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Reclaiming the Food System: Learning from Community Responses to the Impacts of COVID-19

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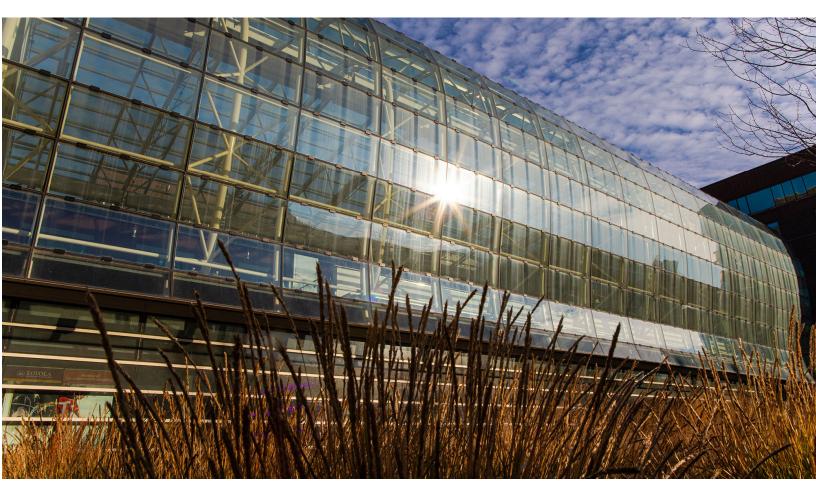## Recommended Citation

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Acknowledgments

Glossary

Food system refers to all the people, resources, and activities involved in keeping us fed: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming, and disposing, recycling, or recovery of food and food packages. It also includes the drivers and outcomes of those processes, plus the complex relationships between the people and activities involved in them. Local food systems are nested within regional, national, and global systems.

Community may refer to a geographic community, such as a neighborhood, or a community of people who share a characteristic, such as race or ethnicity, country of origin, sexual orientation, occupation, or faith, among others. At times in this report, *community* also is used to refer to a sense of connection, camaraderie, and solidarity.

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Introduction

Our dominant food system is racially and economically unjust, environmentally unsustainable, and vulnerable to shocks like extreme weather, crop diseases, or unexpected economic fluctuations. **The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the food system's vulnerability and inequities.** The Chicago Region Food System Fund (CRFSF) awarded roughly $4 million in 2020, to 81 grantees responding to food emergencies created by COVID-19. In April 2021, another round of grants distributed nearly $3 million to 48 grantees and aimed to go beyond emergency response to build an equitable food system capable of withstanding shocks like COVID-19.

In this research, conducted in collaboration with CRFSF and with the assistance of Loyola students, I explored **how non-profit organizations responding to disruptions caused by COVID-19 in the Chicago region food system are opening pathways for re-organizing the food system towards racial equity and resilience** – that is, the ability "to provide sufficient, appropriate and accessible food to all, in the face of various and even unforeseen disturbances."[1]

Toward that end, I facilitated **four food system workshops** in May and June 2022, with a subset of CRFSF grantees. Organizations were invited to send one or two representatives to a workshop if they received a CRFSF grant in April 2021, and their application indicated majority people of color across their board, leadership, and staff. The workshops **centered the perspectives of people of color** for two reasons. First, COVID-19 impacted their communities the hardest. People of color experienced higher rates of food insecurity, COVID-19 exposure through work that could not shift online, COVID-19 cases, and COVID-19 deaths. Second, their experiences and knowledge are essential to create an equitable food system.

Of 37 organizations invited, 20 participated. In all, 26 individuals from these 20 organizations took part in one of the workshops, which occurred in small groups of 4-10 people either in-person or virtually. No representatives from CRFSF were present during the workshops, and the identities of participants quoted in this report were not disclosed to CRFSF.

Participants came from a **range of non-profit organizations**. Prior to the pandemic, several organizations engaged in different areas of food and agriculture, such as:

- Cannabis industry advocacy
- Commercial kitchen development
- Community gardening
- Food assistance / food distribution
- Home gardening support
- Food business incubation

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[1] Tendall, D. M. et al. 2015. Food system resilience: Defining the concept. *Global Food Security*, 6: 17-23.

- Farming
- Farmers markets
- Farmworkers rights
- Nutrition education
- Urban agriculture education and volunteer opportunities

Roughly one-third of the organizations did no food-related work before the pandemic. Their work involved a range of services, such as:

- Arts appreciation
- Business incubation
- Community-building
- Emergency financial assistance
- Health and wellness
- Serving the LGBTQ+ community
- Supporting domestic violence survivors
- Technology education
- Trades education
- Worker health and safety

These organizations became involved with food and/or agriculture due to an increased need for emergency food assistance within their communities due to the pandemic. Their food-related work continued at the time of the workshops in 2022.

Although all workshop participants were CRFSF grantees, I asked them to speak about their work related to food and agriculture more broadly. Thus, the conversations extended beyond specific projects supported by CRFSF. During the workshops, participants shared:

- How they **adapted their work during the pandemic in ways that may expand opportunities for longer-term, systemic change** within the Chicago region food system.
- How they perceive the **importance of partnerships** to the success of their food system work, especially during an unexpected shock.
- What they envision as a **desirable future for the food system**.

