

Seeding Partnerships for Agroecology and Just Transitions in the Northeast Kingdom



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AGROECOLOGY**



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“Transformation occurs when we focus on the structure of how we gather and the context in which the gatherings take place; when we work hard on getting the questions right; when we choose depth over speed and relatedness over scale.”

- Peter Block, Community: The Structure of Belonging

Introduction

This report is about partnerships, and it is also about the work that is often less noticeable but can make a big difference in eventual outcomes. This report is about collaboration across teams that each bring unique perspectives and expertise, and the power that can be generated when ideas and efforts are combined. This report is about the potential for Just Transitions in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont and emerges from a shared belief that we need to be turning away from extractive practices and toward collective regeneration.

Community/university partnerships that center relationships represent a unique potential for the co-creation of knowledge. This project involved the [Center for an Agricultural Economy \(CAE\)](#) - an organization with wide reach including programs that support food access, farm viability, and working landscapes, focused on building a healthy, regenerative food system by promoting local foods and the people who produce them, [Northeast Kingdom Organizing \(NEKO\)](#) - a multi-issue, member-led, coalition organizing for justice for the people and the places of Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, [Rural Vermont](#) - a statewide, farmer and member led organization educating, advocating, and organizing for justice and equity in the food system, and the [University of Vermont Institute for Agroecology \(IFA\)](#) - a research institute that aims to contribute to agroecology transitions through engaged scholarship and action that uplifts agroecology as a holistic, systems approach to confront multiple intersecting crises. The community partners hold embedded knowledge of place, people and lived experiences from previous and ongoing organizing processes in the NEK, and the IFA brings an agroecology-based approach and participatory tools for collecting and synthesizing data.

We centered our work around food system dynamics, but as we were reminded time and again, **food systems are more than just food**; issues of transportation, housing, and jobs, and much more are also closely interrelated. This report includes a brief introduction to the sites where we have focused our efforts in this first year of partnership, and describes our process, what we've learned and where we are headed. It serves both as a rearview mirror of where we've come and a map for where we are headed. The following pages include an introduction to the Just Transitions framework, an orientation to the places within the NEK where we have focused our efforts over the past year, and a discussion of what this means for directing resources and efforts toward transformational change.

Key Insights

- This work isn't possible without strong relationships and trust, but efforts to build connection and trust are often invisible and under-appreciated labor. (See page 17.)
- Analyzing the 'history of the present' - considering the lineage of factors that contribute to our current context - helps us to see patterns and evaluate our strategies. (See page 7.)
- The confluence of challenges can feel overwhelming, but if we channel 'earthworm energy' and each do our small part we can realize profound change through collective action. (See page 17.)
- The principles of Just Transitions guide not only what we focus on and work towards, but also inform the way we work. This means favoring collaboration over competition, and always seeking out regenerative, reciprocal outcomes. (See page 4.)
- Resilience Hubs have emerged to fill key gaps in government support in times of emergency but also play a critical role in the long work of community resilience. (See page 12.)
- Food systems are lots more than just food; they connect producers and consumers through livelihoods, which in turn are impacted by broader social and political dynamics. (See page 2.)
- Community spaces - third spaces that aren't work or home - are vital to Just Transitions, giving people a place to gather in times of joy and celebration and to support each other in times of crises. (See page 10.)

Just Transitions

The idea of just transitions came out of labor unions and environmental justice groups, rooted in low-income communities of color, who were organizing against industries that were harming both people and the planet. Recognizing that simply criticizing the status quo and organizing *against* the industries would potentially leave their constituencies out of work, the [Just Transitions framework](#) was designed to encourage organizing *for* the conditions that were desired.

At the core, Just Transitions endorse alternatives that shift away from systems based on extractive dynamics (whether relating to resources or people) and toward systems that support regeneration and mutual thriving. The framework below is an effective synthesis of how Just Transitions operate, where the left hand side represents the extractive status quo where we cause harm and draw more resources out of the world and each other than we can afford, the middle section is the space where we imagine solutions that move power and resources out of the control of the elite few and into the frontline and fence line communities that are facing the harm, and the right hand side is the regenerative system that we're working toward. The premise of Just Transitions is that we need to change the game – through both new visions and new rules.

