

**NOVEMBER 2023** 

**From Resource to Action:** Building a Diverse Equitable, and Inclusive Community of Organic **Professionals** 

**Project Report & Lessons Learned** 



ASSOCIATION











#### From Resources to Action: Building a Diverse Equitable, and Inclusive Organic Professionals Community

Project Report and Lessons Learned

**Outcomes and Recommendations** from the 2022-2023 Human Capital Project supported by USDA AMS Agreement Number 22-NOPXX-IA0005. We appreciate and applaud the National Organic Program for prioritizing investment in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

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Collective

We extend our deepest thanks to the organizations who shared their time and experience with us and the organic certification agencies who participated in the equity learning cohort. This report would not be possible without them.



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### Context

#### **Project History**

Acknowledging that the pursuit of racial equity is a substantial endeavor that requires collective action, the **Organic Farmers Association (OFA)**, the **National Organic Coalition (NOC)**, the **Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA)**, the **International Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA)**, and **IFOAM - North America (IFOAM-NA)** started coming together in the spring of 2021 to explore avenues for collaboration with the shared goal of bridging existing gaps in research, resources, education, and support for marginalized farmers and the organic professionals who work with them.

As a result, the aforementioned organizations submitted a joint proposal to the National Organic Program's <u>Human Capital Capacity Building Initiative</u> and were awarded two consecutive years of cooperative agreements spanning from 2021 to 2023. In Year 1 (also referred to as Phase One) our project focused on understanding the current landscape of how racial equity is perceived among organic professionals and creating educational tools and resources for the organic community. A detailed report of the initiatives and resources developed is available here: <u>2022 DEI Resources for Organic Professionals</u> (Appendix A). A significant takeaway from this phase was the recognition that advancing racial equity is an ongoing learning process that requires more than isolated, stand-alone training.

Building on the lessons learned from Phase One, and guided by the recommendations provided by the racial equity consultants we collaborated with, Year 2 (also referred to as Phase Two) focused on researching barriers to participation in the organic movement, including but not limited to certification, as well as providing ongoing professional development opportunities for organic professionals to enact DEI change at the organizational level.

#### **Areas of Critical Importance**

Two areas of critical importance, identified during Phase One (2021-2022) of our project, laid the foundation for determining and defining our Phase Two (2022-2023) scope of work. The first area of critical importance was the need to elevate BIPOC-led and serving organizations through resource shifting and partnership development. Racial equity consultants, Cambium Collective, led and facilitated project components in alignment with this area in Phase Two. The second area of critical importance was the need for education around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the organic space, along with concrete tools for organic professionals. Racial equity consultants, Up With Community, led and facilitated project components in this area. Detailed descriptions of these activities are provided later in this report.

### Critical Area 1: Elevating BIPOC-Led & Serving Organizations through Resource Shifting and Partnership Development

Phase One highlighted the urgent need to facilitate connections between BIPOC-led organizations (or organizations representing and serving socially disadvantaged farmers) and potential funding sources. Throughout this phase, Cambium Collective encouraged the Partners to explore ways to shift and leverage power to support BIPOC-led organic and sustainable agriculture organizations with specific demands and policy recommendations. Cambium consultants and project partners acknowledged and emphasized that investments in re-educating white individuals should, at minimum, be matched by directing funds directly to Black and brown communities and organizations.

In response to this finding and recommendation, the first component of Phase Two was initially designed to address the question, "Why aren't there more BIPOC producers in organic?"

However, as the coalition continued on its own racial equity learning journey and reflection, the question evolved to "What are the barriers to organic certification?" and finally to, "Why are BIPOC producers choosing to not certify organic?" The evolution of this core question is reflective of the Partners' commitment to prioritizing relationship-building throughout the process and recognizing that engagement with and participation in the National Organic Program is relational, not just regulatory.

Through the evolution of the core question, the Partners also recognized and acknowledged that the organic movement includes certification but is not exclusively a certification program. The beginning of the movement was based on values of care, ecology, fairness, and health. With this acknowledgment, the Partners also sought to understand the relationship BIPOC producers and organizations have, or wish to have, with the organic movement and how we could support and strengthen that relationship.