This report documents those discussions. The ideas within originated with participants but do *not* reflect a consensus across everyone. Rather, I have summarized the many experiences and perspectives exchanged during the workshops. My interpretation is influenced by my own identities and social position. I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman from the Midwestern U.S. who has lived in Chicago for over a decade. I conduct academic research, teach courses on food systems as well as environmental justice, and participate in the food system as a consumer.

I begin by describing impacts of the pandemic on the food system that participants experienced and how their organizations pivoted in response. I then report participants' visions for the future of the food system and discuss three approaches for achieving equity within it: resource mobilization, partnerships, and community care. I hope that the valuable insights documented within offer inspiration – and provoke reflection by people in power – on how to re-organize the food system towards resilience and racial equity.

Pandemic Impacts on the Food System

In March of 2020, COVID-19 had become widespread around the U.S. and globe. Local and state governments implemented social distancing, masking, and shelter-in-place orders to protect public health. Participants described the pandemic's impacts at that time:

> *. . . getting a million calls of people saying that they didn't know how to access the unemployment benefits, the system was crashing, that they needed to know the numbers to food pantries, so we started getting a lot of calls saying that people were out of work, needed access to food.*

Many organizations were inundated with requests for food and other forms of assistance due to people losing jobs or experiencing reduced hours, losing a family provider to COVID-19, experiencing homelessness, and/or escaping domestic violence, for example.

The pandemic exacerbated existing racial inequities, as evident in the higher rates of COVID-19 illness and deaths, job loss, food insecurity, and lack of worker safety in Black and Brown communities. The pandemic devastated the restaurant industry where workers lost jobs. Frontline workers in other food industries faced increased risk of getting COVID-19, because "a lot of [work] places were not respecting safety guidelines and all the recommendations [of] the CDC." In late May 2020, social unrest arose following the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by Minneapolis police. This led some grocery stores to close, which made it difficult for residents to access food. Other forms of discrimination -- related to gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation, for example – made it even more difficult for some groups to access food.

Many participants reported that efforts by governments and large non-profit organizations failed to meet adequately the needs for food within their communities.

> *The rightful duty bearers, the federal government, local governments – and the spaces that typically have upheld this duty, which are largely . . . exclusionary spaces for people of color and queer folks – have been either, one, not able to do it because of volume of folks coming through or, two, because they've been neglecting it in the case of the federal government.*

As participants responded to these impacts, they also navigated pandemic conditions that affected their daily operations, such as having to cancel in-person programs and losing volunteers. Some also contended with COVID-19 illness among their self, staff, and/or families.

Pivoting in Response

During the pandemic we had to shift on a dime. And we had to make that turn real fast.

Participants described how their organizations adapted their programs and operations in response to the pandemic's impacts. Emergency food assistance was critical at the pandemic's start and participants continue to fill that role in 2022 (Table 1). Unlike conventional food distribution programs, many participants work to ensure that the food they provide respects the cultural traditions and dietary restrictions of the people with whom they engage. They also consider if people have access to a kitchen, gas, electricity, and cooking equipment.

> *. . . a lot of the things that we [were] hearing from community members were that when you go to food pantries they are giving leftovers, or foods that are not culturally relevant, or foods that they're not necessarily knowing how to cook or care to cook. So we designed a program where we surveyed community members and asked what they would want . . .*

> *We also service LGBTQ people who were recently incarcerated and/or might be living in a home where there is not a kitchen, so we provide food that is easier for them to cook and eat.*

> *The community voice is very important in all of our work, so we have to make sure that we're listening . . . and not force-feeding stuff to them.*

Many participants engage in community-based practices to produce food, expand market and grocery options, and develop local food-based economies (Table 2). Some provide health, safety, and financial assistance (Table 3). Everyone also had to adjust their operations given the public safety requirements created by the pandemic (Table 4).

The following tables compile activities across all 20 organizations. No single organization engaged in all of these activities; rather, each coordinated multiple programs and projects as they continued to pivot their efforts in response to changing conditions on the ground.

TABLE 1. Participants responded to the increased demand for food assistance caused by the COVID-19 pandemic through a variety of creative approaches.

Emergency Food Assistance
Food boxes. Quickly organized to distribute food boxes from the Greater Chicago Food Depository, USDA, or local sources "on the streets," at central outdoor locations, and/or through home delivery. This provided food to the "many different folks" needing it.
Home delivery. Coordinated logistics to deliver food boxes, meal kits, or prepared meals to homes, which was especially important for elders, people immunocompromised, and others unable to leave home. Delivery programs also generated jobs.
Outdoor distribution sites. Used parks, vacant lots, and other outdoor sites for food distribution or community meals. This allowed people, including those without housing, to pick-up food while minimizing COVID-19 risks.
Food pantries. Operated community food pantries (after lockdown mandates lifted), often using a "client choice model" where people select their foods. This provided food tailored to community members' culture, preferences, and living situations (e.g., no kitchen) with dignity.
Mutual aid. Organized mutual aid networks of local volunteers to connect people and food. Coordinated food donations and drop-offs. These encouraged neighbors to help one another through immediate action and become an intricate part of solving issues.
Local foods. Distributed food donated by or purchased from local farmers, vendors, retailers, and restaurants. This increased the amount and nutritional quality of food reaching individuals and families. It also offered local farmers and vendors an outlet for their products.
Culturally appropriate foods. Listened to or surveyed community members and provided food suitable to their cultural traditions, staple diets, dietary restrictions, physical resources for cooking, etc. This demonstrated respect and better fulfilled people's needs.
Technology. Created online systems that let consumers order food for delivery or that connected growers who had food to donate with food pantries. This helped ensure food assistance met people's actual needs and increased locally grown food options.
Waste reduction. Included in food distribution excess produce or products made from it. Connected local farms to food pantries, coordinated gleaning, and encouraged composting. Local farms donated produce. These efforts increased local foods for individuals and families and reduced food waste.

