

A REPORT BACK from A NETWORK CONVERSATION

NESAWG - April 2022

NESAWG

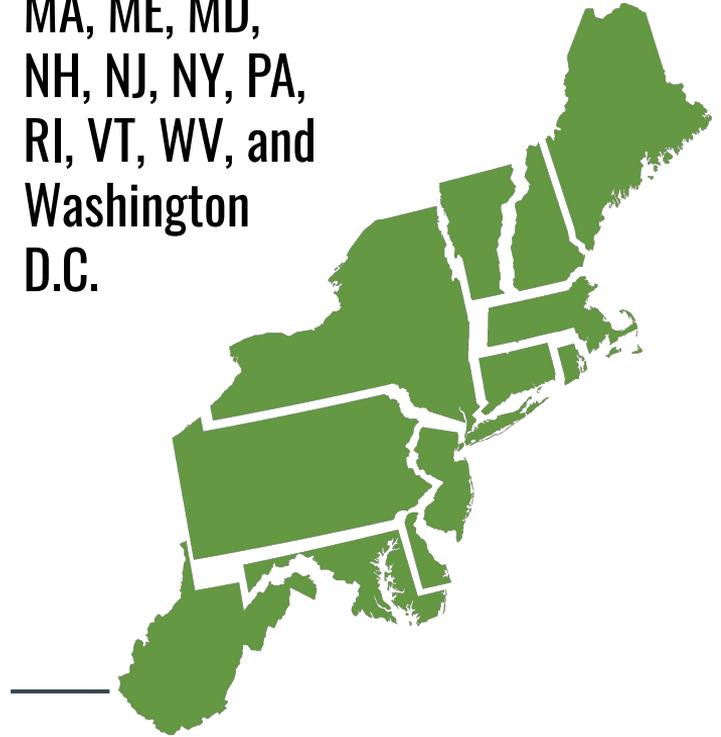
Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group
THE REGION'S FOOD AND FARM NETWORK



Disclosure: This report back includes highlights; it is not a verbatim compilation of thoughts shared.

ABOUT NESAWG

Our region
includes CT, DE,
MA, ME, MD,
NH, NJ, NY, PA,
RI, VT, WV, and
Washington
D.C.



WHO ARE WE?

NESAWG is a 12-state network plus Washington DC of farm and food systems stakeholders seeking to harness regional power to catalyze meaningful change towards a sustainable, fair and just food system for All.

Our goals are to:

- Cultivate a robust network that spans across sectors and the region
- Embody and shepherd equity
- Advance regional interests, sustainability, and equity in food policy

NESAWG'S COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

- **Be Curious, Open, and Respectful** - call in not out/throw sunshine not shade
- **No one knows everything** - together we know a lot
- **We can't be articulate all the time** - give the benefit of the doubt and ask questions
- **We take care of ourselves** - stretch, eat, drink, use the restroom, rest, etc.
- **Confidentiality** - don't speak for others without explicit permission, don't share something communicated in a private or safe space.
- **One mic** - one voice at a time
- **Take Space/Make Space** - if you are usually quiet, challenge yourself to take more space, and if you usually talk a lot, be mindful to leave room for quieter voices

NESAWG'S COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS Cont'd

- **Avoid Jargon, Acronyms, and Industry language** - use inclusive language that is accessible for people with varying inside knowledge
- **Be aware of time** - enough let's move on (ELMO) means if what you wanted to say has already been said, don't say it
- **Speak from your own experience** - Use I statements rather than generalizations
- **Challenge assumptions**
- **Be conscious of intent vs. impact** - no matter intention you're responsible for your impact
- **Expect and Accept Non-Closure** - the work takes time! We're planting seeds, knowing we won't always be able to harvest right away.

