We Need Tools, Capacity and Partnership

Interview with National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

Since 1986 the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) has served as a forum to share information and analysis, build community capacity, raise awareness, strategize and coordinate national efforts toward securing healthy, safe and peaceful lives for all. With its members among local coalitions and immigrant, refugee, community, religious, civil rights and labor organizations and activists, NNIRR has advocated and organized for the human rights of all immigrants and refugees, regardless of immigration status. PRE interviewed NNIRR executive director Cathi Tactaquin.

PRE: How do you incorporate a structural racism analysis into your work?

We try to connect our work to a deeper and broader analysis of structural racism, and in the education work and training that we do, we try to utilize a racial lens throughout that work.

What we hope will be an outcome of that investment is an awareness of structural racism for our main constituency of immigrant organizations and that people will begin to apply that in their organizing, analysis work and their own educational work. We recognize that addressing structural racism includes concerns of immigrant communities; they're not two separate issues.

When you think about your goals for your work, what do you think are some meaningful indicators for measuring progress within that struggle?

For the work of National Network and work with immigrant communities, at this stage a meaningful indicator of progress could mean the openness to including education and training on questions of race and the inclusion of a racial lens in local, state and national organizing initiatives, communications, education.

At a very basic level, we're not looking at direct outcomes, but for now, positive indicators are the awareness and understanding and willingness to include that perspective in the various kinds of education and advocacy work that they're doing.

Do you have tools to actually measure that?

We monitor their publications and activities, we engage together, we bring various organizations together under our umbrella and to our activities, and we attend many of their activities. We have an opportunity to monitor that work, but we don't have a set of tools that we use to do that.

Do you find challenges with the way that work is often evaluated as successful or not by allies, funders or others? Are there assumed measures of progress that are aligned or not aligned with where you're trying to go?

Certainly. Because the crisis in immigration is often one of legislation, a significant remedy or resolution rests within that realm, so political compromise is an issue.

Looking at short-term wins that could have long-term deficits is a constant challenge. The 1986 immigration reform is an example. It was a major immigration bill that was seen as a win, but it included compromises that contributed to long-term deficits and in particular had racial consequences. For example, it included an employer sanctions provision which was acknowledged at that time to have potential to contribute to increased racial discrimination against "foreign-looking" people. The legislation provided legalization for over 4 million undocumented immigrants, but it set into place a program and mechanisms that have contributed to deepening structural racism, particularly applied to immigrants of color.

Also, the arena of legislation, which requires the development of campaigns as opposed to movement building, produces short-term and pragmatic alliances that are sometimes built on very tenuous ground. In fact, it often rejects deeper analysis and stronger alliances that are looking for more long-term, durable solutions. It sets into motion methodologies and immediate, short-term gains over the longer-term benefits.

Do you feel there are starting to be more conversations about how we measure progress, giving movement building the kind of credibility that the legislative campaign piece has had?

At this point there's a great deal of concern that we are not at that place and don't have those tools with which we can codify the steps or the measures for movement building, which could strengthen our positioning with foundations. It's particularly challenging in this economic downturn, where there seems to be more of a drive from foundations to be more pragmatic and rely more on tangible outcomes and arenas where those tools are more defined, instead of supporting movement building. I don't think we are that well equipped at this very critical stage to challenge that and to interact with that process.

What do you feel would need to happen to build the capacity to evaluate efforts in this way?

I don't think we have any key organizations that are effectively doing this kind of evaluation. We would need to have our own level of training about how to incorporate this – and that's coupled, of course, with capacity. There is an openness – with an ounce of cynicism – to get more training. But even if we were better equipped to do that evaluation, how effective would that be given the broader political challenges, especially in our arena?

I feel there can't be the same set of assumptions for all groups – the questions are cookie-cutter and don't allow for organizations to make an assessment. They want the bottom line, and what would you consider to be progress based on that bottom line?

For example, in addressing structural racism in immigration, we have such a high curve based on the standards set by the foundations that even when we make progress we aren't able to adequately convey that.

Based on what we're attempting to achieve, we try to address some of the quantitative elements. One indicator is where we find in our own or members' work a racial analysis, measuring whether that analysis is evident in their communications, education, conferences and events. We try to identify where we know certain sets of organizations that are utilizing educational tools to say that at least these are the organizations that have been exposed to a racial analysis.

Could you share more about what you do and don't find useful in current foundation evaluations?

There are qualitative questions which I do appreciate. Some questions allow you to be frank and give an explanation that may have some depth and analysis so grantees don't think "We can't return to this foundation because we couldn't meet these objectives but we have no way of explaining why." An answer that shows that you fell short isn't necessarily an indicator of failure. The useful questions allow you to be transparent and set up the ongoing relationship – questions like: What conditions changed during this last period that may or may not have resulted in a change of tactics or goals? What were challenges that you faced? What were weaknesses that you found in your plan? How did you address those or did you?

How transparent grantees can be has to do with the foundation and your relationship with the foundation's staff. In doing that sometimes I feel that we are compelled to overreach to meet some foundations' standards. With other foundations, it's more of a partnership with grantees and an acknowledgment that we're working through this together to make progress and there's not an artificial standard.

Cathi Tactaquin is executive director and one of the founders of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. She has also been involved in grassroots organizing and advocacy in the Filipino community on issues of discrimination and foreign policy, and helped to found Migrant Rights International in 1994.
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