



Building an Anti-Oppressive Startup Food Co-op Movement

In 2023, the Up & Coming Food Co-op Conference introduced an Anti-Oppressive Framework developed to help guide the conference, conference organizers, and startup food co-op community center anti-oppression and together, build an anti-oppressive conference and startup movement. The Conference organizers (Indiana Cooperative Development Center and Food Co-op Initiative) developed this framework with invaluable consultation from LaDonna Sanders Redmond. We are grateful for them generously sharing their expertise, wisdom, and guidance. We continue to live into this framework, and to hold it as a living document, adjusting it as we learn and grow together.

This work is hard. It's hard because, together, we are manifesting a new world that doesn't yet exist. This work can also be joyful and freeing. In committing to anti-oppressive practices, we are collectively imaging, visioning, and creating a new world.

When we do this work as a community the impact – including ongoing harm and burden – falls disproportionately on the people who have experienced oppression, and in particular, racial oppression. It can be exhausting. It is up to those of us who do not experience significant oppression to approach this work with intention and thoughtfulness, actively working to lessen that harm or burden.

The Up & Coming Conference's Anti-Oppressive Framework:

We commit to an anti-oppressive framework, which is the method and process in which we understand how systems of oppression including, but not limited to, colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and ableism can result in individual discriminatory actions and structural/systemic inequities for certain groups in society.

Anti-oppressive practices are intentional, active, and a continuous process of recognizing, challenging, and dismantling privilege and oppression, along with mitigating its effects. We do this work through self-education, sharing power, education, alliance building, and language, centering those most impacted, and listening to understand.

Acknowledgement of Oppression and Harm:

The formal cooperative system in the United States, and the food co-op system specifically, have a history of oppressive practices and causing harm to many individuals and groups in our communities. The food co-op system, its institutions, leaders, and the community as a whole have been exclusionary, and our system generally privileges white, urban and suburban, able-bodied, formally educated, and affluent individuals. The Up & Coming Conference and conference organizers are included within this system. While this is changing, thanks to the leadership of those who have experienced oppression, there is much work to do. Our intention is to co-develop and support anti-oppressive cooperative development practices and to help build an anti-oppressive food co-op system. It is a process, and will not be seamless or even smooth. We are committed to the work, to mitigating harm caused by current oppressive systems, and to breaking them down and building new systems that center and are led by those who have been oppressed.

Shared Understandings:

- Anti-oppression is a *framework*, and as such, there are multiple ways to achieve results, rather than one prescribed path.
- We recognize that every individual is coming into this work with a different perspective, different experiences, and different levels of understanding about oppression and privilege.

- Anti-oppression work is a continuous process, and we are always learning and evolving. We commit as individuals and a community to really listening and absorbing when harm has been caused, to naming it, and to learning and growing.
- Oppression is both individual and systemic, and it's also historical.
 - Individuals can cause direct harm to other individuals or groups, often unintentionally. We each have the ability to learn and change our behavior. This is an ongoing and active practice. There is no end point in this work.
 - Systems cause harm and oppress individuals and groups. It is critical to recognize systems at all levels. They include the federal government and major cultural and societal institutions. They also include our cooperative system, our food co-ops system, and our individual co-ops and organizations. We are all part of many systems, and systemic change is needed in systems of all scales.
 - Many systems of oppression in the United States have been perpetrated for generations and are embedded into the fabric of our history. We carry this history in the present.

Some of the ways that the anti-oppressive framework has guided the 2024 conference

This list is not exhaustive but is a representation of how the framework is showing up in tangible ways. The framework also guides how we approach the conference, what our goals are, how we celebrate, and more. We welcome your ideas for how you see the framework showing up, or how you'd like to see us use it in the future.