**OUR NETWORK
CONVERSATION:
DESIRED OUTCOMES
&
AGENDA**



DESIRED OUTCOMES

- 1) An understanding of NESAWG's purpose, value, history, story and how it aligns with our practice @individual, org and systemic levels
- 3) An understanding of how we reflect, learn and grow together
- 4) An understanding of how to address and heal harm; How do we move on to not repeat
- 5) An initial vision of how do we move on together to the future

AGENDA

1. Welcome & Introduction
2. Context & Background
3. An Apology
4. The Need for Affinity Groups
5. Framing
6. BREAK
7. Break-out Rooms by Affinity Groups
8. Full Group Report Back & Reflection
9. Closing & Assessment

AN INTRO TO OUR NETWORK CONVERSATION



CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

- On April 27th, 2022, we held a network conversation in response to a controversial program held in January 2022.
- We held the conversation to share our learnings and our process, and hear how they were landing with the NESAWG network.
- The program opened with an explanation of the controversy from our angle (recognizing that different people have very different perspectives on the event), and an apology from our longest-standing board member on behalf of NESAWG to those we disappointed by advancing programming out of line with our values.

AN APOLOGY

For some years now, NESAWG staff and board, past and present, have been in an evolving and ongoing process to transform how we conduct all our operations, how we share power through our decision-making and collaboration styles, who we center, celebrate and support in our programming, and where we devote our resources and the NESAWG platform. (cont. next page)

AN APOLOGY (cont'd)

This evolving process has led to changes in leadership, representation, and focus, both internally - on the staff and the board, and externally in striving to live out these commitments:

- To center presenters and experts who speak from positions of first-hand knowledge.
- To seek out and support leadership from those most affected and harmed by food system injustices and who hold analyses grounded in racial equity.

AN APOLOGY (cont'd)

- To hold as true that systemic racism and white supremacy are foundational and central food systems issues; that they are inextricable parts of all other food and agriculture issues and must be used as a critical lens in any analysis of the food system.
- To re-evaluate our guiding values and, more recently, to craft the criteria and filters we use to ensure that all our programming reflects those values.

AN APOLOGY Cont'd

And yet, we authorized programming that happened over several years and did not provide adequate oversight, critical analysis or support for its authorship or the launch of the report itself. Systemic racism showed up throughout this process sometimes glaringly, sometimes in subtle ways, in our actions and in large part our inaction. We failed to ensure throughout the process and in the authorship of the report, that there was guidance and contribution from those with direct experience and expertise and first-hand knowledge of food system injustices. By doing so we perpetuated a system that marginalizes and makes invisible the deep expertise, leadership and lived experience of Black, Indigenous, Asian, Pacifica, Latinx, indeed all Peoples of Color in every part of the food system.

AN APOLOGY Cont'd

We deeply apologize to everyone in our community for causing harm by our actions and inactions. We apologize to all the NESAWG staff and board members, past and present, and to the NESAWG partners and community members, who have contributed their time and attention, their emotional labour and love, to the process of recrafting the values we aspire to, and to developing the criteria and filters we usually use to ensure that all our programming reflects those values.

We greatly appreciate those who took the time and energy to call out these inconsistencies and to point out where we did not live up to our own aspirations and expectations. Please know that we have heard you loud and clear and this only grows our commitment to strive to embody equity and dismantle racism.

THE NEED for AFFINITY GROUPS

- We broke up into racial affinity groups during the event so we could discuss the incident in spaces that felt safe for all, and to adequately address the different feelings and questions that we were hearing arise in different sectors of our network, some of which have been showing up differently along racial lines.
- We had several breakout rooms for white participants and one for BIPOC.
- We chose this format so everyone could share their most authentic thoughts and feelings without feeling triggered by others' reactions or self-censoring so as to not offend.

AFFINITY GROUPS cont'd

- At the end of the program, some expressed a desire to hear from the other groups or a regret they had not been able to hear directly from BIPOC.
- We are sharing themes and general impressions that came out of the groups, but are intentionally keeping responses anonymous so that we can preserve people's' ability to share without self-censorship or worrying about how their impressions would land- this was the intention of using an affinity group format.

AFFINITY GROUPS cont'd

Do you have questions about affinity groups and caucusing?

