

## ARTICLES

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# Equity as Common Cause

HOW A SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM NETWORK IS CULTIVATING COMMITMENT TO RACIAL JUSTICE

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Photographs from Food Solutions New England

Marilyn Moore was working as executive director of an organization in Bridgeport, Connecticut, advocating for underserved women with breast cancer, when she began to appreciate more deeply that access to fresh fruits and vegetables simply was not available in many neighborhoods. This spurred her decision to join a statewide network focused on improving food systems, where she was struck by something else. “I noticed,” said Moore, “that I was the only person of color at the table. I wondered, ‘Where are the black and brown people and why are they not a part of the discussion?’”<sup>1</sup>

**NOT LONG AFTER, MOORE** attended a food systems summit organized by a regional network, Food Solutions New England (FSNE). There, she attended a session on addressing food justice and policy planning, joining others who had been asked to “come prepared to think broadly and push the boundaries” (New England Food Summit booklet, 2013). Though social justice had been a part of FSNE’s mission, the session tapped into and fueled the growing desire among many in the region to take these values to another level. Karen Spiller, also a woman of color, led the standing-room-only session and remembers thinking, “We have reached a pivotal moment in which there is a desire and demand to address the challenges of race in our food system, and this is coming from predominantly white participants.”

Following the session, Spiller affirmed the call to others on the FSNE organizing committee, that race and racism needed to be much more central to the food system conversations and work. Determined to seize the moment, FSNE organizers publically committed to putting racial equity at the center of its work going forward.

That moment marked the crossing of a major threshold and the beginning of a collective journey of learning and action that continues to this day. This is a story of that journey. This is the story of how one food system-focused network went about the work of implementing a commitment to racial equity, which deepened its awareness of the dynamics of *othering* and *belonging* in food systems—societally and in its own efforts.

On the *othering* side of the story, power dynamics, white privilege, culturally embedded exclusion, and de facto silencing characterized the early formation of FSNE. The *belonging* part of the story illustrates how a predominantly white network began to face its othering issues and begin a commitment to racial equity.

FSNE’s evolution, grounded in a commitment to sustainability as articulated by the network’s conveners at the University of New Hampshire’s Sustainability Institute (UNHSI), is rooted in ethics and cultural values. Along the way, this commitment has consistently provided an alternative to the dominant orientation that isolates food from questions of racial equity, social justice, and many other critical values, and continually reinforced a *systems perspective* emphasizing wholeness, connectivity, and interdependence.

The unspoken *othering* part of our story speaks to the pernicious invisibility of systemic racism, even when it’s in plain sight. Prevailing viewpoints tended to view food and race and ethnicity (henceforth referred to as race) as separate phenomena to be considered discretely.

From this perspective, it was assumed that a network focused on food should be just that: focused on food while leaving questions of race to others. This view is not confined to academic researchers but is largely embraced by the philanthropic, business, and public sectors and defines focus, rigor, impact, and common sense practicality. Yet this separation is misguided, as apparent in lived experience and in data that show how tightly woven issues of food and race really are.

As a regional food systems network, the mission of FSNE states that it “supports a sustainable New England food system in order to provide healthy food for all, racial equity, sustainable farming and fishing, and thriving communities.”

While the explicit focus of the FSNE network is food, it sees its work implicitly as a cultural project, one aimed at transforming social norms to orient practices toward a sustainable regional food system. This work, the group says, is “inherently experimental and boundary crossing.”

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## Taking the Dive, Going Deeper Together

**FSNE WAS CREATED IN** response to identified need for greater connection, trust, collaboration, and innovation across food system efforts throughout the region.

The network formally launched through the planning of the inaugural New England Food Summit in 2011 around two elements: first, the question of whether the six-state region could develop a charter or some kind of declaration of shared values and aspirations for the region’s food future; and second, an invitation to each of the six New England states to form a delegation of twelve people to participate at the summit.

