

Reflections and Outcomes of the Northeast SARE Project Entitled ““Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training for Agricultural Organizations and Individual Service Providers”

The following memo details reflections and outcomes of the Northeast SARE funded project entitled “[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Training for Agricultural Organizations and Individual Service Providers](#).” The intended audience for this memo is Maine agriculture service providers who engaged with this project as well as other providers committed to centering equity at their organizations and in their work with farmers. This memo was written by project lead and staff at the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA), Bo Dennis, from information gathered from participant evaluations, the farmer advisory committee, discussions with participants and observations throughout the project. MOFGA and project partners hope these key takeaways from the project help other predominantly white-led organizations and institutions serving farmers to better support farmers who have been marginalized and oppressed in our past and current agricultural systems. We also hope sharing these lessons learned informs projects that are designed to further equity and justice work inside agricultural non-profits and institutions.

OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

Goals of the project:

The original project design was intended to begin undoing systemic racism, addressing past harms, and building an equitable future within agriculture organizations and Maine agriculture overall. Farmers from marginalized communities most impacted by structural inequities, especially BIPOC and LGBTQ+ farmers, face barriers to accessing farming support that is exacerbated by historic and current institutionalized discrimination from Maine agriculture nonprofits and government agencies alike.

This project lasted 3 years and had three components. We believe the combination of these created a comprehensive approach to systems change within agriculture institutions. This project was informed by an advisory team of farmers and farmworkers of color, Indigenous growers, and LGBTQ+ farmers. The three project pieces included:

- **Equity consultants**
 - Seven organizations in Maine¹ partnered with equity consultants to conduct an organizational assessment and create a plan of integrating equity changes. The consultants are listed at the end of this memo.
- **Cross-organizational equity space**

¹ Organizations working with equity consultants included Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, Maine Farmland Trust, Maine Department of Agriculture Conservation and Forestry, University of Maine Cooperative Extension, Land for Good, Cultivating Community, and Wolfe's Neck Center for Food and the Environment

- To provide more support, there was a monthly facilitated Zoom peer-to-peer space for accountability and learning for Maine agriculture service providers. Monthly attendance ranged from 7 to 15 participants each time.
- **Equity Trainings**
 - Professional development training was offered widely to Maine agriculture service providers. The specific trainings offered are listed at the end of this memo and included themes such as decolonization, undoing racism in the food system, bystander intervention, and LGBTQ+ allyship. There were 9 trainings offered in total with 120 participants. While an important component of learning, professional development training alone rarely gets fully integrated into daily practice and should be integrated with the above two components.

KEY CHANGE COMPONENTS

The following are key factors for progress in integrating equity into agriculture institutions to better support farmers. These themes should be integrated simultaneously for effective change.

- **Power and systems thinking**

Central to equitable systems change is understanding the larger systems of oppression that our institutions exist within, from the very origins of exploitative agriculture in colonization and enslavement systems to the current reinforced white supremacy in our food system. Existing within this, organizations must identify and transparently discuss the power dynamics that are both *internal and external to the organization*. Only from this place can an organization, which often holds historical and present day power, move from transactional to transformational commitments of equity and build authentic relationships with previously marginalized and underrepresented farmers. Trust and openness to receive feedback in these healing relationships will be key in shifting power and resources to a more equitable state.
- **Importance of leadership buy-in**

As many agricultural institutions and organizations exist within a hierarchical framework and many will continue to be hierarchical, higher level staff with executive decision making power must be fully committed to equitable systems change of an organization's internal and external work. Without this commitment, a few lower paid staff are often taking on this emotional labor, risk, and actual labor and will experience burnout, passion exploitation, and will ultimately be ineffective in implementing larger organizational shifts. Organizational infrastructure must be supportive and willing to shift to support full institutional integration of justice principles. This structure, as well as leadership engagement,

looks different from each organization based on structural realities such as the key differences between nonprofits governance structures and governmental institutions. An example of an effective structure from this project are organizations that formed regularly convening equity stewardship teams composed of staff from all levels of an institution to carry work forward.

- **Accountability**

External and internal accountability are key to moving work forward as well. External accountability includes statements with clear, actionable items shared with larger communities and partnering with external consultants and advisory teams to hold an organization to their stated goals of equity. Internal accountability includes staff members feeling informed, encouraged, and empowered to ask hard questions of each other and the organization to ensure experiences align with the organization's stated mission and commitments.

Staff of all levels and experiences need confidential spaces to process specific issues that come up both in equity and justice training as well as instances in implementing work at their organization. This can be specific to explicit equity shifts but in other realms as well since equity implications can be felt in all work. This space needs to be accountable to patterns that can arise in these processing spaces such as [white fragility](#) and further centering dominant voices. This project provided a monthly facilitated call for Maine agriculture service providers to connect across organizations. The guidelines and intentions for this “Cross Organizational Equity Space” can be found [here](#).

