



Where are We Going with That? Use Transformational Goals to Measure Racial Equity Work

by Rinku Sen

Racial equity requires the transformation of all aspects of our society, from popular thinking to legislation. Yet realpolitik involves transactions – interim steps – that take us only partly there. One way to assess whether these steps are taking us in the right direction is to constantly measure them against transformational goals. By examining the impact of such transactional advances on public discourse, constituency building and the implementation of policies, advocates can have a better sense of whether their work is moving communities toward meaningful racial justice.

For both funders and organizations in the field, three aspects of change toward racial equity are particularly important to build into planning and evaluation. These are: discourse, which refers to the clarity of our ideas and the level to which they are echoed by others; constituency, which refers to all the people whose participation is needed to make change (those affected, potential allies, journalists and policymakers); and policy implementation, where we track the final outcomes of our work. These categories reflect the understanding that racial inequity has institutional roots, girded by policies and practices that create our targets for struggle.

By transformation, I mean a fundamental shift in the logic and desired outcomes of one or more institutions. By transaction, I mean a helpful improvement that may hint at the underlying fundamentals without actually changing them. All transactions, however, are not created equal. How close each accomplishment takes us to transformation depends entirely on how we design interim actions and imagine their role both internally (within the alliance or organization) and externally (in relation to the issue and its institutions). Measuring effectiveness in this context means clearly articulating an analysis and vision, generating high leverage transactions, then gathering the qualitative and quantitative information that tells us how well the plan worked. The evaluation needs to enable us to address the gap between the long and short terms.

At the planning stage it is extremely easy to be vague about our transformational goals, while being very specific about our

activities. We need more balance there, and more connection between these, so that our work can add up to something new. For example, efforts to support unemployed people of color through extended unemployment benefits are transactional. On the surface, such a small policy change doesn't redress the occupational segregation that affects people of color disproportionately. But this example could play out in many ways, based on the organization's strategy in its specific context. If winning extended unemployment is part of a southern organization's plan to challenge racial hierarchies and build a multiracial organization of unemployed people in a state where most are black, then this might be a critical victory on the way to fuller racial equity by building a unified power base among people with the most at stake.

Progress toward transformation would be more likely if the group:

- ▲ highlighted the racial dynamics of unemployment;
- ▲ emphasized the role of institutions in causing the problem;
- ▲ had a plan for leveraging that victory to move on a larger issue;
- ▲ generated support for a strong government role in a fair economy;
- ▲ took an organizing approach to monitoring access through participatory research; or
- ▲ advanced alliances that will later enable a multi-institution approach to connected problems.

Any of these intentions, effectively carried out, could push extended benefits from being a nice short-term win to being a building block for new racial arrangements. Without a long-term strategy, attention to issue framing, or a constituency plan beyond "outreach," a group is more likely to get stuck in the transactional space.

Clarity+Echo=Changing Discourse

At the Applied Research Center (ARC), we believe that effective evaluation starts with excellent planning. We measure racial

justice progress through the lens of discourse, constituency and policy implementation; each category has several elements.

Changing racial discourse requires both clarity and echo. Clarity refers to how well we introduce or expand the use of new language and ideas (or discredit existing language and ideas) in the body politic. But internal clarity isn't enough. Reframing requires constant repetition, over the course of years, which we call echo.

Transformations have to be grounded in values, and transactions that don't elevate notions of institutional accountability, equity, inclusion and human rights are less likely to set the stage for transformation. This is the difference between, say, arguing that the war on drugs has been too expensive or arguing that it constitutes a system of racial control. Arguing both is an increasingly common strategy.

Our values can take on a vague, rhetorical quality when we don't get specific about how we articulate them, particularly in comparison to the imperatives of a short-term fight. Negotiation is a part of social change, and not every constituency can reject potential short-term benefits such as legalization for undocumented immigrants or reduced sentencing for drug convictions to hold out for a giant paradigm shift such as a new approach to national borders or the abolition of prisons. We can keep progressing while grappling with the real-life implications of policy decisions if we focus concretely on how we wish to change the discourse.

The racial discourse in the U.S. is a mess of narrow definitions and outdated paradigms. Most Americans define racism as a matter of individual, intentional and direct bias. The two primary approaches to race are colorblindness and diversity. Colorblindness is the refusal to see race, while diversity is focused on getting a range of bodies around the table, but both operate from the individual definitions of racism. Proponents of either approach can claim the exceptional story of Barack Obama stands as proof of their success – he's the first post-racial president for some, and a marker of the power of diversity for others. In neither case is there an adequate focus on the structures and rules that keep large racial disparities in place.

Thus, a critical measurement of progress lies in whether we can help Americans, including low-income people of color, understand what causes the racial divide today. Can we illuminate the relationship between institutional action and individual experience? Do we have a clear and appealing alternative to the very intuitive "solution" of colorblindness? Can we popularize the

concept of racial consciousness? Do we have a stock of stories and examples that anyone in the organization can use in speeches, trainings, or letters to the editor? Without clarity about which idea we are trying to change and how, we can't make our interventions add up over time.

