

## **Community Food Systems Organizing**

An educational session at the 2007 Southern SAWG Annual Conference  
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### **Presenters**

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### **Summary and Highlights**

This session highlighted two strategic approaches to organizing from groups working on the regional level. The speakers addressed issues such as racism, classism, sexism, land use and urban development.

The Georgia Office of the **Federation of Southern Cooperatives** has over 40 years of experience assisting farmers, according to long-time organizer Shirley Sherrod. The organization approaches the work holistically, developing cooperatives and markets for products in order to sustain individual farmers with limited resources. Its recent efforts to get a processing and packing facility have been ongoing for seven years. With very little government support, they turned to an organization called Red Tomato, based in Boston. Sherrod claimed, "Markets that should be open to them are not...so partnerships are essential." The cooperative was able to market watermelons and pecans on a large scale through these partnerships, keeping their focus on farmers needs first. "Its all about the farmers, not about any organizations or cooperatives. People, whether community residents or farmers, are at the center of it all," said Sherrod. The cooperative is now developing a community kitchen from an old school with USDA rural development funds. They have also developed their own marketing company called SOCO.

**The Glynwood Center** was founded in 1995 in Lower Westchester, Albany County, New York to help rural communities hold on to their agricultural landscape and culture. The statistics for farmland show a rapidly decreasing rate of ownership among family farmers and actual producers, who are no longer able to make a living with their product. Kasinki explained, "The demand for farmland in the valley is astronomical." It is this demand that makes farmers attracted to buyouts that give them access to the land, but manipulate its use. According to Kasinki, the average age of farmers in the valley is much older than the national average of 55. The problems that come from the sale of

these farms are the same problems that keep the new generation of farmers from acquiring farmland, especially since the largest percentage of new farmers in the area are immigrants with little access to capital.

The ***Keep Farming*** program is five years old, and in six local communities. Kasinki noted, “We’re not here just to educate people, we want actions at the end of the day.” The program includes community forums and assessment teams. The strategies are to preserve rural land, create economic development opportunities, and to learn from neighbors. The group targets issues and actions that aid recommendations supporting farmers. The key to their success according to Kasinki is the notion that they “must include the entire community in the process.”