

Centering Equity

An update



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Introduction

The "Equity First" initiative was initiated with the objective of embedding equity, justice, and inclusion as a core value of CRFAIR and leading in our work as the Backbone organization of the Collective Impact efforts of the Good Food Network, its coordination, leadership, and community engagement. Recognizing the systemic barriers faced by equity-denied communities, this project aimed to shift CRFAIR and

the GFN's approach and structure to create a more inclusive environment that truly reflects the diversity of our community. Through this initiative, CRFAIR sought to enhance the network's capacity to support greater equity in our network and seeks to shift our network priorities, decision making, communications and engagement around food sovereignty as we move forward while fostering a sense of belonging and representation among equity denied groups, who are most impacted by food insecurity and marginalized from taking active leadership and cocreation of solutions.

Summary of the Initiative

The "Equity First" initiative is a key step in a transformative effort to embed equity into the culture, approach and operations of CRFAIR and the Good Food Network. By hiring an Engagement Coordinator, engaging Equity expertise, and creating an Equity Committee that would work with the Good Food Network Leadership and guiding group, the project focuses on understanding and growing equity within the network. Key activities included developing an Organizational Equity Assessment Framework, forming an Equity Committee/roundtable, supporting leadership and capacity building of equity-denied groups, prioritizing equity led and focused initiatives. The initiative also involved and is centering research studies, and programs such as Cultural foods availability and access, equitable land access, and food sovereignty initiatives. Through broad engagement, the project reshaped organizational policies and communications to center diverse cultural food systems. The initiative also undertook a network leadership cultural humility training to ensure we are equipped with the cultural competency necessary to undertake the work involved. The initiative not only fostered greater inclusion and representation within the network but also provided tangible support for marginalized communities, resulting in significant impacts and setting the stage for continued progress in advancing food justice and equity.

It can not be understated the key work that has been done by our partners to lead, push, and support equity focus and priority for our backbone role and network activities. We say that none of us are free until we are all free, and yet why so much heavy lifting by those that are denied the equity we all aspire to?". Shifting this dynamic is the work to do.

The Equity First Initiative

The "Equity First" initiative was a multifaceted project designed to address the gaps in equity within our work as an organization and our backbone services and support for the Good Food Network. This comprehensive initiative included several key activities, each contributing to the overarching goal of creating a more inclusive and just food system.

1. Equity First Team and Hiring of Engagement Coordinator

One of the first steps was hiring Ruba Elfurjani as the Equity First Engagement Coordinator. Ruba's extensive experience and connections within diverse communities, including her work with the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Committee, were instrumental in broadening our outreach and ensuring that a diverse array of voices were included in the project. Her leadership helped us build trust and foster collaboration with underrepresented groups, laying the foundation for meaningful engagement.

2. Engagement of Equity expertise

We engaged Dr. Colin Dring from Royal Roads University and explored his work and experience with equity and food justice frameworks to provide context and guidance to Equity First Team and our Good Food Network Leadership to support the development of an equity framework for the network. His expertise in food justice and community planning and engagement was critical in shaping our approach and ensuring that our efforts were informed by best practices in equity and inclusion. We participated in the Planning for Future Food Systems Project: Aligning Efforts with Action co-led by the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) and Colin Dring from Royal Roads University looking at the Food Justice Community Planning Tool and Just Food System Evaluation Framework (publicly available to use on PHABC's website: <https://phabc.org/pffs/>. There you will find a user guide, report, and an interactive digital interface with fillable worksheets, tools designed to support food actors in embedding the principles of justice, equity, decolonization and inclusion (JEDI) in their work, evaluate their activities, and measure progress towards creating a more just food system).

We also worked collaboration with underrepresented groups, laying the foundation for meaningful engagement. The key partner in this was through our ongoing

And partnership with Iye Creative, who played an instrumental role in all aspects of the project and created BIPOC led spaces and process that laid the foundation for meaningful engagement. The Equity First team, CRFAIR and the Good Food Network have benefited greatly from the expertise, processes and relationships that Iye Creative team have contributed to this work together.

We also want to recognize the work of Rose Spahan and the entire working group of the EMET, SW.ISTA KAL. Their willingness to collaborate and come together in support of their own learning and work to support community food sovereignty has been full of learnings.

3. Engagement of the GFN Leadership

To ensure that equity remained at the forefront of our network efforts, and was integrated into strategic planning, communications and evaluation, we structured our Good Food Network meetings and workplan with the Equity First initiative at the forefront. This ensured it was an ongoing focus and integrated into our network processes, this led to not only a shift in our communications but also initiated a review of our leadership Terms of Reference. In addition we undertook an intensive cultural humility training series with the leadership and our Board of Directors and staff to build cultural competency and awareness.

