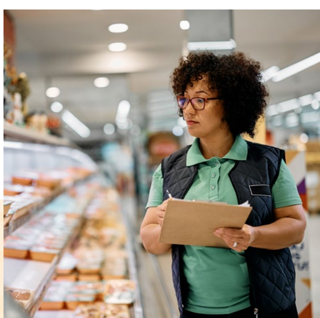
RESULTS & LESSONS

FROM TARGETED INVESTMENT IN SOUTHEASTERN FOOD SYSTEMS



Reinvestment Fund's Equitable Food Systems – Southeast Initiative

April 2026

REINVESTMENT FUND

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Funded by Walmart Foundation

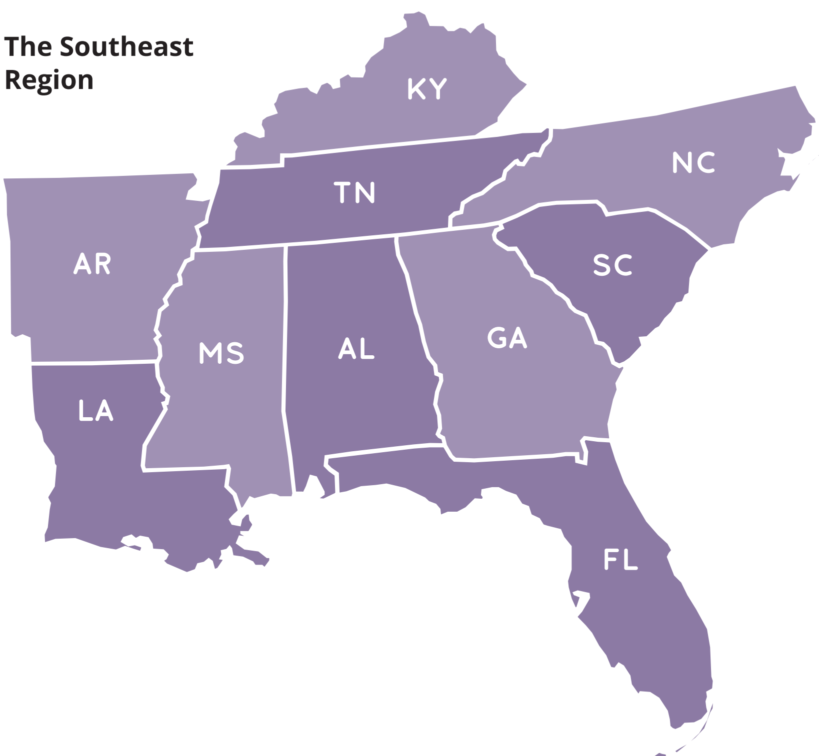
Reinvestment Fund is a mission-driven nonprofit organization that brings financial and analytical tools to partnerships that work to ensure that everyone has access to essential opportunities. Since 2004, the organization has pioneered a comprehensive approach to strengthening food systems to improve access to healthy food and economic opportunity in the food sector for underserved communities. Through a range of programs, Reinvestment Fund provides grants, loans, and technical assistance resources aiming to support community-driven solutions.
reinvestment.com

SFG Strategies specializes in nonprofit strategy, supporting clients via organizational development, strategic planning, impact measurement, community engagement, and resource development. The firm works alongside communities that are often overlooked and underinvested — yet rich in talent, resilience, and opportunity. The SFG Strategies team provided backbone support for Southeast Food Forward, including program design, implementation of the participatory grantmaking process, grantee technical assistance, and program evaluation.
SFGstrategies.com

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Southeastern United States, 6.4 million people needlessly live in areas with limited access to affordable, fresh, healthy foods.[1] This figure represents more than a statistic; it reflects the daily reality of resource-constrained communities where grocery stores have closed or never existed, where transportation barriers compound poverty, and where the legacy of disinvestment shapes what families can put on their tables.

The Southeast Region



1 https://www.reinvestment.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/RF-Limited-Supermarket-Access-Analysis-2024-1.pdf

The Equitable Food Systems – Southeast Initiative (EFS-SI), funded by Walmart Foundation, was designed to amplify the region's strengths in order to address two interconnected challenges: persistent gaps in access to nourishing, affordable, culturally relevant food; and systemic underinvestment in food and agriculture enterprises based in historically marginalized communities in the Southeast. These challenges share common roots in historic disinvestment, and addressing them requires approaches that work on both fronts simultaneously.

Reinvestment Fund brought its dual expertise as a national Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) and trusted administrator of America's Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) to complement existing federal investments while maximizing every philanthropic dollar. EFS-SI combined rigorous research, meaningful community engagement, data-driven geographic targeting, and innovative grantmaking methods to yield two core outcomes: (a) funding that advances community-driven food enterprises, and (b) analytic tools that serve food access practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

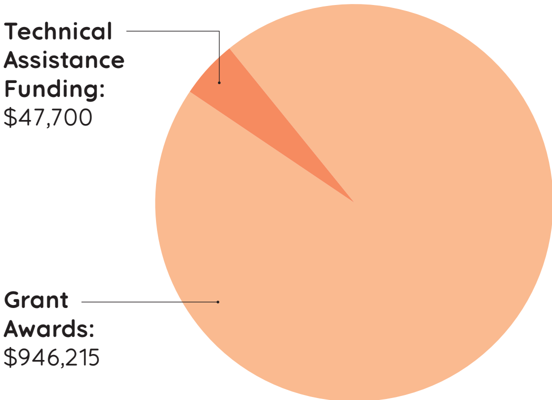
FUNDING COMMUNITY FOOD SYSTEMS

Prioritizing investment into food enterprises, Reinvestment Fund developed Southeast Food Forward (SFF), a grants and technical assistance (TA) program that awarded $946,215 in project grants and $47,700 in TA to 13 community-driven food enterprises across 10 Southeastern states and the region's tribal communities.

The program featured a stakeholder-led application review process, a participatory allocation process where the grantees themselves informed funding decisions for their cohort, and ongoing cohort-based convenings and TA. Beyond the immediate outcomes, the program helped build a pipeline of investment-ready enterprises that are positioned for future public and private capital.

SFF demonstrates that philanthropic funding is essential to fill gaps that federal programs, by design, cannot address. The projects of nine SFF grantees (69%) would not have been eligible for funding from HFFI.

Funding Allocation



ANALYTICAL TOOLS

EFS-SI also supported major enhancements to Reinvestment Fund's analytical infrastructure related to food access and investment. The Limited Supermarket Access Analysis (LSA), a publicly available mapping tool, was updated to cover all 50 states and the District of Columbia with refined methodology that accounts for varying population densities. Its accompanying report identifies approximately 28 million people nationally living in areas with limited supermarket access.

