

Resources for Module 5

Co-op Conversation Guidebook



Example #1



Federation of Southern Cooperatives & Black Farmers

“By 1910, African Americans held title to some sixteen million acres of farmland; by 1920 there were 925,000 Black farms in the country,” observes historian Pete Daniel in an article written for the Journal of Southern History. Yet, Daniel writes, later in the twentieth century, “Depression, mechanization, and discriminatory federal programs devoured Black farmers.”

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (Federation), founded during the peak of the modern civil rights movement in 1967 to support Black farmers in the South’s “Black Belt.” According to the group’s executive director, Cornelius Blanding, the organization has three main goals: cooperative economic development, land retention, and advocacy. The Federation was founded when “22 cooperatives from nine Southern states came together to form...an organization that would collectively support and advocate for Black farmers and rural communities across the South through economic development, training, policy advocacy, and organizing.”

Blanding said, “We believe all land matters, but we especially want to say Black land matters. It matters to us in the South, it matters to our communities, it matters to this work, and it should matter to this world.” Black farmers have often been denied federal resources. In fiscal-year 1983, Black farmers received 109 US Department of Agriculture (USDA) loans for a paltry \$4.3 million.

“Between 1910 and 1997,” notes NSAWG, “Farmland ownership among Blacks plummeted from a peak of 15 million acres to just 2.3 million and the number of Black farmers dropped from 218,000 to just 18,000, significantly outpacing the decline in the number of farmers overall.”

In response, the Federation supported a class action lawsuit against the USDA that centered around Tim Pigford, a Black tenant farmer. The resulting civil rights settlement, the largest in US history, led to \$1.01 billion being paid to “15,600 Black farmers denied farm loans or other benefits because of their race.” Not all Federation co-ops involve farming, however.

For example:

- In Tennessee, Black farmers couldn’t buy gas, so they went across state lines to purchase it at a cooperative they formed.
- In Alabama, Black women couldn’t get jobs or were fired because they registered to vote, so they created quilting bee cooperatives.
- In Mississippi and Louisiana, Black farmers couldn’t get their goods to market because of discrimination by white truckers, so they established their own cooperative trucking business.



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Example #1 Continued



Federation of Southern Cooperatives & Black Farmers

The Federation is well known in co-op and food circles, but not elsewhere. Ralph Paige, executive director from 1985 to 2015, was inducted into the Cooperative Hall of Fame in 2004. At the time, it was noted that “under his guidance the Federation has developed more than 200 units of low-income housing, 18 community credit unions, 75 cooperatives, and an award-winning rural training center. In addition, it has been the primary organization representing Black farmers and fighting the precipitous decline of minority land ownership and independence.”

Paige’s colleague, John Zippert, and his wife Carol —“the first interracial couple married in Louisiana” back in 1967—were also inducted into the Cooperative Hall of Fame. John Zippert directed the federation’s Rural Training and Research Center in Epes, Alabama for 45 years, where he “helped former tenant farmers form the Panola Land Buyers Association buy 1,164 acres of land in 1970.” He also helped established a housing co-op in 1980 and “played a critical role in the Southern Grassroots Economies Project, which works to build democratic ownership in the US South and hosts CoopEcon, an annual training institute for cooperative members.” Carol Zippert was president and founder of the Greene Country Employees Federal Credit Union, which, in “one of the poorest counties in the US, built a credit union that has accumulated more than \$1 million in assets.”

Blanding, who has worked at the Federation for nearly two decades and has been its executive director since 2015, observes that “our history is a shining example of what is possible when limited resource people and communities pool their resources and work cooperatively to solve their common problems and build organizations that are owned and controlled by those that use and benefit from them.” Yet Blanding also recognizes that the organization cannot rest on past achievement, saying, “When we are finished changing, we are finished.”

There is, of course, much more. NSAWG highlights the Federation’s efforts to clear title to preserve remaining Black-owned farmland. The Federation also has five state-level offices that work on cooperative economic development, provides technical assistance to existing co-ops, conducts trainings in sustainable agriculture, and promotes youth empowerment. The group has also assisted farmers developing co-ops abroad in Haiti, Cuba, the Caribbean, and Africa.



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Example #2



Gem City Market & Community Centre

On May 12 th , opening day, Aliah Williamson of local television station WDTN reported, “Located on Salem Avenue, GCM is the first store in the area in almost a decade and one of the first models of its kind.

Inside the store is a health clinic, teaching kitchen, community room, and coffee shop accessible to anyone in the community.” Any time a new food co-op opens is important for its community, but GCM is more than a community-owned grocery store. As Kenya Baker, community engagement director for Co-op Dayton, the nonprofit organization that incubated the co-op, points out, it’s “not only a grocery store, but it is a movement.”

