

## **Land, Power, People: Community Strategies for Self-Determination and Ownership**

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### Presentation Summary:

In founding of the Land Loss Prevention Project (LLPP) 35 years ago, the North Carolina Association of Black Lawyers (NCABL) used as a model the pioneering work of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Emergency Land Fund. The LLPP is a nonprofit public interest organization that provides legal representation and uses community economic development tools to assist in the retention of farms, landownership and preservation of rural livelihoods, mainly in the Black Belt of eastern North Carolina. In turn, land security is the cornerstone of family asset retention, environmental sustainability, and a healthy food system.

The vestiges of “Jim Crow” segregation, coupled with the dynamics of market forces, have resulted in huge losses in the Black farm sector, especially African American landownership, since its height before the Great Depression. With a tenuous hold on less than 3 million acres currently, down from upwards of 20 million acres several decades ago. This is a state of affairs that confounds the collective memories of landowning families. With strong support from African American farmers, the Civil Rights movement overcame the “Color Question” of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Now, in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we are confronted with the “Land Question,” which we must also overcome.

In this, an era in which we are witnessing the rise of next generation farmers and urban gardeners, the lack of access to land is thwarting the ambition of many aspiring agrarian producers. Across the South, rural communities are looking to strengthen the local food economy, and improve health, by expanding access to fresh and affordable produce. These efforts are being impeded by a lack of access to land and structural racism in the farm economy. There are many remedial tools that the LLPP and other African American-led organizations – such as the Black Belt Justice Center, the Black Family Land Trust, Center for Heirs Property Preservation, Federation/Land Assistance Fund, Regional Heirs Property and Mediation Center, South Bronx Unite (diverse urban CLT model) – are deploying to stem the loss of rural Black landownership and urban homeownership due to gentrification. These include limited liability corporations, community land trusts, conservation easements, all of which are effective for traditional forms of individual ownership.

But there is also a different spirit of cooperation brewing in urban and rural areas: novel forms of ownership/sharing/control are emerging to meet the growing demand for access to land. This new sharing economy is being driven by the lived experiences of those who are producing our food and imagining an alternative food system. Yet without agrarian reform in national farm

policy, and new land models that meet the need of this emerging movement in the food rights space, the growth of African American and people of color, rural and urban farmers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be stymied. In that case we will, once again, be faced with a dream deferred, to the detriment of Black and Brown bodies and their livelihoods alike. This is an outcome we must do everything to avoid.