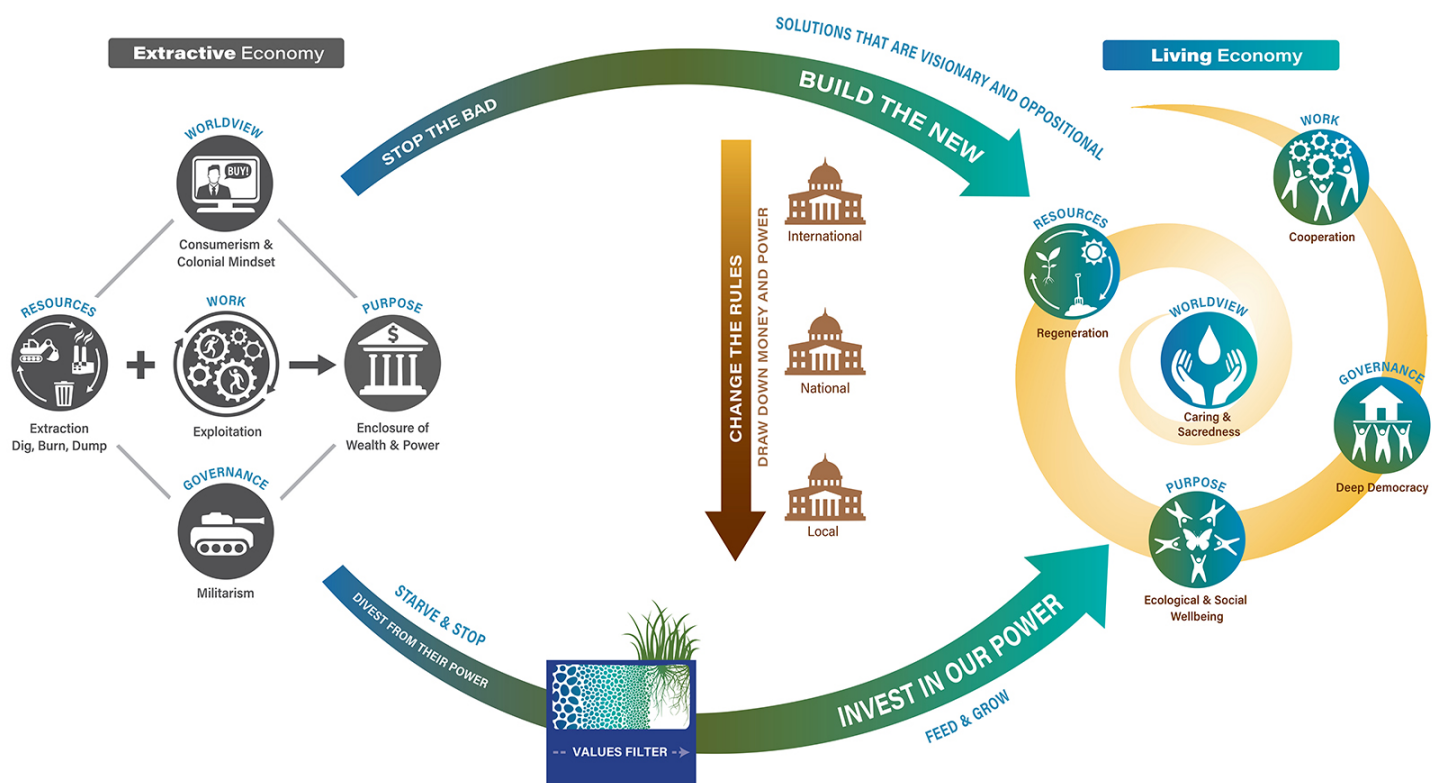


Figure 1: The most recent [Just Transition framework from Movement Generation](#) depicts the existing system and the changes in investments and power that are required to move toward a new paradigm. (Movement Generation, 2025)

One of the reasons for centering Just Transitions in our collaborative work is that all of us were already engaging with the framework on one level or another. In 2015 when CAE began a listening campaign at the Hardwick Area Food Pantry, CAE staff began to learn about community organizing concepts and methods, including the Just Transitions framework. That work was the spark that led to the formation of Northeast Kingdom Organizing. Since then it has been an important concept for both CAE's Community Connections team and NEKO. The framework has been an inspiration and reminder that there is a growing effort to work towards a more just and equitable future for workers, farmers, and communities in the Northeast Kingdom. Rural Vermont began engaging with the Just Transition framework in 2018 as a way to balance harm reduction work while simultaneously pursuing systemic change. In response to increasing use of the Just Transitions framework, principles, and organizing practices within agroecology movement spaces, the Institute for Agroecology engaged in a semester-long learning process on Just Transitions in our Community of Practice and taught a course on Just Transitions in Food Systems 2023.

Northeast Kingdom

The Northeast Kingdom (often called the NEK or 'the Kingdom'), makes up approximately 20% of the land mass of Vermont, while being home to just over 10% of the population, including the highest proportions of elders and people living with disabilities in the state. This rural region of the state is home to beautiful mountainous landscapes, abundant forest and farmland, and scenic rivers and lakes. This is the land of the Abenaki, which remains unceded. The current landscape reflects histories of settlement including sheep and then dairy farming, granite extraction and other industrial waves. This is a place both of strong social ties and the tensions that arise from wide economic disparity and politically diverse perspectives. The region is home to radical puppetry troupes and MAGA devotees, back-to-the-landers and conventional farmers. There isn't a simple set of adjectives that can capture the essence of the NEK, but it has been written about in [books](#) and [articles](#) that attempt just that. A [recent story](#) notes the way food systems work can be a mechanism for finding common ground despite increasing political polarization.