- We are making rest and connection equal priorities with formal workshops and sessions. Last year we incorporated more breaks throughout the conference, which we are keeping this year. We are also minimizing the amount of "presenting" that happens during mealtimes to allow people to rest and connect with others in casual conversation.
- Six affinity rooms will be available on Friday 4:30-5:30pm for attendees: a quiet room, and rooms for individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, Asian American or Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Latino/a/x, or Indigenous. Please use these spaces in whatever way you are called to do so. If you have suggestions for additional affinity spaces in the future, please let us know. You can learn more about the affinity rooms in the conference app and on the website.
- We are honored to partner with the National Black Food & Justice Alliance again this year as they host the 4th Black Led Day on September 12th before the Up & Coming Conference officially kicks off. Black Led Day is a pre-session exclusively for Black-identifying cooperators and those aspiring to join the cooperative movement. This gathering provides a dedicated space to explore and reflect on our collective history and future. We also partner with NBFJA as a thought partner in conference organizing and are grateful for this collaborative relationship.
- We are working to better hold space for, and lift up, the deep history of cooperation in the Indigenous community, and to be collaborative partners and allies with Indigenous communities and cooperators. We see these steps as part of a process and will continue to grow in this effort. Thank you to Nicole Klimek of the Metis Nation for trusting and engaging with us as a thought partner in this work. This year, we are for the first time holding a space for Indigenous conference attendees to connect, share, and ground before the start of the conference on Thursday afternoon. Additionally, attendees will be able to connect again in an affinity room on Friday and after the conference closes on Saturday afternoon.
- We strive to cultivate a conference that holds space for people to safely engage in meaningful dialogue, to learn from one another, and to grow. We have developed [community agreements](#) that all conference participants have agreed to when registering.
- All presenters have been asked to carry an anti-oppressive framework into their workshops and to develop workshops that apply to all startup cooperators and their communities, or if they do not - explicitly name that. Priority was also given in the creation of this year's content plan to sessions that will help us all to dismantle systems of oppression and build an anti-oppressive future .

- We are honored to have so many speakers who have experienced oppression sharing their wisdom, perspective, and expertise with us. This year, 40% of speakers and panelists identify as a member of the global majority. New this year, we have provided a Racial Equity Speaker Honorarium to individuals who self-identify as a member of a group that experiences racial oppression. The \$100 honorarium is a starting point we intend to grow.
- Each of us carries a multitude of identities that inform our perspective and our experiences. To help us recognize some of our identities that are not always visible to others, and to help people with similar identities connect with each other, we are making available colored stars that represent different identities (Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black/African American/Afro-Latino, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, LGBTQIA+, and people with disabilities). We welcome you to stop by registration to add the stickers that represent you.
- Accessibility is vital to an anti-oppressive future, and we are at the beginning stages of this work. This year, we provided guidance to all speakers on how to develop accessible presentations and ensure that all presentation materials are available ahead of time for those who process information better by reviewing materials earlier. We also provide interpreters as requested. These are our first small steps, and we have more to do to make the space we meet in and our online communications more accessible.
- We recognize that some attendees may experience harm during the conference through words or ideas shared by others. We have individuals who are prepared to listen and to provide respectful, caring, and confidential support for anyone who does experience harm. Please connect with a conference organizer (Deb Trocha, Faye Mack, or JQ Hannah) or Allanah Hines to access this support.
- Thanks to the leadership of NBFJA, the conference this year is exploring options to provide childcare for those who indicated when registering that they would benefit from childcare being provided.
- We know that part of building an anti-oppressive future is sharing joy and celebrating progress. We've made space to celebrate together, including Friday night's celebration of co-ops that have opened stores since the 2023 conference and by closing the conference by celebrating and learning from Detroit People's Food Co-op.

Ongoing Engagement

Thank you for engaging in this work with us. After introducing this document in 2023, we invited feedback through the conference evaluation and informally through discussion. The feedback we received was supportive and acknowledged that this work is critical and has been long needed. We also said that we would send out an email to conference attendees to share the feedback we received and invite a small working group to help us consider evolutions in the framework and ways to center anti-oppression in the 2024 conference. We did not follow through on that.

This year, we will include a question in the conference evaluation to request more specific feedback. And, we commit to developing a plan on how to engage with those who are interested in reflecting upon and evolving the framework as needed, and to consider how we will center this framework in planning for the 2025 conference. This will occur after the 2024 conference wraps up.

We also welcome your engagement at any time. If you have feedback, questions, or ideas about the framework and how it's showing up in the conference, please reach out to Faye Mack (faye@fci.coop) or Deb Trocha (dtrocha@icdc.coop).

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