In order to explore the idea of a charter, delegates heard from a range of examples from within and beyond the region, including an early version of what ultimately became *A New England Food Vision*.<sup>2</sup> This vision explored how much food New England could grow while maintaining sufficient forest cover to ensure that healthy ecosystems continued to support a dynamic working landscape and public health.

Even in outline form, the vision captured the imagination of the delegates, and by the end of the summit the group had reached consensus on the importance of furthering its development and continuing annual summits to advance the regional dialogue and network building. The evolving vision figured prominently in a series of meetings, state summits, briefings and workshops, and at the second FSNE summit in 2012, where it was debated and further refined.

As FSNE worked to formalize itself as a network, including the creation of a regionally representative “design team,” it committed considerable time to building alignment around language, creating a glossary of common terms relevant to food systems, such as food, food security, food system, sustainability, and food justice.<sup>3</sup> A shared understanding was developed about what the regional vision was meant to be and the purpose of the network, carefully situating its work in a broader universe of efforts in the region. The hope for these efforts to deepen connectivity and alignment is that they would organically ripple out into people’s networks, which is precisely what has happened.

The third FSNE summit in 2013 was a watershed event for the network. A summary of *A New England Food Vision*, presented by some of its nine white authors, was given a

standing ovation by the more than one hundred delegates, many of whom had tracked the vision’s progress over the previous three summits.

In particular, people applauded the incorporation of a rights-based approach to food, nuanced treatment of alternative diets, and a commitment by FSNE to keep the vision evolving. As described earlier, near the end of that summit, Karen Spiller expressed the strong and growing desire among attendees that race and racism be much more central to conversations at the summit, and that not formally making space for this ran counter to the vision and the values of FSNE.

Members confirmed the need to go beyond general commitments to social justice and sustainability and name racial equity as a formal commitment for the network. The 2014–2016 summits took place in the more racially diverse states of Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut and included new delegations to bring more diverse perspectives to the conversation.

In addition, the FSNE network engaged in putting its racial equity commitment to work through a variety of steps, including recruiting more diverse core team members, educating ourselves more deeply about structural racism and white privilege, and establishing an ambassadors initiative that weaved connections with communities of color in the southern states. These and other actions are discussed in the next section.

But why did this network decide to do this work in the first place? FSNE decided to make racial equity a core value that guides its work because there was a growing awareness that race was a significant predictor of food-related disparities in the region (Satia, 2009; Neff et al., 2009; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). There was also an understanding that focusing on class or economics alone could obscure racism as a deeply embedded driver of injustice. In addition, there was good evidence that explicitly tackling racism would lead to engaging other “-isms” given the intersectional nature of power and privilege in food and other related systems.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, FSNE’s identity as a network rather than an organization, and the central role of network practice and theory that have informed its structure and process, has highlighted the importance of considering patterns of connection and disconnection in our work.

In addition, FSNE’s commitment to place, and therefore a place-based approach to its work in the six-state region of New England, has forced it to speak to the concrete particularities of the region’s geography and demographics, institutions, culture, and history, which in turn has reinforced integration and interdependence. Finally, the fortitude, generosity, and patience of the few people of color who were early members of the FSNE network played a critical role and remain integral to our efforts.

Yet how is it that we arrived at the third summit in 2013 with a bold vision, a Network Design Team, and support from funders with such racially skewed participation? The answer is that it was frighteningly easy.

Two insights of network theory have been particularly helpful—“birds of a feather flock together” and “those close by form a tie” (Krebs, 2005). While this network theory observation is about how “nodes link together because of common attributes, goals, or governance,” the insight holds for perpetuating racial hierarchies and disparities. New

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England is a diverse region, but New Hampshire, like Vermont and Maine, which are often referred to as northern New England, are not diverse (91 to 94 percent white, non-Hispanic) (US Census Bureau, 2017).

As the initial convener and backbone organization, the UNHSI operated in an environment that, while valuing and working to increase diversity, nevertheless remains a predominately white community as is the wider population of food system practitioners, which together dulls our sensitivities and normalizes predominantly white colleagues and collaborators.