#### **Critical Area 2: DEI Education and Concrete Tools for Organic Professionals**

Phase One included a webinar to establish a common understanding of the history of racism in U.S agriculture within the U.S. agricultural community and two intensive training sessions for organic professionals on racial equity topics that were well received, training participants and stakeholders specifically expressed a desire for more in-depth education offerings and concrete tools.

In response to this finding and recommendation, the second component of Phase Two was designed to establish a more continuous model of education and learning. Initially, the plan involved offering a series of three workshops and training for organic organizations. However, through continued conversation and thought partnership, this component also evolved to better suit the needs of organic organizations seeking to embody DEI principles and implement organizational change. Instead of providing three workshops and training open to the broader organic audience, it was determined based on interviews conducted by Up With Community, that organizations were at varying starting points in their racial equity learning journey. These interview findings affirmed what many organic organizations involved in this project were witnessing:- the critical need for a foundational understanding of concepts of race, racism, and other DEI concepts to advance racial equity in the organic movement. As a result, the originally proposed workshop series evolved into the Equity Learning Exchange (ELE), an 8-month training series that combines learning sessions with planning and practical exercises using a cohort-based approach.

#### **Project Team**

#### Consultants

This work would not have been possible without the very talented equity consultants we had the pleasure of working with, the Cambium Collective and Up With Community. Both consulting firms brought specialized expertise in understanding and addressing systemic racial inequalities and biases that may exist within organizations and institutions.

By engaging with racial equity consultants, individuals and organizations can gain valuable insights, strategies, and guidance to dismantle discriminatory practices, foster inclusivity, and create more equitable environments. Racial equity consultants not only help identify blind spots and areas of improvement but also provide the necessary tools and training to promote cultural competency and build a more inclusive and diverse workforce.

#### **Cambium Collective**

Cambium Collective specializes in community engagement that centers people whose voices have not been present in planning efforts. They develop recommendations that address root causes of inequity, seek to build real and lasting change, and stimulate action, collaboration, and implementation. Their focus areas include food systems, climate change, community revitalization, and neighborhood & economic development. The Cambium Collective team includes experienced facilitators & trainers who utilize a variety of approaches based on popular education, participatory learning & collective wisdom. Cambium Collective, LLC served as primary facilitators and context experts for the Project Area of Critical Importance 1.

https://www.cambiumcollective.org/

#### Up with Community

With over a decade of experience organizing, advocating, training, and creating impactful learning experiences, Up With Community (UWC) is a thought and action partner. Their work with diverse teams has helped to articulate goals and processes, bring organizational values to the forefront, and focus team learning around long-term impact. UWC specializes in adult learning and professional development and designed, led, and facilitated the cohort to provide advanced DEI professional development for organic professionals for Project Area of Critical Importance 2. <u>https://upwithcommunity.org</u>



### Partners for Racial Equity in Organic

The Partners for Racial Equity in Organic is a coalition of national organic organizations that joined forces to acknowledge their respective roles and responsibilities in advancing racial equity within the organic movement. They aimed to identify gaps in research and educational support that contribute to the progress of racial equity while leveraging their collective resources, including networks and communication channels, to disseminate funding and potential opportunities for collaboration. Established in 2021, the coalition initially referred to itself as the "Organic Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Steering Committee," as documented in earlier project reports.

Over the past two years, as the coalition collaborated with and learned from racial equity consultants, individual and collective understandings of racial equity and their roles within it evolved. As the coalition continued to learn and reflect on their role and positionality, a collective decision was made that the term "Organic DEI Steering Committee" was not appropriate. This change was prompted by an acknowledgment of the predominantly white leadership within the coalition and the need to avoid appropriating the role of leaders of racial equity work. As a result, the coalition adopted the name, "Partners for Racial Equity in Organic" to better reflect and convey their collective positionality as committed partners rather than authoritative leaders in the space.

Accredited Certifiers Association. The Accredited Certifiers Association (ACA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational organization created to benefit the organic certifier community and the organic industry. The primary mission of the ACA is to ensure consistent implementation of the USDA Organic Regulations through collaboration and education of accredited certification agencies. The ACA represents 64 certifier members, including most US-based National Organic Program (NOP) accredited certifiers. The ACA recognizes the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the organic certification process. We work in a food system that has exploited and unjustly treated people of color for centuries, and the ACA recognizes this as well as the harm that this system has caused. ACA is committed to increasing awareness about these issues and finding ways to collaborate across certifiers and partnering organizations to make the organic certification process more inclusive.

