



A Call to Build Trust and Center Values in Food Systems Work

NOVEMBER 2020

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for
Regional Food Systems

Authors

Sade Anderson, PhD African Diaspora Studies
Racial Equity Consultant
Black Dirt Farm Collective
Community Ownership Empowerment Prosperity Action Team

Kathryn Colasanti
Senior Specialist, Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems

Noel Didla
Mississippi Food Policy Council
Mississippi Food Justice Collaborative
Center for Ideas Equity & Transformative Change

Curtis Ogden
Senior Associate, Interaction Institute for Social Change
Network Facilitator, Food Solutions New England

The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Michigan State University.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Detroit community for hosting the gathering we reflect on in this report and the people who came from all over the country to share their wisdom. We are also grateful to Lindsay Mensch and Andrea Weiss of MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) for copyediting and communications guidance and to Charli Holloway for design. Support for this work comes from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Photo Credit

All photographs were taken by Lindsey Scalera, Community Food Systems Collaboration Specialist, MSU Center for Regional Food Systems.

Suggested Citation

Anderson, S., Colasanti, K., Didla, N., and Ogden, C. (2020). A Call to Build Trust and Center Values in Food Systems Work. Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems. Retrieved from <http://foodsystems.msu.edu/resources/a-call-to-build-trust-and-center-values-in-foods-systems-work>

Racial Equity Statement of the MSU Center for Regional Food Systems

The MSU Center for Regional Food Systems (CRFS) recognizes that racism in the food system is historic, ongoing, and systemic. As we collaborate with partners to advance food systems rooted in local regions and centered on food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable, we emphasize racial equity as a foundation of our work. Read the full statement: foodsystems.msu.edu/racial-equity-statement



A Call to Accountability

In September of 2019, 70 people from across the U.S. came together to learn from each other about the work of coordinating state level food system plans. The initial intention for this gathering was to surface promising practices of developing and implementing food systems plans—meaning guiding documents, such as the Michigan Good Food Charter or the Vermont Farm to Plate Strategic Plan, that are developed with public input, set out a vision for the food system of a particular place, and identify high priority policies and strategies. Over the course of planning and hosting the three day convening, it became clear that a focus exclusively on technical practices was neither practical nor what participants were most interested in. Instead, it was the complex and adaptive process of bringing people together and the way in which we shared our time that most resonated with many participants.

To share more about the design and experience of the gathering, we—the facilitation team—first decided to write a reflection shortly after the event. Much has happened in the months that have followed. The urgency of our present moment in time can no longer be downplayed. The tumultuous events of 2020 have brought the long-standing inequities of our society into stark relief. Six months ago, we were prepared to **inspire** you to bring values and a focus on equity into your food systems work. Now, we are sending out **a call to deep care and accountability** to our fellow food system practitioners. If you are not actively working to counter white supremacy culture and structural racism, then your food systems work is in vain and you are reinforcing the status quo.

Many people have said, and will continue to say, “Equity is important—but don’t forget the food system.” But that attitude—the idea that equity sits in its own disconnected lane—is why 137 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, 66 years after segregation was deemed unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and 52 years after the Indian Civil Rights Act we are still marching for the rights of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). **Transformative change in the food system will not happen unless we work towards racial justice and equity.** The very foundation of our mainstream food systems is laid with the legacy of stolen land, labor, and lives, and that legacy is in every corner of our country, including predominantly or exclusively white communities. One question we encourage those who live in such communities to ask is, “Why is this so? How did we come to be ‘white’ in the first place?” And importantly, “What happened to the peoples indigenous to this region?” Regardless of the racial composition of your community, we all need to work towards structures and policies that promote equity. Any community that implements equitable policies will help ensure such policies become standard everywhere.

And when we prioritize the needs of the most impacted and marginalized among us, everyone benefits.



As a way to hold ourselves accountable to walking the path towards racial justice, we share here our reflections on two practices to advance equity that anyone can incorporate into their life and work: building trust and centering values, including racial equity. We describe what these threads looked like in a small national gathering—including both our personal experiences of the process, the practical event decisions we made, and what participants had to say. Our hope is to challenge you to consider all the ways in which your food systems work is either welcoming or exclusionary and either embodies equity or perpetuates “othering” and undermines the fight for racial justice. Our goal is to leave you with some reflections and some resources—ideas of steps you can take in the work you do and where to go to learn more.

What is white supremacy culture?