This normalcy is part of white privilege, which, as Peggy McIntosh recognized, is “elusive and fugitive” due, in part, to the fact that many white people have been taught not to see all of the advantage and dominance we enjoy as the counterpart to the disadvantage and oppression experienced by people of color. That normalcy obviously extends to the governmental, nonprofit, for profit, and philanthropic sectors of our food system, as well as to all other parts of our society.

So as we developed FSNE and *A New England Food Vision*, the well-worn and self-reinforcing path of white privilege allowed us to talk about social justice and food as a right while forming ties and flocking together with white colleagues from across the region from different sectors. As McIntosh also noted, “To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here” (McIntosh, 1988).

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## Turning the Tide: Innovating for Equity

**AS WE STARTED TO** think about ways to turn words into action, it was very clear that FSNE was essentially “diversity deficient” in the composition of its working teams. We immediately altered our plans to expand the teams to instead focus on recruiting more racially diverse partners. This included a new Emerging Leaders delegation at the annual summit, composed of racially and ethnically diverse individuals under the age of thirty.

The benefit of bringing in voices and perspectives from the margins of what had begun as a white food system movement was palpable and evident on multiple levels: the sense of alignment with core values by committing to racial equity was empowering and liberating for all, regardless of race. There was also a recognition that large areas and populations of New England’s food system that until then had had no voice in the network would be invited to bring their wisdom and knowledge to the network and help shape the identity and character of FSNE going forward.<sup>5</sup>

Besides recognizing the benefits of expanding network diversity, the FSNE planning teams also committed to developing goals to guide the racial equity commitment. A subset of FSNE team members, including now both white and black colleagues and our network facilitator from the Interaction Institute for Social Change, drafted goals and actions. The initial goals recognized the need to build both the will and the skill of all network members to address racism at many levels: personal, organizational, and sectoral. The need to construct a shared understanding of where committing to “racial equity and food justice” could lead us was felt by many. Even with our formal commitment, we hesitated to move forward given the whiteness of the group and an acknowledged lack of experience in addressing these issues. One step we took, as a Network Team, was to read John A. Powell’s *Racing to Justice*. For many white team members, the book opened their eyes to white privilege and power and the dynamics of othering. It also fueled people’s commitment to creating a culture of belonging.

As we built our trust, we developed relationships that were authentic. “What I appreciate the most,” said Marilyn Moore, who became one of our Network Team members, “is that a person of color is not the only one challenging, questioning, and leading the conversation on racial equity.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there was a “commitment to sharing insights, reviewing and deep-diving into material to ensure it is inclusive.”<sup>7</sup> Building the will and the skill was a vital first step to realizing our commitment to racial equity.

## THE AMBASSADORS INITIATIVE

In addition to relationship and skill building among the Network Team, we needed to find concrete ways to manifest the racial equity commitment publicly and authentically, to increase participation in and commitment to a health-promoting, equitable, and just food system. To do this would require network innovations—adapting existing practices and developing new ways of working together and with others that leveraged our deepening connectivity and alignment.

In January 2015, on Martin Luther King Day, we officially launched the Ambassador Team to extend the FSNE network and make *A New England Food Vision* a valuable tool for all communities. Three ambassadors from the FSNE Network Team were recruited from our southern New England states—one each from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, where the greatest racial and cultural diversity exists in the region. The ambassadors were meant to serve the important role of “network weaving” (Krebs and Holley), building bridges to underrepresented communities. With this step, we



Photo: Southside Community Land Trust



Photo: Cultivating Community, Fresh Start Farms

sought to create more of a “movement network” (Mazur and Leach, 2013) to ensure all citizens in New England are able to fully participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, a health-promoting and equitable system.

The Ambassador Team began working together to identify and make meaningful connections with new and diverse partners, organizations, and individuals; to create a space for more racially diverse leadership and mentorship opportunities; and to ensure more connectivity between community efforts and the regional food system work. Current Ambassador Team members are Marilyn Moore, from the Witness Project of Connecticut and state senator from Connecticut’s Twenty-Second District; Karen Spiller, from KAS Consulting; and Julius Kolawole, from African Alliance of Rhode Island.