4. Understanding and Growing Equity in Our Network

The initiative began with an overview/ analysis of our current practices and structures, identifying areas where equity could be enhanced. This process included a review of existing frameworks and an exploration of two specific tools:

- Food Justice Community Planning Tool and Just Food System Evaluation Framework: These tools, developed through the Planning for Future Food Systems Project co-led by the Public Health Association of BC (PHABC) and Dr. Colin Dring, provided a structured approach for embedding principles of justice, equity, decolonization, and inclusion (JEDI) into our work. We used these tools to evaluate our activities and measure progress towards a more just food system.

- GFN Equity Framework Considerations: This framework guided our efforts to address key areas such as power and leadership, resource allocation, organizing and membership, policy and governance, communications, and accountability. It helped us identify gaps and recommend actionable steps to enhance equity across the network.

5. Development of the Equity First: Organizational Equity Assessment Framework

Building on the insights gained from these frameworks, we developed the "Equity First: Organizational Equity Assessment Framework." This draft framework serves as a comprehensive tool for assessing equity across various organizational domains, including decision-making, resource allocation, policy and governance, and communications. It offers a structured rubric to evaluate current initiatives, identify gaps, and recommend actionable steps to enhance equity within the organization. We are working to undertake ongoing assessments related to this framework and anticipate that this will take some time and also be part of an ongoing process.

6. Equity Committee Formation

To ensure the ongoing implementation of equity initiatives, we established an Equity Committee within the Good Food Network. This committee, composed of representatives from underrepresented communities and network leaders is in its early stage of developing with the hopes of playing a guiding role in our work, ensuring that equity remains central to our operations and decision-making processes. This committee has recently decided to shift its structure to an Equity Roundtable and will be developing its membership, purpose, governance and activities in the next phase. It is anticipated that this roundtable will be in support of network members as well as provide leadership and guidance to the GFN Leadership and CRFAIR.

7. Review and Adaptation of Organizational Policies

Through the development of the Equity Assessment Framework we are embarking on a thorough review of our organizational policies, first steps included the review of the terms of reference for our guiding group and the development of our Good Food Network Workplan and strategic planning documents. We also added social justice as a core value in our CRFAIR Organizational strategic planning and revised our partnership platform to make it more user-friendly and less bureaucratic, particularly for equity-denied groups.

8. Cultural Humility and Decolonization Training

A key component of the initiative was a six-month training program focused on cultural humility and decolonization. This program included four key sessions designed to enhance self-awareness, address biases, and build cultural competency within the network with a focus on indigenous knowledge and foodways. By prioritizing this training, we are hoping to build a good foundation to ensure that GFN leaders and key organizations are better equipped to engage with diverse communities effectively.

9. Elevating Equity-Denied Groups priorities

We reallocated and raised additional funding leveraged partnerships to support equity-denied groups in undertaking training and advancing projects they prioritized. This included initiatives focused on equitable land access, cultural crops availability and access, supporting racialized food makers, and food sovereignty initiatives.. These projects were designed by those groups involved and leading to address systemic barriers and create more inclusive opportunities within the food system.

10. Research Initiatives

As part of our commitment to equity, we shifted organizational resources towards supporting priority activities. This included several research studies:

- Iye Creative led Cultural Crops Availability and Access Study: This study explored the availability and access to cultural crops for equity-denied groups, identifying opportunities to integrate these crops into local food systems.

- Equity Framework for Food Hubs: This study focused on building an equity framework for food hubs, supporting equity-denied groups in accessing and processing cultural foods. It was led by Royal Roads Research Nelly Jiminez, who also led a knowledge mobilization session with food hub and community kitchen organizers to determine how they could advance the recommendations for barrier free supportive infrastructure and programs.

- CRFAIR worked as part of the Island Health Food Hubs to support and indigenous led consulting company Sanala, and Robbie Knott undertake research and coaching and provide a framework for “Advancing Food Security and Food Sovereignty for Rural, Remote, and Indigenous (RRI) Communities Across Vancouver Island”

 Draft: RRI Framework March 11, 2024

11. Key partnership Initiatives, partnered with and led by Iye Creative:

(1) Cultural Crops Program

In addition to research, the Cultural Crops Program that included CRFAIR led Farmer2Farmer roundtable discussions to better understand what cultural foods could be grown locally and determine farmer interest and needs. Iye worked with farmers and key food programs to integrate cultural foods into emergency food and food security programming, such as the Good Food Box and this work was also utilized to

undertake research for inclusion of more cultural crops into the South Island FarmHub marketplace.

(2). Makers Initiative

The Makers Initiative, led by Iye Creative, brought together food makers from racialized and newcomer communities to discuss the barriers they faced in starting cultural food businesses. This initiative included training and support for newcomer makers. CRFAIR supported this work with participating in the Ways We Eat initiative and the community celebration. CRFAIR supported a number of the Makers through our Savour Saanich creating market access. The event was a success, with many makers selling out their goods and gaining valuable tools to support their future endeavors. Iye creative also worked with the Esquimalt Farmers Market to create more welcoming spaces and do outreach and support for racialized makers.

