways in the form of identifying deeper questions for food hubs, funders, and researchers about how to meaningfully support racial equity within the food system. We also offer specifics of how to operationalize some of our findings by providing examples of food hubs that have taken clear action toward achieving racial equity.

This project is not a representative sample of food hubs in the United States. It does not attempt to paint a complete picture of all of the ways that food hubs are conceiving of or operationalizing racial equity in their organizations. This project is not a comprehensive operational toolkit for how food hubs can engage with racial equity. For an excellent resource that offers direct guidance on how racial equity can be operationalized in food hubs, please refer to Tamara Jones et.al's *Racial Equity Implementation Guide for Food Hubs*.[43] Finally, this report is not a comprehensive look at the incredibly important work that food hubs owned and operated by BIPOC have done to shift power and ownership in the food system. To familiarize yourself with more stories of hubs that have done just that in the southern U.S., please refer to Dara Cooper's report for Race Forward and the Center for Social Inclusion, *Reframing Food Hubs: Food Hubs, Racial Equity, and Self-Determination in the South*.[44]

DIRECT FINDINGS: FACILITATORS OF RACIAL EQUITY WORK IN FOOD HUBS

This section describes our key takeaways from conversations with participants. We describe the practices and circumstances that participants said pushed food hubs forward along a continuum of being unengaged with, to aware of, to actively operationalizing racial equity. We call the practices and circumstances that encouraged positive motion along that continuum "facilitators." These facilitators are what came up in our interviews and are not an exhaustive list of what can positively influence this work.

Overall, food hubs operationalize their concept of racial equity through different programming and approaches. Some focused on lifting up farmers of color in the supply chain by providing them training and market access. For others, the focus was on the hub itself, in terms of the representativeness of its ownership, leadership, staff, and decision-making and feedback processes. Several hubs focused their equity work on increasing food access to BIPOC via their institutional and community partners.

We saw major themes around shared facilitators and, on the flip side, inhibitors of racial equity work in the following areas: organizational history; leadership, staffing and organizational culture; financial structure; inter-organizational dynamics; and meaningful engagement with BIPOC. Within each theme, we identify specific facilitators that hubs said affected the degree to which they engaged with and sustained work on making progress toward racial equity. The facilitators in each theme are discussed below.

Organizational history

A food hub's organizational history is a record of how values, leadership, and action lead to current operations. Interviewees referenced organizational history to explain why specific values and events came together to form part of a food hub's mission and ultimately operations. Circumstances in an organization's past, such as input from leadership of color in creating values, influenced present day operations. We found trends between how food hubs started, how their mission and goals changed over time and influenced their present commitment to racial equity work.

Reason for being

The motivation behind the creation of food hubs varied. Some organizations had practical concerns to meet the immediate food needs in a community or create a viable economic outlet for local farmers. Meeting economic needs for a specific community, such as providing a site for local farmers to store their produce, was often the initial motivation for starting a hub. Others identified values-based motivation, including ownership of land historically denied based on race, systemic food system changes or concern for environmental sustainability. The identity of those present at the outset largely affected their progress towards prioritizing values-centered work. A subset of organizations began their food hub with community partnerships in the form of a community needs assessment, and horizontal decision-making practices among founders and in consultation with other local food organizations.

Mission

Nearly all food hubs were driven by a mission to invest in the local food system. Some aspects of organizational commitment to racial equity were formally written into their mission statement using phrases such as "*supporting diverse communities*." Whether this language was used explicitly was *not* a determining factor of the extent to which an organization pursued racial equity work. Mission statements reflect the intention to engage in this work, but this intention did not always align with action. Many organizations did not use "racial equity" language in their mission statements but strongly operationalized racial equity through their supply chain, hiring and staffing, and distribution decisions. Even when racial equity was not explicitly stated in the mission of a food hub, some found both formal and informal means to apply its practices to their work.

> *"There are the kind of organizations that actually do racial equity work very intentionally. They have it in their mission, they have it in their name, they are that. Those folks deserve that kind of (foundation) money. There are people who do it maybe organically or accidentally or because it's in their heart. And I would say that's my organization. I don't necessarily think that we deserve any money for racial equity because that's not at the heart of what we are trying to do. It might be a sometimes intentional and sometimes accidental outcome."* - White Male, Food Hub Staff

Leadership, staffing, and organizational culture

Every person who works at a food hub contributes to the organization's culture and helps carry out its mission and goals. Staff at food hubs are instrumental to completing day-to-day activities that keep a food hub operational. We found that food hubs offer varying levels of support to staff in all positions regarding organizational mobility and leadership development. For staff of color, who are underrepresented among leadership in the social sector, this is especially important.

Whether food hubs are intentional about hiring, retaining, and training staff of color reflected their involvement in racial equity work. Decisions around operationalizing racial equity rests in the hands of food hub leadership. The identity, background, and beliefs of those who sit at the decision-making table influence priorities made for the organization. In conversations with folks from diverse leadership positions within food hubs, we found that the leadership structure and commitment to the principles of racial equity influence its operation.

Leadership pipelines

People of color we interviewed shared their thoughts on challenges and improvements to involving more BIPOC in food hub leadership. Across the board, they identified lack of a strong leadership pipeline and lack of staff of color as a problem. For some, organizational culture hindered the growth and development of staff, such as when there was a lack of values in the organization that were deemed as important to BIPOC staff. For others, there was lack of opportunities for upward mobility within their organization. Others felt hesitant to step into leadership due to feeling unprepared. In contrast, a minority of participants felt confident in leadership development opportunities because of BIPOC representation and specific outreach to womxn of color (WOC) and young staff of color in their organization.

"That was me fighting my way to earn my space here... people could tell you all the coaching in the world but until you figure out how to process all of that and how to deal with that change it's a really a hard transition.... I want to build a GPS for folks [of color] to get through all of that mud so that they can take things further. If I had someone to give me these jewels when I was younger, it would have saved me a lot of time." - Latino Male, Food Hub Staff

Some White interviewees also identified issues in leadership pipelines. While some viewed the dearth of applicants of color to staff positions as a reflection of the geographic location, others also pointed to issues with retention of staff of color. Some cited issues including lack of budgeting for professional development, a racial divide between office and warehouse staff where mostly White staff were in programming roles and staff of color were in operational roles, lack of strategies to nurture passion, or all White leadership.

Hubs' intention to have leadership of color arose due to varying circumstances. In some cases, the board of directors or other decision makers chose leaders to reflect the demographic makeup of areas surrounding food hubs, the identities of those that the food hub serves, or to redistribute opportunities to groups historically underrepresented in leadership. Organizations that were intentional about their leadership structure through input or direct appointment of BIPOC were generally making more progress on operationalizing racial equity. Lack of this intentional inclusion, *despite having people of color in leadership*, resulted in feelings of tokenization in BIPOC staff, a lack of commitment from the organization overall to continue hiring BIPOC, and stagnation in pushing racial equity forward beyond a few hires.

Reliance on personal motivation

Many of the food hubs interviewed relied on leaders who were motivated by their own dedication to carry out the organization's mission. This was especially true when involving racial equity. Integrating racial equity was often dependent on the personal dedication of those in positions with influence. Dedication to racial equity was successful in many cases because a leader pushed for it based on their personal commitment. For some food hubs, this precedent was set by leadership but then became part of the day-to-day operations. However, it was more often the case that the dedication to racial equity drifted if the key leaders transitioned out of their role. Without organizational commitment from leadership, racial equity becomes solely an individual responsibility.

> **Without organizational commitment from leadership, racial equity becomes solely an individual responsibility.**

Some food hubs with majority White leadership who were committed to racial equity work largely depended on the personal experiences or beliefs of a few allies. These staff cited a variety of reasons for commitment to racial equity work: feeling that they shared a marginalized identity with BIPOC, recognizing racial inequities in the food system, identifying communities of color in need, or an overall commitment to social justice. Allies who occupied influential positions were more successful at translating these values to organization-wide programming than those with less influence.