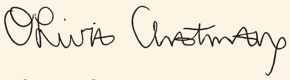
Additionally, a new National Food Access and Financing Landscape Dashboard brings together multiple data sources, including the LSA, into an interactive platform where users can visualize food access gaps, identify financing resources, and map possible investment opportunities.

This report documents EFS-SI outcomes and, equally important, the evolution of Reinvestment Fund's approach to grantmaking. The shifts toward more participatory and trust-based processes through this work represent institutional learning that will shape future programs. The lessons belong not just to Reinvestment Fund but to the broader field of funders, practitioners, and policymakers working toward equitable food systems.

A Note from Reinvestment Fund

As someone from the South, stewarding the Southeast Food Forward grants and technical assistance program has been both a professional responsibility and a personal privilege. My visits to the grantees have been an especially meaningful opportunity to experience their missions beyond words and numbers on a page. I loved meeting and learning from these changemakers who are transforming their communities from the inside out, creating lasting impact.

Our goal with this document is to be transparent and accountable while also contributing to the field. We owe this to our grantees, who trusted us with their time and their stories; to our advisors and the research participants, who shaped this program with their expertise; to our application reviewers, who diligently scored and provided feedback on projects; to our funder, who took a chance on a different kind of approach; and to the larger food systems field and philanthropic sector. The only way we all do better is by learning together, sharing our successes, and honestly reflecting on what we might do differently given the opportunity again.



Olivia Chatman
Program Manager, Equitable Food Systems

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE:

The Case for a Southeast Food Systems Focus

An equitable food system is one that works for everyone. It ensures that families can afford healthy food, farmers and workers are paid fairly, and communities have a say in the decisions that shape how food is grown, sold, and shared, particularly in places that have been left behind. This vision remains far from reality in much of the United States, and the gaps are particularly acute in the Southeast despite the region's many strengths.

The Southeast has tremendous agricultural assets, coupled with creative and resilient communities; yet it also has the highest concentration of food insecurity in the country.[2] Poverty is disproportionately concentrated among Black and Indigenous residents in rural areas, where decades of disinvestment have hollowed out economic infrastructure.[3] Many rural counties lack grocery stores entirely, and limitations to food access persist in historically redlined urban neighborhoods where supermarket chains have either recently withdrawn or declined to invest in the first place.

These patterns do not exist in isolation.

Tribal communities across the Southeast face fractured food systems that trace directly to historical displacement and the disruption of traditional foodways. Immigrant communities, which play essential roles in agricultural production and food distribution, often face barriers to public benefits and lack trust in government programs. Furthermore, climate disruptions like hurricanes, flooding, and extreme heat, threaten supply chains that already were fragile, compounding existing vulnerabilities.

It was within this context that Reinvestment Fund chose to develop Equitable Food Systems – Southeast Initiative (EFS-SI), a data analytics, grantmaking, and technical assistance effort focused on the 10 Southeastern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) and the region's Native American tribes. The challenges were clear, the opportunities for impact were significant, and the Southeast's history suggested that community-driven solutions could further take root if given the right support.

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2 https://www.feedingamerica.org/about-us/press-room/Map-the-Meal-Gap-2025
3 https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-poverty-well-being

ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY IN COMMUNITY-ROOTED FOOD ACCESS

Research conducted when designing Southeast Food Forward revealed a pattern that many working in the Southeast will recognize: strong local ties and commitment, paired with distrust of institutional processes. The legacy of broken promises and discrimination has created barriers that persist long after policies have changed on paper.

This context demanded something different.

Understanding that flexible, privately funded programs can overcome restrictions that limit federal programs, Reinvestment Fund designed SFF with trust building at its core. For example:

- Philanthropic funding enabled grantee participation in the grantmaking process, a new practice for Reinvestment Fund. (See page 10.)
- USDA grants are typically paid on a reimbursement basis, creating cash flow constraints for small food and agricultural enterprises. SFF funds were disbursed upfront, allowing grantees to meet urgent community needs.

To complement the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), which Reinvestment Fund administers, SFF (a) drew on new analytic tools developed by Reinvestment Fund to identify areas with limited supermarket access and/or limited community development financing; and (b) incorporated distinct guidelines and practices.

These included:

- HFFI determines location eligibility based solely on the address of the business's physical operations, but food access enterprises typically serve areas that are not clearly defined by a street address. The impact of businesses like grocery stores and mobile markets, for example, cannot be accurately measured by one or a few addresses. SFF allowed applicants to use various mapping tools to define underserved areas in ways that accurately described their actual impact and service area.
- SFF allowed investments that HFFI does not support, such as certain types of equipment and, and the farm-to-institution value chain.
- HFFI focuses primarily on food retail models that sell a significant assortment of staple and perishable foods, and applicants that only sell produce are not eligible. SFF intentionally included these enterprises.

This design strategy mattered enormously. Nine of the 13 grantees (69%) operated high-impact projects that would not have been eligible for HFFI funding, and all grantees reported that upfront disbursement of funding was significant to their operations and fiscal health.

9 *out of* 13

GRANTEES OPERATED HIGH-IMPACT PROJECTS THAT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ELIGIBLE FOR HFFI FUNDING.

SOUTHEAST FOOD FORWARD

Community-Guided Design Process

Southeast Food Forward emerged from a foundational commitment: the people closest to the problems should shape the solutions. Reinvestment Fund engaged SFG Strategies, a consulting firm, to lead the research that would inform program design. Using a third party helped ensure that participants could speak candidly about what was working, what was failing, and what they actually needed.

Thirty-eight food systems stakeholders across the Southeast participated in interviews and surveys, receiving stipends for their time and expertise. Their input included everything from the types of investments most needed, barriers preventing enterprises from accessing capital, and desired structural features. Compensation was crucial. Asking people for their expertise without paying for it reinforces the very extractive dynamics that SFF was aiming to counter.

Six advisory committee members with extensive knowledge of Southeastern food systems, cooperative development, and community-based economic development provided ongoing guidance. They shaped research design, eligibility criteria, funding priorities, and the participatory grantmaking approach. Their value extended beyond expertise. Having many sets of eyes on the process as decisions were made distributed responsibility and created accountability. Advisors pushed back on assumptions, and some served as application reviewers. They are listed in Appendix A.

"Asking people for their expertise without paying for it reinforces the very extractive dynamics that Southeast Food Forward was trying to counter."

PROGRAM DESIGN ELEMENTS

The research findings coalesced around clear priorities that shaped every aspect of SFF's structure.

Infrastructure Investment

Eligible expenses prioritized foundational capacity such as cold storage, refrigerated vehicles, community engagement, processing equipment, and operational systems. Research participants were clear that lack of infrastructure was a primary constraint on enterprise growth. For example, a mobile market cannot operate without a reliable vehicle; likewise, a cooperative grocer could not become financially viable without significant community input and buy-in. These are not glamorous investments, but they are essential ones.