Another aspect related to this initiative was the mobilization of the research “Equity Framework for Food Hubs” focusing on : building more welcoming and equity promoting community and commercial kitchens and food hubs. This included developing a small network of these groups and hosting our first roundtable that featured the research ed by Royal Roads Research Nelly Jiminez, to determine how they could advance the recommendations for barrier free supportive infrastructure and programs. There is additional work currently underway at the Victoria Community Food Hub to establish better practices with aspirations to develop a Makers Access Fund.

(3) . Equitable Land Access Initiative

Iye Creative, supported through the Partnership Platform in partnership with CRFAIR, advanced an equitable land access initiative, which included forming a guiding group and conducting research to identify barriers and opportunities for land access. This initiative led to the creation of research reports focusing on barriers and interests in land access led by researchers and leaders from equity denied communities. Iye Creative also led a review of the Community Garden Policy of the District of Saanich. We are working together with Iye on policy briefs on equitable land access directed both to the District of Saanich and CRD new Foodlands Service. An equity toolkit for community gardens and the development of a test plot community garden for BIPOC community gardeners was also initiated in relation to this project.

12. Food Sovereignty Initiatives

In collaboration with the emergent working group EMET, SW.ISTA KAL, we supported indigenous knowledge keepers and community workers in advancing food sovereignty initiatives. This included hiring an indigenous coordinator, hosting meetings with traditional foods, and i key projects identified by the working group. We also secured additional funding to expand these activities through co-writing of proposals with the Coordinator, Rose Spahan. .

13. Network Communications and Engagement

We launched a new communications strategy for the Good Food Network that centers diverse cultural food systems and highlights food justice issues. This strategy included creating social media content, newsletters, and events engagement. A key element of this strategy was supporting the network with statements and resources addressing issues like the violence faced by Palestinians and creating an anti-racism strategy to support youth facing racism through creative cultural foods events and support groups.

14. Community Gardens Round table Tool Kit and Training

The Equity Toolkit for Community Gardens was created as a way to grow practices, policies and access in Community Gardens by Ruba Elfurjani and Cinet Munoz ov the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre. The Community Garden Roundtable participated in the Equity Toolkit Workshop and it continues to be a tool for Garden Coordinators. We hope to ensure that it is an ongoing topic of meetings and learning opportunities.

Throughout this initiative, several key learnings emerged:

1. **Flexibility and Responsiveness:** The importance of being flexible and responsive in equity work cannot be overstated. By listening to the communities we aimed to serve and adapting our strategies accordingly, we achieved meaningful outcomes that were relevant to their needs.

2. Ongoing Training and Capacity

Building: Continuous training in cultural humility, decolonization, and equity is essential for building an inclusive organization. These trainings should be embedded into the core of our work to ensure lasting change.

3. Collaboration with Equity-Denied Groups: Collaborating with equity-denied groups was key to the success of this initiative. Their insights, experiences, and leadership guided our work and ensured that the outcomes were truly reflective of their needs and aspirations. None of the community initiatives would have been advanced without the leadership of our key partners Iye Creative.

4. Equity as a Continuous Process: Equity work is ongoing and requires a long-term commitment. This initiative was just the beginning, and we recognize the need to continue evaluating our progress, refining our strategies, and expanding our efforts.

Recommendations for Next Steps

1. Institutionalize Equity Framework: Finalize and institutionalize the "Equity First: Organizational Equity Assessment Framework" within CRFAIr and promote to the Good Food Network to ensure that equity considerations are embedded in all aspects of our work.

2. Expand support for Equity Committee/Roundtable: Continue to support and expand the Equity Committee/Roundtable to support its self-determined growth and remains a central part of the GFN leadership and decision-making processes.

3. Ongoing Training and Capacity Building: Implement ongoing training and capacity-building programs focused on cultural humility, decolonization, and equity for all network members and partners.

4. Embed Equity lens into our work to support the evaluation, center stories of impact and adaptive planning for the Good Food 2025 Evolution.

4. Support for Equity-Denied Community Groups: Increase support for equity-denied groups, including providing additional funding, resources, and capacity-building opportunities for projects and initiatives.

5. Cultural Foods Program Expansion: work with Iye Creative to expand the Cultural Foods Program to include more farmers, makers, and food programs, with a focus on integrating cultural foods into local food systems.

6. Communication and Advocacy: Continue to prioritize communication strategies that highlight food justice issues and support advocacy efforts for equity-denied communities.

7. Evaluation and Monitoring: Develop a robust system for evaluating and monitoring the progress of our equity initiatives, including regular assessments and feedback mechanisms to ensure continuous improvement.

Undertaking focused work both internally in our organization and also to re-center the Good Food Network initiative represents a significant step towards building a more just and inclusive food system in the Greater Victoria region. By making moves to learn and centering equity, we have begun to create a network that is more reflective of the diverse communities it serves, fostering greater collaboration, understanding, and mutual support. However, this is only the beginning. The work of equity is ongoing, and we are committed to continuing this journey, guided by the principles of justice, equity, decolonization, and inclusion.