#### IFOAM - North America. IFOAM North America is a regional body of the IFOAM- Organics

International. Our work builds capacity to facilitate the transition of farmers to organic agriculture, raises awareness of the need for sustainable production and consumption, and advocates for a policy environment conducive to agroecological farming practices/organic farming systems practices and sustainable development. IFOAM North America supports building capacity and enabling access to the benefits of organic agriculture and thriving organic livelihoods with all communities, inclusive of BIPOC farmers and their communities, socially disadvantaged farmers, and underserved small farm populations and their communities. IFOAM-OI has members in over 100 countries and territories.

**International Organic Inspectors Association.** The International Organic Inspectors Association (IOIA) is a professional organization of organic inspectors and offers training and networking worldwide for crop, livestock, and processing inspectors. Incorporated as a 501(c)(3), IOIA operates globally with inspector members in more than a dozen countries. IOIA has been training inspectors since 1993. The IOIA Training Institute trains hundreds of working and new inspectors annually through on-site or webbased internationally recognized training events. In 2020, IOIA delivered 60 training events in four languages through collaboration with 13 cosponsors, including universities, nonprofits, certification agencies, governments, and others. IOIA recognizes the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in growing the ranks of organic inspectors, certification agencies, and producers. Addressing the lack of diversity is critical in creating a just and sustainable marketplace for organic products.

**National Organic Coalition**. The National Organic Coalition (NOC) is a national alliance of organizations working on behalf of farmers, ranchers, environmentalists, consumers, retailers, and industry members involved in organic agriculture. NOC seeks to advance organic food and agriculture and ensure a united voice for organic integrity, which means strong, enforceable, and continuously improved standards to maximize the multiple health, environmental, and economic benefits that organic agriculture provides. The coalition works to ensure that policies are fair, and equitable, and encourage diversity of participation and access. <u>NOC is prioritizing racial equity</u> in our organization and strategies and is committed to listening, understanding, learning, amplifying, working, and acting to address and dismantle systemic racism.

**Organic Farmers Association.** The Organic Farmers Association (OFA) is a membership nonprofit agricultural organization that educates and represents the interests of domestic certified organic producers. OFA strives to build and support a farmer-led national organic farmer movement and national policy platform by developing and advocating policies that benefit organic farmers; strengthening and supporting the capacity of organic farmers and farm organizations; and supporting collaboration and leadership among state, regional, and national organic farmer organizations. Organic Farmers Association was created with values and guiding principles that call for a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organic community.









# **Critical Area 1**

### Elevate BIPOC-led and serving organizations through resource shifting and partnership development

As mentioned in the context section of the report, the activities in Phase Two were determined by the two critical areas identified at the end of Phase One.

#### Activities

The activities developed and undertaken to elevate BIPOC-led and serving organizations through resource shifting and partnership development (Critical Area 1), were led and facilitated by the Cambium Collective.

#### Objectives

The three main objectives established to address this critical area were to:

- 1. Gain a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers to certification for BIPOC farmers.
- 2. Identify priorities for organizations serving under-resourced & historically underserved farmers ("frontline BIPOC organizations"), and how those connect to organic certification and the barriers to certification.
- 3. Identify potential organizations that the Partners for Racial Equity in Organic would like to support or be in a more meaningful relationship with.

#### **Process/Activities**

To elevate the voices of BIPOC-led and serving organizations, it was determined that the best approach was to conduct qualitative interviews with these organizations. To prioritize relationship building at the center of the project's ethos and shift away from transactional project design, the project team collectively decided that the term "conversations" better aligned with the team's values and goals that extend beyond the cooperative agreement.

The purpose of these conversations was manifold-to develop pathways of communication among the organic community and organizations serving BIPOC farmers, identify possible collaboration opportunities, and connect these organizations with funding opportunities to broaden and expand their capacity to support farmers interested in organic transition and organic practices, and to deepen our understanding about what impacts BIPOC farmers' relationship to organic certification.