The movement that would ultimately feed into the co-op organizing effort, as Co-op Dayton’s executive director Lela Klein explains, began on August 5, 2014, when John Crawford III, a 22-year-old Black man, was shot and killed by a police officer in a Walmart store in nearby Beavercreek, nine miles southeast of Dayton. Crawford was walking down the aisle, talking on his cellphone and carrying an air rifle on sale at the store. A white customer subsequently called 911. A video shows the officer responding to the call, shooting at Crawford before Crawford even had a chance to respond.

The shooting occurred just four days before Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. As in Ferguson, the grand jury failed to indict the police officer responsible. As in Ferguson, prosecutors seemed more inclined to defend the officers than prosecute them. (Six years later, the city of Beavercreek agreed in a settlement to pay Crawford’s family \$1.7 million without admitting guilt.)

The August 2014 shooting was captured on Walmart surveillance video and large-scale community protests began shortly afterward. “We all met each other through that,” Klein relates. “Looking back, it was the way we came together that was really special.” Baker observes that because “members of the community, different ethnic groups, religious backgrounds” organized around the protests. This created fertile ground for broader community-building work.

February 2015, six months after the police shooting, Baker recalls, “out came an opportunity map, which outlined the opportunities for food, health care, jobs, education, transportation—the major pillars of life.” The map, used dark blue to show great opportunity and lighter blue and white shading to show low opportunity. Black communities, she observes, “showed the palest of colours.”



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Example #2 Continued

Gem City Market & Community Centre

Erica Bruton, who Baker describes as a “young budding politician,” had worked since 2010 as a legislative aide for the Dayton City Commission. Bruton saw in the map an opportunity for the community to organize; as Baker describes it, Bruton started to “galvanize” residents, which was not that hard to do in an already mobilized community.

As Baker elaborates, after a series of meetings, a consensus emerged among Dayton activists that “food would be the best route” to community empowerment. The group began to explore a co-op model. The vision was to “create a hybrid store that was worker-owned and community-member-owned—a unique hybrid co-op in the urban core.” It was an idea, Baker concedes, that was “practically untested.”

As Klein mentioned at last month’s virtual Up & Coming food co-op conference, the neighbourhood the co-op serves is 80 percent African American, with a median household income of \$28,000. About a third of neighbourhood residents depend on SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or similar federal food benefits. There had been no full-service grocery store in West Dayton since the neighbourhood Kroger store closed in 2009 at the height of the Great Recession. Klein, like Baker, lifted up Bruton’s role, calling Bruton “the original organizer” of the effort. In particular, Klein notes the combination of community organizing and institutional support has been critical. As Klein puts it, “The groundwork that was raised in 2014 and 2015. We had raised the issue of food deserts.” And this meant, Klein says, that major funders took the co-op development effort seriously.

If the group had tried in 2013 or 2014, Klein says “people would’ve been dismissive.” But by 2015, “because there was so much community concern, when we popped up with the institutions, they were ready for somebody to come up with a solution.” Klein adds, “We had support from the city from minute one. From the county. From our local bipartisan legislators.”

All told, the co-op raised \$5.5 million from a range of partners, including family foundations, the Dayton Foundation, a New Market Tax Credit allocation, and local hospitals, who saw the co-op as a way to address the social determinants of health.

These funds covered building and equipment costs. Additionally, the co-op raised about \$500,000 in member equity and \$1 million in debt from an Ohio-based community development financial institution (CDFI) for operations. When GCM opened, it received Facebook support messages from the state’s two US senators, Rob Portman (R) and Sherrod Brown (D), as well as the state’s Republican governor, Mike DeWine.

Example #3



Mississippi Failed its Residents During a Crisis, So They Helped Themselves

When a winter storm knocked out water service to tens of thousands of Mississippi residents, it was Black families that were hit hardest—and who organized their own relief efforts.

For Rukia Lumumba, this time was different. In February 2021, a winter weather warning prompted the native of Jackson, Mississippi, to take precautions, just as she had two years ago when another winter storm hit her hometown. She adjusted the thermostats in her home, filled her bathtub with water, and left the water faucets dripping so the pipes wouldn't freeze, she said.

The next morning, Lumumba could get only a trickle of water from her faucets. Days went by, and her water did not return.

"This storm lasted four to five days," she said. "The ice was so thick. The conditions were so different." Ice covered the roads for days, she said, and stores like Walmart sold out of cases of bottled water.

The back-to-back winter storms in February left about 43,000 homes without access to running water for nearly a month. The cold temperatures caused water plant equipment to freeze and centuries-old water pipes to break, city officials say, which will take more than \$2 billion to fix. The water pressure dropped, the system shut down, and service interruptions were disproportionately felt in communities farthest from the city's water sources, especially in West and South Jackson, areas whose populations are largely Black.

In the time of crisis, grassroots organizing helped the community secure essential needs where the local and state governments came up short. Lumumba, the executive director of the People's Advocacy Institute, received several text messages and phone calls alerting her of others without water. The Jackson-based nonprofit describes itself as a community resource, capacity-building incubator and training ground for transformative justice in the South. Lumumba immediately began to organize from her home, calling folks she knew throughout the state who could help distribute water, blankets, and other essential items, she said.