Like much of rural America, the NEK is struggling against the combined factors of poverty (increasing prices for food and housing and a scarcity of jobs that pay a livable wage), post-pandemic isolation, outmigration and substance use disorders. When these conditions are considered alongside increasingly severe and frequent extreme weather events, like the devastating floods that ravaged the region in both 2023 and 2024, it's clear that the coexistence of and interactions across issues often compound the negative effects. To align our efforts with previous work, we began by looking back to 2016 and

the [comprehensive regional food system plan](#) that was completed by the Northeastern Vermont Development Association and Center for an Agricultural Economy, with funding from a USDA Rural Development grant. Though less than a decade has passed, profound changes have occurred over the years - including the lingering effects of a global pandemic, noticeable shifts in extreme weather events and increasing levels of political polarization. A consolidated update and perspective on the 2016 plan will be made available in late 2025.

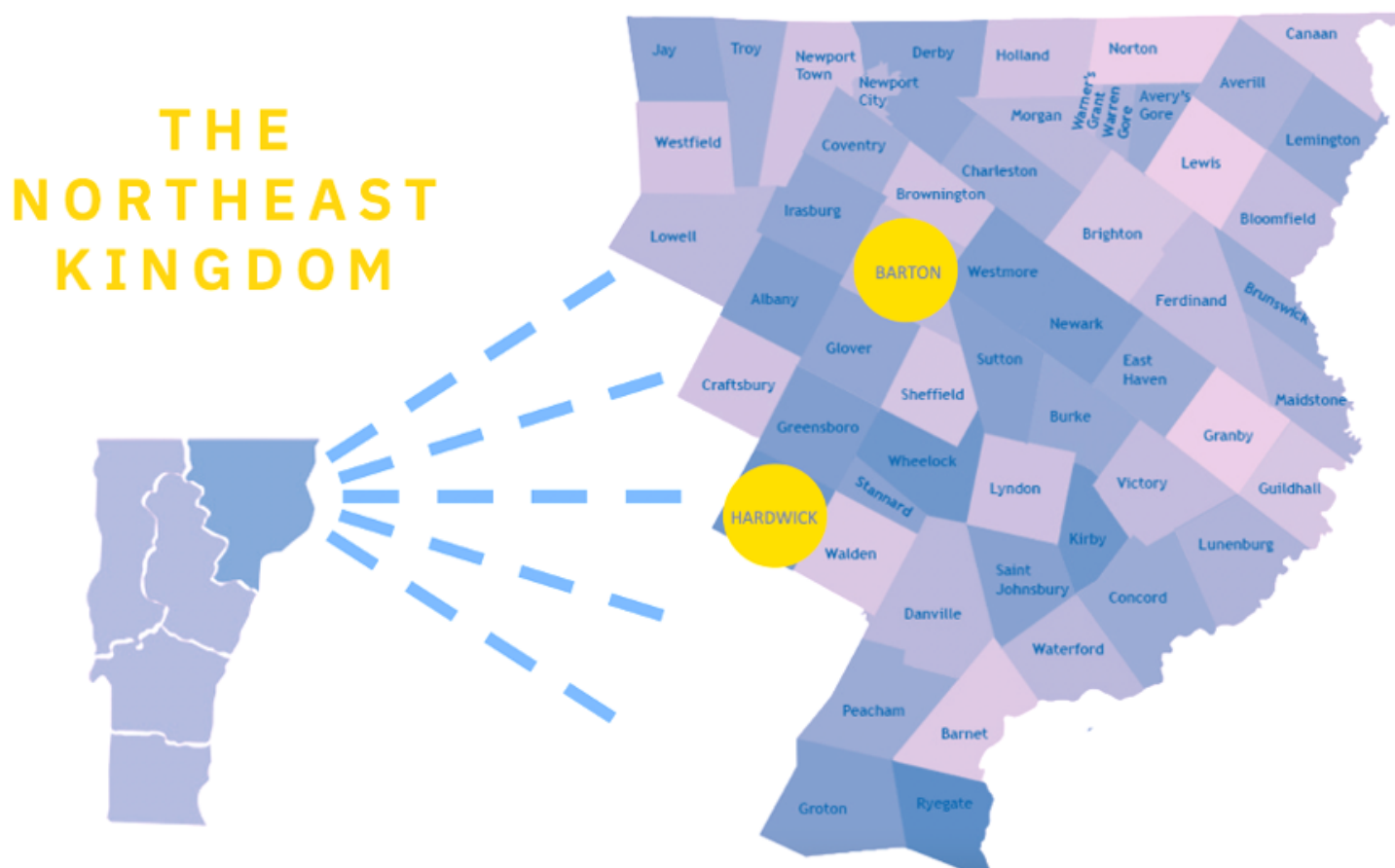


Figure 2: Within the wider context of the Northeast Kingdom, we focused our efforts in and around the towns of Barton and Hardwick.