Community-Driven Approach with Cooperative Emphasis

SFF centered community leadership and accountability to the people being served. To be eligible, applicants needed to embody cooperative principles, e.g., through governance, partnerships, or inclusivity. This emphasis drew on the region's deep cooperative traditions:

- Black agricultural cooperatives representing generations of collaborative problem-solving;
- Native American systems of collective decision-making that have lasted millennia; and
- Appalachian cooperative models that emerged in response to extractive economic practices.

Crucially, the program focused on cooperative principles rather than legal structures. Cooperative formation requirements vary significantly across states and tribal nations in the Southeast, and requiring formal incorporation would have excluded enterprises that operate cooperatively in practice but either have not navigated the legal complexity, or that operate where cooperative law is underdeveloped. It also left room for enterprises driven by community need for which cooperative structure might not be a fit. The eight adapted principles, detailed in Appendix B, provided a framework for evaluating alignment with regional and cooperative values without imposing a one-size-fits-all requirement.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Acadiana Growers Alliance Farmer Cooperative
New Iberia, Louisiana

AGA is a farmer cooperative that aggregates produce from 18 regional farms — many operated by low-income, immigrant, LGBTQ+, veteran, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) farmers — in resource-constrained communities that face frequent extreme weather events. The organization's new mobile market is delivering healthy food to underserved areas, addressing the lack of cold storage and transportation that has limited member farms' reach.

"Without SFF program funding, Acadiana Growers Alliance would not have been able to connect farmers with residents in low food access areas through Growers On The Go at its current scale or timeline. We would lack an equipped mobile market van, refrigeration, and safe food transport needed to bring locally grown food directly into underserved neighborhoods."

Climate Change Resilience and Mitigation
Climate change emerged as a significant concern throughout the research interviews. Extreme weather events, disrupted growing seasons, and supply chain vulnerabilities threaten food access while simultaneously creating opportunities for enterprises that build resilience. SFF incorporated climate considerations through its emphasis on long-term sustainability, and projects with approaches that mitigate environmental harm and undergird community food security against future disruptions were scored more favorably by reviewers.

Transparency and Inclusivity
Transparency was embedded throughout. The Request for Applications (RFA) defined the review process in detail, including the participatory grantmaking components, reporting expectations, impact metrics, and timelines so applicants understood their obligations from the outset.

The RFA was made available in Spanish, with interpretation and translation support offered to Spanish-speaking applicants during the application process. Reinvestment Fund also accepted applications from diverse enterprise structures: for-profits, cooperatives, fiscally sponsored projects, and 501(c)(3) organizations. This flexibility recognized that high-impact food access work happens across organizational types.

Accounting for Capacity
Many enterprises best positioned to advance food access in underserved communities operate with minimal staff and limited administrative infrastructure. Program design accounted for this reality rather than penalizing it:

- A list of potential TA providers reduced the burden on applicants who wanted to include TA in their requests.
- Financial reporting requirements were minimized, with documentation of payment required only for equipment and contracts of $10,000 or higher.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

City of Refuge, Inc.
Atlanta, Georgia

Atlanta's historic Westside has experienced over 50 years of disinvestment, with the nearest grocery store nearly two miles away. City of Refuge is opening a 1,750-square-foot neighborhood market serving a community where nearly one-third of households are SNAP-eligible and recent grocery closures have deepened food access challenges.

"Without dedicated philanthropic funding, such as that received from SFF, we would not have had the resources to collaborate more effectively with partners or thoroughly plan the necessary equipment. There would likely still be no fresh market in our highly impoverished neighborhood, surrounded by food deserts, because local businesses lack the capital needed to invest."

The result was notable: In comparison to HFFI programs, there were proportionally fewer requests for extensions and budget amendments, despite a grant period of less than a year. Clear deadlines, communicated consistently, combined with the exclusion of construction as an eligible use of funds (a common cause of delays), contributed to this outcome. More funding for grantee cohort engagement might contribute to peer support and accountability, further promoting grantees' ability to meet timelines.

"A goal was for grantees to be connected to each other and to Reinvestment Fund as an ongoing resource."

Additionally, all grant funds were disbursed at the beginning of the project period rather than through reimbursement. This approach recognized that small organizations, which often operate without lines of credit or significant reserves, cannot wait months for reimbursement while covering expenses out of pocket.

Ongoing Relationships
Grant funding often operates as a transaction: funds are disbursed, reports are filed, the relationship ends. SFF was designed to be different. A goal was for grantees to be connected to each other and to Reinvestment Fund as an ongoing resource. Cohort sharing sessions, additional TA opportunities, virtual check-ins, and site visits created touchpoints throughout the grant period and beyond. The discussion that follows elucidates how SFF's use of participatory grantmaking approaches contributed positively to the different dynamic.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

FoodChain, Inc.
Lexington, Kentucky

FoodChain's Neighborhood Green Grocery will bring year-round access to local food to a USDA-designated low-income, low food access area. FoodChain sources from more than 60 Kentucky farmers and will offer fresh, frozen, and processed local foods with SNAP, WIC, and Kentucky Double Dollars acceptance, serving at least 5,000 residents annually.

"Without SFF support, progress toward opening the Neighborhood Green Grocery would have been significantly delayed. The flexibility to provide some compensation for the Co-Executive Directors and a community engagement facilitator allowed FoodChain to maintain leadership focus, deepen community input, and move the project forward while balancing other organizational responsibilities."

PARTICIPATORY GRANTMAKING PROCESS

The application review and award process incorporated participatory elements at two distinct phases, each designed to bring community expertise into decisions traditionally made by funders alone.

Phase 1: Representative Committee Review
Eligible applications were first reviewed and scored by food systems stakeholders with regional expertise who reflect the diversity of the Southeast. These community reviewers understood the contexts in which applicants were operating, e.g., the specific challenges of rural tribes, the logistical hurdles of distribution logistics, and the history of cooperative enterprises in the Deep South. With guidance provided during a virtual training session and through a detailed rubric, the reviewers identified high-impact, culturally relevant solutions that a top-down review might have missed. Each reviewer received a stipend for their contributions.

Reinvestment Fund used the Phase 1 scores to select a slate of projects to receive awards, also taking into account geographic diversity, project diversity, and the ability of proposed projects to advance the SFF goals. The 13 selected projects then moved to Phase 2.

Phase 2: Grantee Participation in Decision Making
The second phase added a new and unique component to Reinvestment Fund's typical grantmaking practices that moved towards a more trust based process. Awarded organizations were invited, but not required, to participate in decisions about funding amounts for their fellow grantees. All 13 organizations chose to participate, each receiving up to a $2,000 stipend for their time.