Rukia Lumumba said it was in part to "save ourselves" from "willful and intentional neglect by the state to care for the needs of Jackson." The People's Advocacy Institute delivered water and food boxes to more than 15,000 homes and housed over 100 people in hotels. Also, her organization conducted wellness calls to thousands of residents, which allowed them to provide more relief. The nonprofit organization also raised more than \$20,000 to give out in direct payments for residents to pay utility bills and for other needs.



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Example #3 Continued

Mississippi Failed its Residents During a Crisis, So They Helped Themselves

Lumumba said that while the organization was conducting wellness checks, they learned that a lot of people had also lost their food stamps, food subsidies, or other benefits, and they were hearing that the state had not renewed some of those programs for those residents.

Many of those people were living on fixed incomes, she said. "That was a really big problem."

While it's still unclear when Jackson will have enough resources to overhaul its water system, one option the city council is considering would be to work with the Rural Water Emergency Assistance Cooperative, which creates partnerships between municipalities and water utilities to provide technical assistance, physical assistance, and mutual aid in times of need. That would bring in more volunteers and personnel in response to extreme weather events.

In the interim, on-the-ground organizers will continue to pressure lawmakers, while continuing to prioritize the well-being of the community.

"Our community really came together. We can't wait on the government to meet our immediate needs," Welchlin said. "We've been talking about how to make sure that our community has stockpiles ready for when disasters happen, so we won't be in this kind of situation again."



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Example #4



Native Inter-Tribal Housing Co-op

Native Inter-Tribal Housing Co-op was incorporated in April 1983. The Co-operative was formed for the purpose of providing affordable housing for London's urban Indigenous population.

Native Inter-Tribal Housing Co-operative has a mix of "Rent Geared to Income" units and "Market Rent" units.

We began by purchasing 20 units – single family homes or duplexes. The following year, we purchased another 10 units, and 10 more 2 years after that. In 1994 we built a 15 unit townhouse complex, and purchased 7 more units, bringing the total of units to 62. (note: by 2020, 5 units were sold, leaving a total of 57). These units are scattered over a 10 block radius from our office at 37 Tecumseh Ave, West, in the "Manor Park" area of the city.

A housing Cooperative is a group of people who form a corporation to provide housing services for themselves.

Co-op living is unique to all other forms of housing because it represents a community living within a community.

Democratic management is the lifeblood of a healthy co-op and the people who live in the Coop, and who collectively own and operate the housing, are voting members. The members elect a board of directors from among themselves and authorize the board to conduct the day to day business of the Cooperative in a manner that satisfies all of the requirements of its Charter, Bylaws, Agreements, and Policies.

All members in a cooperative share in the advantages and responsibilities of co-op life, which makes it more than just a place to live.

As a co-op member, you have security of tenure. This means that you can live in your home for as long as you wish if you follow the rules the co-op and pay your housing charge (rent). As a co-op member, you have a say in decisions that affect your home. You and your neighbours own your homes co-operatively. Members form a community that works together to manage the co-op. Co-op communities are made up of all kinds of people – people with different backgrounds and incomes and special needs. These diverse and vibrant communities are the unique strength of the co-op housing movement.



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Example #5



Blood Reserve School Bus Co-op

The Blood Reserve School Bus Coop has been safely transporting Blood Tribe students to schools on and off the Reserve for over 50 years. In 1966 the School Bus Coop was formed with approximately 12 members, however, today the Coop has grown to 38 members. Currently, there are 66 Co-op buses registered with the Province of Alberta. These buses are responsible for student transportation services for approximately 65 routes throughout the Blood Indian Reserve with end destinations for 5 school divisions in southern Alberta.

Prior to the birth of this co-op, there were many bus routes on the Reserve. Though mostly driven by Indigenous peoples, all but one of the buses were owned by white people. Many of the buses, moreover, were shabby hand-me-downs originally used on other bus routes off the Reserve. Folks on the Reserve were far from happy with the set-up. Why, if they got together on the problem, they wondered, could they not Own their own buses?

The result of this “getting together” was a new co-operative venture - a school bus co-op. Fifteen of the 27 routes on the Reserve have now been allotted to the co-op by the school unit. Since classes began that September these routes have been serviced by Indigenous-owned buses, purchased with the help of a federal loan. Each of these buses is equipped with two-way radios, something long overdue on the Reserve.

Income for the driver-owners is handled on a co-operative basis and administered by two directors elected by the group. While not strictly a co-operative, the venture is the result of co-operative effort and continues to bring revenue onto the Reserve.

Vision Statement

Credible, independent and reliable school student transportation system.

Mission Statement

To provide a safe, effective and reliable school bus transportation for eligible students.

Mandate

To provide the most efficient method of transportation for school children who are residents of the Blood Reserve to and from the appropriate school (K - 12).



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