We chose to focus our attention on two sites within the NEK. Both are important towns within their respective counties and exemplify the kinds of climate and economic challenges that are being felt across the region. When these towns were at their historic height, they were important stops along the railroad routes with active agricultural and industrial economies. A hundred years ago, the NEK's picturesque scenery attracted tourists, and the railroad provided infrastructure for efficiently moving goods and people throughout the region.

Over time, a slow economic decline has continued, leaving a situation where nearly a third of the population is over 60 and a similar proportion live under the federal poverty line. Hardwick and Barton are population centers where CAE and NEKO have developed deep connections and many relationships, and both were hit particularly hard by the floods. Both are former agricultural and industrial hubs that have suffered extensively from globalization and corporate economic systems. Both struggle with economic uncertainty, and both have richly strong roots in the working lands and in multi-generational families and communities.

Hardwick (including the villages of Hardwick, East Hardwick and Mackville) is the town where CAE is based, and Barton (which includes both Barton Village and Orleans Village) is where NEKO holds weekly organizing meetings and community meals. Both places have populations of close to 3,000 people, with Hardwick being slightly larger. Because all of the partner organizations are highly networked in the region, we also went beyond these towns - visiting producers who work with CAE, sharing meals and facilitating workshops with NEKO and Rural Vermont constituents, traveling along Food Connex distribution routes, and learning about emerging and existing partnerships.

This Moment, in Context

Just Transitions are motivated by the distinct issues that are manifesting in a particular place, but are connected to environmental dynamics, social influences and political systems that are operating at larger scales. Working to relate what's happening in the NEK to wider systems, we focused on dynamics that are at play within the NEK while also connecting them to external influences (whether at the state level, regional to the Northeast, within the U.S., or beyond). As a project team we used a tool called '**conjunctural analysis**' to collectively brainstorm around these questions. The point of this tool is to understand the 'history of the present' or in other words, to put things in context by considering the historical forces that contribute to the cultural and political dynamics of the current moment.

A critical consideration within conjunctural analysis is that the forces that are combining to create the present are not random, they represent the choices and decisions that have been made up to this point - but neither are they inevitable; we still have power to see what is happening and adjust our strategy toward what is needed. Regular practice with this tool is helpful for developing skills in shared analysis and is useful when setting strategy, because sometimes an idea that is perfect for one moment in time can be completely irrelevant later. If we don't calibrate our plans to the present moment (especially after important and impactful events), we can end up wasting time and resources toward a misguided end. By investigating the structural causes and effects that are influencing the present moment, we can move beyond the impulse to act based on our instincts and instead be making choices that are strategically attuned to current trends.

In the fall of 2024, the project team brainstormed around the major characteristics of the economic structure in the region, recent shifts in the political and cultural dynamics, the problems that are typically identified by the media or the general population, and what we believed to be the root causes of those issues. Themes that emerged included the slow economic decline of many small rural towns (including the loss of local business associations and the mom and pop stores that were previously at the heart of rural communities), recent challenges including consolidation within the dairy industry, land and housing costs and barriers to access - especially for people without generational wealth, an aging population, a changing labor market (increased connectivity making remote work more possible, and subsequent increases in white collar and service industry jobs while blue collar jobs continue to decline), challenges with mental health and substance misuse, and population shifts that represent increasing economic disparity and real tensions between those who are choosing to come to the NEK and those who feel like there are not viable pathways out.



NEKO members brought their ideas and questions to the table during their conjunctural analysis, held at the Barton Memorial Hall on October 12, 2024.

As we shared our thoughts and questions around the table, NEKO mentioned that using conjunctural analysis might be helpful for encouraging shared analysis among their membership as part of building their organizing plan and strategies for the coming year. After several collaborative planning sessions, we worked with Lena Greenberg from [Community Resilience Organizations \(CROs\)](#) to facilitate a conjunctural analysis session during [NEKO's annual membership meeting](#) and focused in on three

topics that are core areas of focus for NEKO's work: social isolation/connection, just flood recovery, and housing. NEKO already integrates the Just Transition framework in their organizational theory of change and follow an organizing cycle that includes community outreach and listening, research, action and evaluation. They were eager to use this tool to determine whether they were investing their attention and efforts toward the highest priorities of their constituency. In the previous months they had committed to providing critical flood relief support (mucking out homes, providing construction support, materials, meals, etc.), and instead of being fully reactive to the moment or unwaveringly committed to goals set previous to the summer's extreme weather, they wanted to make space for a collective calibration and articulation of where they should direct their focus in the coming year. At the assembly, after a short introduction, we split into small groups to explore the underlying conditions/historical context relevant to each issue (social isolation/connection, just flood recovery, and housing) , and then turned to the particular challenges and opportunities related to this current moment as we considered potential strategies to pursue. **Disenfranchisement** and **disinformation** were highlighted as persistent challenges in each of the groups (noting the **challenges with connectivity** - both for internet and cell phone coverage that persist), along with the concentration of resources and power in the hands of a few.