TABLE 2. Participants expanded existing or created new programs to increase food options available to people through local food production, education, and economic development.

Building Local Food Systems
Food production. Expanded or created urban farms, including a hydroponic farm; community gardens; a community greenhouse; or home gardens. These helped expand food access, increase green space, and support education, community-building, and mental wellness.
Markets and grocery options. Coordinated farmers markets; mobile grocery; pop-up markets at parks, parking lots, senior facilities, and schools; pop-up grocery stores in empty storefronts; or permanent retail space. These helped expand food access and support local farmers and vendors.
Affordability. Accepted SNAP and Link benefits.[2] Coordinated Link matching funds to farmers markets. Offered sliding scale prices for food boxes or at farmers markets. Advocated to increase governmental funding. These efforts helped make food accessible to people of varied financial means.
Adult education. Organized educational programs about growing food, culturally-relevant food traditions, nutrition and health, and/or reducing food and packaging waste. Provided cooking demonstrations and recipes. This supported people to grow and/or eat locally produced foods.
Youth education. Led youth education on-site at community gardens and farms or in collaboration with schools and park districts. This gave youth opportunities to learn about agriculture, nutrition, and workforce skills, such as culinary arts or carpentry.
Small business support and workforce training. Provided assistance with business planning, licensing, fundraising, marketing, etc. Showcased locally produced goods at events. Provided opportunities to learn skills (e.g., horticulture, carpentry, culinary, entrepreneurship). This helped build the capacity of local food businesses, create jobs, and contribute to local economies.
Funding for farmers. Re-directed governmental funds to farmers. Offered capacity-building grants to growers. This helped farmers invest in personal protective equipment (PPE), labor, refrigeration, transportation, etc. to sustain or expand production and distribution.
Infrastructure, facilities, or land. Invested human or financial resources to develop infrastructure, such as a greenhouse, refrigeration, and community or commercial kitchens. Acquired land for growing food and indoor spaces for markets or kitchens. This helped support community-based food systems.

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[2] SNAP refers to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. SNAP provides eligible participants with nutrition benefits that can be used to purchase food and seeds for growing food. These benefits are accessed through the Illinois Link Card program.

TABLE 3. Some participants worked for the health, safety, and well-being of individuals and families, including farmworkers and food industry workers.

Health, Safety, and Well-Being
Worker safety. Organized workers in factories and warehouses to improve unsafe work conditions. This helped frontline workers advocate for measures that would reduce their risk of getting COVID-19.
Financial or material assistance. Provided direct financial assistance (e.g., $500 checks or gift cards) and supplies (e.g., laptops for families with children who otherwise could not access remote learning). Helped people apply for rental assistance from municipal and state programs. This supported people who experienced reduced hours or job loss (especially those not able to access unemployment) to pay for rent, food, and other living expenses.
COVID-19 resources. Communicated with community members or essential workers about COVID-19; provided COVID testing; educated people about vaccination; and/or coordinated vaccinations within communities or at workplaces. This increased people's access to accurate information about the coronavirus and resources to protect their health.
Mental health. At least one organization brought mental health specialists to food and garden programs to provide counseling. Others observed the therapeutic effects of people engaging with food and gardening. These activities helped improve emotional well-being at a time when mental health took a particularly bad toll due to the pandemic.

TABLE 4. Pandemic conditions required participants to adapt their organization's operations.

Operational Adaptations
Virtual operations. Shifted from in-person to remote office work. Adapted educational programs, events, farmers markets, etc. to happen online. This allowed organizations to accomplish work that they otherwise could not (although not everyone with whom they work had computer access.)
Outdoor programs. Moved food pick-up locations, educational events, etc. to outdoor spaces. This allowed people to benefit from programs while minimizing COVID-19 risks.
Fundraising. Increased fundraising, which enabled organizations to respond to the pandemic's impacts and, in some cases, expand their work.
Human resources. Navigated staff reductions. Improved staff compensation and benefits to retain employees, hired additional staff, recruited volunteers, encouraged volunteer leadership. This helped organizations sustain the human resources to do their work.
Communications. Increased social media presence, used television and radio, and adapted face-to-face outreach strategies (e.g., door hangers instead of in-person door knocking). This helped organizations sustain community outreach while minimizing COVID-19 risks.
Collaboration. Built relationships and worked with others to secure food donations, distribute food, access resources (e.g, fiscal sponsor, physical space), coordinate volunteers, offer cooking demos and educational programs, raise funds, expand outreach, extend service areas, and more. Partnerships increased organizations' capacity and impacts.
Mission or structure revision. Expanded organizational mission. Re-structured organizational leadership and shifted from a top-down to worker-led culture. Aligning mission and operations supported organizations to be more effective.

Participants nourished and otherwise supported their communities through myriad responses to the pandemic's impacts. Yet, they also observed that food insecurity continues to persist:

> *The impact that this is having already in the community . . . has been absolutely incredible and stunning, and sometimes heartbreaking, because it makes us realize how much of a need there is for access to food . . . Food pantry lines have been long way before the pandemic [and] don't go down . . . the lines are so long and the reason for that, it's poverty.*

The pandemic made more visible disparities that have long existed within society. Participants called for dismantling the systemic oppression that reproduces wealth disparities and inequities in food security, as well as education, health, employment, housing, and other areas.

