

THE
GEORGIA
ACRE
Collective

CASE STUDY: YEAR 1
THE GEORGIA ACRE COLLECTIVE

**Structuring a Place-Based
Collaboration to Advance Agriculture,
Community, Resilience, and Equity
through Values-Based Procurement**

JANUARY 2024



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THE
CONSERVATION FUND



Turner Environmental Law Clinic

*Right: Alexis Edwards of R&G Farms,
Dublin, GA. Cover: Tianna Rose Neal of
Starlit Roots, Keysville, GA*



What is the Georgia ACRE Collective?

The Georgia ACRE Collective is *Advancing Agriculture, Community, Resilience and Equity* (ACRE) through Values-Based Procurement as an Atlanta, Georgia-based coalition of local and national organizations that share a vision for more vibrant and equitable regional food systems. This coalition evolved in 2022 through a yearlong planning process within the local food community that included state, federal and local governmental agencies, institutional buyers, food as medicine practitioners and food system funders in facilitated brainstorming sessions. The purpose of these meetings was to identify desired outcomes and essential partnerships. These stakeholders expressed a desire to come together to improve racial equity, health equity, economic opportunity, and environmental sustainability through strong procurement relationships between local anchor institutions and historically disadvantaged farmers. By incorporating food purchasing standards that align with core values (i.e. diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); climate action), anchor institutions can affect positive social changes through intentional procurement practices.



The ACRE Collective will benefit farms like Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative, a co-op comprised of five Black Veteran farmers.

The ACRE Collective has two primary goals:

1. **Organize demand:** Develop market opportunities for values-aligned producers through anchor institutions in the metro Atlanta region.
2. **Build supplier capacity to meet the demand:** Support the development of resilient regional food production capacity with an emphasis on support for culturally significant (also known as “socially or historically disadvantaged”) growers.

Each goal has a series of initiatives, which are described below in the “How” section. As the ACRE Collective’s work continues beyond the first year, we will explore opportunities to embed values-based procurement in state and local policy.

In the context of the ACRE Collective's work, **anchor institutions** are defined as organizations with significant food purchasing power that are rooted in their local communities by mission, investments, or relationships to customers, employees, and vendors. Examples of anchor institutions include but are not limited to universities, hospitals, corporate cafeterias, sports arenas, and public schools.

The ACRE Collective prioritizes working with **culturally significant** (also known as “socially disadvantaged”) farmers and ranchers. The USDA defines socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers (SDFRs) as those belonging to groups that have been subject to racial or ethnic prejudice. SDFRs include farmers who are Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic or Latino, and Asian or Pacific Islander.

Who is the ACRE Collective?

The Georgia ACRE Collective members include The Common Market Southeast, The Conservation Fund, Health Care Without Harm, Georgia Organics, and The Turner Environmental Law Clinic at Emory University. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation provides an external evaluation of the project. *See appendix for descriptions of each partner organization.*

In addition to the formal members of the ACRE Collective, a variety of other partners are crucial to the success of the ACRE Collective's work. These include but are not limited to Open Hand Atlanta, the Georgia Department of Agriculture, the Georgia Grown Innovation Center, and Drawdown Georgia.

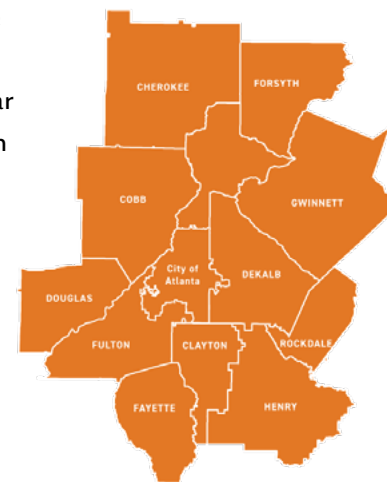
“Historically underserved farmers have long been excluded from wholesale opportunities. Now...with support from organizations in the ACRE Collective, these farms are empowered to participate, grow, and sustain their businesses.”

- Bill Green, Executive Director, The Common Market Southeast

Why was the Collective created?

The ACRE Collective is cultivating partners to address the deep inequities within metro Atlanta's food system, which threatens the health and economic vitality of these communities. The benefits of the food system are out of reach for far too many people, particularly low-income people and people of color. As our country increasingly diversifies, people of color make up a growing share of food workers and food consumers, and they bear a disproportionate burden of poorer health and economic outcomes as a result of the sector's structural inequities.