As the conversation turned to potential responses, proposals ranged from direct action to research and advocacy efforts. Concrete, lower-effort ideas included volunteer teams to help with wood stacking and other seasonal work - especially for elders and others with mobility issues, transportation phone trees as a short term intervention while advocacy for rural transit routes continues, and community meals where people can share food, ideas and connection. Strategies requiring more investment and coordination included a desire for increased collaboration across small towns, villages, and municipalities to streamline efforts and realize economies of scale, getting more funds into the hands of grassroots organizations that have community leadership and accountability, further exploration of alternative senior housing and home share options including conducting an inventory of vacant homes in the area, and continued efforts toward improved rural transportation options.

As the first year of our partnership continued, we returned to the idea of the conjuncture as a way to clarify our understanding of the dynamics we were observing around us. We discussed how COVID exposed the deficit of internet access in the NEK, when kids weren't able to connect for remote learning - and how the push to extend internet service and make public hot spots has also created unintended ripple effects. Now, remote work is possible, which has meant an influx of people earning high salaries and increasing demand for short-term rentals for people who want to spend some time enjoying the NEK but aren't committing to a life there. Tourism has always been part of the NEK economy, but there is concern that the current trajectory is displacing long-time residents and threatening some of the relationships with place (through hunting, fishing and farming) that have contributed to main-

taining the NEK's working landscape.

Having a tool to analyze the current moment is critical, especially when conditions are constantly and rapidly changing. Most of the activities described above happened before the presidential elections of 2024. Since then, several mandates from the Federal Government have significantly changed conditions within these communities. Food access programs are at risk, FEMA support is gone, farm-to-school contracts that producers were counting on are no longer funded. While attention shifts to finding workarounds and new funding sources, our team continues to trace the impetus for these actions to roots that are deeper than their expression in governmental impulses. Recognizing the larger patterns allows us to continue to be proactive in strategy, even as we are forced to be reactive in the moment.

Grounding the Work in Place

Atkins Field is a dynamic community gathering place, stewarded by CAE, that has served different purposes over the years including being the site for community celebrations, the Hardwick Area Farmers Market, community gardens, a small orchard and pump track, among other uses. It is situated adjacent to Cooper Brook, and July rains over the past two years have resulted in flooding that has



Community members gathered at Atkins Field to participate in a guided activity to collectively gather memories and construct a living history of the site. Photo credit: Colin Anderson

spurred a call for rethinking how best to use this space. Before the 2024 flooding, our project team had already facilitated an activity called 'the River of Life' to collect a historical perspective of Atkins Field from community members. The event included participants across multiple generations, sitting together to create illustrated memory maps. By drawing the twists and turns of how Atkins Field has become what it is today, and soliciting stories that represent key moments in time, a picture of what makes this place special and the values that are important to local residents began to emerge. It was clear how important this space is to the community as stories of summer festivals brought smiles and people mentioned time and again the importance of the pavilion as a critical community gathering place during the height of the COVID pandemic and during recent flooding. We comple-

mented this work with a series of community interviews and have created a [short video](#) that will be used as a tool in future design charrettes to solicit input for what should come next as adjustments are made to respond both to changing community needs and a changing climate.

As the conversation has moved to what should happen next for Atkins Field, proposals range from practical suggestions about shifting the placement of community gardens to out of the box ideas like making a pyramid out of waste granite on the property as a tourist attraction. Interest in and commitment to protecting this space for increased resilience in the face of a changing climate remains at the heart of all of the proposals. After sharing sump pumps and community meals at the Atkins Field Pavilion, the neighborhood has already stuck together through some hard times and now wants to think about the longer term changes that are needed. This led to an effort by the town zoning administrator to apply for a grant that could fund the redesign of the entire Granite Street neighborhood. This summer, the community meal series will include workshops about how to handle flooding in the short term as the community works towards a larger plan for how to keep Cooper Brook from ending up in neighborhood basements and in the community gardens. A partnership with CAE and Hazen Union School has enabled the relocation of 10 garden beds to higher ground at the high school so that long-time gardeners can continue to grow some of their own food during the redesign phase.

Check out this [interactive map of Atkins Field](#).

Northeast Kingdom Organizing (NEKO) has organized and built relationships in the Barton community since 2019. In 2023, NEKO coordinated a deep listening campaign, going door-to-door in the villages of Barton and Orleans to hear about opportunities and challenges in the community, directly from the people who were seeing them every day. Talking with over 400 people, this campaign reached nearly a quarter of the population. Funded by a Working Communities Challenge Grant, the door-knocking campaign followed the principles of a Just Transition by focusing attention on gathering the perspectives of low-income people and seniors who were navigating life with fewer resources. Through conversations, it was clear that people were feeling isolated and felt strongly that a community meal site was a critical community asset. This laid the groundwork for reestablishing the **Barton Hub**.