From [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#):

“White supremacy culture is the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

White supremacy culture is an artificial, historically constructed culture which expresses, justifies and binds together the United States white supremacy system. It is the glue that binds together white-controlled institutions into systems and white-controlled systems into the global white supremacy system.”

We refer to “white supremacy culture” and the “myth of white superiority” throughout this publication to describe the many ways in which our society has been built around the mistaken belief that white people are superior to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

Before we go further, allow us to introduce ourselves.



Sade's Reflection

As a young, highly-educated, Black woman I am used to being in all-white or predominantly white spaces. However, when I joined the planning team for the Food System Plan Convening I was expecting more intentional diversity due to its national scope. On the first call I spotted myself and Noel as the only two Black and Brown folks, respectively, with Noel being the only one with the courage to raise the issues of race and values, which was completely absent from the conversation. Immediately I messaged Noel to connect offline.

Thereafter, Noel and I began to build a collective strategy around how to raise the awareness of the planning team in understanding the necessity of integrating racial equity and economic justice throughout the planning process and convening. Within food systems work Noel and I both continue to experience a lack of analysis within the white community around the intersections of race and food. It was really important to push the planning team to think beyond policy and white lived experience. I'm grateful that when Noel and I amplified the need to center racial equity Kathryn and Curtis quickly got on board.

After requesting Kathryn and Curtis answer several questions around their values and understanding of racial equity and food justice we spent time collectively reading articles around these themes and pulling out fundamental ideas that had to be explicitly included in the convening. We agreed to this direction of the convening. There forward, all we could operate from was the trust we created up to that point.

At the convening of over 70 people, less than 10 of those people were a part of the BIPOC community. This further solidified the importance of centering racial equity within the Food Systems Convening. From the location, food vendors, to the opening speaker, all choices surrounding the event were intentionally made to reflect the new collective values. Although some convening attendees were uncomfortable with the centering of racial equity, most embraced it, allowing themselves to interrogate their own values in practice.

Being a part of the design and planning teams afforded me the opportunity to amplify my voice and values as a younger Black woman. I'm thankful for the facilitation team: for new relationships and partnerships in the struggle for justice. I hope that the planning process and convening inspired others to challenge their privilege and live through their values.

With the overlay of COVID-19 with police terrorism, both disproportionately affecting the Black community, now more than ever it is imperative that people commit their values to praxis. This broader system of white dominance that is showing up loud and clear through this moment is the same system that houses food and land injustices. You cannot separate one system of oppression from another. White food system advocates have to deepen their analysis of these systems and the interdependency of these systems. Likewise, white food system advocates have to deepen their analysis of their role in either maintaining or dismantling these systems. It is critical for white people and communities to pour money and resources into African American individuals and communities directly affected at this time and historically as well as Indigenous peoples, communities, and communities of color broadly. This work takes intention and consistency. This work takes being uncomfortable and being willing to sacrifice power and resources. I am hopeful in this moment because of the collective outcry of injustice and hope that this moment is not lost but rather fuels us forward towards transformation.



Noel's Reflection

I'm a 46 year old immigrant from Guntur, India making Jackson, Mississippi home. A couple of ways I've been welcomed to build community are through the Mississippi Food Justice Collaborative and the Mississippi Food Policy Council. When I think about "making home" in Jackson, Mississippi and the Deep South as someone from South India and the Global South, the challenging thoughts I've grappled with are, "How do I navigate home in all my humanity, human complexities, contradictions, struggles, brilliance and culture? What does making home as a single mom mean and entail for my son and I? How do I make home as I navigate people and place at the speed of trust? How do I commit to engaging in principled struggle with the community as I make home? What do transformative processes of making home and building community look like?" In the context of the MS Food Policy Council and the MS Food Justice Collaborative, the questions were, "How do I contribute to transforming Mississippi's Food Systems? What does the role of a willful immigrant look like?" What became evident was that shared beliefs, values, and principles are the bedrock to relationships and authentic collaborations that lead to transformation for sustainable impact across cultures and geographical areas. What also crystallized was that love and accountability are mandatory to engaging in system change.

When I was invited in my role as co-chair of the Food Policy Council and as a steward of the MS Food Justice Collaborative to engage in planning for the national conference, I embodied the learnings of my life and entered the space, ready to unapologetically represent Mississippi as an immigrant who is accountable to native Mississippians. I'm grateful to Felicia, Liz, Asha, Alsie, Alex, Ya-Sin, and Rock for holding me down in that regard.