Envisioning Future Food Systems

> *We can't just reform what we currently have, it's not working. These [dominant] systems need to be dismantled and we need to rebuild . . . Black, Latine, and Indigenous populations have systems, traditions in place, which have been undervalued, underfunded, attempted to be erased.*

I asked participants to talk about their future visions for how food is produced, processed, distributed, and consumed, whether in their own community or the Chicago region. Each person highlighted facets unique to their own organization's work. Some called for fundamental change in the dominant food system. Others focused on creating hyperlocal, community-based alternatives to that system. Together, they offer an inspiring vision to replace the exploitation and harm inflicted by the dominant food system with systems that ensure:

- Healthy food for all regardless of race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, or other social identities.

- Local food-based economies that generate community wealth.

- Farm and food industry workers are valued and protected.

- People are connected to food, land, and cultural traditions.

- Reckoning by society and healing for Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

- Social equity across intersectional issues.

Healthy food for all regardless of race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, or other social identities

> *There's a price that's been placed on food. If you have money, you can eat well. If you don't have money, you get the leftovers. And it's not just about what's left over or that the food isn't pretty. It's around how we view food acquisition as a society and how there is dollars associated with being able to eat and eat well. And we need to unpack that and figure out a better model for that.*

Participants spoke about making food accessible through markets, retail outlets, or door-to-door delivery, for example. Many emphasized affordable, nutrient dense, sustainably produced foods, because "nutrition is related to development and how a person can achieve their goals and their mission in life and we want to see our communities thrive." Some focused on facilitating the requisite supply chains to bring healthy foods into their communities. Others called for technological innovation, for example, to match consumers with culturally appropriate foods.

Several envisioned more locally grown foods through home gardens, community gardens, or commercial farms. Some highlighted the important role of education, for instance, about nutrition, where to find healthy foods, and how to cook unfamiliar foods. Several spoke about addressing food security by supporting local food businesses and their long-term viability.

Local food-based economies that generate community wealth

> *We need to build the economy in these areas where we're still seeing this historic disinvestment and the impacts of redlining and these racially determined policies that negatively impacted the economy.*

> *And then you're able to create jobs, which is our goal. Job creation is important because you have to understand, 'why are people coming to a pantry?'*

Several participants envisioned local food-based economies that generate community wealth by creating jobs and promoting businesses owned by community members. Participants described multiple ways to build local food economies, such as: sourcing from local farmers, especially Black and Brown farmers; building the capacity of locally-owned food enterprises; providing food and agriculture-related workforce training; exploring cooperative ownership models; and increasing the demand for local foods through education, outreach, and marketing.

Farm and food industry workers valued and protected

> *What about workers' rights? . . . I really envision a community where the workers are important. And where we pay attention to people who are . . . risking their lives, in the middle of COVID pandemic . . . to bring the food to our tables . . . the workers, no matter what their immigration status is, are important to the food chain . . . without the workers, there is no food.*

Participants called for ending the abuse of workers – who are often people of color, undocumented immigrants, and incarcerated people – on farms and in food processing and packaging industries. Some noted that these workers, deemed 'essential' during the pandemic, received little if any protection from COVID-19: ". . . they just call them essential because they need them to be working at the moment but they are not essential for anything else." Participants advocated for policies that truly recognize the essential role of workers in the food system by ensuring labor rights, immigration rights, workplace safety, health protections, fair wages (including equal pay for women), job stability, and more. They called for systemic change to protect workers that lasts beyond the pandemic.

People connected to food, land, and cultural traditions

> *We have to get back to our culture for agriculture . . . we have to take care of people and we have to get back to the earth.*

Participants observed that people are "way too separated" from their food sources. This can have negative consequences for health and well-being (for example, by relying heavily on nutritionally poor, highly processed foods). Those from immigrant communities reflected that was not the case in their home countries and called for "going back to our roots . . . the relationship that we used to have with food back home." Some emphasized the importance of food education to reconnect people to growing processes and help people understand "how tomatoes are grown and . . . how long does it actually take to grow a vegetable . . . and why does a farmers market vegetable taste better than a grocery store vegetable." Others expressed gratitude for the opportunity within their community "to connect being outside and being outdoors and touching the dirt together" and "to be in connection with the land and my ancestors through this work."

Reckoning by society and healing for Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities

> *I'm thinking about the need for reckoning and acknowledgement of where our food system is now, because I feel like we're on a conveyor belt running and trying to heal wounds and trying to heal harms that are a manifestation of this bigger system that relies on our exploitations . . .*

> *[the system] doesn't work for us, and there has been too many harms through that system directly related to us, where we were targeted . . . it's constantly there to continue to harm us . . . since that was a harm that was done to us, that harm should be repaired.*

Some participants observed that "white folks in power do have a debt, there's definitely a sense of like reparations still needs to happen." They noted that white wealth has accrued through the exploitation of people of color. They called for equitably redistributing resources and the self-determination of Black, Brown and Indigenous communities around how to use those resources.