Most organizations with all-White leadership and no allies on staff did not make explicit commitments to racial equity work. While the desire to engage was present for most, plans for execution were not. It was more common for these organizations to think of racial equity as living within a single department, such as contracting a supplier of color or partnering with a school that served BIPOC. Organizations without people of color in leadership or allies did not integrate racial equity as fully as those who did.

Reliance on personal dedication for progress remains true at the staff level. Several staff did work outside of their job description to push for racial equity in the organization. The motivation came from their own personal dedication rather than from organizational directives. Roles that were not originally set up to advance racial equity were adapted by dedicated staff to do so based on personal mission. Staff managed to find ways to integrate racial equity into their roles, such as:

- seeking out contracts with BIPOC
- starting book clubs or discussion groups to talk about race
- pushing for organization-wide Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training
- uplifting the voices and initiatives of BIPOC staff

However, without support from organizational directives, these efforts were as short lived as the staff's dedication. Many cited staff turnover as a point that either facilitated or inhibited integrating racial equity work in a role.

Staffing recruitment and retention

Organizations had differing levels of success in recruiting and retaining staff of color. Staff of color at majority-White food hubs shared that retention was influenced by organizational culture. Some BIPOC interviewees shared that they experienced microaggressions, implicit bias, and tokenization. Overall, interviewees of color voiced more of these experiences over the course of their career in food hubs than White respondents. Retention of staff of color is dependent on the organization's culture to be responsive or passive to these instances of bias.

Recruitment of BIPOC staff was also influenced by organizational culture. It could either draw BIPOC toward or away from applying to open positions. Organizational commitment to hiring BIPOC, staffing more than a few token hires, and preferring multiple language abilities attracted more applicants of color. These organizations broadened their searches for BIPOC by valuing work experience from sectors outside of the food system and promoting positions to networks made up of BIPOC. Other organizations attributed the difficulties in getting a diverse applicant pool to lack of BIPOC in their geographic location, lack of representation at the organization, lack of opportunities for upward mobility and the competing draw of other sectors that are more financially stable (e.g. industrial agriculture). It is important to note that the traditional applicant pools that many organizations hire from are embedded in networks of power dynamics. For example, many people with higher educational attainment may only validate knowledge and experiences of others with similar educational and class background.[45] There are barriers to obtaining higher education that are exacerbated by race, education, and income to name a few. As a result, positions with such requirements could draw a less diverse applicant pool. Overall, it was difficult to draw applicants of color when racial equity was not a commitment carried out beyond a single position.

> *"I think sometimes you need to pull people in. You need a culture where you actually say, 'Hey I actually want you to do this for the agenda'... because when you get folks that come from a community that might be nervous or with lack of self-esteem or confidence... you're not going to jump on that agenda. But you didn't have nobody to pull you in. And that little pull, or that little tap on the back to say, 'hey man, you're doing a great job.' That means the world to somebody who's trying to figure out how they fit inside of a place that they don't fit."* - Person of Color, Male, Food Hub Staff

Decision-making

The majority of food hubs interviewed followed a hierarchical decision-making structure in which a board or a few leaders oversee the organization's priorities. A few were able to establish a more horizontal leadership structure where decision-making is influenced by those the food hub serves. In both scenarios the identity, background, and beliefs of leadership largely influenced the organization's commitment to racial equity. The majority of food hubs that had an intentional presence of BIPOC in leadership positions extended racial equity to their programs and operations.

"With" vs "for" approach

We found that leaders approached racial equity work via either working *with* or *for* BIPOC. Approaches that leaders took to work *with* BIPOC often had a scope that extended beyond the goals of providing organic and local produce to communities. Food hubs that saw themselves within a larger network of influence on racial equity in the food system were more likely to extend the scope of their goals. This *with* approach manifested itself in investment of resources to support suppliers of color, creation of sustainable solutions to retain those suppliers of color, reserving seats on boards of directors for organizations or BIPOC working in the community, creation of advisory committees *with* BIPOC representation, and assessing needs and assets of communities of color.

Other food hubs carried out work in a more transactional manner of working *for* BIPOC. Decisions made on programming that affected BIPOC were often made without involving BIPOC. We noted that moving from a single transaction with a farmer of color or donation to schools with a high percentage of BIPOC towards engaging larger systems of inequity and a collaborative approach creates room for working with BIPOC.

Financial structure

The extent to which an organization was financially stable in its operation varied across food hubs interviewed. Some hubs struggled to turn a profit, while others managed to expand with their models. This finding is corroborated in the national food hub surveys of 2013,[46] 2015,[47] and 2017[48] conducted by the Center for Regional Food Systems and the Wallace Center. Finances were extremely important to all the food hubs we interviewed, and the approaches taken to manage them can be classified as the following legal models:

- Nonprofit: 501c3 structure supported through grants, donations, and sales revenue. Nonprofit food hubs also began as partnerships between private donors, universities, or government agencies.
- Hybrid models: Nonprofits were integrated into or alongside businesses such as limited liability companies (LLCs) that allowed for more independence or commercial activity.
- For-profit: Traditional for-profit companies, those with B corporation and C corporation components, those who were for-profit while pursuing nonprofit status or grant funding, and those who acted as self-described nonprofits because they turned little to no profit. For-profit hubs include those with shared ownership models, such as cooperatively owned food hubs and private businesses that started with investments from communities.

Each structure leads to insights regarding how racial equity was integrated into maintaining the organization's finances. All food hubs spoke about the increasing cost of food production. In order to pay more equitably across the supply chain, food costs would have to go up. Each organization handled food pricing differently based on its legal model.

The margin versus the mission

The top concern for most food hubs, regardless of legal model, was to stay in business and continue operations. Interviewees were asked about how the pressure to meet this demand related to the importance of pushing for progress on racial equity. Nearly all responded that without sufficient revenue (either grant or sales) or a profit margin, there is no mission. For some, maintaining basic operations was more important than taking on racial equity as a new priority. The size of the business' profit margin often determined the extent to which they thought about and operationalized racial equity.

However, other hubs saw racial equity as adding financial value to their business. These hubs were able to work racial equity into their finances as an essential function that would increase profitability. Creative uses of this strategy included marketing of their racial equity practices, branding strategies, and pitches to socially conscious investors and funders. A couple of food hub staff said they saw the economic value of increased capacity for innovation and insight that comes from diverse viewpoints and lived experiences.

Finally, some hubs explicitly saw the margin as the mission itself. These were hubs that were individually or collectively owned by BIPOC. Recognizing that the food system has historically oppressed and denied ownership and control of finances to BIPOC, they are actively creating strategies to advance their mission through shifting economic power. Some hubs used or are informed by collective ownership models or Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs),[49] to spread that economic power more widely.

Nonprofit food hubs

A nonprofit structure can lend itself to expanded programming in areas that tie directly into racial equity work, particularly for advancing food security, supporting farmers of color, and creating jobs. For example, many food hubs were able to provide locally grown produce to low-income communities of color at subsidized prices because they were able to utilize grant money that was given to increase access to food for target populations. Use of funds to complete mission-driven work towards racial equity was more common in nonprofits. It was also more common for nonprofits to partner with other organizations.

Racial equity work in nonprofits was often reliant on financial drivers of the mission, which challenged the sustainability of the work. Programs such as subsidized food costs to low-income communities of color were supported by other lucrative parts of an organization that offset the costs incurred, or funded via grants and partnerships. Even though interviewees cited the pressure for these programs to become sustainable, the funding sources were often unsustainable. Many interviewees cited frustration with the rapidly shifting priorities of the grant cycle. The funding landscape is driven by trends in the wider landscape. Participants expressed that today funding could be focused on racial equity approaches, but then shift to another approach before the work has a chance to be proven effective.

Few nonprofits interviewed were able to achieve solid financial footing, but those who did found creative solutions in working with anchor institutions such as schools or hospitals. Some were able to work with partner organizations or businesses to create demand for efforts aligned with racial equity. Many hubs expressed a desire to make their racial equity work more permanent.