What I walked into the conversation knowing was that as a privileged immigrant making home in the poorest and second most hunger insecure state in the nation, and as the co-chair of the policy council, I had the responsibility of upholding the [beliefs, values, and principles](#) articulated by the land and water stewards. I also had to be accountable to the truths and legacies of Indigenous genocide, land theft by settler colonists and enslavement of African people, the exploitation of undocumented and documented immigrant labor, and the continued impact of white supremacy culture on the politics, policies, and power dynamics in the state.

The planning committee who made the first call consisted of mostly white women, a couple white men, Sade and I. That's to the best of my recollection. I stayed quiet for a long time, as I was very new to this space and needed to understand the landscape. During the conversation, when the opportunity to share input was welcomed, I took the courage to ask what values undergirded the process. Kathryn as the anchor of the process and Curtis as the facilitator welcomed the question for us to collectively struggle through. Sade and I began building as a result of the call and together, we were able to partner and share our truths with Kathryn and Curtis about how trusting white-led national gatherings has a legacy of being racially and economically inequitable to Indigenous, Black, and Brown communities.

Our truths were honored and the four of us started engaging in design, facilitation, and evaluation processes, which moved beautifully at the speed of trust. We were able to change the intention of the gathering from being a call for state level policy councils engaging to create a national platform to hosting a gathering of food policy stewards undergirded by racial equity, economic justice, and environmental justice. What the four of us were able to do was dig deep into being ethical as leaders stewarding the process and uphold food sovereignty as the ultimate cultural change we all deserve as we strive to impact the health, well-being, and healing of our communities. The energy of the values we undergirded the process with moved through us four from design to facilitation to evaluation.



As I sit and reflect on the magical and uncomfortable moments that became the Detroit gathering, I have to definitely share about what it has manifested into: friendships, principled collaborations, and notes and showers of love and appreciation that brought smiles, tears, and joy to me.

One critical extension that birthed out of the Detroit gathering that I must uplift is the four of us being invited by Karen Bassarab and Anne Palmer of the Center for Livable Future to join the National Policy Council Conference design, thought partnership, and accountability work. It's been beautiful, necessary, and challenging to engage in that process and rethink possibilities in real time with collaborators and allies across the spectrum as to how we must grow, respond, imagine, build, and prepare since COVID-19 has pushed us into social distancing based configurations.

During these uncertain times when we are rapidly responding to the pandemic's impact on ourselves, families, and communities, the continued violence against Indigenous, Black, and Brown lives through police violence and state sponsored repressions, the experiences of our work must inform the pathways of our short-term pandemic response and the long-term visioning of the sustainability of the health, well-being, healing, economies, and cultures of our communities. That kind of [beloved resilient communities](#) can only be imagined and built, if we can truthfully reckon with this moment, and fully embrace that we have to fulfill our generational missions to transform our food system trajectory to steward a future for our children and the generations of children yet to be born. COVID-19 based work from home has clearly proven that engaging in and valuing labor is an ethical imperative. We must engage our institutions and governments to shift the culture of work and decolonize how food systems and economies are invested in. We must demand that governments across the scale and philanthropy make impact investments in building resilient regional food systems and economies. We must work to change the culture of power, policy, and giving towards divesting from extractive and exploitative practices.

So I ask and challenge you to develop your [community economic canvases](#) where the circles of life are regenerative and restorative, and all our emergencies are undergirded and scaffolded by beliefs, values, and principles that will allow us to move towards the system change Mother Earth and her life forces, and all the living beings that have inhabited, that currently inhabit, and those yet to inhabit deserve. Let's not forget that our ancestors and our future generations are willing us to do the right thing, and we have each other to find the courage to face the necessary tension that comes with the sacred responsibility of being stewards of life and living. I welcome us all to Free The Land, By Any Means Necessary!

Kathryn's Reflection

Kathryn's Reflection

I am a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman who grew up in a middle-class community in Ann Arbor, Michigan. With the exception of my gender, every group I identify with has unearned privileges and this has borne out in the way I have been treated throughout my life. In the years after college, the compensation level of my non-profit internships meant I had to utilize public assistance to get by. In the process, I became keenly aware of how poor people are treated and how I was treated differently than those around me. Inexplicably to me, even though I could not afford my next meal, privilege was written all over my face and I was treated accordingly.

Through life experiences like these, I am used to being trusted right away. I am not used to having my credibility and my integrity questioned. This project was different. When I invited Sade and Noel to serve as co-facilitators, they sent me a list of questions—deeply challenging questions about the motivations and values underlying the steps I was taking to bring people together in a convening. I spent a day or so feeling defensive and threatened before I was ready to try to answer. Then I took a deep breath and decided to listen and answer as openly as I could.