#### To meet the above objectives, Cambium Collective designed a 5-step research process:

#### Identify Organizations of Interest

20 Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, immigrant, and multi-racial organizations that are led by and serving their communities were selected as organizations of interest for initial research. The selection of organizations was primarily based on recommendations from the Partners for Racial Equity in Organic (Partners), complemented by Cambium's own network connections and field knowledge.



#### Partner Preparation Meetings

Before initiating outreach, Cambium facilitated a series of preparatory meetings for the Partners. These meetings sought to account for any existing relationships Partners have with the organizations of interest and with which ones Partners were particularly interested in building a relationship; to establish a shared understanding of what we are asking of these organizations to participate in conversations with us and what the Partners are offering in return; and to formulate a strategic outreach approach. During this process and due to time constraints, the Partners prioritized 15 organizations to reach out to during this project period.



#### Conduct Preliminary Research

Cambium conducted an initial web scan of these organizations to gain insights into the programs, services, and initiatives these organizations were involved in, their collaborative partners, and the priorities of the communities they serve. This involved reviewing organizational websites, press releases, reports, and other forms of public communications such as social media.



#### Facilitate Conversations with Organizations of Interest

Cambium facilitated the dialogues between the Partners and the organizations. Their facilitation involved taking comprehensive notes to allow all participants to fully engage in the discussions. They also served as an additional set of ears to ensure that the information conveyed was accurately recorded and interpreted, to reduce the influence of individual lenses, perspectives, and potential biases in the interpretation of the shared information.



#### Debrief with the Partners

Two debrief meetings with the Partners were facilitated by Cambium. The first debrief meeting took place after half of the conversations were completed as a checkpoint for how the Partners felt the conversations were going and to discuss any pivots that may be necessary given the themes that were emerging. The second meeting took place at the end of the project period to discuss the findings and lessons learned from the process.

### **Results: Barriers to Organic**

To assess how the NOP and the broader organic movement can more effectively understand and respond to the needs of Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, immigrant, and multi-racial agricultural organizations and the farmers they serve, fifteen organizations were invited to participate and meet with the Partners during the project period. Unfortunately, due to several complications, the research pool was not as comprehensive as we had designed for, and thus, the barriers question may need additional attention to farmer groups that lacked representation in this research such as Asian groups and Indigenous Nations and organizations. In all, seven organizations providing support to farmers of color participated. The identified barriers to farmers of color in accessing and participating in the National Organic Program, which are summarized below, provide valuable insights for areas of focus in education, funding priorities, policy development, and enhancing support mechanisms for farmers.

The top barriers that emerged from the research include:

#### Access to Farmland

Land access remains the greatest barrier for farmers of color, an even greater barrier in comparison to white farmers (due to histories of chattel slavery, violent land theft, discrimination from state programs, and more). Secure land tenure is important for all farmers, but especially for Organic producers because of the 3-year transition to Organic. It's difficult to invest in organic transition without secure land tenure.



#### **Access to Capital**

Structural racism has made it difficult to access capital and financing that is often limited, restrictive, and insufficient. Furthermore, the communication channels used to disperse information, resources, and funding opportunities often do not reach farmers of color and the organizations they may rely on for community, connection, and support.

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#### National Organic Program Requirments

The process and the required paperwork are time and resource-intensive, especially for small operations. Coupled with the fact that farmers report negative experiences with certifiers, inspectors, and USDA agents, they feel a lack of agency and respect in the process, exacerbating feelings of misaligned values.



### Lack Of access to a Certifier with robust supportive programming

Farmer access to the National Organic Program is primarily mediated by their certifier. While a wide range of services is offered, there is inequitable access to services across regions.



#### **Limited Education on Organic**

Misinformation on what is required and the amount of time and resources it takes to become certified is a barrier.



#### Language

Simply translating documents into other languages or having inspectors who speak the producer's language is insufficient. For farmers who are immigrants especially, a lack of institutional knowledge and true understanding of the rules and regulations is prohibitive.

For a comprehensive examination of the findings, please refer to the full <u>Needs,</u> <u>Priorities, and Barriers to Certification Report</u> (Appendix B).



#### Depending on the market, economic value isn't always clear, or a core value

Small-scale farmers are more likely to have personal relationships and credibility with their consumers, lowering their priority to have their products validated by a third party. In these instances, accessing a larger market share is a low priority since they are focused on feeding their community.