A critical measurement of progress lies in whether we can help Americans, including low-income people of color, understand what causes the racial divide today.

In measuring echo, quantitative measures will dominate. New media technologies allow us to create and distribute reports, stories, videos and all manner of other tools that repeat our frames, and they have the added benefit of built-in metrics. At the same time, new technologies have threatened the very existence of traditional media sources. The days of faxing press releases to reporters on your issue or geographic beat will soon be a thing of the past. Fiscal crises and reorganization of print and broadcast media now force a smaller number of reporters to cover more ground. While a mention in *The New York Times* is still very important, it is harder to get than ever before, and we have to learn to use alternative media to get large-scale attention.

New technologies allow us to measure audience size and reaction in ways that were impossible just a few years ago. We can measure the number of eyeballs from particular zip codes that watched our latest video, see from reactions and comments what kind of material is popular; count the number of people who downloaded our reports, and so on. In addition to the pure numbers, we can also measure the kinds of media we're earning (ethnic, independent, mainstream), and understand the nature of resistance or support we receive in the blogosphere. We can do Lexis/Nexis searches to look at the frequency with which local news outlets use our language from one year to the next. We can collect stories about who responded positively and negatively to our new frame, and consider those results against the audiences we're trying to reach.

Constituency

Even the best ideas have limited exposure until critical masses of people become willing to fight for them. For the sake of simplicity, I will define a constituency here as all the people who are willing to fight for a particular change, which should include those who would be positively affected by it. In multiracial

organizing of any kind, a common problem is that groups make “outreach” plans to get particular communities engaged in an agenda that is already set. This is extremely common among predominantly white organizations that wish to appear diverse or to deflect attempts to split them from communities of color. But it can also be seen among organizations of color that want to work with others. The outreach model sidesteps the hard work of building constituency: conversation and research to understand how the problem affects that community, working through any obstacles together, addressing historic conflicts, crafting priority solutions that work for all, and framing the issue broadly enough to draw multiple communities. Efforts that aim for real constituency engagement have to know and act on the difference between outreach and organizing.

In a transformative constituency-building strategy, then, we would have to measure the actual ownership a particular group of people is taking on a given issue, and the sophistication with which it is developing its power base. Ownership is marked to some degree by decentralized engagement – when groups commit themselves to a particular fight, picking up its framework, demands, or tactics in their own context. The immigrant rights movement offers an excellent example, as thousands of tiny organizations in Latino, African American, Asian and white communities nationwide have marched together for immigration reform. A constituency of color, though, does not stand in for the analysis that drives the discourse intervention. While people of color are more likely to acknowledge the presence of racial discrimination, they aren’t necessarily more likely to see its institutional and structural dimensions.

Some of the goals and markers of such organizing might include:

- ▲ internal alignment on concepts, frames and goals;
- ▲ a new group of people identifying with racial justice;
- ▲ expanded set of leaders with particular skills;
- ▲ communities taking initiative to start work on an issue, and
- ▲ progress on resolving historic conflicts.

Demographics are also critical to measure in constituency building. This is where most foundations and many organizations begin and end their evaluative inquiry into race. While diverse demographics don’t guarantee successful advocacy or implementation, it is important to set demographic goals based on your strategy and values, and to measure progress against those goals. At ARC, we ask attendees of our programs to fill out a demographic survey because we are concerned with reaching large numbers of young people as well as particular racial groups.

Implementation

Ultimately, we want our racial equity work to change public policy and institutional practice. Rarely do we win the exact policy we want at once, particularly in our most ambitious efforts. Thus, it’s critical to be able to measure the meaning of incremental change here, particularly the role of lost policy struggles in creating or slowing momentum toward the victory. I use policy very broadly here to refer to legislation, regulations and practice. The point here isn’t to have all the questions answered with a yes, but rather to identify the remaining space between our goals and our achievements so that we can adjust the strategy. This is an especially important principle in long-term efforts to make change. Because compromise is an inevitable part of those efforts, assessing policy implementation against those goals will always produce shortfalls – the question is whether we can leverage the victories for further struggle. This is a good reason to build data gathering into most policy demands – data tells us whether our solution is working and what else needs to be done. A recent example is in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) that Congress passed to stimulate the economy. A group of organizations worked to get antidiscrimination guidelines built into the bill itself, but only succeeded in getting the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to use them in setting regulations for the act’s implementation. The mandate is less strong, and a regulatory victory has less effect on the discourse than a legislative one, but the OMB adoption nevertheless offers leverage to state and local groups that hope to influence the distribution of ARRA funds. That answer would be reflected as a response to the third question below.

Some of the key questions here are:

- ▲ Which policymakers supported us, and why?
- ▲ How did the final policy compare with our demands? What did we gain and what is still left to fight for?
- ▲ Did we pass new policy, create implementation guidelines or both?
- ▲ How are we monitoring the effective implementation of the policy?
- ▲ Is there an explicit focus on reducing racial disparities or generating racial equity built into the plan? If not, did we develop a way to keep that frame in place?