The process began with conflict-of-interest disclosures. Grantees then met virtually to participate in a sharing process, during which each described their organization and how funding would advance their communities' food access priorities. Each also read fellow applicants' proposals and then discretely recommended funding allocation amounts for both grants and TA. Sample questions were provided for the grantees' consideration, but grantees were trusted to use their own expertise to formulate their recommendations.

SFG Strategies, including a participatory grantmaking advisor, facilitated the sessions, helped grantees with questions that arose, received their recommendations, and calculated the suggested allocations. Reinvestment Fund did not participate in the sharing sessions, as having a third party in this role helped ensure candor and prevented funder-grantee power dynamics from suppressing honest input. Additionally, SFG Strategies shared peer feedback with the individual grantees, minus any identifying information, so they could understand their fellow grantees' rationale for their allocation recommendations.

The benefits, however, extended beyond allocation decisions. Survey results indicated that grantees experienced the participatory grantmaking process as highly transparent and empowering. Ninety-two percent rated transparency at the highest level, and 100% rated their sense of empowerment in the top two levels. Participants described the experience as breaking from traditional philanthropy, and fostering a sense of belonging, shared ownership, and humility.

"92% rated transparency at the highest level, and 100% rated their sense of empowerment in the top two levels."

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Freshly's Market
Aberdeen, Mississippi

In Monroe County's USDA-designated rural limited food access area, Freshly's Market is the only locally owned grocery within miles. This woman-owned, African American-led store serves as a primary food source for SNAP and WIC beneficiaries, though limited cold storage and a lack of marketing about its products have historically constrained its fresh food offerings.

"Over 1,100 community members enrolled in promotional communications, indicating expanded reach and early customer growth momentum."

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Healthy Flavors Arkansas LLC
Conway, Arkansas

Arkansas was declared the most food-insecure state in the nation by USDA in 2023. Healthy Flavors Arkansas is establishing the Farmer-First School Food Hub to distribute locally grown produce to early childhood education centers across Central Arkansas, shaping children's food habits and helping healthy food habits take hold.

"The networking that this initiative has stimulated has transformed thinking about the possibility and need to work with the youngest in society to shape their food habits and culture, before ultra-processed foods take hold in habits and lifestyles. Without this grant, the vision and the relationships to transform school food in Arkansas would not be as crystalized and efforts to provide leadership in this direction would be delayed."

Eighty-three percent of grantees reported strong peer learning (rating it 4 or 5/5), with half of the grantees rating it at the highest level (5/5). Participants consistently highlighted the benefit of learning from one another's approaches, challenges, and strategies, making the process feel more like a professional exchange than a competition. Many described their participation as "learning by doing," gaining confidence, exposure to new organizational models, and practical experience in presenting or reviewing proposals.

This dual function, both as a mechanism for allocating funds and as a hands-on professional development opportunity, amplified the overall value of the process. As one grantee put it: "Hearing the other projects made me rethink how I could grow mine — before I even got the grant funds."

83%

OF GRANTEES REPORTED STRONG PEER LEARNING AND HALF RATED IT AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL.

Outcomes and Impact: By the Numbers

REACH AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Southeast Food Forward awarded $946,215 in grants and $47,700 in TA to 13 community-driven food enterprises. The average grant was $72,786. Additionally, five projects received TA funding averaging $9,540. Grantees are located in and serve communities across Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and the region's tribal communities.

The program received 101 applications. After an initial eligibility screening, 57 applications remained. From this pool, 13 projects (23% of eligible applications) were selected, five of which received an additional TA allocation. This acceptance rate reflects both the heft of the applicant pool and the reality that demand for flexible philanthropic funding far exceeds supply. With more resources, additional high-quality projects could have been funded.

Of the 13 funded enterprises, four are women-owned or controlled; eight are owned or controlled by someone who identifies with a BIPOC minority group; and seven are located in and primarily serving rural areas.

Average Award Amounts

Technical Assistance: $9,540
($47,700 total)

Grants: $72,786
($946,215 total)

Evaluation of the program revealed a gap in the number of applicants and awarded enterprises that are led by immigrants and individuals for whom English is not their primary language — despite the fully bilingual (Spanish) application process and essential role these communities play as both contributors to and consumers of Southeastern food systems. Future iterations of SFF would benefit from including more time for targeted relationship development and outreach to engage this constituency, as well as TA to support enterprises with the application process.

SECTORS AND PROJECT TYPES

Grantees represent diverse organizational stages — from early-phase mobile markets to established food hubs — serving rural, suburban, and urban

Grantee Characteristics

Primarily Rural Serving: 7 out of 13

Women-Owned/Controlled: 4 out of 13

BIPOC-Owned/Controlled: 8 out of 13

communities. Project types include mobile markets reaching neighborhoods without grocery stores, food hubs connecting local farmers to institutional buyers, community grocery stores in limited food access areas, and processing and distribution infrastructure.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Market 166 Grocery and Kitchen Cooperative
East Point, Georgia

In the Tri-Cities area, 83.6% of residents in predominantly Black neighborhoods live more than a mile from the nearest supermarket — a legacy of systemic disinvestment and supermarket redlining. Market 166 is a Black-led, community-owned grocery cooperative building local food access through cooperative ownership.

"Funding all at once changes the game: Having the full grant upfront meant we didn't have to pick and choose which priority to fund first. We worked on branding, market studies, and hardware simultaneously, keeping our momentum high and our 2026 goals on track. ... We especially valued the participatory phase; it provided great insight into the granting process and allowed for meaningful connection with our cohort."

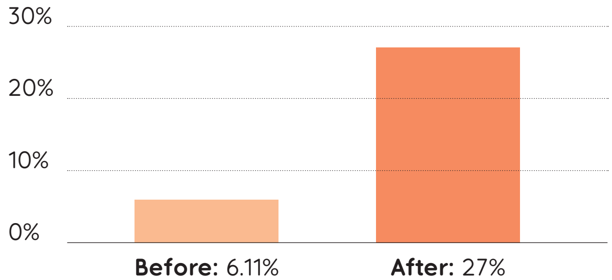
As one grantee said, “Infrastructure must come before scale. Adequate cold storage, transportation, and operational systems are foundational to moving local food efficiently and equitably. Without these elements in place, even strong farmer relationships and community demand cannot be fully realized.”

FOOD ACCESS IMPACT

Retail Enterprises

Twelve grantees engaged in retail sales. Before the grant period, their combined annual retail food sales totaled $552,000. After, it was estimated to be $1.9 million, representing a 250% increase in the value of food moving from these enterprises to their customers. The same 12 grantees reached 23,597 retail customers before the grant period and 47,234 after — effectively doubling their customer base.

Share of Retail Sales Using Nutrition Benefits



Seven of the 13 grantees reported either newly receiving SNAP authorization, having SNAP applications in process, or making progress toward their application during the grant period.