# Lessons Learned

While the previous section outlines specific barriers identified through conversations with BIPOC-led and serving organizations, it is also crucial to recognize the overarching themes that help provide a broader context to these findings. A summary of these themes is as follows:

- Barriers to Organic Certification are Systemic: The most significant barriers that were identified repeatedly in conversations with organizations and producers had to do with access to and sustaining land ownership, financial security, and how immigration status limited what was available to immigrant producers.
- Small, Diversified Organic Producers with Marginalized Identities Are Organic's Most Unrecognized, Under-Supported Asset: Farmers need to own their land and have stability to be able to afford the time and expense of organic certification. The NOP has made substantial investments in learning the barriers to organic certification; with the answers now clear, using the NOP's influence and place within USDA to support an agency shift to adequately resource "marginalized and disadvantaged producers" to farmland ownership is the most impactful way to create opportunities for racial diversity in organic.
- From a Wider View We Can See Organic Certification as One Piece of a Large-scale Effort: It's necessary to see organic certification as one piece of the large-scale effort to change our food system towards one that prioritizes health, ecology, fairness, and care. When we look through this lens, we see the connections with BIPOC farmers and communities also doing the work of changing the food system. This is key to understanding how things are relational.

• USDA's NOP Is More Than A Regulatory Program: A common theme that emerged from conversations with the organizations is that community building and support are core values of BIPOC producers. While there is a shared understanding that there are requirements and standards to be met, there is also a desire for a culture of inclusion, technical assistance, and support when people are not meeting regulations to help them get into compliance instead of exclusion and consequence.



- **Specific Programming to Support Particular Populations Is Helpful:** No one-size-fits-all solution exists. Developing regional and place-based understanding to direct funding to support existing organizations, to support new organizations that are needed in other areas modeled off existing programming that is successful, or creating new USDA resources when needed are all approaches that can better serve producers across the country based on their particular set of barriers, needs, priorities, and challenges.
- **Relationship Building Takes Time; Ongoing Funding Is Needed:** To achieve racial equity, BIPOC producers and producer-led organizations need to be fully integrated into partnerships and networks. Building these relationships requires more resource-intensive time for BIPOC organizations that are often operating at or over capacity, and under-resourced.
- To Build Relationships, It Is Necessary to Support BIPOC-Led Efforts: Attending the events, webinars, conferences, policy discussions, and other programming hosted by BIPOC-led and serving organizations is a foundational way that other organizations working within the organic movement can start to learn about their missions, programming, needs, and priorities. Farmers are more likely to look first to the local resource organizations they trust for support rather than organizations with which they do not have an established relationship. Distributing resources for organic programming to trusted BIPOC-led organizations will build trust and establish long-term partnerships to expand the number of organizations working within the organic movement.
- Please review the full <u>Organic DEI: Phase Two Lessons Learned Report</u> (Appendix C) for an indepth review.



### Recommendations

Based on the results of the Project findings, we propose the following recommendations:







#### Organic Cost Share Expansion

Continue and expand the benefits of the Organic Certification Cost Share Program. Many organizations expressed that the costshare program has been crucial to securing organic certification for marginalized and disadvantaged communities.



#### Inclusive Culture of Certification

A new approach and culture to organic certification that centers inclusion, technical assistance, and support over penalties and consequences. Furthermore, certification programs should support and work with the customs and cultural sensitivities of indigenous, immigrant, and BIPOC producers instead of training them to the norm of the way certifiers do things.



#### Extended Funding to Sustain Relationship-Building Work

Extended funding agreement periods are imperative to sustain relationship-building work. We recommend the establishment of longer cooperative agreements or funding periods to provide sustained support for DEI initiatives. The ongoing investment in and financial backing of relationship-building and partnerships should persist, as the strength of the organic movement hinges on its interconnectedness. Priority should be given to efforts aimed at connecting with Black, Indigenous, latino/a/x, Asian, and immigrant communities, as well as organizations involved in sustainable and regenerative agriculture movements. Adequate funding should be allocated for these conversations, particularly for BIPOC participating organizations.