The ambassadors’ work has taken the form of “coffee chats,” presentations at state and local conferences and meetings, exhibits and tabling, university class discussions and church forums, online forums, and community monthly meetings. It has been critical to first acknowledge the existing contributions of community efforts to the regional food system movement. It has been equally important to make explicit the sometimes-invisible links of the food system operating at the neighborhood, city or town, state, and regional levels. Discussing the role that each of us plays in the transformation of our food system, with equity at its core, has helped to open the door for visioning a different future for how we feed everyone with dignity and fairness. “The nonnegotiable commitment made by FSNE to racial equity and food justice was a critical and bold declaration for our network. That, along with the intentional weaving and linking of the long-standing and vibrant activism deeply rooted in our communities around food and race with our regional food system work, has been food for my soul!” said Spiller.<sup>8</sup>

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That engagement has resulted in more individuals and organizations being directly involved with *A New England Food Vision* and has expanded the FSNE network across the three states, in particular, and across New England as a whole. The ambassadors were intentional about creating pathways to more active contribution to FSNE, and they committed to using the summits of 2015 and 2016 as an entry point into the network. Fifteen individuals of color, known as FSNE Trailblazers, were invited to participate in the 2015 and 2016 New England Food Summits. Thirty Trailblazers are now advocates for *A New England Food Vision* and participate in the FSNE network.



## SELECTED GOALS THAT REFLECT COMMITMENT TO RACIAL EQUITY AND FOOD JUSTICE

1. To promote a shared framing and understanding of concepts central to food systems, racial equity, and food justice.
2. To provide leadership in identifying opportunities to build greater awareness of the persistent pattern of racial inequality and food injustice that permeates our food system, while actively building the capacity and commitment to policies and practices that lead to a more equitable and just food system for all.
3. To identify and/or develop broad-based, targeted strategies to ensure diverse engagement by citizens in New England, who become fully able to participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, a healthy, affordable, accessible, environmentally sound, and fair food system for today and future generations.
4. To build greater state, regional, and national awareness of the reality of white privilege and structural racism operating in the food system.
5. To enhance collaboration designed to promote food justice and racial equity.
6. To enhance local, state, and regional communication platforms and network development designed to address racial equity and food justice.
7. To commit to collecting, analyzing, disseminating, and curating qualitative and quantitative data and stories that serve as indicators or benchmarks related to racial equity and food justice.

Whether through writing blogs and stories for the FSNE website, hosting informational sessions and workshops, or participating in the FSNE Network Leadership Institute, the Trailblazers have made and continue to make significant contributions.

FSNE continued to increase diversity through the addition of thematic summit delegations that crossed state boundaries. The Emerging Leaders delegation was introduced in 2014, which brought eighteen leaders between the ages of nineteen and twenty-nine to the summit, many of whom were historically underrepresented and people of color. This initial delegation included Abel Luna, an organizer with Migrant Justice, an organization that works on food justice and immigration issues in Vermont. Luna stood up in a plenary session and identified the largely absent voices of food chain workers. He observed that wages and benefits, as well as working conditions, have been historically unfair and unlivable, yet rarely addressed by the dominant food movement. With his help, we formed a new Food Chain Workers delegation in 2015. Food chain worker perspectives continue to shape the direction of our efforts.

## THE 21-DAY RACIAL EQUITY HABIT BUILDING CHALLENGE

In 2015, FSNE collaborated with the Interaction Institute for Social Change to create another network innovation by building upon the work of Dr. Eddie Moore Jr. and Debby Irving to offer our first annual 21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge.

The Challenge seeks to leverage virtual and in-person “network effects” to normalize conversations and action on race and racism in our food system.

Over the course of three weeks, participants commit to dedicating time and space to developing more effective social justice habits, particularly those dealing with issues of power, privilege, and leadership. A collection of readings, audiovisuals, and prompts are offered online to help participants explore the connections between race, racism, and food systems. The Challenge provides an opportunity to discover resources, to share insights, and to become more knowledgeable, sensitive, and capable of celebrating diversity and addressing racism in our work.