Here are a few resources:

- [Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People](#)
- [Compilation of Caucus and Affinity Group resources](#)

**FRAMING:
TO SEE
TO ANALYZE
TO ACT
(A Freirean Approach)**



A FREIREAN APPROACH

NESAWG found the need to frame this Network Conversation - and subsequent conversations on regional food systems change - using a Freirean approach to introduce the lens of a critical analysis and the development of a collective critical consciousness. We strive for a liberated consciousness that can self-reflect and generate action towards systems change on a consistent basis making this a praxis of Reflection-Action. The Freirean approach and the framing for developing this praxis can be summarized as follows:

A FREIREAN APPROACH

TO SEE ▪ TO ANALYZE ▪ TO ACT

TO SEE

- Identify
- Name
- Break down
- De-construct
- Brainstorm
- Context Awareness
- Make visible; unveil
- Expose
- Discover
- Perspectives; lenses
- Root Causes
- Cluster; Prioritize

TO ANALYZE

- De-code
- Search; external input; findings
- Critical Analysis with a Critical Consciousness
- Connect the dots
- Systems Analysis
- Power Analysis
- Problem-Posing
- Reflection & dialogue
- Planning; Strategy
- Problem-Solving
- Decision-Making

TO ACT

- Transformation
- Radical Change
- Systems Change
- Critical Action
- Conscientizacao
- Education
- Humanization
- Liberation
- Healing
- Praxis Development: (Action + Reflection Cycle)

A FREIREAN APPROACH (cont'd)

During this first phase of the work, NESAWG will be focusing on “SEEING”: naming, identifying, seeing the system with its manifestations, impact, and root causes; but also lifting and shining a bright light on the resilience and transformational work that our BIPOC communities have been tirelessly doing for centuries.

This “Seeing” will be elicited through brainstorming sessions, open-ended questions, dialogue, and story-telling among other things. We fully recognize the danger of a single story that has plagued the food system since colonization.

A FREIREAN APPROACH (cont'd)

NESAWG started the Network Conversation in small affinity groups (1 BIPOC + 5 White groups) that focused on five questions:

1. What do you know/understand about what happened?
2. How do you feel? (1-3 word response - no explanation)
3. Do you think there is a problem? What is the problem? What are your concerns?
4. Given all of this...what can we do? Are there 2-3 ways our efforts could be directed? (don't spend too much time)
5. What are your key take-aways from this conversation?

At the end of our Network Conversation, NESAWG was able to cluster the shared ideas into themes.

CLUSTER THEMES AT A GLANCE





next future
representation accountability
change impact feelings
growth vision
steps leadership
operationalizin

BIPOC AFFINITY GROUP - CLUSTER THEMES

relationships
language
divisiveness
vision
accountability
planning
facilitation
representation
agreements
action
inclusion-exclusion
solutions
racism
communication
history
education
emotions
growth
process
impact