Once we began to work together as a facilitation team, we spent many Zoom calls talking about our values and the values we wanted to lift up through the convening, leaving very little time for the hundreds of logistic decisions. But before we could discuss any of the practical matters of the event and the agenda, we had to work through how we would allow for honest conversations, how we would honor each person's contributions, and how each decision—from the meeting location to the invitations, to the topics of conversations—would promote equity.

Not knowing the details of the facilitation plan further in advance made me anxious. In the end though, it all came together beautifully and I realized that through our process we had built a foundation of trust and respect that allowed us to co-facilitate effectively with or without the details pre-scripted. By nature, I like to dive in and get things done. But through this project, I learned to move at the speed of trust. And I learned that nothing meaningful or transformative can get done until supportive relationships are in place.

In the months since this gathering, I have increasingly felt the urgency of recognizing the ways I perpetuate racism through both my action and inaction. But I am conflict averse by nature and prefer to avoid persuasion in any form, whether it's my kids to brush their teeth or my institution to change its policies. I have also tended to assume that when it comes to racial equity, I should sit back and listen and leave it to the people of color to speak up. What could I possibly contribute? But I have begun to recognize that I have the luxury of choosing whether or not to acknowledge the existence of racism, a



luxury that my BIPOC friends do not have. And I am learning to see the heavy and unjust burden that I place on people of color when I choose to sit silent. As many have said before, it is not the people of color who should bear responsibility for solving racism, it's the people who created the problem who bear responsibility: white people. It is time for me to share the emotional burden of advocating for racial justice.

I have been grateful for the opportunity to learn alongside my co-facilitators both in the months leading up to the convening and in the months that have followed. And I am grateful that in this call to accountability to all of you, I have occasion to hold myself accountable.

Curtis' Reflection

Curtis' Reflection

I am a white, straight, cisgender man, who has had the benefits (along with some of the blinding effects) of higher education, who graduated with an undergraduate degree from a public university debt-free because of support from my grandfather, and was able to put a down payment on a home in Amherst, MA because of a gift from my in-laws. All of that has helped me to pursue a values-aligned path in the so-called non-profit sector without the burden of having to pay back exorbitant loans. It also has advanced me into the upper echelons of privilege in this society where so many, and so many more Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, are consumed with concerns about their basic survival and well-being. I try to remind myself of this everyday in some way.

On one side of my family, I am able to trace my roots back to New Amsterdam (New York City), another privilege, and those who came to this already occupied land from England to find “greater opportunity” for themselves, often at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. On the other side, and much more recently, my family fled oppressive conditions in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Ukraine to come to this country. They came here by their own choice, yet another privilege. Yes, I am counting ...

I also count myself privileged that I grew up in Flint, Michigan, in what amounted to a single parent household (my mother has struggled with serious mental illness most of my life), going to public schools in a declining industrial community, and living in a very racially- and class-diverse neighborhood. While we had no “AP” classes in my high school, my advanced preparation, such as it was, came from the social education I received growing up in a place like Flint—in school, in the neighborhoods, on the basketball court—through friendships and interactions across race and ethnicity. It also came through my father, a kind and gentle man who advocated for justice and peace his entire life, and who educated me by his example

and also through the talks he took me to (Angela Davis, Nikki Giovanni, William Little) and the books he had around the house (*Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, *Wretched of the Earth*, *Decolonizing the Mind*). I am grateful for this formation, not because I feel like “I’ve got this” when it comes to issues of race, gender, class and justice, but because I know my entire life will be spent “trying to get this,” continuously pursuing what one of my heroes, the Reverend Howard Thurman, once called “the growing edge.”