In 2015, over two hundred participants signed up for the Challenge, and this year participation reached nearly 1,500 individuals from diverse organizations, states, and food system sectors from across the country. As our outreach for the Challenge has expanded, so have requests for additional information (Burke, 2015). Inquiries about and interest in the Challenge have come from people working on a range of environmental and social issues.

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## Ripples and Waves

**NETWORK INNOVATIONS ARE SOME** of the ways FSNE has worked to bring its commitment to racial equity to life. Ongoing capacity-building around and discussion at FSNE meetings have helped to normalize the conversation about race and racism in white- and non-Hispanic-dominant organizations and communities, encouraging them to take a closer look at their work and consider how they might need to change.

For example, the FSNE racial equity commitment helped inspire a network of university and college faculty and staff to develop a guiding “statement on equity in the food system.” This network, the Inter-Institutional Network for Food, Agriculture, and Sustainability, has formed key partnerships with the Food Chain Workers Alliance and enlisted support from PolicyLink and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity.

The FSNE commitment to racial equity has also changed the way entities like state-based food system planners in the region view and approach their work. As one individual from the Vermont Farm to Plate Network said, FSNE has provided “multiple value-adds, but by far the best has been the focus on racial justice. We have a lot of work to do, but knowing it is being held up at that level has been big and will continue to have a ripple effect on the work we’re doing.”<sup>9</sup> The Vermont Farm to Plate Network put equity and justice front and center during its 2015 annual network gathering, which included a keynote presentation and training on systems thinking and structural racism.<sup>10</sup> The network has continued to integrate the commitment throughout the state in the work of its Food Access Crosscutting Team.

Other regional food system-related networks and organizations have followed suit in publicly committing to focus on the fundamental nature of racial equity to sustainable food systems.

Organizations like the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) say supporting FSNE’s racial equity commitment requires bravery. The alliance is “a fishermen-led organization building a broad movement toward healthy fisheries and fishing communities.” Following a FSNE meeting in which members were asked how their work would tackle issues of race and equity, NAMA coordinating director Niaz Dorry included a letter in her organization’s newsletter encouraging supporters to “be brave and stand up” to ensure just and equitable fisheries and food systems” (Dorry, 2013). In doing so, she realized it would not be universally well received. “Must admit I am nervous about how this commitment [to racial equity and food justice] will further transform our work and approach. The language of today’s marine conservation movement is not written with racial equity and food justice in mind” (Ibid).

Dorry’s concern was not unfounded. Following her message, NAMA received its highest number of unsubscribes, as well as numerous personal responses (Dorry, 2016). After all, said Dorry, “most people we work with are fishermen and women who live in rural communities that are deeply affected by neoliberal policies, yet don’t recognize how the inequities they experience are rooted in historic and systemic racial inequities. They don’t see much they have in common with those who appear different from them. The tendency is to focus on the differences, not the commonalities.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet thanks to the bravery of Niaz Dorry, her NAMA colleagues and partners, and the FSNE network, her response to the backlash was resolute: “Clearly, we made some people uncomfortable,” she said. “Good. For too long, our comfort has come on the backs of many who have been uncomfortable for a long, long time” (Dorry, 2016).



Photo: Housatonic Community College | Food Solutions New England

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## Navigating and Moving Forward, Together

**IN 2015, FSNE BEGAN** a yearlong systems mapping process to better understand how to increase our network impact in supporting our shared vision and values. While there had been a strong desire to engage in some type of systems mapping earlier in FSNE's history, we had made a conscious decision to delay that step until we had made progress on developing more diversity and inclusion in the Network Team, who would be the ones to engage in the systems mapping process. It was clear to everyone that the outcome of any such process would reflect the diversity, or lack thereof, of participants. While we had not in any way reached the levels of diversity and inclusion to which we aspired, we nevertheless decided it was time to take this step.