- **Professional development training**

While some organizations think training alone will lead to change, professional development training on equity subjects needs to be integrated along with all of the aspects listed above to be supportive and effective. All staff and board of organizations should be expected and supported to complete such training for knowledge to shift and grow at all levels of an institution.

CHALLENGES

The following elements posed challenges consistently across agriculture organizations trying to implement equity and justice work in their support of farmers. In order for effective change to be made, these will need to be comprehensively addressed.

- **Organizational staff consistency and capacity**

Turnover notoriously affects the forward motion of an organization's work as well as relationship building. Similarly, staff capacity and time to attend training,

engage in peer to peer spaces, and time to integrate crucial changes themselves were cited as barriers. While linked, capacity and staff time can be separate issues- lack of capacity can include lack of motivation, supervisor support, and lack of ability to implement changes. In some instances in this project, unaddressed power dynamics led to gatekeeping and restricting equity learning to a few staff hindered the change impact, especially at larger institutions. In order to lead to impactful change, equity work must be prioritized and institutionalized at every level, rather than held by individual staff members.

- **Existing within oppressive systems while working towards change**

It is an uncomfortable but important experience for people in power to learn and grapple with how their daily work is intertwined with and further reinforces oppressive systems. One example from this project included agriculture organizations engaged in land access for farmers discussing how their work interacts with decolonization efforts. In order to create space for change, leaders at organizations must be open to receiving feedback and transparently discuss how they will shift. This includes questioning and ideally pausing and ending harmful programs and practices.

- **Time needed for unlearning and restructuring**

- Within white dominant institutions and organizations, there is a constant push, overwork, and forward movement, often with little reflection. When this movement forward perpetuates harmful systems, there needs to be dedicated time to pause, reorient to justice, and make necessary changes. It is therefore imperative that organizations committed to change slow down and assess, with support and accountability, to unlearn harmful practices and restructure in equity. These pauses must be matched with fiscal commitments in order to prioritize equity shifts and a reduction of requests of staff workloads to allow for collective and individual processing space.

- **Institutions vs non profits implementation**

- As learned through this project, the timeline and integration of necessary change varies significantly between scale and organizational structure. The most striking difference was between the non profits and governmental institutions/ universities engaged with this project. Barriers to change were higher at the latter due to entrenched formal communication styles, bureaucratic systems, and hierarchical structures as well as size. In this project, it took much longer for institutions to be ready to begin external consultant relationships. We see this as the reality of these systems, and encourage change by any and all means necessary recognizing that timelines and barriers will differ.

We hope these lessons learned help inform future projects as well as impactful changes within agriculture organizations committed to an equitable food system. The path towards justice is rarely linear and even in the messiest of times in this project we hope to have provided tools of reflection to move towards more equitable futures. Many of our organizations are entrenched in harmful systems so this project asked us to slow down and be realistic about how we define “success.” We saw new awareness as a step forward, even if that awareness is about harm that is currently happening as white supremacy is often unspoken and continues patterns of oppression as the norm. Beyond the ending of this project, organizations have continued to build relationships and commit to change. Some organizations engaged in this project continue to work with equity consultants, are pausing or shifting programs, and have dedicated specific funds to staff engaging in equitable systems change. Equity stewardship teams are continuing in these organizations to ensure change commitments are integrated. It is critical that all organizations and institutions see equity commitments one in the same to their mission of supporting farmers, not as siloed issues.



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RESOURCES

Equity Consultants

- [Think Again](#)
- [Service to Justice](#)
- [Up with Community](#)
- [Visions Inc](#)
- [Beyond Racial Equity](#)
- ResourceFull Consulting
- Chann Consulting

Trainings

- [Cross Cultural Community Services](#)
 - *Three part series on implicit bias and cultural competency.*
- [Soul Fire Farm “Uprooting Racism” Training](#)
 - *Training on historic and current discrimination in agriculture and transitioning to a racially just food system.*
- [Wabanaki REACH “Decolonizing Non-native Communities”](#)
 - *4 part series including history and present day Maine- Wabanaki relations and decolonization*
- [Equality Maine](#)
 - *Training on the experiences of and how to support LGBTQ+ farmers*
- [Right to be bystander intervention training](#)
 - *Training on how to intervene when witnessing discrimination and injustice*

Print resources

- [Awake to Woke to Work](#)
- [White Supremacy Culture](#)
- [Racial equity tools glossary](#)