For-profit hubs

An alternative to dependence on grant funding for racial equity work is to have a for-profit structure. Corporations, LLCs, hybrid, and cooperatively owned models can leverage financial control to advance racial equity. For-profit hubs that did not have a deeply rooted racial equity mission were often subject to the same dependence on the bottom line as to whether racial equity work would be prioritized or not. As mentioned above, those food hubs owned by BIPOC saw advancing racial equity and achieving profits as one in the same.

> *"Everyone's solution to delivery models is buy ten more trucks. Bring somebody else to run something. Our model is: it cannot be extractive it has to be owned by the community, and run by the community.... My attitude is, we have to own the delivery system. I don't want to see people running around making $15 an hour, unless we own it. You shouldn't be running that stuff. That should be ours. We need to own parts of that system in terms of creating community wealth. The major emphasis is building community wealth at this point."* - Black Male, Food Hub Staff

Inter-organizational dynamics

Regardless of their level of engagement, food hubs are part of a larger network of businesses and organizations. Stakeholders in government offices, nonprofits, other business, schools, and hospitals can all contribute to a local food system. Food hubs were able to collaborate with different organizations to make progress toward racial equity in local food systems. Some of these partnerships looked like efforts that would promote healthier neighborhoods, sustaining a contract with a group of BIPOC growers, connecting BIPOC growers to loan programs, providing free technical assistance and opening facilities up to neighborhood groups. However, collaboration was also impeded by different factors like trust, competition for funding, historical racial trauma, and differences in values.

Trust

Trust between partner organizations and across the supply/demand chain was essential for establishing working relationships to advance racial equity. Meaningful engagement between organizations was often the result of relationships built on a foundation of trust.

Organizations were able to establish trust in a diverse manner of ways that were often dependent on the context of the partnership. For some, it was consistently offering space for neighborhood organizations to meet. Or, the organization already had pre-existing partnerships with BIPOC that established its reputation in the community. Others became more involved, like joining boards of community organizations, providing technical assistance in a project free of charge, following through with a long-term contract, or sending compost to community gardens. Relationships between partner organizations that began with trust were better able to carry out racial equity work together.

Maintaining trust between organizations was also an essential function of partnerships. Food hubs were able to maintain trust by following through on their end of partnerships, being transparent with funding, and actively investing resources in sustaining the partnership (financially or contributing staff time). For example, one hub was able to connect with a loan agency so that they would be able to, together, offer more loans to food entrepreneurs of color. Another food hub was able to partner with a community organization that promoted fitness and healthy eating in the community.

On the other hand, lack of trust between partner organizations hindered collaboration. Lack of trust can stem from historical racial dynamics. Based on a history of racism in the food system, and food hubs specifically, White spaces are not historically welcoming to BIPOC. This can cause immediate suspicion on behalf of BIPOC to even engage with White-led organizations. An organization's specific history of working with BIPOC also affects trust. Interviewees shared that Black farmers were often suspicious when White food hubs reached out to them based on the experiences of other farmers of color working with that hub.

At times, food hubs did act as brokers of trust. In one case, an anchor institution and farmers of color in a food hub network did not trust each other because of perceived bias on the part of the anchor institution (hospital, school)[50] toward the cultural community of the farmers. Food hubs played a role in establishing trust in this case.

Personal motivation of staff at partner organizations

The extent to which partnerships advanced racial equity was dependent not only on the personal dedication of food hub staff, as mentioned above, but also on the personal motivation of leadership in the partner organizations. Allies at external organizations who were personally dedicated to racial equity were able to push the partnership in a more racially equitable direction. For example, a partner at an anchor institution (hospital, school) could be personally invested in increasing food obtained from farmers of color without directive from the anchor institution. This motivation would drive them to reach out to collaborate with food hubs who have a strong presence of farmers of color in their supply chain.

Competition for funding

Food hubs described that many different stakeholders seeking funding for racial equity work (and for food hubs in general) has led to a competitive funding landscape. One interviewee shared that within the last four to five years, interest in funding racial equity work has increased. Organizations have differing capacities to navigate this landscape. Larger organizations that are more well established have more resources to obtain grant funding. One interviewee shared that White-led organizations, who already had money and might be newer to engaging in racial equity work, were more successful when applying to grants because of their existing capacity. Smaller, BIPOC-led organizations who are already carrying out racial equity work expressed frustration about this dynamic. Many organizations doing similar work may also be applying to the same grants, creating competition.

Competition for funds extended beyond non-profit hubs. Folks of color getting their food hub started or in their early stages stated it was difficult to obtain investors in their work. There is a long history of racial discrimination in investment practices. Participants said that in for-profit food hubs, there are racial disparities in investment of projects. Entrepreneurs of color had more difficulty accessing traditional sources of funding for projects from banks, lenders, and USDA grants. In some cases, working with certain entities involved compromising personally-held values. Others refused to trust organizations that had breached trust in the past, and others lacked the technical capacity to be competitive for these funds.

Financial gatekeeping

Participants described several instances where funding was accumulated by larger organizations, which tended to have majority White leadership. This created tension because these White-led organizations then became gatekeepers of funding sources for smaller nonprofits with BIPOC in leadership. These White-led organizations were the stewards of financial resources in that they themselves administered grants or funded new partnerships. The type of knowledge funders use to validate the work of grantees creates differing levels of power in that they often rely on metrics that smaller grantees do not have the capacity to produce.

Financial gatekeeping by White-led organizations affected interorganizational dynamics. For example, some Black-led food hubs were no longer willing to work on projects for which White-led organizations were the stewards of funding. Farmers of color also had to work with White intermediaries in food hubs in order to access new markets. In many ways, larger and White-led organizations were the gatekeepers of financial and cultural resources that created uneven power dynamics with collaborators of color.

> *"This is a problem in this country in general, and across the industry. [Funders] say they want to help, and there are people that sincerely want to help. But I think if you don't have people from those communities there to help advise and manage it, you're not really going to understand how things work in that community... I've gone to everybody but nobody seems to ask me the right question. All they have to ask me is what can I do to help you. If they can provide the help and I see how it fits in our system, then that's fine. I'm gonna do that. Just because someone says they wanna help and then they wanna come in and lead things the way they think we should operate because we're in the wrong... I'm not interested in that. We've had challenges with (USDA) because of that history. And within my group that's still strong. To this day it's still a challenge to even do anything with them."* - Black Male, Food Hub Staff

Maturity of the local food system/movement

Participants described the context of the local food system and food movement as important to their success. In areas with a strong consumer demand for locally and ethically produced food, hubs found themselves with a stronger customer base that was receptive to advertising the value added by engaging in racial equity work.

Growth of local food systems corresponded with greater familiarity of racial equity issues present in it. For example, one food hub mentioned that the presence of several cooperative grocery stores gave them numerous customers who valued a supply chain of many farmers of color. The creation of market demand for products that support a racial equity mission was more common in more mature local food systems.

Food hubs and gentrification

Many food hub facilities and offices were located in neighborhoods undergoing gentrification. The extent to which the hub engaged in a conversation around their contribution to gentrification varied. Some hubs recognized that the location demographics of those who originally inhabited a neighborhood were not those who the hub served. Others acknowledged that the products going through their facility were not accessible to lower-income members of the neighborhood, but rather those with higher disposable income for food. Staff reflected that their establishments coincided with other outside businesses moving into the same neighborhoods.

To balance their effect on neighborhood change, hubs opened their facilities for community use or set up programming to serve the food needs of those in the neighborhood. However, most hubs viewed their facility without this critical lens. Regardless of these efforts, the perception of those we interviewed was that food hub facilities contributed to gentrification, and that affected partnerships. For example, some suppliers no longer wanted to sell to hubs that were contributing to gentrification. In these cases, partnerships were either created or broken based on the food hub's contribution to gentrification.

Meaningful engagement

Across the supply and demand chains, inclusion of BIPOC work in food hub operations was perceived as either meaningful or tokenizing. The relational authenticity of including BIPOC in supply chains, staff, and distribution networks was varied. Authentic relationships, as defined by interviewees, existed between BIPOC and food hubs when there was some degree of equitable partnership established. Often, partnerships were made to advance a mutually beneficial goal.