In parallel to the systems mapping, the Network Team was asked to clarify FSNE's values, to state them clearly and succinctly to ensure alignment of the entire team and the growing network. We had already progressed in the systems mapping to the point of naming what the team agreed to be important dynamics of the food system that we felt should be the focus of our collective efforts and how we might best go about shaping those dynamics. Importantly, the mapping process had named a broad underlying goal of ensuring a food system that would serve the *human dignity* of everyone it touched. The process also identified three areas around which FSNE would develop an integrated strategy: democratic empowerment, a new food story or narrative, and just and sustainable economies.

Several elements of the story serve as indicators and artifacts of the transformation of FSNE's identity and the journey from *othering* toward *belonging*.

First, the explicit inclusion of racial equity in the purpose statement represents the shift from only referencing general principles of "rights-based" and "social justice" approaches in our 2014 vision, to naming racial equity as a core value that will be served, and in fact *driven*, by the New England food system that we collectively envision.

A food system that is a *driver of racial equity* cannot afford to simply consider production, distribution, marketing, and consumption in narrowly conceived market economic terms; nor can it limit its vision, values, and language to "racial good will" or to just acknowledging that white privilege is operating in our food system. It commits FSNE to using "a critical race lens" that disrupts the dominant food-movement narrative, which is generally white, privileged, and color-blind (Rush 1999; powell 2016; Holt-Giménez, 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2016; Giancattarino 2014).

Similarly, the inclusion of "racial equity and dignity for all" as an explicit value, and specifying that "racism must be undone in order to achieve an equitable food system," firmly and unequivocally commits FSNE to leading with questions of *common interest* as opposed to *self-interest* to address these *bigger-than-self questions* (Crompton, 2010). It also commits FSNE to a holistic outlook that accounts for the inherent complexity of our food system. For example, it requires us to ask who has access to land, sea, education, capital, technical assistance, markets, and healthy local and regional food, and who does not? How is racism operating in the system, and how can it be undone to achieve true

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equity? And finally, *trust* is named as the lifeblood of collaboration that FSNE commits to building across diverse people, organizations, networks, and communities to support a thriving food system; and this assumes that *everyone* must be “part of the political community with the rights and privileges of membership” (powell, 2011, 155–156).

The early part of FSNE’s voyage as an organization has been about the awakening of a predominantly white network to the central place of *othering* and *belonging* in our food system and the obligation to put racial equity at the center of its work and to take actions to honor that commitment.

This commitment has been, for some, uncomfortable or even a threat; for others, a perceived distraction and confusing; and of course, for many others, a welcome relief. By grounding ourselves in this commitment and an ongoing process of trust building, we have given ourselves a way to right our course when we unintentionally deviate, and along the way we have cultivated genuine connections across diverse racial groups that have altered our collective identity and purpose in important ways. As with any voyage, ours proceeds with both a fixed destination and with humility and resolve for the journey.

## REFERENCES

- 1 This statement is based on personal communication on January 12, 2017.
- 2 Presenters included representatives from Vermont Farm to Plate, the Michigan Good Food Charter, and Roots of Change in California.
- 3 The support from and understanding of network development by the Henry P. Kendall Foundation and Courtney Bourns, senior program officer, was a critical factor.
- 4 See, for example, Ceasar McDowell's TEDx talk, "Design for the Margins," at <http://interactioninstitute.org/design-for-the-margins/>.
- 5 Senior program officers Courtney Bourns, of the Henry P. Kendall Foundation, and Christine James, of the John Merck Fund, provided leadership in bringing their own organizations and other funders to the table, including the Merck Family Fund and the Island Foundation, among others.
- 6 This statement is based on personal communication on February 1, 2017.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See more at "A Racial Equity Commitment: Lifting Up Community in Food System Transformation," <http://www.foodsolutionsne.org/blog/racial-equity-commitment-lifting-community-food-system-transformation>.
- 9 This statement was recorded in notes from the Community of Practice meeting in September 2016.
- 10 This statement was taken from personal communication with Ellen Kahler on January 12, 2017.
- 11 This statement was taken from personal communication with Niaz Dorry on March 1, 2017.

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