> *And they should give us the funds to do that, but then leave us alone, that we can do it ourselves . . . looking at our history, we know how to till the land, we know how to farm, we know how to do this. It's when they get in the way of it and they use it as power over us that these harms occur.*

For several participants, land is central to reckoning and healing: "we need to understand how land works, and how we acquire the land, and how we can revitalize the land." Some called for protecting the lands of Black farmers, noting that the United States has so few Black farmers because they were removed from land, as well as returning lands to Indigenous communities –

and recognizing these as interconnected struggles. Some advocated cooperative land ownership. Others noted the need to address intergenerational trauma related to working the land:

> *. . . there's some trauma around tilling from the earth. Slavery and its impact and its visualization has been very traumatic, not only from an economic perspective for Black people, but from a performance perspective. If you know that your ancestors were enslaved and made to till the field, it is some resistance for some around actually going and tilling the field. We have to work through that and have some peace around what that looks like.*

Social equity across intersectional issues

> *I'm thinking about the need for all of us that are doing our food based work to really recognize how all of these troubles are interconnected. . . . And so what does it look like when we started looking at our struggles connected with struggles for immigration? What does it look like to call for full citizenship and just labor rights for farm workers that are growing the foods that we eat? . . . What does it look like when we actually start looking at the struggle that Black farmers have in the United States? . . . What does it look like when we actually look at our struggles for food interconnected with the struggle for land back for Indigenous communities? . . . And I think that we tend to work in silos because the system makes it so we have so many emergencies and fires to put out in our communities every single day that it's hard for us to be like, 'Hey besides my neighborhood, besides my block, like this other struggle is very much interconnected with mine.' And I feel like, at least as people of color, if we try . . . to really look about how all of our struggles are interconnected, I feel like there could be a lot more opportunities for joining resources.*

Participants described how the same social determinants underlie disparities related to food as inequities in education, health, employment, and other issues. One explained social oppression like an onion with layers that need to be unraveled. Some expressed gratitude for intersectional work already occurring within their communities through relationship-building and partnerships. Others called for greater intersectional organizing and collaboration across organizations working on different issues and with varied communities to mobilize resources more effectively for social equity.

Resource Mobilization

How do we create models that makes this sustainable?

Participants identified funding as one among multiple supports that would enable them to sustain their staff and operations, develop facilities and infrastructure, expand programs, and provide direct material assistance to people needing it. All had experience with philanthropic or governmental grants, but the range of grant-writing experience varied. Some had many questions about grant writing, while others had a dedicated grant writer on staff. Some also noted the importance of diversifying an organization's revenue stream through an income-generating business model in order to avoid relying on the "crapshoot" of grants.

Participants expressed sincere gratitude for grants that have supported their work. However, they also observed that philanthropic funding often perpetuates harm by reproducing the same system of privilege, oppression, and power that underlies the dominant food system. Some explained that funds often address the symptoms rather than root causes of food insecurity. Others observed that some funders support organizations working in Black and Brown communities alongside projects harmful to those same communities by financing developments that contribute to gentrification or degrade lands in a Black farming community, for instance. Some expressed concern that the influx of money from the government and private donations during the pandemic is ending, while people still struggle with the pandemic's consequences.

> *. . . the emergency food system and recognizing that it's based mostly on this idea of charity, charity capitalism, specifically. And that the emergency food system isn't something that should have to operate in perpetuity and yet we're treating the symptoms of the COVID-19 pandemic with the emergency food system. And that's what we're seeing a lot of funders funnel their money to . . .*

> *I would have preferred if there had been some sort of community owned hub where these food donations could come in and then at the end of this whole pandemic wouldn't it have been amazing to have strengthened some sort of co-op model with this outside support, versus feeling like these handouts are good, but they also can feel extractive and keeping people more reliant on free things, rather than this ground up economy building that is needed.*

Participants raised critical questions about who benefits from philanthropy and the fairness of funding decisions. Several felt that large non-profit organizations received more funding than those working directly on the ground with people in local communities.

> *How equal is this if we are on an unequal plane? What does it look like for whoever has the most access to resources to make sure those resources are*

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getting out and are not getting pooled into one specific organization or all going . . . to overhead in big organizations, as opposed to going to the people that are on the ground talking to community members every single day?

And [large non-profit organizations] tell stories and they build networks and they fundraise. And they have big organizations and payrolls and everything. And then lean to this group [of small non-profits] and it's like, 'Hey ... we want you to come in on this grant with us and in exchange we'll give you $20,000,' only to find out later that this was an $800,000 grant. How am I doing all of the work and you all getting a nickel out of it?

Participants offered these recommendations for funders:

- Center Black, Brown, and Indigenous voices in funding decisions and prioritize organizations doing on-the-ground work with those communities.

- Shift funding models from *scarcity and competition* to *abundance and sharing*.

- Provide multi-year and unrestricted funding so that organizations can sustain operations and adapt as conditions change.

Center Black, Brown, and Indigenous voices in funding decisions and prioritize organizations doing on-the-ground work with those communities

Let's say that they have $5 million to distribute and they got applications that totals like $10 million, and then we see organizations getting $400,000 of that grant distribution and other organizations like [ours], for example, getting $10,000. You're like, 'What is this? What is this imbalance?' and then see what they're proposing, what are we proposing, and like 'Oh, my God, it's because we're really proposing the money goes directly to . . . implementing the work.'