The planning for the September gathering in Detroit last year was yet another opportunity to have this perpetual learning stance affirmed. It was a complete *blessing* to be invited into this process, not just of planning, but of getting into “right relationship” with my co-facilitators—Sade, Noel, and Kathryn. As a member of a multi-racial community of practice at the Interaction Institute for Social Change, where I have been “employed” for the past 16 years, I am in ongoing inquiry about what is required of me to stand as an “accomplice” in the pursuit of racial justice and healing. This is not about formulas or plug-and-play, but getting into *authentic* relationship with the unique, living, breathing, and beautiful people with whom I have the good fortune to partner and from whom I get to learn. The invitation, in particular issued by Sade and Noel, to take this work not simply as a prerequisite but also as central to “the work” was very much appreciated. And it bore fruit (so we have heard) not just during the gathering but beyond, in continued work together and mutual support. I am grateful that we were all aligned as a facilitation team that the Detroit experience had to be something other than a typical “conference” or endless (not really engaging) panels of “talking heads.” We wanted to extend the same invitational spirit, intimate sensibility, and engaging quality to all who joined—a continuous conversation that would hopefully carry beyond our time. And we know the conversation has continued with many, and is intensifying in these challenging times that also seem full of promise. (As the poet Leonard Cohen sings in *Anthem*, “There’s a crack, a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”)

And now it seems that we are more clearly standing in “a portal” to truly new possibilities, grounded in racial equity, economic and environmental justice, well-being, sustainability, community thriving, and human dignity. And with no guarantee, and certainly not without continued hard work, on ourselves, in community with one another, and on the larger systems of which we are a part. While it may feel like things are getting worse at times, I tend to side with adrienne maree brown, when she writes, “things are not getting worse, they are getting revealed; we need to hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.” No way through but through, no looking away, but this does not have to be drudgery or done in despair. As I have learned from so many of my BIPOC colleagues, and in particular Black women, there can be joy in the struggle. Actually, there must be some joy in the struggle, especially if we want to model *right now* the new and better world we hope to build.

With deep appreciations to my co-facilitators and gratitude to ALL present in Detroit for what you are doing, onward and in solidarity!





Reflections on Building Trust and Centering Values

In the following sections we share our thoughts on the importance of building trust and centering values. We describe what these efforts looked like in our facilitation team and we offer the strategies we used to incorporate these priorities into the convening. We also draw on take-aways offered during the event and two evaluation surveys, one distributed immediately after the event and one distributed seven months later, to share how convening participants reacted to the attention on building trust and centering values.

Building Trust

In order for people to move together towards a shared goal, they must trust one another. Without trust, people will not be willing to work together. Trusting relationships allow people to work through inevitable conflicts productively and to navigate an uncertain path.

Trust is also the foundation for authentic sharing, which is necessary for meaningful learning. And meaningful learning—listening across communities, sectors, experiences, and demographics—is the foundation for transformative food systems work. As *The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement* puts it, “The time has come to strengthen and enliven our local relationships between community members. Restoring our civic engagement environment is the pathway to ensuring that policies reflect the diversity and worth of our experiences, enabling more people to contribute to the community in which they are a part and live meaningful lives.”¹ In other words, we can’t understand what policies will advance food justice without creating spaces where people with a wide range of experiences can be heard. And we can’t create those spaces without building trust.

Much of the time, we share only the most polished version of our work and ourselves. Conferences highlight the “experts”; everyone else often just sits and listens. What is lost in this dynamic is the opportunity to learn from the many and not just the few, to dig into our failures, emerging efforts, and all the messy paths to progress. Furthermore, if we do not take the time to build trust across lines of difference, we will miss the chance to hear diverse perspectives that are key to navigating our complex and challenging times.

Building trust as a facilitation team required that we first spend time understanding the values and identities we were each bringing to the table. Before we could even touch the agenda, we spent many hours by phone and email discussing who we were (we have continued to evolve!), how we would work together, how different contributions would be honored, what institutions stood to benefit from a convening, and whether and how the convening could be a safe space for all invited.

When we began to think about the agenda, we knew that we wanted the convening to be a time of honest sharing and open dialogue. We needed to create a space where 70 people, most of whom did not know each other, could enter a room for the first time and bring their authentic selves. To encourage participants to build trust with one another, we spent a lot of time thinking through the details of both the physical space and the ways that conversations would be structured. These are some of the strategies that we found helpful.

¹Holley, K. (2016). *The principles for equitable and inclusive civic engagement: A guide to transformative change*. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University. <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/my-product/civic-engagement-a-transformative-guide/>



Room design. We took care to make the space inviting and affirming. We brought in fabric to decorate tables and we set aside a space for attendees to place cultural offerings. We ensured that snacks and water were available at all times. During breaks we played a collective playlist from songs participants had sent us ahead of the convening. We wanted each person to have a moment of feeling individually seen by hearing a favorite song.

Seating arrangement. We set the tables and chairs in small groups of eight. People faced each other, not the speakers or facilitators. When we opened the convening, we sat on the risers to the stage, rather than standing on the stage behind a podium, in order to be on the same level physically and relationally as the participants.