Conversely, an equitable metro Atlanta food system is one that creates a new paradigm in which all — especially the most vulnerable and those living in low-income neighborhoods and communities



of color — can fully participate, benefit, and prosper. It is a system that, from farm to table, from processing to disposal, ensures economic opportunity; high-quality jobs with living wages; safe working conditions; access to healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food; and environmental sustainability.

Creating this new paradigm requires building a new infrastructure while also dismantling racial, economic, and other structural inequities in the food system. While building a more equitable food system, we must continue to operate within existing economic systems, though guided by different values. The ACRE Collective aims to inform the values that guide local spending and investment decisions through anchor institutions, which can play a major role in localizing benefits, combatting the climate crisis, and shifting resources to historically marginalized people.

However, building demand alone will not suffice to restore regional production capacity in the Atlanta foodshed. Current production volume, product diversity, and pricing are insufficient to meet existing demand and the potential economic benefit generated through this approach. There is a need for a coordinated and comprehensive support system that creates the conditions for disadvantaged farmers and ranchers to meet demand and thrive, including affordable access to land, capital, and consistent markets.

Despite all of the historic challenges faced by people of color, and farmers of color in particular, there is currently an abundance of opportunity to reverse long-standing negative outcomes for oppressed growers. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreements (LFPA) and Local Food for Schools (LFS) will create more than \$30M in procurement opportunities for socially disadvantaged and local producers in Georgia over the next three years. The Common Market has been included in the Georgia Department of Agriculture's contract as the produce aggregator for LFPA and is distributing food to K-12 school districts through LFS. While encouraging, the question: **"What happens when the grant goes away?"** is already being raised by farmers across Georgia.

Fortunately, the ACRE Collective's efforts offer a meaningful solution to the pending LFPA/LFS procurement cliff that growers face. Coordinated programming will generate sustainable demand for food grown by socially disadvantaged producers through long-term market relationships and commitments from anchor institutions based on values. This partnership will additionally create fair access to land and capital, and it will build the capacity needed to create generational wealth.

How does the ACRE Collective work?

COALITION STRUCTURE & SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP

The ACRE Collective was formed with the concept of *Systems Leadership* in mind. Systems Leadership is “a set of skills and capacities that any individual or organization can use to catalyze, enable, and support the process of systems-level change” ([Systems Leadership for Sustainable Development, Harvard Kennedy School, 2019](#)). While Systems Leadership is a comparatively new field, it builds upon decades of research and cuts across the disciplines of science, mathematics, and social systems to provide a process that surfaces the capacities needed to address complex problems. Rather than a recipe for what must be done, Systems Leadership provides guidance on tools that create the conditions for leaders to articulate and see the system in which they work. In our context, this includes a set of skills and capacities that integrate collaborative leadership, complex systems understanding, and coalition building across systems.

Formal programming of the ACRE Collective began in fall 2022 with a three-year funding commitment from The Rockefeller Foundation, and has been facilitated by Project Manager, Emily Hennessee. During the first half of 2023, the coalition convened virtually every month to coordinate organizational work plans aligned with collective goals. Partners convened in Atlanta, together with The Rockefeller Foundation, for a two-day in-person gathering, site visits, and working sessions.



The ACRE Collective and Rockefeller Foundation during a tour of Snapfinger Farm.

In spring 2023, the coalition conducted a materiality assessment in order to identify and prioritize the environmental and social issues that represent the greatest impact to the ACRE Collective stakeholders, including institutional purchasers and growers in The Common Market’s supply chain. This assessment built upon a previous materiality assessment conducted by The Common Market in 2022.

By June 2023, the coalition developed subcommittees to further the goals of the ACRE Collective and shifted to bimonthly virtual meetings for all partners. Each subcommittee is aligned with one of the project goals (1. *Organize demand*, or 2. *Build supplier capacity to meet the demand*) and is facilitated by a different member of the coalition. A description of each subcommittee follows.



Local Foods Incentive School Pilot Subcommittee

The ACRE Collective is facilitating values-based local food incentive pilots within metro Atlanta school districts. Beginning in the 2023-24 school year, the ACRE Collective provided a grant to two districts, Marietta City Schools and Rockdale County Schools, to increase the amount of local, culturally significant food included in school meals. As part of the pilot program, the ACRE Collective is providing new culturally appropriate recipes, training for school nutrition staff, and support to implement taste tests.

The purpose of this pilot is to demonstrate how local food incentive dollars support a shift toward local procurement, catalyze economic opportunity for farmers in our region, and increase student access to fresh, healthy foods. The pilot's success will build the case for statewide adoption of a local food incentive program for school meals across Georgia.