WHITE AFFINITY GROUPS: CLUSTER THEMES

BIPOC AFFINITY GROUP: A DEEP DIVE INTO KEY CLUSTER THEMES

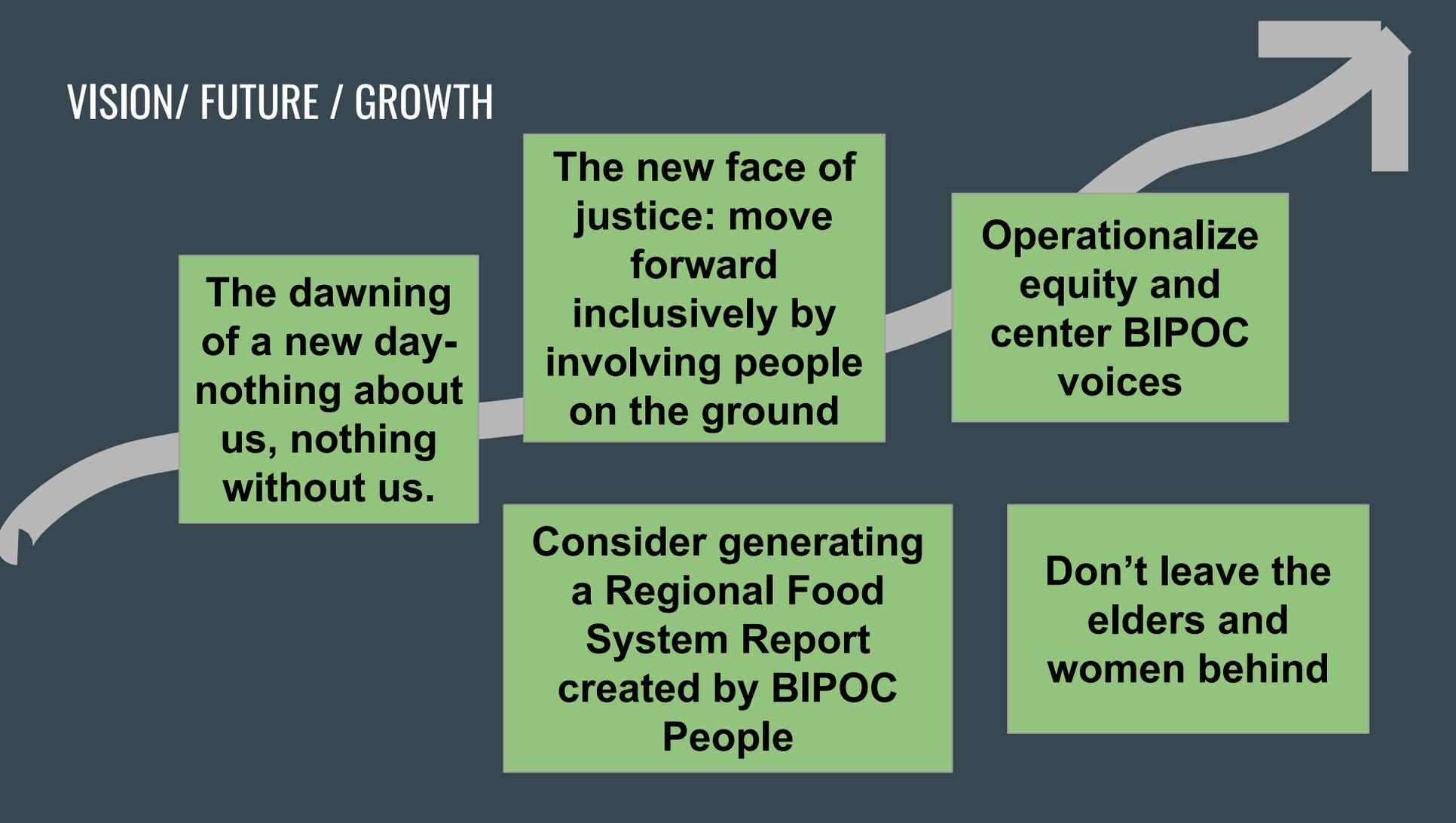




next future
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BIPOC AFFINITY GROUP - CLUSTER THEMES

VISION/ FUTURE / GROWTH



**The dawning
of a new day-
nothing about
us, nothing
without us.**

**The new face of
justice: move
forward
inclusively by
involving people
on the ground**

**Operationalize
equity and
center BIPOC
voices**

**Consider generating
a Regional Food
System Report
created by BIPOC
People**

**Don't leave the
elders and
women behind**

SYSTEMS CHANGE

The dawning
of a new day-
nothing about
us without
us.