Opening session. To earn the trust of other participants in the room, as a facilitation team we shared our individual intentions for the convening - what brought us into the room and what we hoped to offer to the group during our time together.

Session format. For the sessions, we developed a model of a “conversation catalyst,” where we invited three to four people to *briefly* share their experience related to a particular topic. In this role, people were asked to share orally, without slides, in a way that invited discussion and learning. We told the conversation catalysts that the intention was to honestly share real challenges and promising practices and avoid presenting yourself as an expert.

Cultural offerings. We invited participants to share a cultural offering, such as a song, a poem, or a movement practice, to open and close each day together. This helped create a deeper sense of connection across participants by acknowledging other dimensions of our shared humanity and allowing people to share their gifts and talents.

Many convening participants expressed their appreciation for the way the time was structured. Based on what was shared verbally with us as a facilitation team, in writing during the event, and in evaluation surveys, the efforts we made to allow participants to connect authentically clearly resonated with many people. In the follow-up survey, almost half (47%) of respondents commented specifically about how the structure of the convening left a lasting impression, and many reported that they had applied several aspects of the facilitation structure for use in their own work across the country. Page 13 offers perspectives from participants on the value and impact of being in a trusting environment.



In Their Own Words:

The Impact of Building Trust



What is one thing you are taking away from today?

(From post-it notes written at the end of each day of the convening)

"I appreciate the facilitation team and opportunities to **share openly and honestly** about my work and challenges."

"I'm grateful for all of the discussions and **honest experiences shared by other practitioners** in the room."

How do you plan to apply something you discussed or learned about in your work?

(From an electronic survey sent immediately after the convening)

"I will use cultural offerings in facilitation, as well as some of the other facilitation methods that consider **other ways of learning and knowing.**" - *participant from the Midwest*

"I am taking away a lot of thoughts about meeting structure and facilitation from the overall convening planning, structure and flow. The structure of the agenda to put racial equity at the forefront and the structure of the conversations that **allowed for honest discussion and audience participation** was very effective and made for interesting conversations. These are techniques that would be helpful for us to use in our presentations and to share with food policy councils." - *participant from the Mid-Atlantic*

In what ways was the convening valuable?

(From an electronic survey sent immediately after the convening)

"Plenty of space and time to not only network but **deeply connect** with new folks. Got to see and experience an excellent setting for doing this important relationship building." - *participant from the Midwest*

"Community agreements that seemed to put everyone on an even (enough) footing to **feel comfortable** (enough) in this structure and flow." - *participant from the North West*

"Having **so much time for conversations** was incredibly valuable. I also found it useful to hear that many of us are asking the same questions, struggling to think through similar processes, grounding our work in similar values, etc." - *participant from the South East*

Please describe how you have applied something you discussed or learned at the convening.

(From an electronic survey sent seven months after the convening)

"We found the format used for presentations at the event—[asking] a small group of presenters...to think about responses to a set of questions beforehand and then using a **conversational approach** with a moderator—was engaging and effective. We've used this in meetings since the event." - *participant from the Northeast*

"I learned how to facilitate discussion rounds and **have used this in meetings** I have helped organize." - *participant from the Midwest*



Building trust is important beyond hosting effective meetings. Building trust is essential to food systems work and transformative change. Unless we create spaces of trust, we will not be able to make space for the people who are most harmed by our current food system to lead the path forward. And we will not be able to make lasting change. Our ability to transform systems of injustice depends on our ability to transcend our dysfunctional cultural norms of individualism, competition, and top-down decision making. A recent article from the Network Weaver quotes Jane Wei-Skillern, who draws on nearly two decades of research into collaborations and networks when she claims, “The single most important factor behind all successful collaborations is trust-based relationships among participants. Many collaborative efforts fail to reach their full potential because they lack a strong relational foundation.”²

Centering Values

Values are foundational. All actions are driven by and grounded in values, whether explicit or implicit. While building trust provides the motivation to move forward, values reveal the direction to move in. What does our vision for change look like? What does collaborating to reach that vision look like? Identifying shared values in a group or collaboration is like creating a roadmap. Once you know which road to take and how you will travel, it is easier to reach your destination. As food system practitioners, many of us hold deeply rooted values. Yet most of the time we keep these values in the background and avoid naming them explicitly. As a facilitation team, we took a different approach. We realized that in order to co-create a convening, we needed to name the values that we each held personally and to identify the values that we wanted to lift up through the event. We knew we needed to create a space that modeled the values that are essential to transformative food system change. Through our conversations, we made a commitment to center equity, racial equity in particular, throughout the convening.