Equally significant, nine grantees reported data on benefit acceptance. Before the grant period, an average of 6.11% of their sales used SNAP, WIC, or other benefits. After, it was an estimated 27%. This shift reflects both expanded benefit acceptance infrastructure and intentional outreach to low-income households.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

New Ground Farm
Pembroke, North Carolina

Robeson County ranks among the Southeast’s most economically disadvantaged, with many elders and low-income residents lacking transportation and relying on processed foods. New Ground Farm, a Lumbee-owned operation, is launching a mobile market to deliver heritage crops to tribal and municipal housing communities.

“Without the Reinvestment Fund grant, New Ground Farm would have remained limited in its ability to reach elders, low-income households, and rural communities facing persistent food access barriers. In the near term, the mobile market would have been delayed or significantly scaled back, limiting distribution of fresh, culturally relevant foods and slowing progress on EBT access and nutrition education.”

Average Change in Institutional Food Sales

Before and After Grant Period

$1.5MM → $1.8MM → **26.1% average increase**

Excluding Outlier*

$1.4MM → $1.8MM → **49.3% average increase**

**The outlier grantee experienced a 66% decline in institutional sales due to a federal grant cancellation.*

Non-Retail Enterprises
Five grantees operate through institutional and wholesale channels. Grantees reported a total of $1.5 million in annual institutional food sales before the grant, with projected sales of $1.8 million after the grant, an average change of 26.1% across five grantees. One of these grantees lost funding related to a large federal grant cancellation, resulting in a loss in institutional sales (from $121,623 to $40,854, or -66%). Removing this grantee from the calculation, the other grantees reported a total of $1.4 million in annual institutional food sales before the grant, with projected sales of $1.8 million after the grant, an average increase of 49.3%.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

New North Florida Cooperative
Marianna, Florida (also serving Alabama)

A new commercial blast freezer will allow this farmer-led cooperative to extend shelf life and expand year-round distribution to school districts across the Florida Panhandle and Alabama's Black Belt, reaching more than 78,000 students in 13 high-poverty counties while increasing income for socially disadvantaged farmers.

"Without this grant, NNFC would have remained limited in its ability to aggregate and preserve fresh, locally grown produce at scale. In the near term, farmers would face higher post-harvest losses and fewer market opportunities. Over the long term, the absence of cold-storage infrastructure would constrain growth, reduce reliable access to local foods for schools and community partners, and limit economic returns for small and underserved producers across the region."

The volume of food processing volumes also reflects expanded capacity. One grantee moved from not processing any food to processing an estimated 300,000 pounds. The same grantee increased aggregation from 2 million pounds to an estimated 2.4 million pounds, and distribution from 1.95 million pounds to an estimated 2.35 million pounds.

COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

The emphasis on the adapted cooperative principles shaped the character of the funded portfolio, and only two organizations were previous awardees of other Reinvestment Fund-administered programs at the time SFF awards were made.

"Concern for community" and "commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion" were universal principles: all grantees center community benefit in their mission and embed belonging into their practices. "Cooperation among cooperatives" was equally prevalent, with all grantees collaborating with other community-driven entities. Twelve grantees (92%) provide community education and/or workforce development, and the same proportion operate with community governance structures.

These principles manifest concretely in grantees' operations, for example, advisory boards shaping product selection and pricing; partnerships with local organizations extending reach and building trust; and mission-driven operations that treat community impact as a key measure of success.

ENTERPRISE OPERATIONS AND GROWTH

Beyond food access metrics, grantees reported positive operational outcomes that suggest growing organizational strength and financial sustainability. Nine of 13 grantees (69.2%) reported early revenue growth, improved cash flow, or cost savings. Eleven (84.6%) cited acquiring new customers or clients, and eight (61.5%) reported seeing increases in repeat customers. Additionally, 11 (84.6%) grantees said they diversified their products or markets.

These outcomes suggest that the combination of flexible capital, TA, and other cohort supports positioned SFF-funded enterprises for continued growth beyond the grant period. Likewise, the operational improvements indicate that enterprises are not just completing grant-funded projects, but bolstering the underlying business models that will sustain impact over time.

"84.6% of grantees cited acquiring new customers or clients, and 61.5% reported seeing increases in repeat customers."

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE THAT BUILT LASTING CAPACITY

Five grantees received individual TA support from third-party providers (administered by Reinvestment Fund), totaling $47,700. The services addressed specific organizational needs: business planning, marketing and social media strategy, operational planning, branding consistency, and, in one case, capacity support when a grantee experienced an unforeseen personal situation that would have impeded project completion.

Grantees consistently reported that TA provided access to expertise that would otherwise have been unaffordable. It enabled strategic focus on building skills and systems that will serve grantees long after the grant period ends.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

PAL: Play. Advocate. Live Well.
Spartanburg, South Carolina

PAL is advancing Spartanburg's local food system through aggregation, farm-to-school distribution, and pop-up markets in historically disadvantaged communities, providing infrastructure for small farmers to reach institutional buyers.

"Without this grant, the PAL Food Hub would not have the capacity to scale operations to efficiently store, aggregate, and distribute locally grown food. Our ability to support local farmers, pursue institutional markets such as child nutrition programs, and expand access to fresh food in underserved communities would be significantly limited."

