

Equity, Justice and Decolonization at BC's Farmers' Markets

A report based on the British Columbia Farmers' Market Association Member MeetUps Program, 2021

Everyone gains when our farmers' markets reflect the diversity of our communities. It's good for business, good for food security, and good for social cohesion. Markets become more vibrant, attract new customers, and develop relationships with new sectors of the community. Sometimes, new granting and sponsorship opportunities open up.

There are so many benefits to offering, and being part of, a space where everyone feels welcome. Ultimately, there will be more farmers, more food producers, and a stronger local economy, as people who once faced barriers now encounter opportunities.

That's why the BC Association of Farmers' Markets held a series of three workshops on equity, justice and decolonization in 2021. Taught by urban farmer and educator [Cheyenne Sundance](#), author of the [Anti-Racism in Farmers Markets Toolkit](#) (see box), these Zoom sessions were attended by market organizers from across BC.

This report summarizes the key learnings from the sessions.

Because the workshops were spread over a six-month period, the attendees were able to begin implementing what they learned, creating on-the-ground changes at numerous BC markets. You'll see some of these highlighted below in "Equity in Action" boxes.

WHY LEARN AND TAKE ACTION AROUND DIVERSITY?

Why do we need to work at making markets more equitable? Won't that just happen naturally?

It's easy to assume that anyone who wants to vend at a market will just show up. But that doesn't necessarily work for everyone.

[The Anti-Racism in Farmers Markets Toolkit](#)

This toolkit lays out the whys and the hows of making markets more inclusive. Created by an organization called the Equity in Farmers Markets Working Group, it sheds light on how racism can operate invisibly, and offers exercises and tips to help market teams improve their practices.

The Toolkit was based on input from a focus group made up of youth who were Black, Indigenous, or people of colour, who were not participating in markets but were interested.

The focus group answered questions such as "What do you want at a market?" "Why aren't you at a market?" and "What are you hopeful for?" The yielded illuminating results and is a process that could be replicated anywhere.

Farmer and educator Cheyenne Sundance gained insight into the experiences of young black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) farmers while teaching an agriculture mentorship program.

“These youth, like me, are in their early to mid 20s and BIPOC...I ask them where they see themselves in agriculture. I am often met with silence or feelings of being unsure. There are a few reasons for that, but the largest is that there is little to no representation at farmers markets,” she writes in the Anti-Racism in Farmers Markets Toolkit.

If aspiring farmers do not see their own community, culture, and personhood reflected at markets, it’s hard for them to feel welcome, and thus to see a pathway to economic success, says Cheyenne.

Barriers facing BIPOC, youth, and other marginalized people

- Lack of start-up funds
 - First or second generation immigrants, Indigenous people, and descendants of families impacted by colonialism, slavery, and intergenerational trauma often do not have inter-generational wealth to support education and business start-up
- No transportation
- Language barriers for first generation immigrants
- Unwelcoming attitudes
 - Long-term vendors who feel they worked towards a stable position at the market may feel resentful if new BIPOC vendors are encouraged
 - Market managers may be unaware of their needs
- Intimidating registration processes
- Feelings of alienation
 - Markets often appear to be places for prosperous white people (and research backs this up*). Because of this, BIPOC, youth and low-income farmers can feel that vending at a market is not for “people like them”
 - Our culture represents farmers as white. Think about farmers from movies, books, even nursery rhymes (for instance, Old MacDonald)—you don’t see much diversity

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There are so many things that farmers markets can do, and are doing, to welcome a more diverse set of vendors. There’s a growing movement of markets across North America who are innovating, discovering, and changing—and reaping the benefits. We can learn from them, and from each other.

Solution #1 CREATE SPACE

- Provide tables, tents, chairs, and other equipment as a free or low cost loan
- Allocate a certain number of stalls for under-represented vendors (tip: don’t put all these tables in one area, but rather spread them out around the market to avoid feelings of tokenization)
- Rotate spaces so that a variety of vendors get access to the best spots
- Encourage established vendors to share stall space with new vendors

“When I started vending at a market, I had no car. I used Ubers to go to market! It was unorthodox, but I made it work. If there hadn’t been the offer of a free table and canopy, I couldn’t have done it.” —Cheyenne Sundance

Solution #2 REACH OUT

SEEK OUT DIVERSE VENDORS

- Approach community groups and agencies that work with BIPOC communities, youth, etc.
- Print out posters and/or flyers and post at community centres, libraries, and other public places. Include information about support your market offers (i.e. table and tent loans, reduced rates, easy registration, etc.)
- Contact farm training and incubator programs and let them know you are inviting vendors from under-represented groups
- Look for people who are doing work similar to what you are doing, or want to do. Reach out with an email or phone call