◀ *Marietta City Schools' nutrition staff get ready to enjoy a local meal prepared during a training with the ACRE Collective.*

Grower Outreach & Support Subcommittee

Even though Georgia boasts a rich regional food culture and agribusiness stands as its primary industry, there is a notable gap between the market demand for value-aligned foods and the growers' ability to meet it through wholesale production. Georgia hosts a significant number of large-scale, wholesale producers and a fairly vibrant network of smaller farms that are focused on direct market relationships. However, within the regional foodshed, there is a lack of mid-sized wholesale producers who also meet market interest for demographic and/or climate-friendly practices. Farmers, ranchers, and value-added processors require access to land, capital, and meaningful commitments from markets in order to make a reasonable investment decision to participate in wholesale and institutional markets.

This subcommittee is responsible for identifying and conducting outreach to regional growers with capacity and interest in wholesale production. Additionally, this subcommittee expands access to land, capital, coordination, and technical assistance within the regional food supply chain to meet wholesale market requirements and demand.

Anchor Institution Engagement Subcommittee

A primary goal of this initiative is to cultivate demand within regional anchor institutions for healthful food grown with socially and ecologically restorative production values and greater societal benefit. This subcommittee created a list of priority anchor institutions in metro Atlanta to build and strengthen relationships with, including hospitals, universities, sports stadiums, public schools, and corporate cafeterias. Building upon existing relationships, the subcommittee is engaging leaders from these institutions to build a campaign of regional leadership committed to shifting food procurement dollars for the greater common good. As of November 2023, eleven forward commitments have been made by metro Atlanta institutions to socially disadvantaged growers.¹ This subcommittee is also actively monitoring the progressive increase in procurement funds directed towards these growers, among other measures.

¹ Eighteen forward commitments to socially disadvantaged growers have been made by institutions throughout the Southeast, including the eleven Atlanta-area commitments.

“When we commit to consistent purchasing volumes, the farmers know they will have a guaranteed market for their produce at the price they need, and our chefs know the product is going to arrive when they planned for it.”

- Katelyn Repash, Aramark’s Responsible Sourcing Procurement Director



WHAT IS A FORWARD COMMITMENT?

Forward commitments are agreements made in advance with institutions, like universities and hospitals, to purchase products from values-aligned growers over an extended period of time, often a growing season or calendar year. Although this sounds like a relatively simple concept, forward commitments reflect a major paradigm shift compared to the standard model of institutional food purchasing, which includes placing orders week to week, providing little to no stability to farmers. By making forward commitments, institutional customers harness their purchasing power and become engaged, mission-aligned investors in our regional economy and our agricultural communities, rather than mere purchasers and consumers of products.

Celebrations Subcommittee

Building off evidence within Systems Leadership that positive reinforcement encourages behavioral change, the ACRE Collective will award, celebrate, and promote the institutional leaders who set and meet tangible goals related to this initiative. The subcommittee plans to integrate values-based institutional procurement into the award programs of its partners, starting with the expansion of the **Farmer Champion Awards** by Georgia Organics to encompass colleges and universities.

Legal Toolkit Subcommittee

Shifting procurement practices at anchor institutions is complex and specialized, and yet building institutional capacity for values-aligned procurement is central to expanding market access and securing widespread change in the food system. Led by the Turner Environmental Law Clinic at Emory University, the ACRE Collective is developing a toolkit that will focus on guidance, strategies, and legal tools for institutional procurement change. The Legal Toolkit for Values-Aligned Procurement: Market Access will include templates, model language (e.g. sample contract provisions), and institution-specific considerations that support anchor institutions, sustainability teams, and procurement professionals in actualizing more equitable procurement. The toolkit will help institutions integrate values-based food purchasing goals into their procurement protocols, and use their purchasing power to grow resilient regional food systems.



▲ Salad prepared by Marietta City Schools with kale from Love is Love Farm.

Over the past year, the Turner Clinic has solicited input from executives, dining teams and departments, procurement managers, food service management companies, chefs, producers, lawyers, and nonprofit organizations to determine what content will be most beneficial to players throughout the supply chain. Currently, four Market Access tools are ready for ACRE Collective utilization and continued development. These tools focus on an institution's preparation for and implementation of values-aligned procurement, including determining institutional values, establishing food purchasing guidelines that incorporate these values, announcing the institution's commitment to values-aligned procurement, and entering into purchasing commitments. Five additional Market Access tools are being drafted and focus on an institution's assessment of its capacity, preparation for an effective program, and implementation of values-aligned procurement. By the end of the grant period, we expect to have 12 Market Access tools and related guidance and strategies for building institutional capacity for values-aligned procurement.