#### BASED ON CONTENT BY CAMBIUM COLLECTIVE

**ORGANIC FARMERS** 

ASSOCIATION

#### BUILDING A DIVERSE EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE ORGANIC PROFESSIONALS COMMUNITY

International Organic

NORTH

AMERICA





USDA

ORGANIC

ΙΔΤΙΟΝΔΙ

GANIC

### Recommendations for Intentional Relationship Building with BIPOC Organizations

Establishing connections with organizations led by and serving Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, Asian, and immigrant farmers, along with fostering collaboration with these communities, is of critical importance for cultivating a diverse organic movement in the United States. To have a more profound influence on climate change and food security, we must ensure that a broader spectrum of organizations and farmers is actively engaged. Nevertheless, building these relationships demands careful attention and intention. Based on our process, we offer the following recommendations for those interested in embarking on similar relationship-building endeavors toward achieving racial equity:



As your organization discusses reaching out to BIPOC organizations, it's important for you as an organization and for the people who will be doing the outreach to know specifically why you are reaching out to them. Be clear about the need to build relationships, act inclusively, and work inclusively. Ask - what can this look like with your organization? Furthermore, it is important that in exchange for each ask, you are prepared to make an offer.



Get to know the organizations that you are interested in connecting with (via their website, reports, policy briefs, and social media) and share those initial findings with your group so you are prepared with a baseline understanding of the organization you are meeting with.

#### Identify Existing Connections and Relationships

Consider any existing relationships that your organization and partners have in place and start there. As you complete your outreach, also take note of where there was a lack of connection and how that may impact the project.



Organizations have life cycles; providing more flexibility and extended timelines may be necessary to meet organizations where they are at. Coming to the process with this approach ensures that we meet them where they are, rather than imposing rigid schedules and deadlines by our or the funder's terms.



Attend and Participate in Events Hosted by Organizations You Want to Work With

Start by attending the events of the organizations you are interested in connecting with. Suggest passing along funding to those organizations in your project proposals with minimal time or effort needed from the organization to receive the funding.



During our outreach process we realized that we needed a lot of time to prepare, schedule, reflect, and make adjustments.



#### Be Respectful of Organizations that Do Not Have the Capacity to Engage

No response is a response. If you request a meeting with someone and they don't respond after 2-3 prompts, they probably don't have the time or capacity to meet with you. Move on and adjust your plans accordingly.





#### Resource the Work

Offer significant financial support as a contribution to the organization's commitment of time and resources. We allocated \$2,500 to each organization to compensate them for their time for multiple staff meetings with us, preparation for the call, scheduling time, and post-call follow-up. Recognizing that we were engaging with BIPOC organizations while representing a predominantly white group, we openly acknowledged in our outreach that this amount was insufficient for the extensive resource transfer that is required, and we transparently identified our funding source.

#### BASED ON CONTENT BY CAMBIUM COLLECTIVE









NORTH

AMERICA



USDA

ORGANIC





# **Critical Area 2**

#### Provide continued DEI education and concrete tools for organic professionals

The activities developed and undertaken to provide continued DEI education and concrete tools for organic professionals (Critical Area 2), were led and facilitated by Up With Community.

#### Objectives

The two main objectives established to address this critical area were to:

- 1. Develop accountability mechanisms to keep the Partners for Racial Equity in Organic grounded in the goals established in Phase One of the project.
- 2. Support organizational learning and implementation on racial justice and equity for organics certifiers and inspectors through continuous educational professional development opportunities.

To achieve the stated objectives for Critical Area 2, Up With Community (UWC) led and facilitated two main project components, the development of an accountability mechanism for internal use among the Partners, and the establishment of the Equity Learning Exchange.

#### Accountability Mechanism

#### Process

To ensure the Partners remained anchored in the priorities set during Phase One, UWC designed an accountability tool intended to assist the coalition in recognizing their areas for improvement and how racial equity can be integrated into various programs and projects. The approach was straightforward and practical, involving the development of an accountability tracking tool centered around the shared goals defined during Phase One of the project. These goals included:

- Moving resources to organizations that support BIPOC producers and handlers, and being in solidarity with/in support of BIPOC-led work.
- Developing policy changes or demands to advance racial equity in the organic movement.
- Creating and defining a community of practice and action for people working to enact racial equity in the organic sector. This space could include farmer community groups to aid in shared understanding.
- Establishing internal and external professional development programs to develop racial equity skills and capacity within the sector.