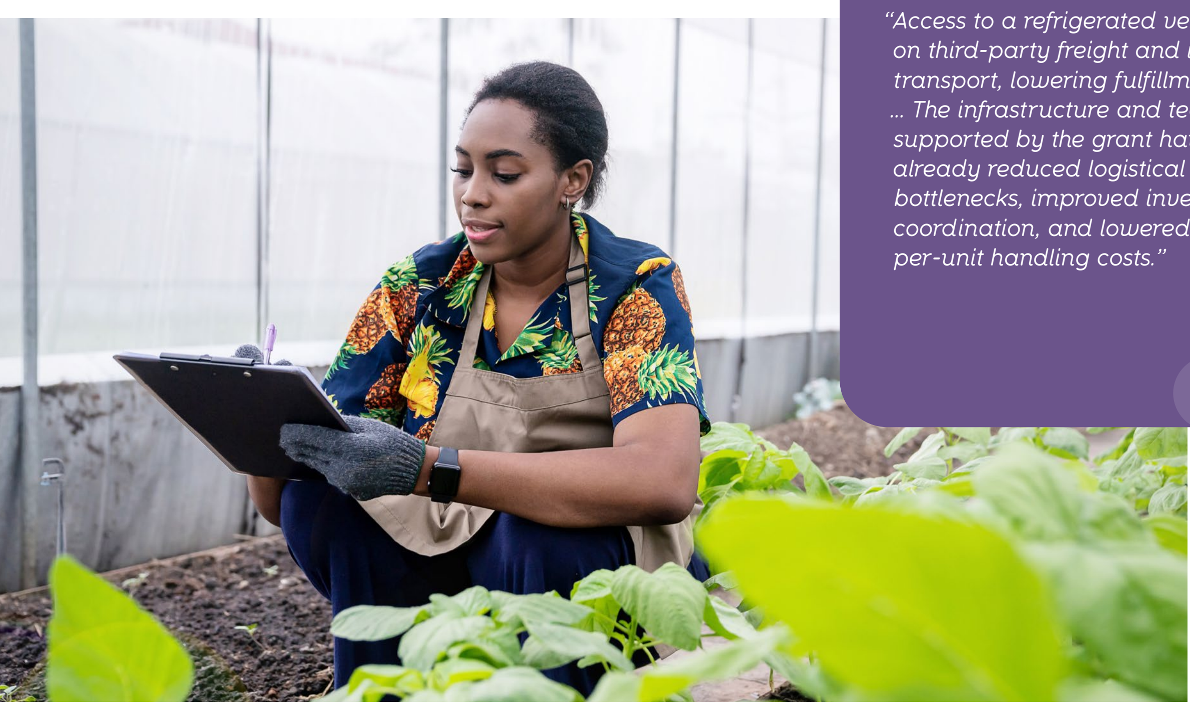
Peer Networks and Cohort Connection

Numbers capture only part of the story. The rest lies in less quantifiable changes: trust built, relationships formed, and capacity developed. The combination of participatory grantmaking and the cohort experience helped form a network of grantee practitioners who understand the nuances of food access work in the Southeast.

Grantees were encouraged to visit each other's locations and received stipends to support these exchanges. Reinvestment Fund also adapted in real time to grantee priorities, offering group convenings for project updates and peer problem-solving; training sessions on financials, debt financing, community engagement, and food business operations; and one-on-one TA for individualized fundraising needs.

One participant shared, "One of the most valuable aspects was the opportunity to hear from other grantees, share insights, and ask questions during the grantee calls..., which fostered meaningful peer learning and reflection. We would welcome ongoing sharing sessions or learning cohorts to continue that exchange."

Reinvestment Fund also conducted site visits, which provided opportunities to see the business models and funds in action, as well as understand operational challenges. For grantees, the visits created space to build trust, ask questions about compliance and reporting, and share their stories in ways that could support broader communications and future opportunities.



CATALYTIC EFFECTS ON FUTURE INVESTMENT

All grantees reported actively pursuing or having secured funding to complement their SFF investments, including from public and private, local and national sources. Additionally, 12 grantees (92%) expressed interest in learning more about financing options, including loans, equity investments, and other capital sources.

Reinvestment Fund provided opportunities to meet with lenders and discuss debt financing, including guidance on determining loan readiness and equity assessments. This strong interest signals growing enterprise maturity and potential investment readiness, exactly the kind of pipeline development that positions community-driven enterprises for long-term growth.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Radical Shoots LLC
Nashville, Tennessee

Life expectancy in some of Nashville's most marginalized neighborhoods is 20 years lower than in affluent areas, with diet-related chronic disease concentrated in specific ZIP codes. Radical Shoots, a microgreen farm, is building a pop-up market network to deliver nutrient-dense foods through a cooperative aggregation model.

"Access to a refrigerated vehicle has reduced reliance on third-party freight and inefficient multi-trip transport, lowering fulfillment and handling costs. ... The infrastructure and technology supported by the grant have already reduced logistical bottlenecks, improved inventory coordination, and lowered per-unit handling costs."

Learning and Adaptation

Learning requires acknowledging not just what worked, but what can be improved and what remains unresolved. The following reflections examine where SFF succeeded, where tensions persist, and what questions remain open for continued exploration.

> "Building trust takes time and intentional relationship development."

FLEXIBILITY AS TRUST BUILDING

Flexibility with grantees regarding both the use of funds and timelines proved critical, given the broader funding environment, shifting economic conditions, and volatility of supply chains. Project implementation for some grantees included logistical barriers from supply chain delays, staff transitions, and evolving market conditions. SFF's flexibility — allowing grantees to adjust plans within broad parameters — enabled responsiveness to these challenges rather than rigidly adhering to original plans that no longer fit the circumstances.

This flexibility required Reinvestment Fund's trust in grantees' judgment and the grantees' trust that Reinvestment Fund would not look negatively upon them for requesting reasonable adaptation. The SFF Program Manager was in close contact with grantees; four modified their final approaches, using grant flexibility to optimize outcomes. Building trust takes time and intentional relationship development — exactly what the participatory grantmaking process, cohort model, and site visits were designed to support.

GRANT DEPENDENCY

A complex question of project sustainability looms over many grant programs: Will this funding help reduce enterprises' reliance on grants over time, or does it simply extend dependency by another cycle?

The strong interest in financing options, the active pursuit of additional capital, streamlined business operations, and increased volume of sales and customers reported by grantees suggest that they are building toward more sustainable business models.

Further, infrastructure investments like cold storage, vehicles, and equipment created operational capacity that generates ongoing value; and TA that built marketing, financial management, and operational skills has created lasting organizational capability.

However, honest reflection requires acknowledging uncertainty. Some enterprises might achieve financial sustainability, while others might remain grant-dependent, albeit hopefully at a reduced level. The distinction matters for how funders think about ongoing support — and for how enterprises think about their own trajectories.

PARTICIPATORY IDEALS AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

The results of the participatory grantmaking process demonstrated real value: grantees felt a shift in power dynamics, peer learning flourished, and trust deepened. However, participatory grantmaking within institutional structures involves inherent tensions that merit examination.

The desire for deep community engagement during program design requires capacity that most organizations lack. Hiring a consultancy to support development, implementation, and project management was essential to SFF's results since Reinvestment Fund would have otherwise lacked the bandwidth for meaningful stakeholder engagement and most likely would have defaulted to familiar approaches. Participatory processes require intentional investment.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Retaaza
Atlanta, Georgia

Rescuing surplus produce that would otherwise be wasted, Retaaza delivers affordable farm-fresh food to families facing food insecurity through mobile and pop-up markets at public transit stations throughout Metro Atlanta. This woman- and minority-owned B Corp connects local farmers directly with underserved communities.

"Because of our new vehicle, the 3,458 customers that shopped with us during the grant period gained access to fresh, local, affordable produce and goods. Retaaza has gained an asset that allows us to immediately expand our community market reach to new food access challenged areas in Atlanta."

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

The Newberry Institute
Hawkinsville, Georgia

Pulaski County has no full-service grocery within five miles, an 18% poverty rate, and significant farm food waste alongside persistent hunger. The Newberry Institute is creating a hybrid pantry-market that rescues cosmetically imperfect produce from local farms and sells it affordably through a sliding-scale model.