HOST EVENTS

- Vending isn’t the only way to create wider representation
- Hold cultural events such as performances and workshops; for instance drumming, dancing, storytelling or crafts, such as making corn husk dolls
- Ensure events are family-friendly, with activities for kids and youth
- If your market has musicians, create a culturally diverse program

REACH OUT THROUGH ADVOCACY, SUPPORT & PARTNERSHIP

- Partner with a farmers’ group to offer a workshop or training for aspiring BIPOC farmers
- Help people who want to do food processing find commercial kitchens they can use
- Advocate to your Health Officer to allow traditional foods

Equity in Action

“A group in town is working with local First Nations to raise awareness of Indigenous place names. Our market gave them a stall for free to do some communication and fundraising. They told us the market was the first place where someone supported them.” —Powell River Market

Equity in Action

“We’ve had a decrease in Haida representation at the market since COVID. I’ve been working to get an online Foodsafe course to happen to make it easier for Haida vendors to return.” —Masset Market

Equity in Action

“We’re working on creating more partnerships, especially with our local high schools, so we can support kids getting into entrepreneurship. We offer youth to vend free of charge and we are looking to partner with a group that offers business support so we can provide mentorship for the youth. That way we reach two new communities.” —Comox Valley Market

Equity in Action

“For Canada Day and for the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, we made a clear point that we were recognizing those things, and also we spoke with Indigenous partners to see if there was anything they wanted us to do. On Canada Day we hired an Indigenous musician to play. On the National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, we collected donations for the Residential Schools Survival Society at our info booth. We collected over \$600. We also encouraged vendors, staff and volunteers to wear orange shirts.” —New Westminster Market

Solution #3 PROVIDE EASY ENTRY

- Offer multiple ways to register as a vendor—online registration, paper forms that can be sent by post, and a phone-in option
- Have two different contact people so new vendors have more choices of who to deal with
- Think about how the market manager has power as a gatekeeper; simply being aware of this will help you make equitable choices

“Having an online option to register can make it easier for people who don’t have English as a first language, because they can use Google Translate.” —Cheyenne Sundance

TIP: It is helpful to know if a vendor is from an under-represented group. Your application form can ask “Do you identify as Black, Indigenous or a Person of Colour?” Offer as an option “prefer not to answer” so this doesn’t feel intrusive.

Also, you can ask “What is your business specialty? What are you known for?” to invite them to talk about culturally relevant crops and foods.

Solution #4 REVIEW FINANCIAL STRUCTURES AND POLICIES

- Consider setting vendor fees as a percentage of sales (e.g. 4% of sales or \$20, whatever is greater). This can be a bit more work to set up and run but is an equitable approach
- Offer free or discounted fees for new BIPOC and youth vendors, especially in their first year. You can call this a “new farmer program” or “new vendor program” or “equity program”
- Offer a payment plan or other flexible approaches

Equity in Action

“We’ve waived fees for Indigenous vendors as a form of reparations and reconciliation. Our board felt very strongly about providing every grace and opportunity for vendors who may not traditionally been able to operate freely in the market space.” —Downtown Chilliwack Community Market

Equity in Action

“This year for our holiday market we got a grant from the municipality to help us offer six scholarships for vendors who face barriers in bringing their products to market. We are covering stall fees and insurance fees, and have arranged to provide tables and tents. We hope this will make the market a more accessible opportunity for all. Vendors are invited to self-identify as needing the scholarship.” —New Westminster Market

Solution #5 SEEK FUNDING

- Keep an eye on the BCAFM website and newsletter for information about grants
- Ask your municipality and your MLA's and MP's offices about funding opportunities
- Local businesses and financial institutions may be happy to sponsor vendor fees, equipment, or other needs; they can be approached with a phone call or email
- Look for synergies—a climate action grant could work if you put the focus on sustainable agriculture, an economic development grant could focus on entrepreneurship, a health-related funder might donate for a healthy eating initiative
- Partner with other organizations (environmental groups; chambers of commerce; health agencies; groups that support youth, minorities, women, etc.) to bring in new funding streams and build relationships

Equity in Action

"We approached our Credit Union and asked if they'd sponsor a tent, table and chairs for new vendors, aimed at increasing diversity. They were really receptive and want to work with us."
—Comox Valley Farmers Market

Solution #6 BUILD A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE

- Set up a mentorship program between new and seasoned vendors. This can be as easy as "Seasoned vendor, meet new vendor. It would be great if you could be available to give tips and answer questions."
- Encourage established vendors to welcome new vendors—introducing themselves, trying their products, and telling customers about them
- Have a fair and transparent system for vendors to bring forward concerns around potential discrimination at the market (if you have a BIPOC Advisory Group (see below), this could be a job for them)

Tip: the mentor and mentee should not be selling the same type of product to avoid any sense of competition.