Evaluation

As noted above, Alliance for a Healthier Generation (Healthier Generation) is evaluating the ACRE Collective. Since the launch of the coalition, Healthier Generation has participated in all ACRE Collective meetings and leveraged a variety of data collection tools to create a formative and summative evaluation plan for the ACRE Collective. [See appendix for a copy of the evaluation plan.](#)

The ability to effectively coordinate action to shift whole systems is dependent upon “seeing the system.” While there are several ways to do this, Healthier Generation routinely uses two processes as part of developmental evaluation support: 1) discussing and mapping the flow of information and support and 2) causal loop mapping.

For the ACRE Collective, this process included three steps:

1. Key informant interview sessions with representatives;
2. Analysis of qualitative data transferred into the Kumu social system and system mapping platform to identify system components; and
3. Meeting to review analysis, improve map accuracy, and talk through what the map “tells us” about our intended strategy.

These analyses along with the Materiality Assessment show strategic places to intervene in the larger food system as well as how to anchor communications within the context of common values. [See appendix for details.](#)

The Common Market blog: ▶
The ACRE Collective is featured in the Atlanta
Journal-Constitution, September 10, 2023

Communications

Communications, including external public relations, is a key component of the ACRE Collective’s strategy. The group seeks to widely share the joint learnings and proof points of its work in order to benefit both local and national initiatives focused on scaling values-aligned procurement within anchor institutions and intentional supply-chain investments, in addition to influencing policy approaches. This case study is one of several case studies that will be created over the three-year grant period. To document ACRE Collective milestones, The Common Market has published bimonthly [blogs](#) focused on the ACRE Collective.

To support these goals, the ACRE Collective hired a local public relations firm in mid-2023 to amplify our efforts via the media and create easy-to-disseminate communications materials for partners to use in their various communications channels.





Conclusion

We are eager to partner with Atlanta-area institutions, farmers throughout the Southeast, and community partners to improve our regional food and farm systems. For more information, contact The Georgia ACRE Collective Project Manager, Emily Hennessee at emily@thecommonmarket.org.



APPENDIX | PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

The Common Market

For nearly 15 years, The Common Market has collaborated with diverse communities, institutions, and farmers to expand the accessibility of good food for vulnerable people. Founded and led by people of color, The Common Market has modeled the potential of vibrant, values-driven regional food systems through its role as a nonprofit aggregator and distributor of good food. The organization first expanded its model to Georgia in 2016 and its Southeast chapter is located in East Point, GA. The organization has partnered with anchor institutions since its first delivery as a means of scaling equitable access to good food and market opportunities for rural producers. Since its founding, The Common Market has directly invested over \$130M in local economies through its food system work, including via the LFPA and LFS programs in Georgia.

The Conservation Fund

The Conservation Fund's Working Farms Fund builds a healthier, more equitable and resilient food system. The program permanently protects at-risk farmland across the Atlanta metro region, creates opportunities for ambitious, diverse farmers to scale up local food production, and through conservation easements and lease-to-own options, these farmers will come out of the program owning their own farms with developed markets to sell products. At the end of 2023, the Georgia Farms Fund will have secured 10 farms and more than 1,000 acres of farmland for next generation farm businesses.

Georgia Organics

Georgia Organics is one of the oldest statewide sustainable agriculture nonprofits in the South. The organization has grown steadily in its 25-year history to increase organic farming in Georgia, build a nationally recognized farm-to-school program and invest in local communities to organize and seed their own local food projects. The organization has a strong track record of attracting members, donors, and grants from foundations like the

Arthur M. Blank, Wilber & Hilda Glenn Family, and James M. Cox Foundations, as well as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The organization recognizes that food work must be undertaken with long views, short strides and lots of partners to gain traction over time. Our work founding and spearheading the Atlanta Local Food Initiative and the Georgia Farm to School Alliance with key partners, as well as coalescing local assets within communities, prepares us for this challenging work.

Health Care Without Harm

Health Care Without Harm works to transform health care worldwide so that it reduces its environmental footprint, becomes a community anchor for sustainability and a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice. Its Healthy Food in Health Care team supports hospitals and communities to adopt strategies that support resilient, equitable, climate-friendly food systems. It co-led the Anchors in Action Alliance, which worked to align food purchasing standards for all institutional types, which resulted in the 2023 update of its Healthy Food in Health Care Standard.