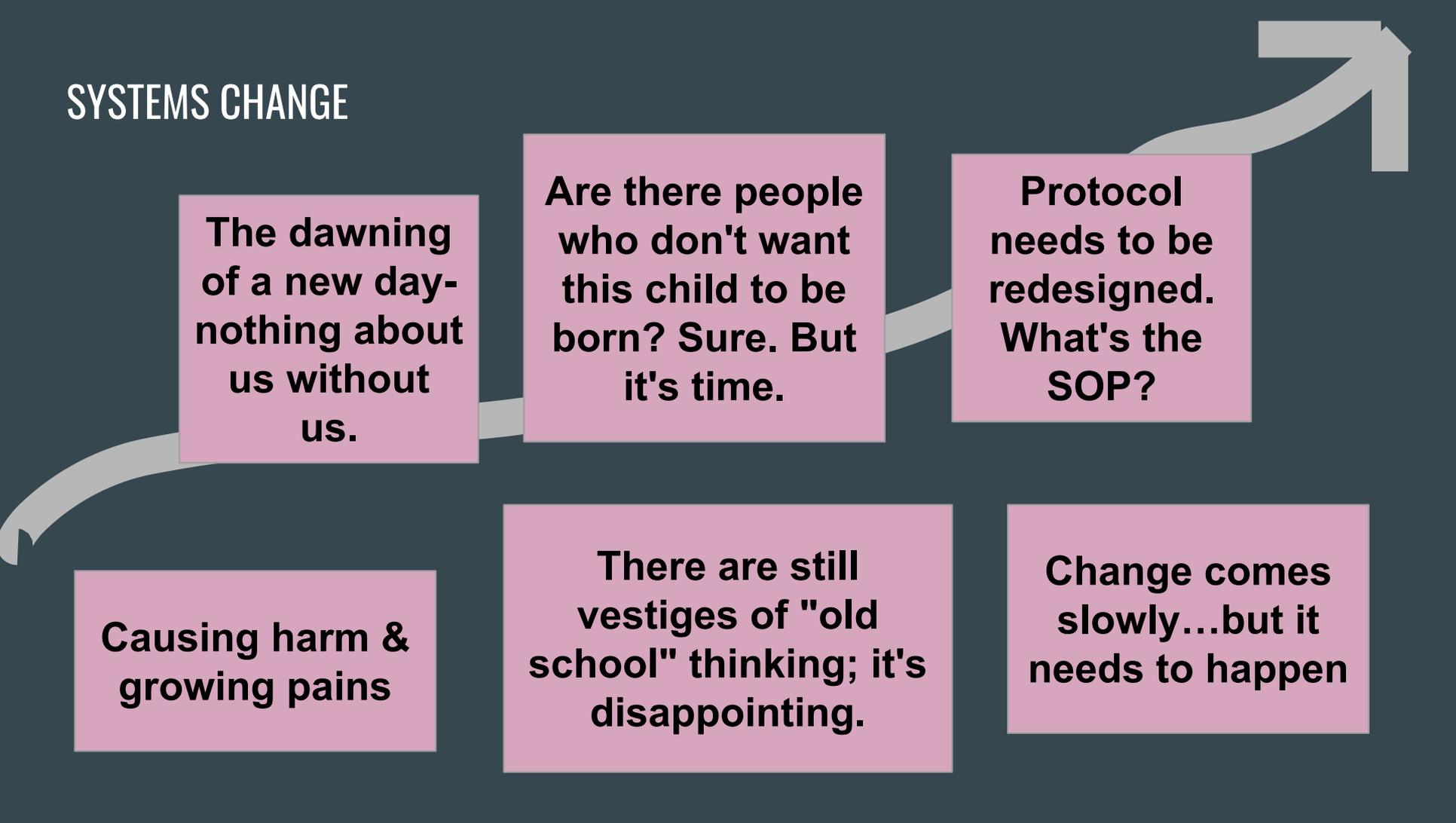
Are there people
who don't want
this child to be
born? Sure. But
it's time.

Protocol
needs to be
redesigned.
What's the
SOP?

Causing harm &
growing pains

There are still
vestiges of "old
school" thinking; it's
disappointing.

Change comes
slowly...but it
needs to happen



REPRESENTATION & LEADERSHIP

When it comes to racial equity, social justice, and inclusion, representation is everything. Nothing About Us, Nothing Without Us!

Identify if there is any group missing in the conversation, and make sure we bring more people **BEFORE we set the table!**

Include a lot of intersectionality and diversity

Operationalize equity and center BIPOC voices

Being intentional with BIPOC representation

Social Change work requires intentional inclusivity.