Solution #7 DIVERSIFY GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

- Work towards a diverse board of directors. When positions become available, actively recruit people who will round out the representation
- Create a BIPOC Advisory Group (you could call this something else, depending on what you feel fits your community) to discuss, recommend, advise and implement initiatives

Equity in Action

"It's important that our board reflects the community we serve. Right now it doesn't. I put funding for a BIPOC advisory council into next year's budget. It's a great alternative to trying to overhaul the whole board, and the members of that council might eventually be recruited to the board." —Esquimalt Farmers Market

Solution #8 KEEP LEARNING

- Provide diversity training for your board and staff
- Schedule a session with your board to discuss the questions suggested in the Anti-Racism in Farmers Markets Toolkit
- Check out local or on-line courses, workshops, and discussion groups

Equity in Action

“During the winter when the market takes a break, some board members are all taking an Unsettling the Settler course.” —Hazelton Farmers Market

Solution #9 COMMUNICATE

TALK TO DOUBTERS

There will likely be vendors, board members, and others who are skeptical or sometimes downright hostile to efforts to increase diversity. Frank, respectful conversations can bring people on board, or at least start building bridges (see Box: Tips for Talking About Diversity)

EMBED INCLUSIVE MESSAGES IN ALL YOU DO

- Include clear, positive language in your mission statement, rules, membership info, board orientation material, etc.
- Include a territory acknowledgement on your website, posters, signage, etc.

Equity in Action

“We’ve started discussing a name change, following the example of our Regional District, which changed from Powell River to qathet, an Indigenous word. Powell was the superintendent of residential schools and supported those institutions. Maybe we’ll use both names, or maybe we aren’t ready for a change. It’s a hard discussion, but talking about it is a big step.” —Powell River Farmers Market

Equity in Action

“We got new name tags printed for staff and volunteers, and included the option of adding pronouns. Some vendors didn’t understand why we were doing this, so it shows that we need to provide some education.” —Comox Valley Farmers Market

Tips for Talking About Diversity

Use positive language and focus on benefits

- “It’s about growing our community. Who wouldn’t agree that having more people growing food and selling it locally is a good thing?”
- “New types of vendors bring new products, which brings in new customers.”
- Avoid words that are politically charged

Appeal to everyone’s desire to have a fair, fun, and prosperous market

- “We want to make this an inclusive space where everyone has opportunities, especially people who historically have lacked access to these possibilities.”

Plan ahead for key conversations. For instance, if you want to talk to a vendor who has been skeptical, think about what their goals and fears are. People are worried that something will be taken from them; they could lose their prime spot, or feel unfairly treated. These are valid concerns.

Recognize vendors’ hard work and success and invite them to join you in providing that to others

- Tell them they are important, why people love their product, why their product will continue to do well
- “You are doing so great with your farm and you’ve developed such great community relationships. Not everyone has the resources to do that. I am seeing people need a helping hand to get to where you are.”

Listen and ask questions

- “What do *you* want?”
- “If you were in my shoes, what would you do?”

“Talking about barriers is often more accessible than talking about privilege. Instead of telling people ‘you have too much,’ tell them ‘they have too little.’” —Cheyenne Sundance

LET THE PUBLIC KNOW

- Use social media and your website to celebrate your equity initiatives
- If you will have rotating tables or other changes, let the public know what to expect
- Talk to journalists; issue media releases

Equity in Action

“We’re working with a local First Nation Chief to make sure we get the territory acknowledgement right, and we will include this in our weekly newspaper ads.” —Hazelton Farmers Market

MOVING TOWARDS FOOD SECURITY AND FOOD JUSTICE

The equity, justice, and discrimination workshops held by BCAFM in 2021 gave market organizers a chance to learn more about these issues. Over a dozen participants have taken action and made plans for the coming year, all based on what they learned. Communities and customers can look forward to more diverse, welcoming, and sustainable markets, and all of this contributes to better food security and food justice in British Columbia.

“Our markets are dynamic and bustling places that are actively creating an alternative food model within the industrial food system. We are building community, human connection, and fostering economic livelihood. This is pretty amazing stuff! But when we look at our markets through a food justice or an anti-racist lens, we can see who is not there and who is being excluded. It is our responsibility to act on these observations.” —Anti Racism in Farmers Markets Toolkit

Resources

The [BCAFM webpage](#) has a list of articles, books, guides, and reports

[The Anti-Racism in Farmers Markets Toolkit](#) has information and ideas for action

*This University of Toronto [Master's thesis](#) examines the way farmers markets are predominantly white, affluent spaces