The Turner Environmental Law Clinic at Emory University

The Turner Environmental Law Clinic provides important pro bono representation to community groups and nonprofit organizations that seek to protect and restore the natural environment and promote environmental justice. Through its work, the Clinic offers students a hands-on introduction to environmental law and trains the next generation of environmental attorneys.

Alliance for a Healthier Generation

For more than a decade, The Alliance for a Healthier Generation (Healthier Generation) has worked with schools, youth-serving organizations, businesses, and communities to empower kids to develop lifelong healthy habits by ensuring the environments that surround them provide and promote good health. Driven by our passion that all young people deserve a chance to live healthier lives, our work has impacted up to 28 million kids across the country.



Evaluation Questions



FORMATIVE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

- What works for different farmers in what ways and under what conditions? What is the social infrastructure needed to facilitate values-based wholesale supply?
- What are the needs of purchasing institutions that are critical for viability and sustainability? What is the social infrastructure needed to facilitate values-based procurement?
- What unintended consequences or negative side effects are appearing that need to be addressed?

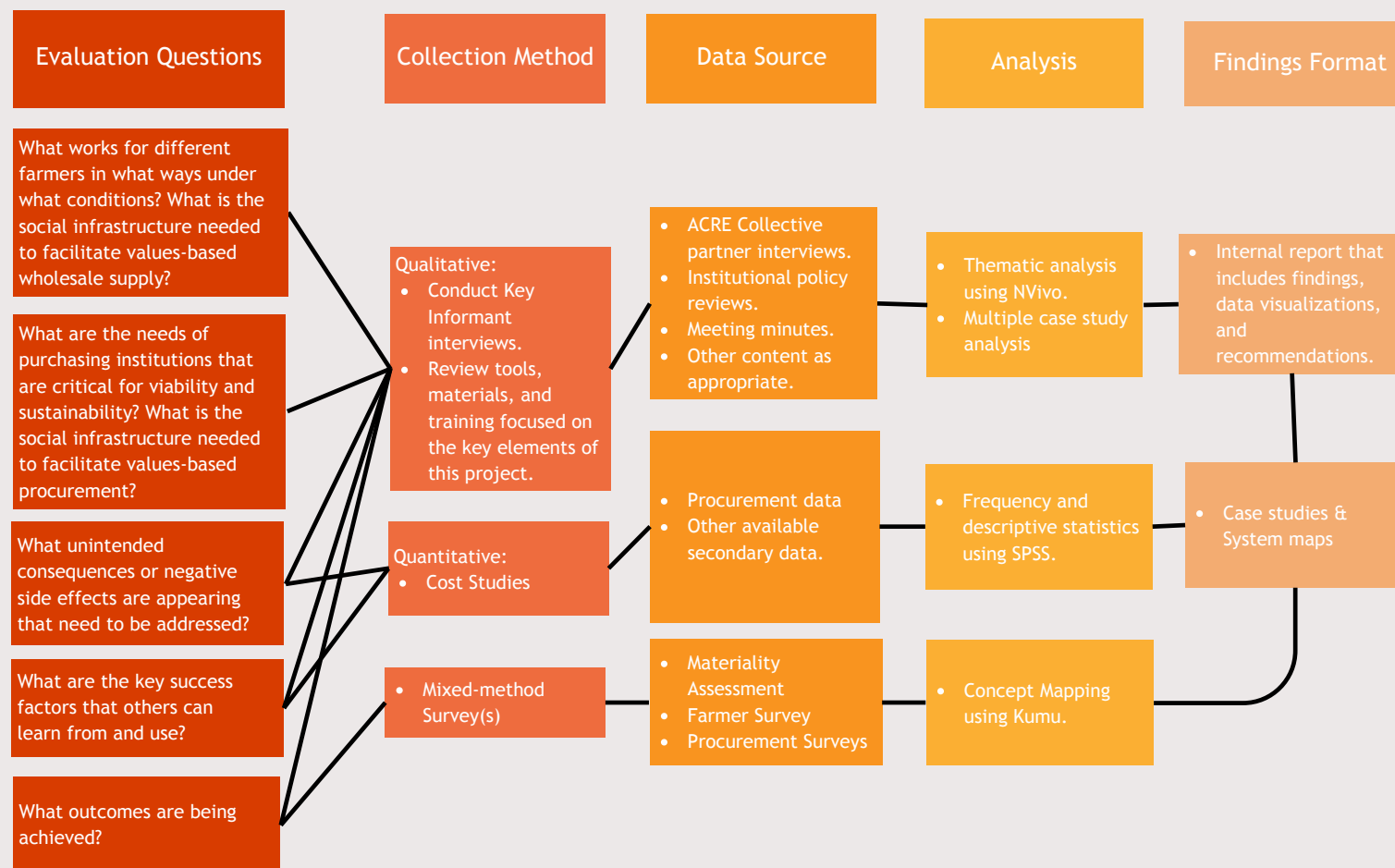


SUMMATIVE EVALUATION QUESTIONS

- What are key success factors that others can learn from and use?
- What outcomes are being achieved?