Tokenization and box-checking

Some food hubs pursued partnerships with BIPOC for externally motivated reasons including receiving grant funding or fulfilling a demand from a client. For these hubs, inclusion of BIPOC stopped at this level of engagement. Some hubs defined and operationalized racial equity as the involvement of a few BIPOC farmers in the supply chain. Others would partner with a BIPOC- led organization, but were gatekeeping most of the project finances. For these food hubs, involving BIPOC was viewed as primarily a transactional relationship.

While we did not interview suppliers or partners of color for this project, those (that we interviewed) in close contact with them shared insight on their perspectives. There was a consensus that partners/suppliers of color knew when they were being tokenized. In a few cases suppliers/partners refused to partner with organizations when this happened.

Hubs expressed conflicting desires around initiating relationships with more diverse suppliers/partners. Even though staff at some food hubs wanted to work toward more inclusion of BIPOC, they hesitated if the organization overall was not advancing racial equity. Other hubs wanted to communicate to their customers about the value added to their products if they were equitable, but were aware that sharing narratives of BIPOC partnerships could be exploitative.

> *"I think that in order for minorities to really be engaged with food hubs, racial equity has to be the goal of the food hub. And not just on paper. And not just as a token that "I want to recruit one or two." I think you just really have to care about minority growers. Maybe that's what makes it so different than people that are just doing it to saying they have two minority growers. Where maybe I can say in my phone, I can probably pull up 20 minority growers. I think it has to be genuine. If you're not genuine people will know and they won't want to be a part of that."* - African American Female, Food Hub Staff

Metrics and data collection

Only three interviewees reported that their organizations collected information on measuring racial equity. Those hubs mainly collected demographic data on customers, institutions served, partners, employees, board members, and/or farmers. The most common data collected was staff demographics. Hubs reported collecting this information for different purposes. For some, tracking was a part of holding accountability for inclusion, but for others it was to report back to funders.

More commonly, organizations measured their progress informally. This was especially common in organizations with deeper institutionalization of racial equity work. So much of their organization was dedicated to doing racial equity work that they felt there was less of a need to formally track metrics. Instead, many interviewees knew, based on who they interacted with, basic demographic information for staff, partners, and farmers. Other staff took it upon themselves to track the causes food hubs were involved in. For example, a few staff tracked involvement with groups advocating for creation of food labels for fair farm worker treatment.

Several interviewees shared metrics they would like to see food hubs incorporate. These included:

- tools to track progress of BIPOC leadership or turnover in an organization;
- a measure that would determine the ratio of BIPOC staff within the organization;
- the amount of decision-making power held by BIPOC; and
- a metric around treatment and pay of farmworkers

Geographic context

Many of the participants believed that their ability to make progress toward racial equity was dependent on the demographics of their immediate region. Interviewees located in mostly White areas pointed to area demographics as a barrier to engaging with BIPOC. Because of a perceived lack of BIPOC presence, there was a lack of engagement with racial equity. Even when efforts were made to reach out to BIPOC, food hub staff were self-reflective of how this may be tokenizing. However, some food hubs proximal to more diverse areas, and not directly located in them, still made concerted efforts to operationalize racial equity. Even though they were not directly located in communities of color, an effort was still made to include racial equity in programming overall.

Labor

Generally, there was very little engagement among food hubs in concerns of labor outside of the hubs' own staff, with a couple of exceptions. One hub was specifically dedicated to providing opportunities for farmworkers to become owners and operators with market access for their products. Another hub mentioned that they tried to broach the subject of labor conditions with one of their suppliers and was quickly shut down. A few mentioned some involvement in advocacy efforts for bringing awareness to fair farm labor practices. For the most part, looking at racial equity in the supply chain stopped at inclusion (sometimes meaningful, sometimes tokenizing) of farmers of color. This was in part because many farmers that are contracted with hubs are small and therefore have a small labor force, often made up of family. But this is not always the case. Farm labor is a notoriously invisible population in many alternative food solutions, and this remains true for many of the food hubs interviewed.

While there was attention from many hubs (particularly nonprofit hubs) on the demographics of who was receiving food directly, we did not hear of any hubs paying particular attention to labor conditions of their institutional and corporate customers. For example, we did not hear about requirements on the part of hubs for their customers to engage in fair labor practices for cafeteria workers, restaurant workers or grocery store workers, who are often BIPOC. As many interviewees noted, food hubs run on very small margins. Therefore, it is no surprise that their larger customers are not beholden to additional standards.

The description of facilitators presented below is helpful for an overall view of factors that interviewees expressed were important for pursuing and sustaining racial equity work. Different facilitators will yield variable results, based on the hub itself and the context in which it is working. Progress toward racial equity can look and be conceived of in many different ways. With that in mind, we will next analyze our findings through multiple theoretical frameworks that helps us conceive of progress in different ways.

Overview of Facilitators for Advancing Racial Equity Work In Food Hubs

THEME	FACILITATORS
Organizational history	Meaningful engagement of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in: founding mission, initial planning, partnership formation, definition of racial equity work
Leadership, staffing, and organizational culture	Recruitment, hiring, and retention practices; leadership pipeline; decision making structures; feedback structures; inclusivity of organizational culture
Financial structure	Access to external funding for mission work; BIPOC ownership (individual or collective)
Inter-organizational dynamics	Context of racial power dynamics; trust between organizations; history between organizations; personal dedication to mission in partner organization staff
Meaningful engagement	Internal vs. external incentives for mission work; geographic demographics; depth of relationship with suppliers, staff, and customers; attention to labor conditions

MULTI-FRAME ANALYSIS

This section analyzes the direct findings from the interviews through multiple frames. Food hubs are one small window into the enormous and layered topic of racial equity work in the food system. Because of the enormity of this topic, we did not want to oversimplify analysis of our findings. We identified multiple frames that feel relevant to this work that will add richness to what we heard in these interviews. These frames emerged organically from the expertise of our specific project team. This is not an exhaustive list of relevant frames, but an example of how these results can be viewed in multiple ways.

We find that food hubs are on a continuum in terms of progress toward and commitment to racial equity work. We look at our findings through the frames of food sovereignty, intersectionality, resilience, and universalism to better understand these continuums. For each frame presented, we identify which facilitators identified in the interviews apply to advancing racial equity as seen through that frame.

Food sovereignty

Stolen lands and stolen people are at the root of the U.S. food system's racist foundation. Theft through colonization and slavery formed a food system that went hand-in-hand with White supremacy and capitalism. White control over means of production and financial benefit in the food system has been maintained by many policies and practices since then. Inequitable ownership and control are mechanisms of power central to institutional and structural racism carried out through the food system. As such, any serious attempts at progress toward racial equity via the food movement must deeply consider shifts in ownership and control in all outcomes and processes.

Food sovereignty holds ownership and control of all aspects of food system as central elements to progress toward racial equity:

> "Food sovereignty advocates believe that control of the means of food production, distribution, and consumption are critical elements to the empowerment and survival of Blacks and other disadvantaged groups."[51]

> "Food sovereignty is a radical alternative movement where the people participating democratically control the production, distribution, and consumption of food."[52]

> **Through the lens of food sovereignty, food hubs make progress toward racial equity when they go beyond thinking of BIPOC as recipients of programming and service to attempting to make significant shifts in control and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and financial benefit of food hub work.**

Through the lens of food sovereignty, food hubs make progress toward racial equity when they go beyond thinking of BIPOC as recipients of programming and service to attempting to make significant shifts in control and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and financial benefit of food hub work. In many ways, the roots of food hubs are aligned with food sovereignty. Food hubs have been a powerful avenue to self-determination, where barriers to market entry and food access are broken down by farmers of color uniting forces to overcome the barriers.

However, from what we learned through this research, food hubs may create environments where White privilege again results in control of land and financial capital. When we look at how "racial equity" is operationalized in some food hubs, we see that often this takes on a service model focus, as in the examples where food prices are subsidized in underserved neighborhoods. We see a separation of "the margins and the mission" in this model, especially in White-led and-owned food hubs where the racial equity mission is separate from and secondary to the financial health of the business.