Before the pandemic, the Hub had been a place that connected locals through activities and a senior meal twice per week. Historically, the space had been a vibrant community hall hosting community meals, events including holiday pageants and movies in the theater upstairs. Over decades, Barton – like many other smaller rural towns – gradually experienced a loss of community connection. This was compounded by social isolation that deepened as people followed COVID protocols, and in April of 2022 the space finally closed, and the community meal merged with Glover.



Community members remove drywall from a home damaged in the July 2023 floods. NEKO assembled mutual aid crews to clean and gut flooded homes across the region in both 2023 and 2024. Photo Credit: NEKO.

In July 2023, when the flood disaster devastated the Barton community, NEKO was uniquely positioned to react. They leaned into the relationships and trust they had developed in the community through their listening campaign and established two flood response hubs – one at the Barton Memorial Hall and another supply hub down the road at the Orleans Federated Church. Later, the Barton Memorial Hall became a FEMA Disaster Recovery Center. Initially, the Barton Hub housed flood disaster and cleaning supplies, distributed grocery vouchers from the CAE and promoted Emergency Eats. Over time, non-perishable food was added, and the Giving Pantry was formed. Now, the Barton Hub buzzes with activity. With the help of BASSI (Barton Area Senior Services, Inc.) who were the meal site’s original organizers, weekly community meals returned to Barton in 2023 after the Glover senior meal site was wiped out by the flood. Since then, the Barton Hub Meeting has been established, bringing various community groups and community members to help plan activities, write grants, imagine, and build relationships. Now, the meal serves as an organizing base, and a related program demonstrates the principles of food sovereignty through a Grow Your Own partnership with CAE (where community members are supported in growing, preparing, and preserving food). In response to requests by their membership, NEKO is conducting another listening campaign about transportation challenges, and currently has active youth and elder caucuses who are identifying and organizing around critical local issues.

Check out this [interactive map of NEKO’s work in Barton](#).

Practicing with Just Transitions

As our partnership unfolded, a theme emerged related to how internal dynamics within each organization (and alignment with the principles of just transitions) were critical components of the change that was desired in the wider world. As demonstrated above, NEKO was already operating from a theory of change that explicitly mentions Just Transitions, but CAE and Rural Vermont had varying levels of familiarity with the framework. One frequent comment was that there was agreement with the ideals, but less clarity around what it looks like in practice. We workshopped this question with the full team in March, uncovering persistent tensions and thoughtful questions. At its most basic, the group agreed that answering the question ‘is this extractive or is this regenerative?’ was an important first step in making progress toward Just Transitions.

Examples from each organization began to flow as we looked at where their work was aligned or misaligned with Just Transitions, including: new protocols within hiring committees where direct reports are able to contribute to the creation of job descriptions and participate in the interview process, sharing staff across organizations (examples within CAE include shared positions with NEKO, the Hardwick Area Farmers Market and Hazen Union School), utilizing community meals as a space for soliciting ideas and opinions from area residents – engaging folks in considering their own potential for coming up with solutions to local challenges, and shifting power dynamics at school parent conferences by helping the students to lead the conversation (sharing about themselves – including their own achievements and challenges, instead of hearing the adults talk about them). What is consistent across each of these examples is practicing power with – instead of power over.

David Upson, better known as Opie, is the Town Manager of Hardwick. During a late winter meeting with the CAE Equity Committee, the Just Transitions framework was mentioned, and Opie was intrigued to think about what it would look like to apply those principles in Hardwick. Fast forward to April, and IfA, CAE and Opie collaborated to design a Just Transitions workshop at ‘[Hardwick State](#)’ a “town-wide, weekend-long, pop-up free university” that was organized by the [Civic Standard](#). The workshop began by grounding in shared values and providing a brief overview of the concept of Just Transitions and its lineage in labor and environmental justice movements. As we talked about feeling like a victim versus finding agency in the face of struggle, one participant mentioned [Erica Chenoweth’s “3.5% rule”](#) and the power that can be achieved through nonviolent action when a relatively small proportion of the populace is actively engaged. We collectively identified that the support systems we have often relied on are now faltering (specifically noting cuts to Federal programs for disaster relief, the Local Food for Schools and Child Care (LFSCC) program, and Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) funding, among others). We talked about hyperlocal issues like solar power and traffic patterns, community meals and how they connect to bigger conversations about international

dynamics (like trade agreements and tariffs) and how to incentivize engagement with carrots instead of sticks. The session ended with interest in continuing conversations around the potential for Hardwick to become a 'Just Transitions town' - an idea that is slated to be taken up when the equity committee resumes meetings in the fall.