"This grant has helped us make steady progress toward long-term sustainability by strengthening the basic infrastructure and operating setup we need to run reliably. The cold storage improvements and food-handling supplies support safer storage, reduced spoilage, and more consistent day-to-day operations."

Additionally, Reinvestment Fund is a financial institution, and financial institutions — even those focused on community development — have cultures shaped by risk management. This creates genuine tension around grantmaking flexibility. What are the optimal roles of funding guidelines and reporting requirements? When might trust-based philanthropy become insufficient fiscal stewardship? Grantees vary in their reporting quality, for example. Some report comprehensively regardless of requirements, while others always provide the least-amount of information required. These variations create questions about to what extent structure serves accountability versus creates unnecessary burden.

> "Participatory grantmaking within institutional structures involves inherent tensions."

MOVING FROM PILOT TO PRACTICE

SFF grantees and Reinvestment Fund both benefited from the participatory grantmaking process. For example, grantees gained voice in decisions, built peer relationships, and were exposed to the grantmaking process through participation, whereas Reinvestment Fund gained access to community expertise and benefited from distribution of the decision-making workload across a broader group.

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

VEGGI Farmers Cooperative (Sông Community Development Corporation)
New Orleans, Louisiana

New Orleans East is home to a largely immigrant, BIPOC, and working-class population with limited food access. VEGGI Farmers Cooperative, a BIPOC- and immigrant-led urban farming operation, aggregates produce from 10 community farmers and distributes it through a CSA, farmers markets, and home delivery for SNAP recipients and single mothers.

"If we had not received this grant… we would not have been able to get a walk-in cooler. With this walk-in cooler on our site, we no longer need to transport our produce 12 miles in order to store it for sale. This saves on time, gas, and space that we have to share with other farms."

There is consensus to continue this approach: 92% of grantees stated that they would prefer participating in grant decision-making processes in the future, and 92% expressed interest in continued cohort engagement opportunities. However, institutionalizing participatory approaches requires ongoing commitment and compensation for contributed time and effort of external participants. It is easy to revert to traditional grantmaking when timelines are tight or when new staff lack familiarity with participatory methods. Sustaining the approach requires organizational priority-setting that protects the resources that participatory processes demand.

POSSIBLE PROGRAMMATIC ADAPTATIONS

Looking ahead, other grant rounds could be improved with additions and adjustments:

- This first cohort of SFF grantees could provide input on the next RFA based on their direct experience. They could also be included in a future grant round's Phase 1 review, bringing more regional practitioner expertise to the evaluation process and helping to build a larger SFF community.
- Additional time could be built into Phase 1 to incorporate a review roundtable discussion of applications; this could help identify proposals that merit discussion and improve calibration across reviewers.
- Phase 2 could be enhanced by expanding the funding range, making the grantees' recommendations about allocation amounts more consequential.
- The relatively short grant period (less than a year) and moderate grant and TA award size (up to $86,136 total) worked for the infrastructure investments that most grantees had prioritized. Longer periods with larger grants could support more substantial projects.
- In-person convenings for advisors and grantees could cross-pollinate ideas and deepen relationships in ways that virtual meetings cannot fully replicate.
- With dedicated funding, longitudinal evaluation could examine whether the participatory process structure yields measurably higher participant trust, stronger relationships among grantees and with Reinvestment Fund, and better equitable food access outcomes over time.

92%

OF GRANTEES WOULD PREFER PARTICIPATING IN GRANT DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES AGAIN.

BUILDING THE EVIDENCE BASE

Research and Data: Tools for Success

Reinvestment Fund complements its grantmaking with research and data that guides capital deployment and policy advocacy. Through EFS-SI, this commitment was advanced by translating complex data into practical tools for practitioners, funders, and policymakers working on food access nationwide.

These tools inform not only where to invest, but how to address underlying market and infrastructure gaps.

Findings could have implications for Farm Bill reauthorization, state healthy food financing programs, local zoning and economic development strategies, and nutrition programs.

LIMITED SUPERMARKET ACCESS ANALYSIS

The Limited Supermarket Access Analysis (LSA) has long been one of Reinvestment Fund's signature contributions to the food access field. By examining income, distance to stores, and car ownership rates, it identifies communities facing overlapping barriers to obtaining fresh, affordable food.

Through EFS-SI, the analysis was substantially refined. The updated methodology accounts for differences in population density and car ownership rates across metro and non-metro counties, recognizing that access constraints take distinct forms in rural and urban settings. Geographic coverage was expanded to include Alaska and Hawaii, and three classifications of access were introduced to enable more precise, context-sensitive interventions. Additionally, the analysis now covers 10 years, allowing stakeholders to track how food access has changed in their communities.

Further, the LSA's estimate of 28 million people living in limited-access areas establishes a national baseline for tracking progress and directing investment, and provides a shared framework that aligns advocacy, capital, and program design. By bridging data and action, the LSA equips local leaders, funders, and policymakers to make stronger cases for investment and structural change, eventually shifting the field from isolated projects toward coordinated, systems-level responses.

NATIONAL FOOD ACCESS AND FINANCING LANDSCAPE DASHBOARD

The National Food Access and Financing Landscape Dashboard complements the LSA by integrating multiple data sources (e.g., the LSA, Census Bureau, USDA, and financial datasets) into a single, accessible platform. Rather than requiring users to navigate fragmented information systems, the dashboard offers a consolidated view of food access, demographics, and financing infrastructure.

In addition to visualizing geographic disparities, dashboard users can identify areas eligible for New Markets Tax Credit allocations, locate CDFIs by state, and assess local market conditions for food enterprises. This interactive planning tool strengthens evidence-based decision-making. Funders can identify strategic investment opportunities; policymakers can target limited public resources more effectively; enterprises can evaluate market feasibility; and community organizations can be well equipped to advocate for neighborhood needs and opportunities.

SCALING IMPACT THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

EFS-SI represents a proof of concept that exceeded expectations regarding not only near-term food access, but also enterprise capacity and investment readiness. It provided a synergistic combination of data analytic tools, and a grant and technical assistance program that featured community-guided design, flexible funding, participatory grantmaking, and cohort-based support.

BROADER ADOPTION

The Southeast Food Forward grantmaking and TA approach offers a low-risk entry point for funders interested in more participatory philanthropy. It maintains funder accountability while creating meaningful opportunities for community voice and peer input.

Further, the SFF model is adaptive and can also be adopted incrementally.

What worked in the Southeast can be adjusted for other regions based on local context, existing relationships, and community priorities. The core principles — community input in design, flexibility in implementation, participation in allocation, and peer learning throughout — translate across geographies even as specific strategies evolve.

For example, the strategic focus on the cooperative principles emerged during the research phase and was organic to the Southeast focus, but it might be less relevant to another region, where it might instead make sense to prioritize a specific type of distribution infrastructure.

"What worked in the Southeast can be adjusted for other regions based on local context, existing relationships, and community priorities."

PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Reinvestment Fund's track record demonstrates alignment of capital with community-led priorities. The organization's CDFI expertise, federal and private grant administration, and now participatory grantmaking experience create distinctive capacity to connect philanthropic, public, and private funding with community-driven expertise for maximum impact. Further, the data infrastructure — the LSA Analysis and National Food Access and Financing Landscape Dashboard — enables opportunities for targeted, measurable investment.

Reinvestment Fund invites funders, policymakers, and practitioners to explore partnership through the tools, processes, and relationships developed through EFS-SI.

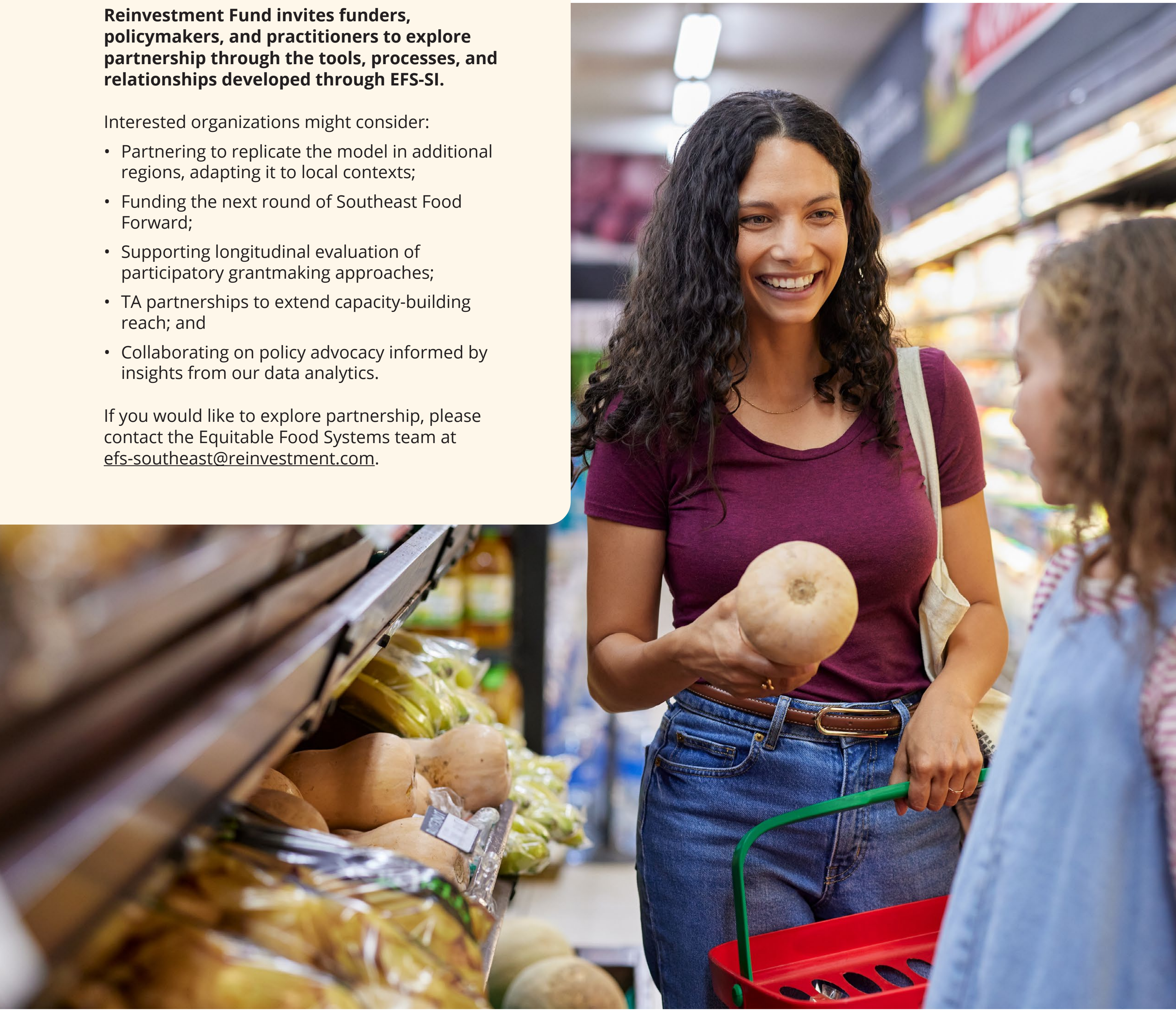
Interested organizations might consider:

- Partnering to replicate the model in additional regions, adapting it to local contexts;
- Funding the next round of Southeast Food Forward;
- Supporting longitudinal evaluation of participatory grantmaking approaches;
- TA partnerships to extend capacity-building reach; and
- Collaborating on policy advocacy informed by insights from our data analytics.

If you would like to explore partnership, please contact the Equitable Food Systems team at efs-southeast@reinvestment.com.

ONGOING COMMITMENT

In conclusion, the work documented in this report is not an endpoint but a foundation for deeper engagement. Reinvestment Fund remains committed to participatory learning — continuing to gather feedback, adapt approaches, share lessons openly, and be accountable to the communities we serve.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SOUTHEAST FOOD FORWARD ADVISORS

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Self-Help Credit Union

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Marquitrice Mangham
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In Her Shoes Inc.

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Spring Creek Food Hub
(now CEO, Freshlist)

Bahia Nightengale
Executive Director for Farm and Food, Louisiana Central
(now Chief Operating Officer, Shreveport Green)

Jean-Luc Rivera
Deputy Executive Director,
Latino Community Fund of Georgia

APPENDIX B: THE ADAPTED COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

The cooperative principles used for Southeast Food Forward were adapted from multiple sources, including the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, the National Cooperative Business Association, and the International Cooperative Alliance. To be eligible for SFF, applicants needed to demonstrate that their work was aligned with at least five of the principles.

- **Voluntary and open membership:** Any person willing to accept the responsibilities of membership and wishing to use services is welcome. There is no discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political affiliation, income level, occupation, or any other factor.
- **Democratic member control:** Members have control over setting policies and making decisions for the organization.
- **Member economic participation:** Members contribute to capital democratically and equitably. Most capital remains the property of the organization rather than being redistributed to individual members.
- **Autonomy and independence:** Organizations embracing cooperative principles are autonomous and democratically controlled, not subject to control by outside organizations.
- **Education, training, and information:** Organizations provide education and training to cooperation members, board members, and community members, and seek to inform the public about their mission and operation.
- **Cooperation among cooperatives:** Organizations work together, creating structures that help improve communities and create broader impact.
- **Concern for community:** Organizations help develop their surrounding communities in sustainable ways.
- **Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility:** Organizations incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility as integral principles in their business practices.

REINVESTMENT FUND

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