Dedication to racial equity can quickly fall by the wayside because food hubs generally operate with small financial margins. This holds true for for-profit and nonprofit food hubs alike. In contrast, for many of the food hubs owned or led by BIPOC, there was no separation of the margins and the mission. Operationalizing the mission of racial equity went hand-in-hand with BIPOC owning and controlling the food hub itself, means of production and distribution. Some of those hubs did additionally participate in the service model for communities of color as well via programming like subsidized food costs, but ownership and/or leadership of color was central to how they conceived of racial equity being operationalized in their food hubs.

Food hubs can make progress toward racial equity through a food sovereignty approach by focusing on equitable control and ownership of outcomes and processes. Cooperatively owned food hubs with strong participation/ownership from employees of color, including those with Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOP),[53] offer a promising route to progress as seen through a food sovereignty lens.

Facilitators that are important for advancing an approach that is rooted in food sovereignty:

Leadership, staffing, and organizational culture
Obviously, the identity of leadership matters when it comes to equitable ownership and control of food hubs. Leadership pipelines are important. Representative boards are important. The degree to which a food hub's organizational culture encourages and institutionalizes power-sharing in decision-making processes with staff, suppliers, and consumers of color is a critical factor in making progress toward racial equity from a food sovereignty perspective.

Financial structure
The financial structure of a food hub determines the depth to which the hub can truly be equitably owned and controlled. In nonprofit hubs, leaders are often beholden to the priorities of funders. Building pipelines for leadership of color in nonprofits is important, as those leaders can and do control hubs' operations and processes. However, they do not own any profits from the food hubs' operations.

In for-profit hubs run by BIPOC, there is increased control of operations and ownership of profits. Cooperatively owned for-profit hubs can spread the benefits of ownership to many. When food hubs have avenues for ownership by employees such as ESOPs, hubs embrace food sovereignty through more equitable power-sharing. Through a food sovereignty lens, food hubs that emphasize deep shifts of power through ownership and control of decision making and profits are perceived as doing deeper racial equity work than those who are operating primarily in a service model to communities of color.

Interorganizational dynamics
Access to financial capital matters tremendously in moving toward more equitable ownership and control of food hubs. Starting and operating a food hub can take significant investment. As we heard in the interviews, access to capital and investments is not, however, always equitable. This is true both in terms of who has access to investments from lenders and who controls and receives funding from foundations.

Intersectionality

There is more to an individual's identity than their race or ethnicity. Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how a person's identities (including but not limited to race/ethnicity, gender, class, faith, body size, sexuality and ability) combine to create unique experiences of discrimination or privilege. The ways that aspects of a person's identities overlap create experiences of oppression that are singular to that combination of identities. The sum of a person's identities, in other words, is more than its parts.

Intersectionality was initially coined in 1989 by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to elucidate the oppression of African-American womxn.[54] Crenshaw writes:

"Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things."

Food hubs can begin to make progress toward racial equity through an intersectional lens by considering how other identities might intersect with race/ethnicity to pose unique challenges to equity. Food hubs can consider who they are lifting up via their supply chains, leadership, ownership, and distribution networks from an intersectional perspective. For example, in addition to ensuring the hiring of a given percentage of womxn and a given percentage of BIPOC on staff, hubs might start by looking at how many womxn of color specifically are employed and are given leadership or decision-making opportunities. Hubs committed to racial equity via their supply chains might look at their inclusion practices through not only the lens of race/ethnicity, but also that of immigration status or class.

Most hubs we spoke to that were focused across the supply chain did not have meaningful programming or policies in place to uplift or ensure fair treatment of workers. Food workers are often subject to unique forms of oppression stemming from overlapping identities of race/ethnicity, class, immigration status, and gender. One food hub we spoke with was specifically dedicated to providing opportunities for former farmworkers to transition to a role of owner/operator and support them in a pathway to broader market access. An intersectional approach to racial equity may begin with food hubs simply asking more nuanced questions internally about who they are uplifting and who might be left behind.

Facilitators that are important for advancing an approach that is intersectional:

Meaningful inclusion
Food hubs can use intentional data collection and analysis to foster an intersectional approach. If hubs are already in the practice of collecting demographics in their supply chains, staffing, and distribution networks, they can look at this data more closely to analyze based not only on one identity, but multiple identities. Using the example above, a hub could look at its hiring of not only percentage womxn or percentage BIPOC, but also percentage womxn of color. This is one example of many combinations of identities. Hubs who do not engage in formal data collection, but more informal tracking and knowing, can begin simply paying attention to the unique combinations of identities that they are or are not including and serving.

Generally, increased attention to the conditions and treatment of labor from farm to plate can advance a more intersectional approach to racial equity. Farmworkers, restaurant workers, grocery store workers, and institutional cafeteria workers often have complex overlapping identities with race/ethnicity that put them at a unique disadvantage in our food system, including immigration status, class, education, and gender.[55] One way hubs could begin increasing attention to labor issues is by asking their suppliers and customers about their labor practices.

Resilience

Resilience is generally defined as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.”[56] Resilience also is an applied term in many fields, including ecology, neurobiology, and the food system itself. Tendall et al. describe the term this way:

“Resilience can be broadly defined as the dynamic capacity to continue to achieve goals despite disturbances and shocks.”[57]

Food hubs’ racial equity work is resilient if they maintain progress toward the goal of racial equity, “despite disturbances and shocks.” There are many challenges to the resilience of racial equity work for food hubs. External challenges include economic forces, such as shifting priorities of funders, cycles of grant funding, and changing values of individual and institutional customers. External economic forces reveal how resilient the mission is to the margins. External forces can also include interorganizational dynamics.

Partners that hubs collaborate with, such as farmers or processors, can face their own resiliency challenges. Internal challenges include leadership and staff turnover if an organization’s dedication to racial equity work rests on the shoulders of individuals, rather than the organization as a whole. Internal challenges may also include mission drift and organizational culture. Finally, a challenge to the resilience of racial equity work generally is the resilience of racism and racial *inequity*. A food hub working within a food system must consider how resilient inequities and systems of oppression are to attempts to change them.

Facilitators that are important for advancing an approach that is resilient:

Organizational history
Organizations with an original mission (written or not) that involved progress toward racial equity tend to have more resilient dedication to that work. Early and meaningful involvement of BIPOC in the formation of the food hub and its work are factors contributing to a resilient approach.

Leadership, staffing, and organizational culture
The personal motivation and identity of leadership matters. Often (but not always), the race/ethnicity of leadership matters in determining the degree — and resilience — of personal motivation for racial equity work. Commitment to racial equity is less likely to falter based on changes in level of funding when leadership is personally committed. Leadership pipelines and representative boards are important in creating space for decision makers with resilient dedication to racial equity. The degree to which the organizational culture of a food hub not only attracts, but also retains staff of color is critical to the resilience of creating a food hub with equitable participation and ownership by staff. A supportive environment and opportunities for upward mobility for staff are important facilitators.

Financial structure
Financial structure plays an important role in the resiliency of a food hub's mission to external economic shocks. For nonprofit hubs that are forced to adapt to changing priorities of funders, dedication to racial equity work might go up and down with funds available for that work. For hubs individually or cooperatively owned and led by BIPOC, where the mission of racial equity is built into the financial structure of the hub, fluctuations in economic forces will only affect the mission as far as economic returns will fluctuate for those in ownership.

Inter-organizational dynamics
Trust is critical for resiliency of the partnerships that are jointly pushing toward progress. Trust can allow for partnerships and relationships to withstand and adapt to shocks and changes. Reliance on specific individuals that uphold a dedication to racial equity in partner organizations can pose challenges when those individuals are no longer in their leadership roles.