Navigating Big Changes, Together

[The Yellow Barn project](#) represents nearly seven years of negotiations and planning coming to fruition. This new food hub sited at 'the gateway to Hardwick Village' houses storage space for Jasper Hill Farm and provides a significant increase in capacity and improved delivery infrastructure for Farm Connex - CAE's distribution arm. Throughout the development process, CAE made commitments to a net zero heating/cooling system, installed solar panels, and made other choices that represent investments in higher upfront costs but savings and a commitment to lowering environmental impacts over time. The new food hub building provides office space for the CAE community connections team, an accessible community kitchen, and approximately 7500 square feet of food distribution space including areas for cold storage across three temperature ranges. Jasper Hill's shift out of the Vermont Food Venture Center space also creates additional potential for CAE programs in that building.

The new food hub is having a huge impact on daily operations and represents the rapid growth curve that CAE has experienced over the last ten years (growing from a staff of 11 to 39, and an operating budget increase from \$650,000 to over \$4M). While they maintain roots as a hardscrabble local organization trying to make local food a viable option for area producers and local consumers, CAE has now grown into a position of having statewide and regional influence - and is still calibrating their systems to reflect those changes. At the beginning of the project, CAE articulated a desire to make the food hub project



Local food producers and CAE staff take a tour of the Food Hub facility before operations are transitioned into the new space. Photo credit: Martha Caswell

accessible for the wider community and be accountable to them. They described wanting to create open lines of communication and mechanisms for community input, shifting from a reactive to a more proactive position in terms of work with farms/producers. In support of this, we created a Fall 2024 survey to help CAE update their database, facilitated a producer's gathering in early December 2024 and conducted a series of interviews in the Spring of 2025.

The producer gathering was an opportunity for business owners who already work with CAE to get a sneak peek of the new food hub space as the final pieces were coming together, ask questions about the upcoming changes, and share their ideas and requests for CAE as they enter this new phase. After a tour of the new space guided by CAE staff, participants gathered at Front Seat Café for food and conversation. Splitting into three tables, we guided the conversation by focusing on values from the CAE strategic plan (resilience, collaboration and equity). Participants appreciated that CAE had invited them to the event as they commented on the importance of gathering in person, and mentioned that a convening role was something they want CAE to continue to hold.

Producers expressed interest in ideas like aggregated purchasing (buyer's clubs for common materials as a tool for cost-savings) and additional educational offerings (workshops related to business viability, opportunities to share 'pro-tips', resource lists for small business needs, etc.). Challenges with hiring and wanting to encourage young people to pursue work within the food system, led to questions about the potential for workforce development and apprenticeship programs. A desire to combine peer connection with learning developed into an idea for a problem solving/brainstorming cohort and starting up a cycle of 'hack-a-thons' or other opportunities to bring a challenge into the middle and benefit from multiple perspectives for working it through.



Food producers who work with CAE through processing, distribution and/or business planning channels gather to think forward about how the new facilities offer an opportunity for increased responsiveness to community needs. Photo credit: Juliana Neira

As a follow-up to the gathering in December, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews to learn about current dynamics around farm and food businesses so that CAE could be designing and re-

working their programs and using their infrastructure in ways that are responsive to the moment and anticipated needs. This was a collaborative effort that demonstrated trust from CAE as they sent representatives from IfA and Rural Vermont out to speak with their producer partners. Most of the conversations referenced ongoing challenges like the increasing uncertainty from climate change and recent extreme weather events, and the food hub's increased capacity for refrigerated and root storage were noted as critical resources for the moments when rush harvests are needed before a flood event (something that seems increasingly common in the region). Access to capital, labor, and insufficient time to manage both the production and business sides of their enterprises remain ongoing pinch points, and challenges more specific to the moment include recent price volatility, inconsistency around funding sources, worries about the financial hardship of customers and how that will ripple out to impact producers, and maintaining a reliable workforce. Each conversation included references to these system-wide issues, but also creative ideas for ways to tackle small pieces that feel within reach. With appreciation for CAE's power and influence, instead of asking CAE to take on all of the issues, the request was that they put their weight behind the efforts of others - strengthening their connections with groups who are advocating for policy-level change on these issues (like Rural Vermont, NEKO, Farm to Plate, NOFA VT, etc.)

Weaving it Wider – *what does this mean for the region?*

Connectivity, in many forms, was a theme throughout this project. It's literally hard to get around in the Kingdom - mountainous terrain and class four roads mean that something that looks close on a map can take a surprisingly long time to travel. CAE knows this well through Farm Connex - their food delivery service that moves nearly \$13M in local food per year. Connecting producers to markets is one of the critical behind-the-scenes components of a healthy local food system, but despite being necessary it is often a money-losing venture. Food hubs are an attempt at aggregating and redistributing food at scale so that small producers are not responsible for all of the steps of connecting their products with consumers. Mapping this 'missing middle' of the supply chain is the focus of a new collaborative project that includes CAE, which is led by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and UVM researchers from the Spatial Analysis Lab. Being able to visualize the connections (and gaps) will be an important complement to the grounded work of this project that has focused on building skills and connections to move away from extractive practices and toward options that provide net benefit. CAE will continue to assess their business practices as part of that new project, and members from this current project team will support analyzing those results through the filter of Just Transitions.