These are some of the strategies that we found helpful to center values and lift up equity throughout the convening.

Opening Session. We structured the introduction to ground us in the convening location as a way to practice the value of place and honor those that came before us. We started with a land acknowledgement to recognize the Indigenous communities in the Detroit area. We invited a Detroit activist to share about the Detroit context and to challenge participants to center their thinking around racial, economic, and gender justice. And we invited a representative from the meeting location—the Wayne County Community College District—to share about the venue. We named power as an important dynamic to pay attention to during our time together.

Introductions. As part of introductions, we asked each person to answer, “What is one value you hold that guides your work?” We asked people to share these values verbally at the outset to help draw attention to values as foundational and to create a picture of the values collectively held by the people in the room. Each value was also written on a flip chart and posted near the front of the room to remain visible throughout the convening. See page 15 for a visual representation of the values participants named.

Session format. While session topics varied substantially, the conversation catalysts in each session were asked to discuss what values were driving their work and how their organization was operationalizing and practicing those values. This helped to keep values at the forefront of the discussion throughout the gathering.

² Mease, L. & Ehrlichman, D. (2020, May 20). Cultivating change amidst collapse. Network Weaver. https://networkweaver.com/cultivating-change-amidst-collapse/?mc_cid=031288445e&mc_eid=9513ded49d



Facilitation. As a team we were very thoughtful about how we shared the space, how we partnered with each other, how we could support one another around potential “triggers,” who spoke first, and how we could model the values of equity, solidarity, and collaboration in action.

Catering. All of the breakfasts and lunches were sourced from independent Detroit caterers that shared our values. Most of the catering businesses were run by people of color. We set aside time in the agenda for each caterer to share a little bit about themselves and the food they served to show that we valued their contributions and foster a sense of connectedness between the people preparing and the people eating the food.

Many convening participants remarked on the different ways that the convening centered values, particularly around racial equity. The comments from participants on page 16, taken from written input during the event and from evaluation surveys, show how people reacted to and learned from the focus on equity during the gathering.



In Their Own Words:

The Impact of Centering Values



What is one thing you are taking away from today?

(From post-it notes written at the end of each day of the convening)

“This was an **AMAZING** way to open the convening and **center our discussions around equity** and the people and places we are accountable to.”

“I am grateful that we **started our time together with racial justice** so it could actually be centered there instead of being an afterthought.”

How do you plan to apply something you discussed or learned about in your work?

(From an electronic survey sent immediately after the convening)

“I will be bringing new ideas about how to do policy back to my Policy Committee. I will be **framing our work in terms of equity and climate** [change] in a more consistent, explicit way, among other things.”
- participant from the North East

“I am thinking a lot about how to use the concept of developing shared values to guide the work and engage across sectors as well as additional **encouragement to be bolder** in centering justice in our work.”
- participant from the Midwest

In what ways was the convening valuable?

(From an electronic survey sent immediately after the convening)

“Realized the importance of **always centering values and equity** in food systems work.” - participant from the Midwest

“Centering discussions on **equity and systemic issues in food and ag systems** was very valuable.” - participant from the Southwest

“Leading with racial equity in a way that focused on **how we practice it**, not just why it matters.” - participant from the Northwest

Please describe how you have applied something you discussed or learned at the convening.

(From an electronic survey sent seven months after the convening)

“I appreciated that you **started the whole event with a conversation about equity**, so that everyone had the expectation that it has to be a consideration, if not the guiding force of our work.”
- participant from the West

“What we learned—in the run-up to the conference (I was on the planning team) and at the conference—gave us powerful backing for a new approach to our state network’s food charter plan, to **elevate the voices of marginalized communities** and do deeper listening first.”
- participant from the Northwest



As someone once said, “If you don’t know what you stand for, you’ll fall for anything.” The fundamental transformation of our food systems must be grounded not just in technical solutions, but in a different set of values that are explicit about what and who matters. Our current dominant food system clearly does not center the dignity of workers and many growers, producers, and fishers. It does not center well-being, instead favoring profits for the few and corporate growth. It explicitly and implicitly favors white dominant culture and the myth of white superiority at the expense of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and ultimately of a habitable planet.