Universalism

A universalist perspective assumes that there are fundamental truths that have universal applicability. White supremacy perpetuates a universalist perspective via the assumption that White beliefs, values, and ways of being apply to everyone else. This perpetuates the perspective that White ways of thinking and experiencing are neutral or beyond that, ideal. Julie Guthman, writing about the alternative food movement, states:

"[a] manifestation of Whiteness is universalism, or the assumption that values held primarily by Whites are normal and widely shared...when particular, seemingly universal ideals do not resonate, it is assumed that those for who they do not resonate must be educated to these ideals or be forever marked as different. It is in this classic missionary impulse that universalism works to reestablish difference."[58]

A (White) universalist perspective devalues the beliefs, perspectives and lived experiences of BIPOC. Viewing the findings of this project through the frame of universalism is important not only because of its troubling presence in the alternative food movement, but because it can apply to the misuse of the concept of equity itself. Kyle Powes Whyte, a Michigan State University faculty and member of the Pottawatomi tribe, writes:

"Different cultures, life experiences, and social situations have their own philosophies, concepts, and practices of or relating to equity that are unique. There is no such way to anchor equity in any one language or cultural usage across race and cultures. So, the topic of equity requires cultural, experiential, and social pluralism."[59]

Food hubs can avoid a universalist approach to their racial equity work by working to build systems and structures that allow diverse voices to be heard, valued, and directly influencing decisions. Food hub leadership can consider their assumptions about the communities they are "serving" and what they need and want. A commitment to open dialogue with stakeholders that goes beyond the beginning phase of building a hub is critical. Fostering a culture of welcomed feedback from organizations and individuals in the supply chain, on staff, and in distribution networks about what is working and what is not is a great step in recognizing the pluralism of perspectives on “good food” and racial equity.

Facilitators that are important for advancing an approach that is not universalist:

Leadership, staffing and organizational culture
Via hiring practices, decision making structures, and organizational culture, food hubs can strive to uplift diverse voices in decision making and leadership. Uplifting others’ perspectives involves building a culture of welcoming feedback and open dialogue. It also involves serious consideration of what is heard, including establishing feedback loops for how diverse input becomes operationalized.

Meaningful inclusion
To advance an approach that is not universalist, it is critical for hubs to move beyond tokenizing and box checking, from their supply chains to their distribution networks. A culture of welcoming feedback and dialogue can extend beyond staff to hubs’ broader network of stakeholders. Hubs can establish opportunities for feedback from stakeholders in their supply chain and distribution network on what their needs and wants are, as well as how they conceive of racial equity itself.

EXAMPLES OF FOOD HUBS/FOOD SYSTEM ORGANIZATIONS THAT OPERATIONALIZE EQUITY

As the review team discussed the findings from the interviews, it became clear that one of the most direct ways to frame what it means for food hubs to operationalize racial equity is to provide examples of what they are doing. Below are a few examples of how food hub/food system organizations operationalize equity and food justice in their work.

Corbin Hill Food Project

Corbin Hill Food Project is a Harlem, New York-based nonprofit social enterprise that supplies fresh local food to those who need it most. Corbin Hill delivers this food through a direct to consumer farm share program and to various institutions and community organizations through a wholesale program.

Corbin Hill uses an equity lens across the entire food supply chain. The organization has co-created programs and partnerships with community groups in a manner that recognizes and honors the power and knowledge of the community. The programs are flexible and are defined by the community, not by Corbin Hill.

As it works across the local food supply chain, Corbin Hill places great value in honoring and respecting community assets. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Corbin Hill has used its strong community-based networks to share the risk with supply chain partners so those partners have the capacity to supply healthy food to Corbin Hill shareholders. For example, for the contract they received from New York City under its GetFoodNYC Emergency Food Home Program[60] during the pandemic, Corbin Hill is intentionally working with Brooklyn Packers, a Black-founded worker cooperative. Corbin Hill, as an organization, secured a line of credit that made net seven payments (paying the partner no more than seven days after being invoiced/work completed) possible such that Brooklyn Packers had the needed resources to meet the scaling up of transportation/distribution resources to get all the food boxes where they needed to go. The workers share in the profits of the cooperative, underscoring Corbin Hill’s intention of having Black and Brown ownership along the food supply chain.

Corbin Hill has instituted a social impact model on pricing for shareholders that prioritizes the needs of low-income communities through pricing and location. Dennis Derryck — founder of the Corbin Hill Food Project — points out that often the point of access for funding from foundations and grant-makers is healthy food access and health. In order for equitable food system models to be successful in the long term and get at the root causes of racialized poverty, funders must also create access points that focus on community ownership, food justice, and community wealth building. Dennis shares that in building partnerships based on equity, Black or Brown- led food hubs and food system organizations must go beyond having a seat at the table; they must set the table and invite other partners, including White-led organizations to join.

For more information on the Corbin Hill Food Project, contact Erica Christensen or Dennis Derryck at their website, corbinhill-foodproject.org.

The Common Market

Equity has been the orientation of The Common Market since its precursor, East Park Revitalization Alliance — founded by Haile Johnston and Tatiana Garcia- Granados — built a healthy community through food. The Alliance focused its energy on economic opportunity as a root cause of food insecurity, which informed its approach to hiring and leadership structures. Its work to bring about a greater degree of food sovereignty for the Black and Brown people of the community it began serving evolved to focus on leveraging markets to support greater equity within the food system for all marginalized people, regardless of race.

Grounded in this early work of the East Park Revitalization Alliance, Haile, and Tatiana founded The Common Market, a nonprofit regional food distributor, and codified its focus on equity through its vision, mission, and values.[61] The impetus for The Common Market developed from its increasing awareness of the disease and life expectancy disparities of the community in Philadelphia where Haile and Tatiana lived. The programmatic design of its intervention was in direct response to systemic racism and economic exploitation its founders were experiencing alongside their neighbors.

The Common Market has always placed priority in hiring women and people of color for all positions, including its Board of Directors. The organization remains a people of color-led group, with all of the senior management positions held by women and people of color, including the two most senior officers. As The Common Market began to demonstrate success in its model in Philadelphia, the primary motivation for expansion to other cities was Haile and Tatiana's desire to shape the values of the emerging good food movement. They wanted to demonstrate that an equitable distribution model, led by BIPOC, could grow to bring positive outcomes to diverse urban and rural communities. The Common Market has over the past 12 years directly invested over $75 million in the communities where it works.

The Common Market chose Atlanta, Georgia as its first replication site to demonstrate the model for the benefit of Black and Brown farmers in the region. Its choice of Houston, Texas for a second replication was to create fair market access for more Latinx farmers and farm workers as well as access to better food in a city with the highest youth and teen obesity rates. The Common Market is now turning to policy to bring about greater health and food equity in the emergency food assistance sector. With the suffering from food insecurity exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, The Common Market again sees an opportunity to heal communities with food.

To learn more about The Common Market, contact Haile or Tatiana through The Common Market's website, thecommonmarket.org.

FoodShare

The nonprofit FoodShare (Toronto, Ontario) started in 1985 as a pilot program addressing the reality of hunger in the city of Toronto. In 1992, FoodShare hired its first executive director. The organization has an array of programs, including a good food box program, a fresh produce to schools program, training for educators about good food in schools, community garden building, and educating students about healthy food.

FoodShare began a strategic focus on food justice in 2012. As part of its food justice statement,[62] FoodShare acknowledges that patriarchy, colonialism, White supremacy, and unbridled capitalism all play a role in establishing and maintaining the inequities in the food system.[63] FoodShare is committed to further developing community assets in Toronto and build agency so that its residents have a seat at the table and can play an active role in identifying and implementing solutions to address racialized poverty and hunger.

FoodShare has a supportive partnership platform to ensure that power among its various partners is distributed equitably. It has a nine-member Indigenous advisory circle so native people have a voice in healing, reconciliation, and sovereignty in the food system.

FoodShare has recognized the importance of walking its own talk as a food system nonprofit organization. It provides a childcare subsidy for its workers when employees meet outside of normal work hours. It has raised the pay of its lowest wage workers by 25% without raising the wages of its highest paid workers. It has introduced a wage ratio so that the highest paid workers at FoodShare cannot make more than four times that of the lowest paid workers. FoodShare also provides a loan program for its workers to help them build their own community assets and manage financial hardships in a fair and just manner.