Evaluation Plan

Audience(s): Internal stakeholders, institutional partners, broader food system community.



Intended Use: Inform and improve implementation model. Suggest best practices for what works in other values-based procurement initiatives.



Programmatic Outcomes And Measures

In addition to the evaluation of the project there are specific measures tied to programmatic outcomes. These will also be tracked and form the foundation for reports to the Rockefeller Foundation.

Georgia Acre Collective Logic Model

Strategic Goal 1: Develop institutional markets for values-aligned producers in support of better nutrition access.

INPUTS

Test and share unique and collaborative approaches to building regional health equity and economic opportunity.

Scale existing farm to institution initiatives.

Award, celebrate and promote institutional leaders.

Initiate a public school food incentive program.

MEASURES

The dollar increase in procurement shifted to prioritized growers by the institutions and food service management companies engaged in our procurement commitment campaign.

Pounds of healthy food that are distributed to institutions.

The number of acres put into production by participating farmers in support of institutional procurement commitments.

Food service RFPs include language that supports local, healthy, and sustainably grown food.

New and sustained resources committed to support good food values rather than low-cost procurement.

OUTCOME

Working Groups: Food system and policy and advocacy.

Increase in institutional healthy food procurement from black and other disadvantaged farmers and ranchers using ecological production practices in the Atlanta region.

Georgia Acre Collective Logic Model

Strategic Goal 2: Support the development of resilient regional food production capacity.

INPUTS

Grower Outreach.

Support land access and ownership for socially disadvantaged growers.

Employ novel approaches to equitable capital access for farmers.

Support demonstrable commitments (e.g., forward contracts and multi-year crop plans).

Collaborative training and technical assistance programs.

MEASURES

Number of new farms acquired or expanded by black and other disadvantaged farmers and ranchers using ecological production practices that are engaged in wholesale production through this initiative.

Greater than 75% of growers engaged report a desire to increase wholesale production through this initiative due to positive economic benefits.

Increases in wealth creation in the domains of Built Capital, Political Capital, Intellectual Capital, Social Capital, and Cultural Capital.

Number of forward contracts created.

OUTCOME

Growth in the number of farmers meeting values priorities who are equipped to meet institutional demand in the Atlanta metro area.

Seeing the System: Articulation, Iteration, Action, & Reflection

Step 1: Key informant interviews

The Key Informant (KI) interviews were semi-structured conversations that were recorded and transcribed. Interviewers followed a script that invited interviewees to describe the food system landscape. Each member of the ACRE Collective was interviewed, and the interviews were 30 to 50 minutes long. The questions we asked were designed to elicit the interviewees' perspective on the food system in the Atlanta Metro area.

Step 2: Analysis of qualitative data

Each interview transcript was reviewed for accuracy and a Thematic Analysis was completed using NVivo 1.17. The analysis findings are displayed in [this Kumu map \(Figure 1\)](#). Each node in the final map represents a system component. The arrows represent the flow among system components as articulated by KIs. Each node in the interactive map is linked to interviewee quotes in a sidebar.

As depicted in Figure 1, growers and institutions need the services provided by ACRE Collective partners to establish and maintain relationships with institutional purchasers. Critical roles that need to be filled by partner expertise and capacity are values-aligned aggregation and distribution across local suppliers and institutions. Key components of this role include: 1) identifying values aligned institutions, 2) developing and distributing tools and resources that support formal relationships with values-aligned distribution sources, 3) providing opportunities for local farmers to build capacity, raise capital, and transfer knowledge about best practices in scaling their production to wholesale.