#### Results

While accountability is a fundamental shared value among the Partners, the practical application of the tracking tool was limited. Although we completed all the activities aligned with the previously mentioned goals, the tool could have been more beneficial if it had been consistently revisited during every Partner meeting to anchor us in our work. The challenge here does not lie in the tool's design but in its utilization.

#### **Lessons Learned**

**Creating an Accountability Tool vs. an Accountability Practice:** Although our initial intention at the beginning of Phase Two was to develop an accountability tool, it became apparent that what was truly required was an ongoing accountability practice, supported by a tracking tool to monitor our progress and the evolution of our thinking. Shifting accountability from a tool to a practice reflects the lessons learned and recommendations above, related to doing the work in a manner that is oriented around relationships rather than only documentation.

#### Recommendations

**Create an Accountability Practice Early:** Once the project was underway, it was challenging to attempt to build an accountability mechanism to track our progress towards these larger goals as we were designing other project components simultaneously. Our recommendations for establishing an accountability practice include setting clearly defined objectives, setting measurable goals, and revisiting the accountability tool at every partner meeting to review and assess progress, assign responsibilities, celebrate milestones, and remain open to adapting and evolving project strategies and approaches.



### Equity Learning Exchange

#### **Process/Activities**

To support organizations through continuous DEI educational opportunities (Objective 2), UWC designed and established an Equity Learning Exchange (ELE)- an eight-session intensive working workshop series that employed a cohort model to educate and provide concrete tools for organic certification and inspection agencies to make organizational change towards greater racial equity.

Before developing the curriculum, UWC conducted stakeholder interviews with those who participated in our Phase One project components. The themes that emerged from those interviews are as follows:



#### Strong Preference for Peer Learning and Interaction

Peer learning and the chance to connect with peers is highly valued and preferred, in contrast to training designed in formats where participants are unable to interact with one another.



#### Need for a Space to Discuss Institutional Change

Participants expressed a need and desire for a space to discuss their needs for institutional change.



#### Tensions Involving Capacity, Trust, and Competition

While there was a general enthusiasm about new funding opportunities, concerns related to budgetary constraints and inflation heightened apprehensions about how funds would be distributed, allocated, and utilized.



### Lack of Clarity around Agency and Ownership

Many interviewees reported a general lack of clarity regarding who is, and should be, responsible for advancing racial equity in organic, along with the role they can and should assume in this initiative.



#### Varying Organizational Purposes

The majority of interviewees shared a closely aligned mission, primarily centered around protecting organic standards and extending their reach to a broader array of communities. This requires a working relationship with the government and a mindset of protection, conservation, and boundary setting. In contrast, many BIPOC agricultural organizations are starting from a very different place: a desire to care for and develop relationships with land and community, protection of farm workers from toxic agrochemicals, the preservation and sharing of cultural practices that have often been erased or marginalized by the government and society at large, and finally, a commitment to placing care and powersharing at the center of their work.



### Limited Understanding of Identity and Power

Although interviewees were enthusiastic about potential racial justice and equity-centered outcomes, they lacked shared frameworks of what power is, how to share it, and the influence of identity in actualizing desired outcomes.

In light of these identified themes, UWC recommended an introductory peer learning cohort as the best option for most of the targeted audience during this project phase. This recommendation was put forth with the recognition that some individuals and organizations within the sector have already advanced beyond the stage where an introductory cohort would be beneficial. In contrast, others remain unconvinced of its usefulness. It is important to note that these considerations were outside of this project's scope; it has been acknowledged for future recommendations that alternative approaches or models may prove more suitable for different audiences.

Based on the aforementioned themes, the ELE curriculum was structured into three components: first, an exploration of foundational concepts and tools for organizational planning and implementation; second, an in-depth examination of specific questions about alignment, planning, and relationships; and finally, organizational readiness for implementing organizational goals.



# **Cohort Results**



The first ELE cohort consisted of seven certification agencies, each of whom selected 2-4 decision-makers from their staff to participate in the program. The cohort prioritized certification agencies operating under similar organizational structures, governmental expectations, and requirements. Thus the conversations could more deeply focus on racial equity learning because the audiences were similar.

Participating organizations have reported the following results from their participation in the cohort:

Trusting peer learning relationships, some of which they look forward to continuing after the cohort and continuing to invest in each other's learning and growth. This is particularly notable as, in an economic sense, some of these certification organizations compete with each other; they have been able to set that aside for the common goal of promoting equity in the sector overall.