Consider the example of the Organizing Apprenticeship Project (OAP) in Minnesota. OAP is an intermediary organization that trains and supports community groups. For ten years, it had done good work in diversifying its own base. About half of its trainees, board members and small staff were people of color. About five

years ago, however, they were unable to prevent internal conflict over its racial direction. Several key players began to organize internally around a set of demands designed to make OAP prove that it was a racial justice organization. In the end, the board of directors (including members of color) rejected their demands, two board members and one staff person left the group, and OAP initiated a racial justice assessment of its work and the context in which it was operating.

During that assessment, board members and staff interviewed 60 Minnesota activists of color. They discovered that while people gave them credit for working hard on inclusionary organizational practices, the state's racial politics were pathetic. Communities of color lacked power not just in the mainstream, but also within progressive circles, greatly limiting their ability to push an equity agenda. The diversity that OAP had built, devoid of an actual racial analysis, wasn't enough to help the group move beyond reaching out to communities to actually integrating the concerns of communities of color into a broad progressive agenda.

As they reflected on the fallout of the internal struggle, OAP also began searching for projects that could change the larger landscape. Their first project was a Legislative Report Card on Racial Equity, wherein they graded state legislatures on their performance against a set of racial equity criteria. They organized a committee of advocates and community leaders, including traditional community organizations, ethnic associations, workers' organizations and others who reviewed the criteria and chose bills to track through the legislative session. The report analyzed the racial impact of bills, and then graded each public official on their vote. The grades were often predictable, but sometimes not. For example, conservative legislators sometimes voted progressively on race issues as they tried to keep up with the rapidly changing demographics of their districts. Legislators of color sometimes received poor grades because they didn't take leadership on issues of racial equity and show up to vote.

The first year OAP released the report, the state's largest daily newspaper, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, refused to publish the story that its reporter produced. The head of the editorial board told OAP's director by phone that the newspaper had its own

The newspaper's editorial said that all of the state's policy proposals should be subjected to a racial impact analysis just like those in the report card.

view of racial disparities, and racism had done nothing to do with it; the board leader essentially accused OAP of race-baiting. Months later, OAP helped someone who had a good relationship with the editors to develop the language to describe the need for a racial equity lens. That ally set up a meeting between OAP and the editorial board. Following the next report card, the newspaper's editorial said that all of the state's policy proposals should be subjected to a racial impact analysis just like those in the report card. Since then, OAP has also started an educational equity collaborative that has recently fought for and won the practice of racial impact analysis at the district level.

By circling back year after year to the report card, they have continued the discussion — and created echo — on a significantly different, more meaningful terrain than where it started.

OAP's first report card named five champions of equity — lawmakers who sponsored multiple bills that could possibly impact people of color in particular. The fourth report named 31 champions. The champions, from both sides of the political aisle, represented rural, suburban and urban districts with varying concentrations of constituents of color. In addition, the state legislature as a whole and the governor showed improvement in major issue areas. In the first report, none of the criminal justice bills studied were signed into law. By the fourth, pass rates on progressive criminal justice bills rose to 100 percent. OAP found a way — first by laying out the standard, then by persisting in efforts to reach the *Star Tribune* and state legislators — to bring significantly more clarity to discussions of racial equity. By circling back year after year to the report card, they have continued the discussion — and created echo — on a significantly different, more meaningful terrain than where it started.

Within five years, OAP's members made major progress in all three areas of evaluation: they've shifted the discourse and established a racial equity standard for the state's policymakers, starting with internal alignment on the concept of racial equity itself. They've built an invested constituency among people of color. And they're on their way to policy implementation. Each of these accomplishments reflects to OAP's transformational approach to racial equity. The progress on criminal justice bills and in other policy areas are still small markers, of course, but they constitute a great deal more progress than OAP and

its allies had when their primary definition of equity was the supremely transactional notion of getting diverse bodies in the room. The transformation strategy emerged from their deep inquiry process and thorough evaluation of each step they took against the goal of building and exercising multiracial power in pursuit of racial equity.

This paper suggests broad categories in which we can do our planning and evaluation, but in the end, there need to be enough resources devoted to the act of evaluation for the movement to achieve real scale. The tools and time available to racial justice groups for these activities need to be greatly expanded. While external evaluators can be important at particular times, consistent internal planning and evaluation will have the most effect on a group's commitment to and skill over time.

Achieving racial equity is more than possible, but it means starting with clear definitions and goals. As funders and grantees alike struggle to measure their impact, identifying precise indicators will be increasingly important. Those indicators need to be grounded in a core reality of doing this work – we never win the most important changes in a linear trajectory. There's always pushback, loss, compromise that makes the line of progress loop back and forth. Ultimately we have to take ourselves out of the daily work enough to make sure that it is the right work.

Rinku Sen, president and executive director of the Applied Research Center (ARC) and publisher of *ColorLines Magazine*, is a leading figure in the racial justice movement. Rinku has written extensively about immigration, community organizing and women's lives for a wide variety of publications including *The Huffington Post*, *Jack and Jill Politics*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Forbes.com*. Her latest book, *The Accidental American: Immigration and Citizenship in the Age of Globalization* (Berrett-Koehler) won the Nautilus Book Award Silver Medal. She is also a member of the PRE Advisory Board. www.arc.org