Participants called for a greater portion of funding to go to organizations working directly with marginalized communities. Many also called for changes in grant-making processes to level the playing field. These included, for example, revising application requirements to be suitable to small organizations and re-gauging selection criteria to fund the most needed work rather than "splashy" projects. They called for funders to shift decision-making influence or power about fund allocation to people of color in ways that are authentic and meaningful, not tokenistic.

Looking at [a funder's] steering committee . . . and the amount of people either like, one, white folks on that committee or, two, folks who are in higher up positions of power even if they're folks of color, not all skinfolk are kinfolk. [It's] perpetuating the same systems, the ways that things have functioned, and that is not a huge deviation from the kinds of harm that have already been done. . . . [We

need] movement to community controlled wealth . . . We're the ones who generated that wealth in the first place, specifically Black, Latine, and Indigenous people, we generated that wealth for the rich, white folks [who] were able to start these fancy foundations. So give it back to us.

Shift funding models from *scarcity and competition* to *abundance and sharing*

Often small pockets of money is thrown out into the community and then you have individuals going against one another, organizations going against one another to receive that funding . . . it's all just part of that game to keep us in bondage and to keep us at each other instead of actually dealing with the real problem.

We shouldn't have to . . . poverty pimp our stories and write this heartbreaking grants for us to get a little bit of crumbs . . . what does it look like to change the way the funding happens?

Many participants raised concerns about needing to compete with one another for funding and called upon funders to innovate alternative models for grant-making. They called for a shift from competition to cooperation:

. . . scarcity is a white supremacist mindset, it's fabricated in order to keep us in competition with one another. And one of the most difficult things when it comes to creating partnerships, maintaining collaborations and relationships, is when you feel like you're in competition with other people, other organizations, coalitions, grassroots spaces that are doing dope ass work. And so it's inherent in a grant process. And just rethinking how grant making works, I'd love . . . for more intentional thought to be to be done around moving away from that competition-based mindset of grant making towards something that uplifts and honors the relationships that are already happening within our communities and that sustain our communities. Because, honestly, collective voices are how we're able to continue the work that we're doing in nourishing our communities.

Participants would like funders to encourage organically developed collaboration across non-profit organizations but not to impose partnerships upon grantees:

. . . forced partnerships don't work, or partnerships where there's a requirement in order for you to access funds that you have to bring in a partner, especially if there's a pre-identified group of partnerships, choose one of these . . .

And creating a lateral way of connecting because grantees, winners of funds, it becomes hierarchical, like your organization is better, you're making more

money, you're worth this much. It's a repetition of oppression. It becomes playing into the systemic issues that we're working against or trying to dismantle. And really [we need to be] building together . . . what are your resources, what are my resources, where do we overlap?

Provide multi-year and unrestricted funding so that organizations can sustain operations and adapt as conditions change

[Program] sustainability . . . the underpaying of people in our communities . . . these things are inherently linked through funding, the lack of multi-year funding . . . If we want to think about sustainability, and we want to think about like growers are historically underpaid, specifically Black and Brown growers, immigrants, people within the carceral system [who] are often also a part of the agricultural system, we need to be providing multi-year funding . . . toward these kinds of projects that are led by and for community members who are doing this on the ground work.

. . . general operating support. That is what we need. That's what enables you to adapt, that's what enables you to put in that extra garden that you didn't plan on doing because there's a reason for doing it . . . General op, sometimes it's just capacity, all of a sudden you realize you absolutely have to have another HR person to develop all of the HR things that are happening . . . general operating enables you to grow and grow in the direction you need to go.

Many participants called for grants with at least two or three-year cycles that would offer financial stability. Many also noted that funders prefer "sexy projects" that can be splashed on an annual report but that their greatest need is for unrestricted funds, which they would use in various ways, including to improve compensation and benefits for staff, who are often underpaid; expand capacity by hiring particularly engaged volunteers; provide youth employment; and develop much-needed "back office" infrastructure for coordinating logistics of food delivery routes, managing payroll, or accounting, for instance.

In addition to funding, participants described other supports that would advance their food-related work (Table 5). The supports desired were unique to each organization.

TABLE 5. Supports, beyond funding, that would enable organizations to continue their work toward food justice.

Desired Support	Illustrative Quote
Connector across organizations	. . . people don't always understand how much labor it takes to collaborate . . . it's sort of expected that we'll do that in the margins of the work we already do . . . but . . . we need people to be hired to do that connective work . . . And we don't need somebody to create a structure over us, but . . . to help connect the resources and the programs.
Community outreach: virtual and in-person	Social media like that's a whole job in itself . . . continue to spread the word, how do you do that? We've done mailers, we've done actual footwork . . . knock at every person's home. These are jobs that need to get assigned to people . . . one person can't do it all . . . it's much easier when you have a team.
Skilled staff	We would like to have more people who are with modest skills, for example, to work for the organization . . .
Systems for measuring impact	[others] are so good at talking about your metrics … I'd like to know how you're tracking that.
Volunteer management	We're understaffed . . . so making sure that you have enough support from your volunteers . . . and we're properly organized to adapt to that. Sometimes we have way more volunteers than we can actually [use] . . .
Technology support	. . . to collect data and to have [food assistance] applications and all of that, there's technology involved … online ordering for a . . . do your own shopping food pantry . . . so there's technology systems out there . . .
Policy influence	We have political folks and our governance body who are disconnected from how food is grown, produced, distributed in our own neighborhood. That is a problem and certainly speaks to why there isn't enough resources.
Land and water for growing food	…the red tape around remediation of spaces and clean up, that has become very expensive… …water access for community gardens, so that's something to deal with at the city level, it became very expensive for gardeners to access water…
Cooperative ownership models	. . . this community owned grocery store idea is something that we could use . . . new kinds of grocery models to look at

Partthips

We would not be able to do everything that we do without the support of our partners.