The current uprisings around our country suggest that existing dehumanizing and extractive “norms” are collapsing, and through the cracks people are lifting up with fewer inhibitions what they really believe and prefer, sharing their experiences more loudly, especially those that have lived under the boot of oppression, and fighting for new agreements about how the world is and should be. We can choose to live out these agreements now, even in small ways, in who we spend time with, and how we treat one another. We can choose to model authenticity, vulnerability, generosity, and solidarity in our daily lives and our food systems work.

Taking Action

Through the preceding reflections, we have shared with you steps that we took to prioritize building trust and centering values in the process of planning and hosting a small national convening. We cannot change the world overnight, but we can all take steps to incorporate these practices. Now it is your turn. What will you do to build trust and center values in your work? How will you advance racial justice *in practice*?

We leave you with a few ideas and resources to get started. These are not exhaustive lists and there are many other valuable resource and idea lists out there. But dive in and see where it takes you.

Ideas

Consider how you can make change at three levels—individual, organizational, and systemic.

Individual

- Educate yourself about the past and present of race and racism in this country and your community.
- Understand your own racial identity and racialized trauma. Look to your own community for support rather than further burdening those who are already oppressed.
- Talk to your people. Educate your family, friends, and the next generation about race and racism and how to dismantle white supremacy culture.

Organizational

- Welcome being led by BIPOC leaders not just for the optics but to flip white supremacy culture on its head.
- Dismantle white supremacy within your organization. Start by reviewing and revising practices of hiring, compensation, and promotion.
- Co-create systems of care to support those experiencing pain and trauma. Establish employee assistance programs that are race-informed.



Systemic

- Redirect power and resources to communities that have historically been marginalized.
- Advocate for policies to create equitable structures that restore justice, such as efforts to reform police departments.
- Advance new narratives about the past, present, and transformative future of food systems that center truth, justice, and other values.

Resources

Explore the resources below to learn about the link between racism and the food system and the many ways that the myth of white superiority dominates our culture.

Videos

- [Race the House we Live In](#) (6 minutes)

Podcast Episodes and Audio Files

- [Voices of the Food Chain](#) (2–3 minutes each)
- [Aspen Ideas Festival: 'How to be an Antiracist'](#) (51 minutes)
- [The Land of Our Fathers, Part 1 - 1619 Podcast](#) (31 minutes)

Podcast Series

- [Seeing White](#)
- [For the Wild](#)
- [Irresistible](#)
- [Edible Activist](#)
- [The Secret Ingredient](#)
- [Point of Origin](#)

Articles and Blog Posts

- [Backgrounder: Dismantling Racism in the Food System](#)
- [Why We Can't Separate Justice and Sustainability in the Food System](#)
- [Food Workers Food Justice: Linking Food, Labor and Immigrant Rights](#)
- [Why Should It Take a Pandemic to Bring out the Best in Philanthropy?](#)
- [Acres of Ancestry Initiative/Black Agrarian Fund](#)

Resource Lists

- [Want to See Food and Land Justice for African Americans? Support These Groups](#)
- [What Can White People Do?](#)
- 21 Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge
 - [Prompts](#)
 - [Resource Page](#)
- [An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System, Seventh Edition](#)
- [Native Land Map](#)
- [Indigenous Ally Toolkit](#)



Anti-racist & Racial Equity Trainings for your Organization

- [The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#)
- [Racial Equity Institute](#)

We hope that the reflections, resources, and participant reactions we have shared here have challenged you to bring strategies to build trust and center values into your work. And we hope that you will share with the facilitation team and with one another what you are learning as you do so. There is a wonderful network practice called “working out loud” where we share what we are doing, why, and to what end. This is not about grandstanding, but rather being vulnerable and offering gifts to others who may find that what we have to share is just what we need.





MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

Center for
Regional Food Systems

The Michigan State University Center for Regional Food Systems advances regionally rooted food systems through applied research, education, and outreach by uniting the knowledge and experience of diverse stakeholders with that of MSU faculty and staff. Our work fosters a thriving economy, equity, and sustainability for Michigan, the nation, and the planet by advancing systems that produce food that is healthy, green, fair, and affordable. Learn more at foodsystems.msu.edu.

Center for Regional Food Systems

Michigan State University

480 Wilson Road
Natural Resources Building
East Lansing, MI 48824

For general inquiries:

EXPLORE: foodsystems.msu.edu

EMAIL: CRFS@msu.edu

CALL: 517-353-3535

FOLLOW: [@MSUCRFS](https://twitter.com/MSUCRFS)

Email addresses and phone numbers for individual staff members can be found on the people page of our website.