Valuable peer conversations that expanded their understanding of what was possible for their organizations, and new insights on how to do equity and racial justice work from the stories of other organizations in the cohort.

Increased understanding of how organizational change happens in general, and on equity and racial justice in particular. Increased clarity about their organizational purpose in pursuing equity goals, the outcomes they hope to achieve, and the process for achieving those outcomes.

# **Cohort Results**

New tools and skills to lead organizational change from within how to set up leadership teams, build buy-in, address roadblocks, and move ideas to action. Deeper awareness of the importance of relationships for building and sharing power - in general and for equity.

Increased skills for relationship building with BIPOC communities.

Equity planning tools and analytical frameworks that were immediately applied to existing and emerging projects within their organizations.



#### BASED ON CONTENT BY UP WITH COMMUNITY

#### BUILDING A DIVERSE EQUITABLE, AND INCLUSIVE ORGANIC PROFESSIONALS COMMUNITY











## Lessons Learned

While developing, establishing, and facilitating the Equity Learning Exchange (ELE), several lessons were learned during the process and will be valuable for future ELE cohorts and anyone looking to replicate similar work. A summary of these lessons is as follows:

- Be Aware of Organizational Workflows: Different sectors within the industry experience varying peaks and troughs throughout the year in terms of capacity. In our case, the initial stages of the application cycle saw a delay in submissions, mainly because the application was launched during a period of high demand for certification agencies and inspectors.
- Flexibility is Critical: Although the design of the ELE and its curriculum was a collaborative process at the start of Phase Two, it is of utmost importance to remain open and responsive to feedback from cohort participants and group dynamics. At a few moments throughout the cohort, there were times when pauses and pivots were needed to enhance the collective learning experience. Such pauses and pivots were warranted for a variety of reasons, including recognizing when participants needed additional time to fully digest and apply their learning, as well as accommodating the emergence of new topics of interest as priorities.

# Recommendations

Based on the conclusion of the first Equity Learning Exchange cohort, we propose the following recommendations for others interested in similar work:

- Set Expectations Early: Upon being accepted into the cohort, participants received a welcome letter outlining what to expect, logistics, considerations to take into account before the start of the cohort, and action items. Once the cohort officially launched, participants received a copy of the syllabus ahead of time, which could ease any potential anxiety and allow organizations to plan their workloads to accommodate the cohort commitment.
- **Pre and Post-Session Work is Valuable:** Learning cannot be limited to active session times alone. Participants were required to complete preparatory activities before sessions involving generative and reflective work. Additionally, they were asked to establish a practice of team check-ins to debrief from sessions, guided by prompts provided by the facilitation team.

# Moving Forward

Because of the positive reception from organizations within the organic community during Project Phase 1, the Partners for Racial Equity in Organic prioritized securing funding to continue this work within the domestic organic movement. The Partners secured multi-year cooperative agreements under the National Organic Program's Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP) from 2023 to 2025. The programs and partnerships that have emerged from both the organic community and the National Organic Program are promising indicators of the commitment to the continuous advancement of racial equity across the organic movement.

The work completed through the <u>Human Capital Capacity Building Initiative</u> was used as a foundation for the Partners' TOPP proposal. Building off of the results, lessons learned, and recommendations, Partners for Racial Equity in Organic are excited to continue this work in the following areas:

Continue to connect with and resource the BIPOC organizations that we had conversations with to share resources discussed and build trust over time.

Expanding the Equity Learning Exchange (ELE) to provide education and resources to different sectors of the organic community through three additional cohort groups over three years.

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Supporting community connections and farmer-to-farmer sharing networks through Farmer Circles.

4

Establishing a Community of Practice for ELE participants to provide opportunities for continuous learning, community building, cross-sector collaboration, and continued coaching support.

5

Establishing a paid internship program to support organic career exploration, networking, and pathways with outreach to a diverse student body.



Appendix A) <u>2022 DEI Resources for Organic</u> <u>Professionals</u>

Appendix B) <u>Needs, Priorities, and Barriers to</u> <u>Certification Report</u>

Appendix C) <u>Organic DEI: Phase Two Lessons</u> <u>Learned Report</u>



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