Organizations leveraged resources to respond to the pandemic's impacts through collaboration. Partnerships involved non-profit organizations, food pantries, farmers, caterers, chefs, small businesses, large retailers, community health centers, senior centers, community colleges, K-12 schools, and park districts, among others. Partnerships enabled organizations to expand capacity, funding, and volunteers, plus access food and other supplies for distribution to those needing them. Some acquired access to facilities like office space or land for growing food and hosting educational events. By coordinating with other organizations, participants also expanded their outreach and provided services to a wider range of people. Yet, not all partnerships proved constructive; indeed, some participants described harmful experiences.

> *. . . there are some very popular organizations who are receiving funding that will continue to receive funding, because they have received the franchise tag, if we have any basketball fans here, that they're the foundation by which food security lives upon. And I have found those organizations to not be at all encouraging for partnerships or gleaning of information or interested in launching small pilots. And the little guys like my foundation often get crushed, even though we bring all of the intellectual genius to the table, someone else typically gets the credit for that. So . . . there has to be equitable partnerships, and just because I'm a little itty-bitty doesn't mean that I should get less pieces of the responsibility and/or the money. We bring as much knowledge, as much experience to the table, and want to be considered to be an equitable partner regardless of when we got in the game and who else has been in the game prior.*

> *. . . the coordination was awful, the additional coordinating work that we had to do was really, really awful and really disrespectful and we decided to no longer partner with that organization that got really big grants, because of the way that they were treating communities of color.*

Examples of disrespectful partnerships included doing more work for a project than a partner who received most of its funding, being tokenized in partners' outreach materials but discriminated against in actual service provision, or partners who failed to uphold their commitments ("they hit you and quit you").

In contrast, participants called for and intentionally worked to create partnerships built upon equitable, respectful relationships.

I wouldn't call it a partnership, honestly, they're relationship-building . . . that's really what's been sustaining us.

For us, [it's] understanding one another's role and the mission and then the individual that you're looking to be in relationship with. I think a lot of times we're prompted to go into relationships where it's one sided – we're believing that we need something from them and we often give too much or sacrifice too much of ourselves. So we made it part of our culture not to do that. This is who we are and we're unapologetically that. And then accepting us for who we are, and then at the same time us meeting you where you're at, and then in that we can have a true relationship.

Collectively, they offered these recommendations for sustaining effective partnerships:

- Build genuine relationships with shared values and understanding of the community.
- Share resources equitably from an abundance mindset.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities, honor each other's business model, and respect boundaries.
- Foster trust through communication, transparency, and accountability.

Build genuine relationships with shared values and understanding of the community

For a good partnership, it has to be a symbiotic relationship. And you have to be compatible with each other. You can't partner with everybody. And just to take it to one more level, it needs to be a spiritual connection. You have to have the same beliefs, to some degree, same values.

Participants emphasized that they do not partner just for the sake of partnering or because a grant requires collaboration. They partner with others with whom they have established good, even friendly, relationships. It is important to know each other and how you work before committing to a partnership, not least because "at the end of the day . . . you are responsible for the work that organization is doing."

Also important are similar values and a shared understanding of the community with whom the partners engage. Many participants work with people who have been harmed by dominant institutions and, thus, rightfully distrust those outside of their own community. They spoke about the importance of staffing programs with people who look like and speak the language of community members, so that people feel welcome and comfortable to participate. To establish trust within communities, some build relationships with elders and other "community pillars," which is important so that "you can understand how to help without necessarily harming."

Share resources equitably from an abundance mindset

> *. . . every organization, regardless whether they're small and medium or large, has a certain level of privilege and opportunity to think in a framework of abundance and continue to share resources.*

Counter to experiences of being disrespected, taken advantage of by larger non-profit organizations, and competing for resources, participants called for fairly allocating funds between partners and sharing other resources available to them. They described identifying the unique material and human resources of each organization and working together to leverage those. This could include coordinating shared use of a growing space, equipment, or commercial kitchen, for instance. Another example would be working together to bring a wider range of services to a given community because each organization fulfills a different role.

Essential to organizations' capacity is their human resources, yet burnout is a real risk in non-profit organizations, which are often understaffed (see "Provide multi-year and unrestricted funding," p. 16). Some participants reflected that effective partners must share a commitment to maintaining realistic expectations given staff capacity and, even further, to curate rest.

> *. . . curating moments where we just build as people. That's been really pivotal in transcending our relationships and partnerships beyond the work. We make sure that we are advocating rest and self-care and incorporating that into our programming . . . Our community is going to always need us to be of service, but they also are going to need us to be nourishing ourselves.*

Clarify roles and responsibilities, honor each other's business model, and respect boundaries

> *You have to be very, very clear about what is your role and what is the role of the other organizations because misunderstandings are coming, conflict of interest can show up.*

Participants emphasized that it is essential to clarify roles early on. Several use a written memorandum of understanding (MOU) to clearly delineate roles and they return to this MOU when confusion arises. Some spoke about the importance of "honoring the other partner's business model or mission, so that you're not pushing your vision onto them too hard." Some observed that concerns about competition for funds, clients, etc. often prevent collaboration. These can be overcome by "having those conversations . . . so we [come] to an understanding of respect for each other and to respect the boundaries, but we [are] able to come together and form a team."