To learn more about Food Share's efforts, contact Executive Director Paul Taylor at foodshare.net

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOOD HUBS

- Review the report *Racial Equity Implementation Guide for Food Hubs: A framework for translating value into organizational action.*[64] Reflect on how the Racial Equity Implementation Guide Principles can be applied to the various core areas of your food hub operations.
- Visit with managers of other food hubs who have operationalized equity into their operations. What are they doing that you can apply to your food hub operation?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOOD HUB STAKEHOLDERS

Funders

- Consider who is gatekeeping funds and power in the organizations you fund and the partners of the organizations you fund.
- Perform an analysis of which partners are receiving funding in your network based on race of leadership or management, organization size, and whom they serve.
- Are there other organizations who have a long-standing commitment to racial equity that you could fund that are run by BIPOC?
- For White-led organizations that you fund, balance your expectations for a change over time in racial demographics of the organization. Consider whether that organization is willing to do its own work to understand how and why it has failed BIPOC in their program efforts, and through their organizational culture.
- Encourage inclusion of metrics for racial equity that are driven by grantees, not by your organization or consultants you hire.
- Invest in diverse arenas for racial equity work spanning the supply to demand chain. If your primary focus is healthy food access, for example, how are you also promoting wealth creation and ownership of aspects of the supply chain?
- Consider what kind of evaluation you ask for. Does it encourage box checking, or meaningful inclusion? Consider the different systems of oppression that might pose barriers for organizations to report on metrics.
- Move from service-based project models for healthy food access to food sovereignty models for building ownership, power, and control within the community.

Academics

- Consider your role in how you frame your research and outreach strategies and theories of change. Does your need to be the expert get in the way of shifting course for the better?
- Examine the research questions you are asking. Are they universalist by nature?

- The gatekeeping of funds happens not only around equity work in food hubs, but more broadly in research and outreach work on social determinants of health. Consider how those dynamics are at play in your own work and collaborations.
- Create methods or research that capture a breadth of evidence for racial equity work, even when not explicitly stated or captured.
- Create space for your definition of racial equity to expand to a plurality of definitions.
- When you write grants to do research and outreach in communities, make sure that the community-based organizations have commensurate financial resources and power in making project decisions.

Nonprofits

- Create space for your organization's definition of racial equity to expand to a plurality of definitions.
- Is the way you and your partners address racial equity advancing a White based universalist perspective?
- Open a dialogue about demographics/race of partners in your network.
- Is there any work done in your organization that could be better done by folks working directly in communities, and do you have adequate sources to support their work?
- Consider using a multi-frame analysis/perspective when doing organizational work on equity.
- Include organizations led by BIPOC as partners in grant proposals and share those resources in an equitable way that builds their capacity and recognition for the work.

Food hub customers (food retailers, food service managers, restaurant managers/chefs, consumers)

- Research and operationalize best practices on equitable procurement.
- Create a demand for racially equitable practices, including fair labor practices.
- Organize with others and leverage your buying power to create demand for racial equity practices in your local food hub.
- Create material to share stories about successes or wins in advancing racial equity work.

Local, state, and federal government officials

- Create space for your organization's definition of racial equity to expand to a plurality of definitions.
- Create infrastructure that supports local control over the food system.
- Create a plan of operations that prioritizes/conserves racial equity work under differing levels of organizational financial health. This can help maintain racial equity work even under tight margins.
- Help create a new or empower an existing food policy council to have significant BIPOC membership and leadership that represents the community's population.

FUTURE QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND OUTREACH IN FOOD SYSTEMS WORK

- How can the facilitators represented in this report be operationalized as metrics for accountability?
- How can we measure the resilience of food hubs' work toward racial equity? For hubs that are not for-profit, what meaningful metrics can avoid box checking while also producing accountability?
- To what extent are we advancing food sovereignty through food hubs and other food system projects and/or interventions in communities?
- What is the extent of private and collective ownership of hubs by BIPOC and to what degree is that approach addressing inequities?
- How can healthy food incentive programs and models incorporate food sovereignty as a primary goal?
- How do we operationalize a non-universalist research and outreach approach to racial equity work?
- How do we recognize the pluralism of views and definitions of racial equity, while also finding and creating working definitions or guidelines, such as found in the report led by Tamara Jones[65] that are useful and applicable?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Food hubs are one small window into how the food system interacts with racialized systems of power. Food hubs can play a part in dismantling those systems. Food hubs exist on a continuum of engagement with and operationalization of racially equitable practices. The definition of progress in this work can be viewed from several theoretical frames and is conceived of differently by hubs.

Our interviewees shared freely about what inhibits or facilitates their engagement in this work. We have highlighted facilitators throughout the report. Our hope is that our findings are useful not only for food hubs but for those who study them and provide technical and financial assistance to them. All these parties play a part and are accountable in advancing progress toward a racially equitable food system.

EPILOGUE: AUTHORS' REFLECTIONS

In keeping with the pluralism and narrative ethics we are trying to uplift through this project, we recognize the importance in each author speaking for themselves. Each of us brings a unique perspective to this work, stemming from our intersectional identities, lived experiences, and scholarly training. Below are contemplations from each author. Each of us has chosen to share what we wish.

Sarah Rodman-Alvarez

As a woman born into Whiteness, who has chosen to work in the racial equity and food systems space, the question I am always contending with is: How do I step up in my allyship journey while stepping back to heed voices and leadership of BIPOC? I am often wondering how to walk this line, and whether I am overstepping or understepping. Being in that discomfort is central to my work. I try to keep an open mind and make myself available for feedback on how I am doing. I try to stay authentic and say when I don't know. And, of course, there is so much I don't know in the context of this work. I exist in a body racialized as White. I do not have the lived experience of anything else.

Being in the humility of not knowing can run counter to some of the culture of academia, as we are encouraged to cultivate our identities as experts. A project like this can reveal that tension — wanting to show the validity of one's work and needing to push forward, while staying honest about where decisions were questionable or not right — is something to navigate. Over the years, our terminology and best practices for doing this work will evolve. I have no doubt I will look back on some of my work with a cringe. I often return to this Paolo Freire quote from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, also quoted in Eric Holt-Gimenez and Breeze Harper's report for Food First, *Dismantling Racism in the Food System*:

"Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their 'generosity,' the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity,' which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty."[66]

I ask myself what led me to this line of work — the emotional reward of that "generosity," or a deeper more authentic drive to uproot systems of oppression? I'd like to think I am heavily in the latter camp, partially due to a recognition that these systems of oppression actually oppress us all (unequally). And yet, I do identify a twinkling of that self-congratulatory "generosity" as well. It is aligned with the back-patting reward system in academia. About that, all I can say is that a recognition of where the oppressor lives within is as critical (if not more) to this work as the finger pointing outward.

Roxana Rodriguez

My own liberation, and that of the diaspora of people of color, is tied to advancing racial equity work. I am compelled to call for a more racially just food system because I see evidence of a more racially equitable food system born out of creativity and necessity in BIPOC communities. I lean into bringing my whole self into this work, and valuing the love and rage that comes with that. This project revealed the simultaneous beauty and toll of doing this. I think about my family and people I love who are campesinx, and are dying slow deaths due to the same labor practices that organizations that I interview ignore. I feel this rage in my body, and it takes a toll on me. I also feel a sense of solidarity and inspiration from speaking with folks that are succeeding at creating equity with and for BIPOC. These efforts keep me going, and also highlight my own shortcomings going into this work.

Sometimes, I do not share the same lenses as those I am in solidarity with. My experiences of oppression are different from those of others and their ancestors. I constantly stop and ask myself whether I am projecting or inferring things from findings that may not be there due to my own sense of a feigned solidarity. I am a young scholar, and embraced this opportunity to learn, grow, and come across questions that I didn't have the answers to: How do

I make sure these findings aren't skewed because I am seeing more negatives than positives? How much of myself do I invest because this work is so personal? How far away am I willing to stray from my own community to translate things over to a more academic language? I value this complexity in the process because it mirrors the beautiful complexities present in our communities. I go into these processes ready for challenges, and the curiosity to do better as I hope my peers and colleagues have.

Rich Pirog

As a privileged White male who has worked in the food system space for more than 35 years, I have come to realize that historical and current structural racism is the core challenge preventing sustainability and resilience in our food system. Over the years, as I have talked with BIPOC food system leaders about equity in our food system, it has become clear to me that, as a leader of a food systems-based Center, I do have multiple roles to play. It is important to do this work not only as a supportive ally saying supportive things, but as an accomplice taking risks to influence the large educational and research institution I am a part of.