ACCOUNTABILITY

**Normalize
having
accountability
partners**

**Used to be taking
our token opinion;
but now
operationalizing in
policy & procedure**

**Research &
Expertise rooted
in lived (BIPOC
frontline)
experience**

**Policies and procedures -
checklists and
safeguards to ensure a
wide diversity of input
and perspectives**

**Why are white
folks being
experts on
racial justice?**

**Mindshift that WE
ARE YOUR PEERS.
That's going to
have to be repeated
over and over.**



**WHITE AFFINITY GROUPS:
DEEP DIVE INTO KEY CLUSTER THEMES**

relationships
language
divisiveness
vision
accountability
planning
facilitation
representation
agreements
action
inclusion-exclusion
solutions
racism
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growth
process
impact

WHITE AFFINITY GROUPS: CLUSTER THEMES

VISION/ SOLUTIONS / NEXT STEPS

NESAWG having a working group reading authors of colour, and broadening and deepening our analysis and understanding of racism.

Hosting a convo soon about regionalism and how its a solution.

Create a more precise definition of the problem (race, class, education, literacy etc)

Dedicate explicit efforts & resources to create a space for farmworkers (primarily Latino, black, indigenous) at the NESAWG table since they are central to the success of agriculture.

Generate a Regional Food System Report created by BIPOC People

VISION/ SOLUTIONS / NEXT STEPS



Provide what the people who were harmed need

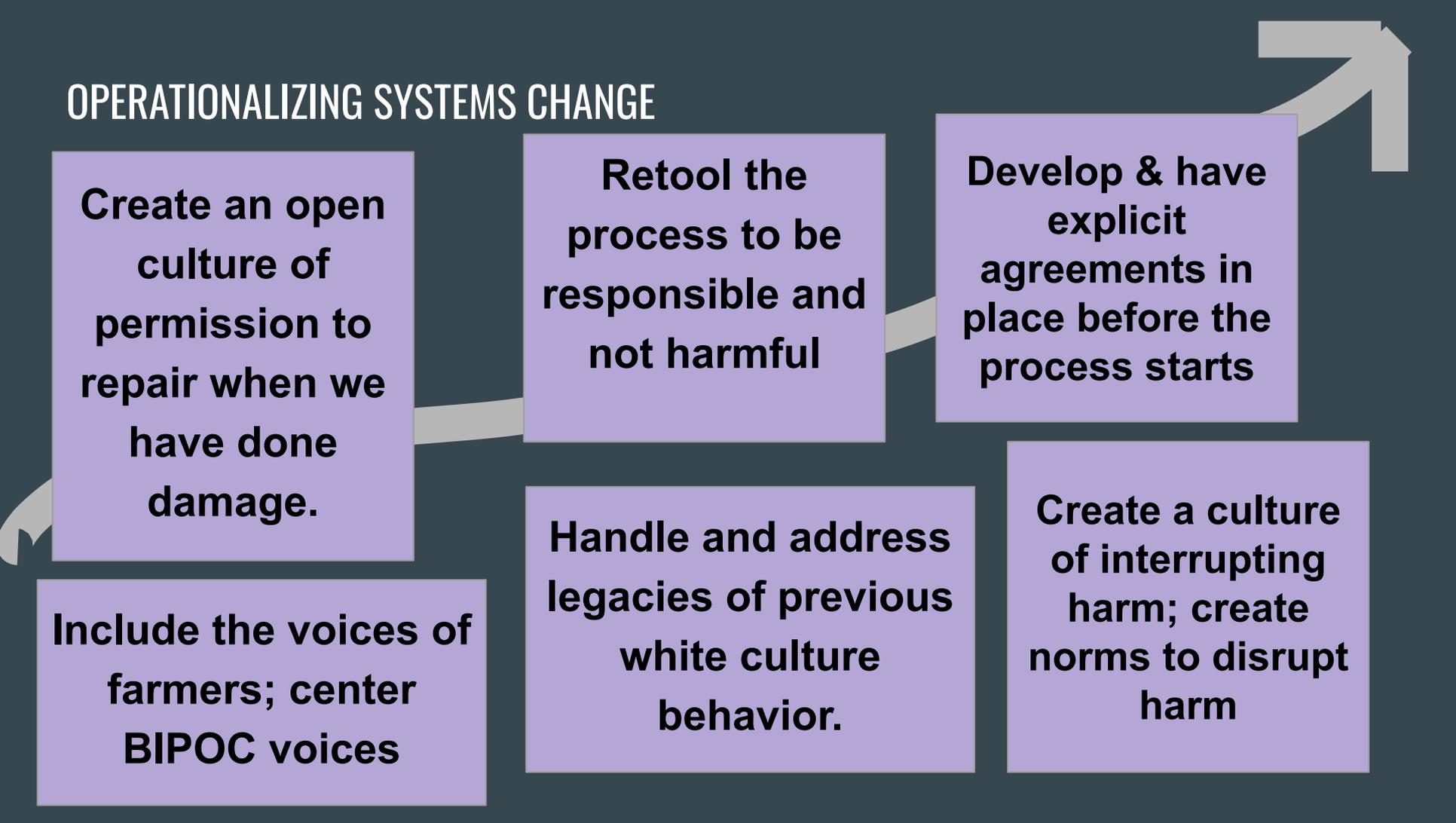
Discuss published report & improve it

(Place) food systems as a discipline on the map and the language and vocabulary.

Lessons learned (internalize and create guide)

1. listen and learn; take responsibility for missteps; 2) support reparations work (e.g. landback, funds for Black farmers); 3) Center BIPOC perspectives, needs

OPERATIONALIZING SYSTEMS CHANGE



Create an open culture of permission to repair when we have done damage.

Retool the process to be responsible and not harmful

Develop & have explicit agreements in place before the process starts

Include the voices of farmers; center BIPOC voices

Handle and address legacies of previous white culture behavior.

Create a culture of interrupting harm; create norms to disrupt harm

REPRESENTATION & LEADERSHIP

BIPOC experience not included; out of alignment with direction. Need to center on lived experience of food insecurity & lack of food justice