Foster trust through communication, transparency, and accountability

> *. . . communication, collaboration, accountability, and transparency are key elements to any relationship.*

Participants identified communication as essential to effective partnerships. Similarly, they valued transparency. For example, if one partner cannot fulfill a specific commitment, they inform the other and discuss alternatives rather than disappear. Transparency and accountability are especially important when funds are funneled through one organization to others so that one partner does not receive the majority of money and credit while another does most of the work. Again, MOU's are useful for clearly delineating roles. Communication, transparency, and accountability all serve to build trust. "One of the biggest issues with partnerships . . . is the trust, it's trust among people."

Community Care

> *I'm grateful for the sheer amount of people who are in this space, in this sector, doing this work from a place of love, like genuine, deep-seated care for our communities and our neighbors and our loved ones. It's really beautiful.*

Evident in participants' descriptions of their work is a deep care for the communities of people with whom they engage. They give their energy, time, talents, skills – and sometimes money from their own pockets – to bring their communities food, connect community members with a range of resources, support people to be "healthy and whole," empower local leadership, develop local economies, and more. Many described feeling energized by – as one participant put it – "hearing all of the thank you's and God bless you's . . . people really do feel it in a really deep way, in a heartfelt way, that it's really important that we are providing this." Participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to impact others' lives positively, whether helping people fulfill personal goals or creating networks that support small businesses to flourish. Some described their work as living their mission and fulfilling God's calling.

Participants noted that they also benefit from interacting with the respective communities with whom they engage:

> *I am grateful for community, for how welcoming and humble but also wise they've been . . . it's not just about quote-unquote helping somebody but also being open enough to receive feedback and receive love and receive teachings from the community that you're supporting. I've been feeling also very*

> *supported by the communities that we've been working with and I'm grateful for them.*

They appreciated a range of gifts from the community, including relationships that enhance their own quality of life, the exchange of ideas, local leaders, and trust. Some also valued knowing that their work at a local level – alongside the work of many others in other communities – supports broader social change for racial and economic equity. Some noted that community care is what enabled many people to survive the pandemic thus far:

> *If it wasn't for care systems and Indigenous practices of caring for each other, cooking for each other, checking in with each other, none of that was government based, a lot of us wouldn't have made it [during the pandemic]. And I do also want to shout out mutual aid and that being a really beautiful system of care that really kept a lot of people alive, when the city itself, funders, and even the government wouldn't step up.*

The care that participants demonstrate for their communities – and the ways in which they honor community members' identities, cultures, and knowledge as they engage in their work – offer a valuable model for others working to strengthen local and regional food systems.

Conclusion

This research explored **how non-profit organizations responding to the impacts of COVID-19 are opening pathways to re-organize the food system towards racial equity and resilience**. In May and June 2022, four food system workshops brought together 26 individuals (in groups of four to ten per workshop) from 20 majority people of color organizations who received a CRFSF grant in April 2021. All workshop participants were CRFSF grantees but the conversations extended beyond CRFSF-supported projects to the food system more broadly and its intersections with other social issues.

Responding to the dramatic increase in food insecurity and other pandemic impacts that disproportionately affected Black and Brown communities, participants innovated a variety of practices (Tables 1-3). Many worked to ensure that food assistance aligned with the community's culture. Several provided locally-produced foods in order to increase the freshness and nutrition of foods reaching people in need, support farmers, and grow local food economies. Others worked to ensure the safety, rights, and well-being of workers on farms and in food processing, packaging, and warehousing industries.

Care for and with community was evident throughout participants' descriptions of their work. Much of their work occurs through community-oriented efforts, such as people coming together to grow, prepare, and/or distribute food. They described the importance of maintaining

relationships and understanding the unique cultures of specific communities, whether one is coordinating food assistance or supporting people to start or strengthen a business.

Responding to the pandemic's impacts required mobilizing human, material, and financial resources. The latter comes, at least in part, through grants; however, philanthropy often reproduces systems of privilege and oppression. Recommendations for funders interested in shifting unequal power dynamics include the following:

- Center Black, Brown, and Indigenous voices in funding decisions and prioritize organizations doing on-the-ground work with those communities.

- Shift funding models from *scarcity and competition* to *abundance and sharing*.

- Provide multi-year and unrestricted funding so that organizations can sustain operations and adapt as conditions change.

Partnerships helped participants address pandemic-related disturbances by leveraging resources to overcome challenges and carry out programs that met community members' priorities. Yet, inequitable and disrespectful partnerships caused harm. Recommendations for developing effective partnerships include the following:

- Build genuine relationships with shared values and understanding of the community.

- Share resources equitably from an abundance mindset.

- Clarify roles and responsibilities, honor each other's business model, and respect boundaries.

- Foster trust through communication, transparency, and accountability.

Participants described visions for the future of our food system unique to their own areas of work. Compiled collectively, their visions include these key elements:

- Healthy food for all regardless of race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, or other social identities.

- Local food-based economies that generate community wealth.

- Farm and food industry workers are valued and protected.

- People are connected to food, land, and cultural traditions.

- Reckoning by society and healing for Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

- Social equity across intersectional issues (e.g., food, agriculture, immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, workers' rights, education, policing).