ACRE COLLECTIVE PARTNER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In terms of food system work in Atlanta, what have you been engaged in over the last four years? What lessons have you learned?
 - a. Probes:
 - i. Have you been part of unsuccessful efforts? What do you attribute to those failures?
 - ii. Are there aspects of your role and work that you hope to transfer (work your way out of)?
 - iii. What do you see as a role that your organization or some other organization will have to play in an ongoing way?
2. Describe a time when you felt most excited about and successful in the work you were doing to forward a more equitable and resilient local food system.
 - a. What unique factors made this moment possible (e.g., leadership, relationships, power dynamics, behaviors/beliefs, policies/practices)?
3. At the end of three years, this project is extraordinarily successful and poised to continue long into the future. What are one or two things that the group would have done extraordinarily well that contributed to this project's success?
4. Please share the top five issue/value areas that your organization is excited about furthering and prioritizing via this project? Issue areas: People & Supply Chain, Environmental Stewardship, Community & Local Investment, Transparency & Governance
 - a. Which, if any, of these priority issues/values are you not currently engaging in?
 - b. Which of these issues/values do you expect to be most important to institutions? Why?
 - c. Would inaction around any of these issues prevent your organization from meaningfully engaging in this work?
5. What else would you like The Common Market and Healthier Generation to know that you think is critical to understanding how to implement this project and/or measure its impact?

Step 3: Partner Meeting

The ACRE Collective met in person, together with The Rockefeller Foundation, at The Common Market's office and warehouse in Atlanta in May 2023 to engage in strategic direction setting. During the participatory mapping activity, Collective members listened to each organization's work and what contribution they were making specifically to the ACRE Collective's effort. Then, Collective members examined the map, asked clarifying questions, and located their role as illustrated in [this Kumu map \(Figure 1\)](#).

System mapping is a relatively new process for establishing the leadership necessary to transform systems. The function of these visuals is to create reasonable boundaries for unbounded systems so that participants can, among other things, articulate positive and negative reinforcing loops. The loops, as seen in Figure 3, allow system leaders to explore areas to intervene within the bounded system (Meadows, D., *Thinking in Systems*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2023). In Figure 3, the reinforcing loops for institutions and growers are articulated more clearly than they are in the Kumu maps to the right.

The loops highlight the essential role intermediate organizations play and these maps form the foundation for conversations about the role that each member of the ARCE Collective plays independently and how their work is mutually beneficial and reinforcing. It also highlights critical areas that may be underdeveloped or absent altogether. The updated map displayed [via Kumu](#) shows the roles that each Collective member plays across the system.

Figure 1 (thumbnail: [detailed map here](#))

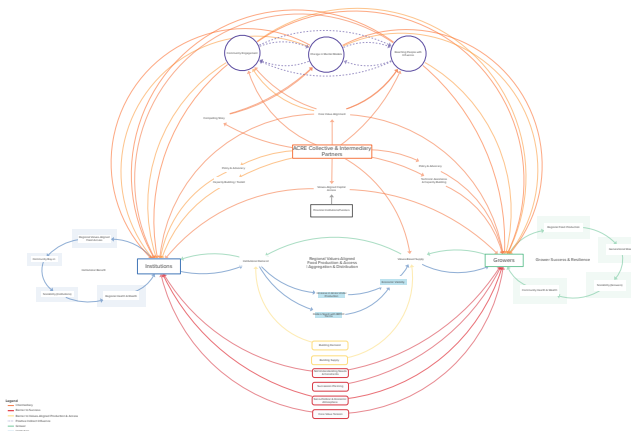


Figure 2 (thumbnail: [detailed map here](#))