Whether it's connecting food and farm businesses to each other, hosting community meals, mucking out and rebuilding homes that were damaged in recent floods, or advocacy campaigns to make sure that local laws support even the smallest-scale cottage industry producers, people to people power

and the potential for locally generated efforts to make a real difference is a clear signal from this first year of work together. As we start to look toward what is next, the potential for stretching even further into new or revived expressions of collective action is at the fore. Ideas like cooperative banking models, community resilience networks, and the revival of workers unions and associations like the Grange - were frequently mentioned over the past year. Given the uncertainty around Federal programs and other funding streams, the motivation for further exploration of locally controlled solutions is strong.

Within our project team, three main observations emerged around the importance of interpersonal and interorganizational connectivity.

In moments of stress, perceptions of scarcity are often amplified. Making sure that 'our needs are met' can often generate an instinct to protect resources instead of sharing them. However, this project has reminded all of us about the **importance of strong organizations** and what is possible when we invest in establishing trust and recognizing our alignment, even as we maintain our differences. There is both efficiency and abundance in working together rather than apart, but it requires investment up front to set clear expectations about roles and responsibilities, and intentionality around enacting the transformations within our organizations that we want to manifest out in the world. Echoing requests from the producers for consolidated services and resource hubs, we discussed the value of resourced organizations supporting smaller fledgling organizations through fiscal sponsorship - recognizing that none of us can do everything, but that when we combine efforts we can achieve more. **This aligns with Just Transitions through shifting narratives of dependence on external inputs and investing energy in nurturing our own agency and initiatives.** Among this project team, collaboration has already deepened through plans for upcoming events and emerging projects, including nascent conversations about the potential benefit of a federation of Vermont grassroots organizations modeled after similar entities in other New England states. Appreciating what we've learned from each other, and looking forward to continuing what we have begun, we've joked that this has been a process of all of us getting over ourselves and realizing that our best chance for success is by working together.

While above we have emphasized the importance of collaboration, sometimes it can feel like everything needs attention at the same time, which is both overwhelming and unattainable. The counter to that is something that we discussed as an opening prompt during one of our full team meetings, but then turned into a theme that followed us throughout the rest of the project. The idea came from a blog post about the real negative impact of apathy and the importance of '**earthworm energy**' or small persistent acts toward the change we want to see. Instead of assigning the full responsibility to fix things to any one entity, it reminds us that we each have a responsibility to do our small part toward making change happen - distributing the effort broadly with less asked of each of us individu-

ally, while seeing the power of what is possible when we act collectively. As one team member noted - “We’re definitely swimming in some very gnarly waters right now and it creates uncertainty for the future.” We know that some of what we try won’t work. What we are committed to is encouraging persistence and believing in the potential for positive change through small acts over time.

In each of our organizations, in distinct ways, we are all working toward thriving, dignified communities. For this project we have been using a food systems lens, but we’re also clear that **food systems are more than just food**. As was reinforced during conversations at community meals and through surveys and interviews, affordable housing, struggles with access to health care, reliable labor, transportation, and more, are each contributing factors to the context in which we are working. While the NEK has characteristics that make it unique, it is also emblematic of many of the struggles across other rural regions of the Northeast and wider U.S.

This partnership was not designed to focus solely on the organizations and their work, but was also an intentional investment in listening to the priorities and concerns of community members. We followed an iterative process of gathering input, coming back together to consider the options, and returning to the community with proposals and requests for further input on what to do next. What we realized as the partnership evolved was how much we had to learn from each other through a facilitated process of asking systems-level questions to make sense of complex regional dynamics. By being people-centered and based in the Just Transitions framework, we worked to deconstruct the silos and individualism that are so prevalent in our work and communities. We looked for ways that together we can be stronger and smarter with our resources, using collaboration to build on what each of us is doing.

Partnerships like these offer the potential for deep analysis that is often beyond the scope of what community-based organizations or academics can achieve on their own. While researchers add capacity and can introduce new methods, the community partners ensure that the work captures the full complexity of the region and does not misrepresent on-the-ground realities. As we close out our first year, we are celebrating the opportunity and resources that made this partnership possible. Seeding new things is a critical component for supporting change. However, we know that for things to really take hold we have to keep strengthening the roots. We are not going to be able to enact the Just Transitions we desperately need if we can’t convince folks to invest in a longer view of the future. Join us - we’ve only just begun.

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