Food Systems groups struggle with trying to become more inclusive after starting out as a white-majority group

Broader coalition & find the researchers with the lived experience

The need to center BIPOC voices

Include low income farmers & BIPOC perspectives

No research/study to be done without including BIPOC voices

ACCOUNTABILITY

Why didn't NESAWG review the report?

Review process for products prior to presentation

An opportunity has been lost for NESAWG to provide needed leadership both on regional food systems and the centering of people and groups on the frontline of food system injustices.

Haven't seen any discussion yet of what was actually said in the report, and how to improve it.

Process for presenting the report during the webinar wasn't followed. Vetting research, sharing slides beforehand

We need to recognize when there is a problem.

RACISM

Do work that doesn't perpetuate white supremacy in an economy and culture that are built on white supremacy

Racism runs deep in our society and food system. Direct efforts to explore these issues.

Understand structural racism, the brutality of capitalism, and how a different kind of food system can undo this

The need to delve into deeper analysis of systemic racism.

Deep listening.

Ensure we are centering, listening to, believing the voices and experiences of BIPOC people in the group. Continue to provide resources and support for understanding, undoing and dismantling white supremacy.

RELATIONSHIPS

Growth of any org can be painful and should be done with a goal of mutual respect and empathy.

Don't lose NESAWG's spirit of inclusiveness. Don't want to lose the power of the shared table.

Create mutual respect; think about how we can embrace cultural, linguistic, educational, ethnic, ... differences.

Work from a place of understanding that people are coming with good will.

Worry that some people are going to disengage if their viewpoints are not welcomed.

Hosting conversations is a good strategy.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED WITH NESAWG:

- [Support our Annual Conference](#)
- [Join our mailing list](#)
- [Join the NESAWG Community Listserv](#)
- [Donate to support our work](#)
- Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) @NESAWG
- Email us at info@nesawg.org
- Call us at 401-484-8110



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