Land grants often have failed Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) through our research and outreach efforts, and through our organizational culture. We must commit to doing better through our actions. This report is a small action step. This project has been a tremendous learning experience for me. It has reinforced my belief that our Center for Regional Food Systems must turn the corner and move toward power-sharing strategies that promote food justice and equity, rather than being content that service work to support healthy food access is sufficient.

John Fisk

Local and regional food systems are critical to the development of a more just food system that provides food security to all communities, offers livelihood and wealth building opportunity to urban and rural areas, and reconnects us all to the ecosystems that we rely upon and must steward. Food hubs have shown themselves to be an important strategy, among others, in the development of these food systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed many things in our society including the vulnerability and inequity of the industrial food system. Local and regional food hubs have shown their ability to function during this time and their value-driven role in food security and economic stability.

Despite the role food hubs play, it has become painfully clear that racial inequity also plagues their development and that they have not escaped ever present dominant White culture. I am honored and humbled to be part of this research and report. Participation in this effort along with the active implementation of the commitment to racial equity we have developed at the Wallace Center have revealed to me the depth and extent of the structural racism built into our food and agricultural systems and society at large. Personally, I have been very active in food hub development, research, and advocacy but for the most part been blind to the depth and extent of the racial inequities that underpin food systems.

I now see that as a privileged White male seeking to change our food system for the better, I have a responsibility to use my privilege to address racial inequity in our food system and beyond. That the change I seek is incomplete and inadequate if it does not address racial inequities. I want to offer my gratitude for those food hubs and other local food organizations, some of which participated in the study, that shared with us how they are living their commitment to racial equity and have shed light on how others may do so. This report is one step in that direction, the results are complex and nuanced. I hope it provides a basis for more research and action that supports us all working towards equitable food and farming systems.

Kimberly Carr

As I reflect on the structural inequities and inequalities in the food system and the current COVID-19 pandemic that, at no surprise, disproportionately and severely impacted racial and ethnic minority populations, particularly Blacks or African-Americans, I remember Dr. Martin Luther

King Jr.'s quote written from his Birmingham, Alabama jail cell in 1963 stating, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere... We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." The operationalization of Dr. King's quotes can be seen in the findings of this report particularly that of the latter sentence, "whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

This report was dear to me as a young Black woman and mother born and raised in the Deep South. I was educated at three historically Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, located in the cultural and geographical, Southern Black Belt region of the United States. "Southern Black Belt" was a term coined by two prominent Black scholars, W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, describing the high concentration of Blacks in the South and a geographical area denoting the dark, rich, and fertile soil used for growing agricultural crops. My great-great grandfather was a biracial, but identified as Black, Alabama farmer. His lived experiences growing up in Jim Crow Alabama and the rich legacy he passed down through my family has afforded me the opportunity to provide insight on this report.

It is my hope that this report begins to "turn a dial" towards signaling to researchers the importance of getting the participants' narratives "right" in terms of the moral imperative, rather than, viewing these participants as subjects whose narratives (i.e. data points) can be edited to fit a research outcome. Narrative ethics played a key role in this report. As researchers, we are classically trained to be technical problem-solvers (e.g., plan study, execute procedures using standard methodologies, interpret findings, publish). However, there comes a time like in this report, where being a technical researcher and reading off an interview script does not "feel right" and the data becomes "messy." "Rightness and wrongness" refers to moral and ethical dimensions, whereas, "correct and incorrect" refers to objective measures. Equity, regardless of the "modifier" in front of it (e.g., racial or health), involves people and their right to fairness, justice, and autonomy in detailing their lived experiences (i.e. narratives). As researchers embark on conducting qualitative work, we must be careful in how we capture participants' narratives and be respectful of their experiences.

Phillip Warsaw

The challenges facing the food system in light of the COVID-19 pandemic have put into stark relief the everyday inequities faced by BIPOC communities, as well its impacts. BIPOC have always been marginalized in the food system: working underpaid (yet "essential") jobs in production and retail, and facing inadequate access to nutrition in their communities. In this current crisis, these disparities have uniquely manifested themselves in the galling COVID-19 mortality rates among BIPOC within the U.S., both as a result of a higher rates of exposure as many BIPOC continue to work to support the country as a whole, and of a higher prevalence of comorbidities fueled, in part, by inadequate nutrition. As a young African-American scholar, this current state of affairs fuels a range of deeply personal emotions. I am deeply angered at the lack of movement within academia, government, and other cornerstone institutions to take radical action to remedy this deep pain felt by BIPOC communities, yet struggle to understand my own role contributing to a solution as a member of academia.

It was this struggle that brought me to this project. Understanding the diverse ways in which BIPOC are resisting the institutional racism, colonialism, sexism, etc. that are endemic to the food system, and contributing my own understandings and knowledge, both from my work and lived experience, is foundational for building the infrastructure necessary to hold our institutions accountable. The answers, as they were, are necessarily messy and complex, but there is value in that messiness, and bringing that to the forefront as a challenge to the oversimplified logics of neoliberalism is a foundational step towards a more equitable food system.

Noel Bielaczyc

This report is a necessary and timely outgrowth of the 2019 National Food Hub Survey, which has been conducted biennially since 2013 by a team of White researchers. The survey has always grappled with questions about how racial equity is operationalized by food hubs, in part because it has relied primarily on an academic concept of food hubs that is rooted in White institutions.

Our conversations with Tamara Jones and other BIPOC food hub leaders revealed an additional challenge with the methodology: A quantitative survey simply does not allow for the type of "messy" conversations that are needed to advance learning on this topic. The interviews that informed this report tell different stories about food hubs and highlight the values and motivations of the people who work in them. These viewpoints are an essential part of the food hub narrative and should be elevated as such. Although this project and the 2019 National Food Hub Survey happened concurrently, this project has deeply shaped the forthcoming survey report and has changed the trajectory of that research going forward.

Working on this report has also brought me to reckon with the Whiteness of food hubs. My identity as an educated White male from an upper middle-class background allows me to fit in at meetings, network gatherings, and conferences, without discomfort. As a network coordinator and outreach specialist, it is difficult to acknowledge the truth that this space does not always feel welcoming to BIPOC folx. This must change. I hope this report challenges other food system researchers, support organizations, and food hubs themselves to think critically about their role in dismantling systemic racism, as it has for me. I also want to express my deep gratitude to the rest of the research team for their commitment, wisdom, and partnership throughout this project, as well as Tamara Jones and Dara Cooper, upon whose work this report is built.

Terri Barker

It has long been recognized that wealth begets wealth. Having access to resources creates access to more resources. This report highlights that food hubs are not an exception and this fledging anti-racist food system model of self-determination does not exist outside the system that spurred its creation.

Study in anthropology revealed anthropology's deeply problematic role of privileging a euro-centric cultural lens, leading to the dehumanization of non-White Indigenous, ethnic, and racial communities for the purposes resource exploitation and wealth building. These historical inequities, made palatable for mainstream discourse, have grown roots in our institutions, companies, and communities. They have profoundly shaped who has access to networks, leadership, and influence in many sectors including the food systems and agriculture sectors. On most days and in most rooms where I engage agriculture and food systems leaders, I am often one of few women and the only person of color in the room. Tokenism and diversity quotas has been the well-meaning result of multicultural initiatives to combat these inequities, but non-White Indigenous, racial/ethnic communities are still overwhelmingly positioned as consumers and in low level positions in the food system and agriculture sectors.

I continue to struggle to find my place in this work as a practitioner working from within the system while occupying a front row seat to how longstanding historical equities and privileges perpetuate a "business as usual" approach to organizational operations, access to capital, etc. Strong leadership and organizations committed to equity are important to giving space and place to the non-White Indigenous and racial/ethnic voices and communities. A commitment to equity also positions practitioners and organizations to address food systems related challenges like climate change, COVID-19, and other impacts that disproportionately affect these communities.

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