Kumu Map of Key Informant Interview Data

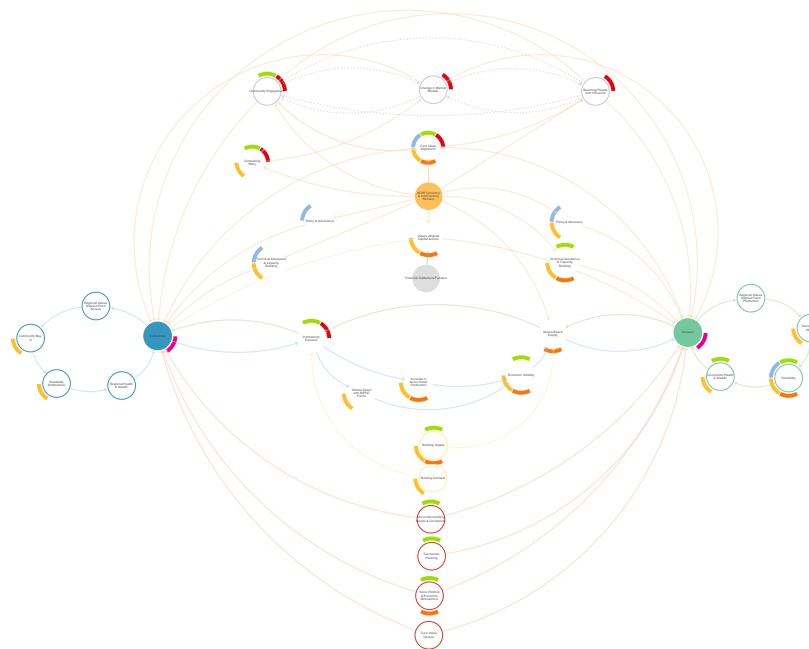
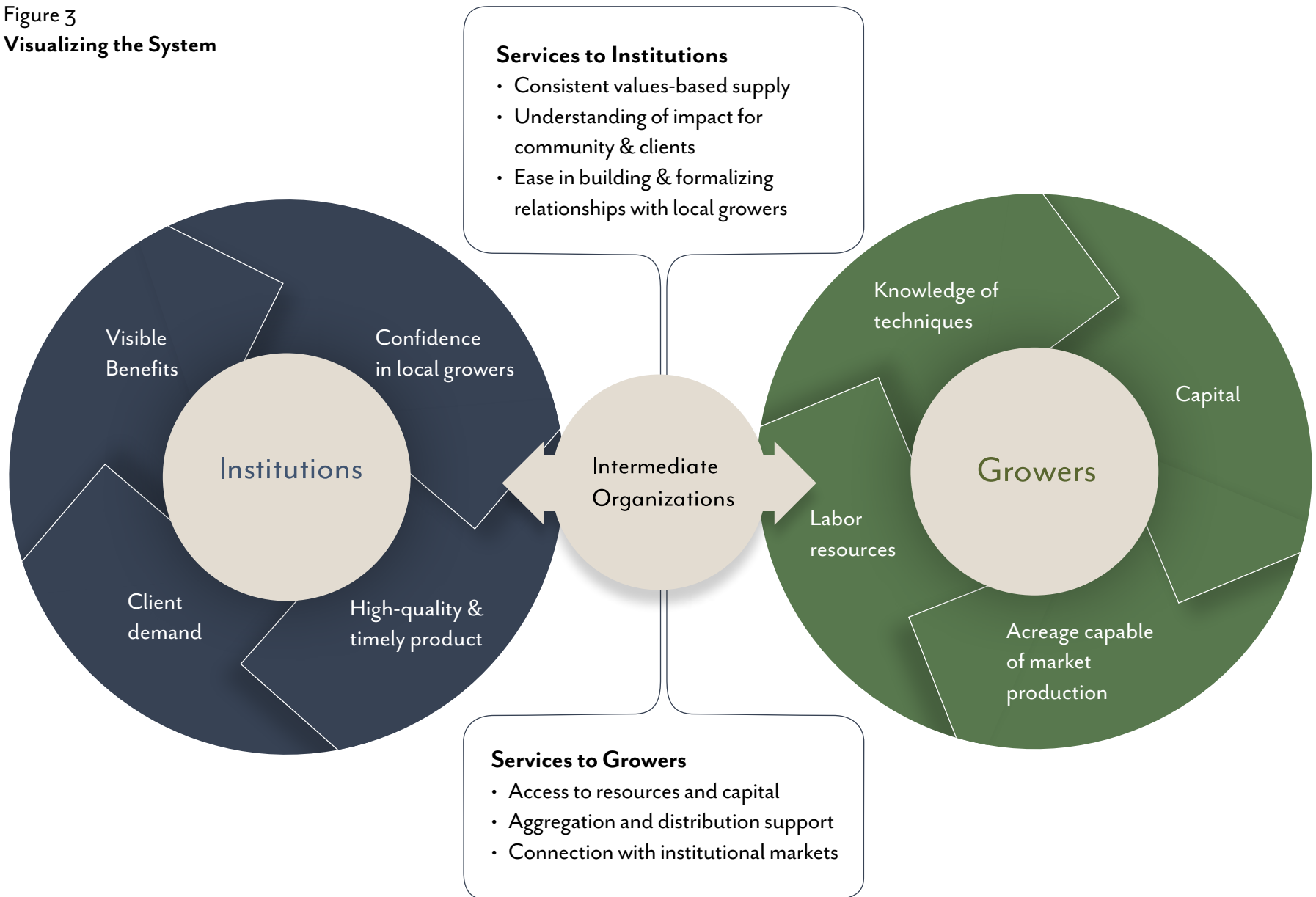


Figure 3
Visualizing the System



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