

Evaluating the Racial Justice Movement: Voices from the Frontlines

PRE Executive Director Lori Villarosa conducted a series of interviews with community activists engaged in racial justice efforts to hear their perspectives on the prospects and challenges of evaluating their organizations' progress. In early 2010, she spoke with Dan Petegorsky and Kalpana Krishnamurthy of Western States Center, based in Portland, Oregon; Cathi Tactaquin, executive director of the Oakland, California-based National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, and Gihan Perera and Badili Jones of the Miami Workers Center. Following are excerpts from each of these conversations.

Identifying Markers of Change at Multiple Levels Interview with Western States Center

Dan Petegorsky (DP) and **Kalpana Krishnamurthy (KK)** are staff members of Western States Center, which was established to help strengthen and further develop the progressive movement in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming. For more than two decades, the center has served to connect Western activists, building their sense of shared values, honing their strategies for building power, sharpening their political analyses and forging relationships and alliances with the broader movement for social, economic, racial and environmental justice. Its Research and Action for Change and Equity Program (RACE) supports organizations building power in communities of color, immigrant and refugee groups and communities in addressing vital racial justice issues.

PRE: What do you think are meaningful indicators for measuring progress in addressing structural racism?

KK: I think there are some new tools that cities, governments and organizations are pushing to help us get there – racial equity impact statements, racial equity report cards.

There are ways of evaluating the end impact of policy through the racial disparity lens and ensuring that you have race-neutral outcomes at the forefront of policy rather than 20 years down the line. Some of those tools have gained traction in ways that are significant. For example, assuring that there are racial equity benchmarks in jobs programs that happen at the state level – these types of benchmarks are how the measure of progress can be made. And we have been trying to figure out what those tools were going to be for years now.

DP: It can, though, be very challenging to measure and evaluate strategic interventions to address structural racism. Over time it's not difficult, methodologically, to measure progress or retrenchment in structural racism as it affects various sectors

– housing, political representation, educational achievement, employment, wealth creation. We know how to conduct disparity studies and how to measure whether the end effects of policies, culture, education are affecting specific populations – until laws are passed making it illegal to collect such information.

When we're measuring the progress of interventions year to year in the context of larger forces, how do we know when it may be that there's no change but we have staved off even harsher numbers?

DP: I'm talking about over longer ranges of time. Depending on the complexity of the data and how you construct the regression analysis, if it's done right, the evaluation will look at those various factors. But it's hard to assess which specific interventions will produce which outcomes within the context of, say, a grant period.

KK: The way that we're describing this may make it sound as if we think evaluating this work is so simple but I think that there's two things that come up as barriers. First, the capacity of organizations to gather and manage the data. When Dan talks about "regression

analysis,” he’s lost me. I don’t know how to put the data together and I don’t think many of the organizations we work with at a community organizing level have the capacity to put that data together either. So yes, we may know how it should or could be done, but the people on the ground and community-based organizations that need the tools have no way to access that data.

Secondly, as much as we’re articulating that there are really clear ways to look at policy – and how race-neutral and universal policies have not done the work that they were supposed to do – the reality is that organizing using a structural racism analysis is still in its emerging stages. We don’t have enough of the right tools that are built around the core fundamentals of different sectors. I think that sometimes we’re using a blunt object to do fine surgery. We do have a couple of tools (such as racial equity impact assessments or report cards) and need to develop more. And some will have to be sector specific. We need both academics and organizers to develop them.

DP: One other thing in relation to what Kalpana just said: even where it’s possible to do some good evaluation – there are reasons why some of the institutions that have the capacity aren’t doing it. There’s another level of fear based on the current legal framework – there have been efforts to prevent you from even gathering the data that you need to measure what we’re talking about. Recently there was some controversy about the city of Portland’s programs that were supposed to be helping women and minority-owned businesses. While on the surface, there was concern because it appeared that 51 percent of these public construction-related contracts were going to firms owned by white men, the deeper story was that city officials were pleased that they had been able to develop any programs at all. They weren’t sure they could legally structure a program designed to give priority to people based on race, so instead they organized it to include a certain level of small business that was not racially defined. So while the 51 percent figure was alarming to some, the city officials saw the program as a victory given the obstacles they faced in developing a response to the construction contract disparities.

Many of the organizations we work with at a community organizing level don’t have the capacity to put that data together.

And of course in this present moment there’s the reluctance of the Obama administration to frame anything as having race-specific impact or intent.

Measuring the quality of intervention remains problematic. One way it’s problematic: in relation to foundations, the timeline for funding is so stunningly short term that it is impossible to measure the impact of any real meaningful interventions in a structural sense, at least as they’re taking place. You can say “Did you do this specific input?” and talk about the output, but in terms of the outcome, you can’t evaluate it within the context of short-term funding.

KK: Too often when we look at strategies and interventions for tackling structural racism we’re only looking at policy outcomes and not any of the community organizing measures that allow organizations to build on those wins and move successfully towards addressing other pieces of structural racism within their communities. Meaningful indicators for measuring the quality of interventions have to be at multiple levels. Often we’re looking at the specific policy, but other meaningful indicators are organizing measures – did it build an organization that is now set up lead other racial justice fights? Did the campaign support the development of leaders of color and white allies?

Do you think there is increasing awareness among grantee groups of wanting to look at it that way, and movement in the foundations toward recognizing those indicators?

KK: I think the core racial justice funders have long supported organizing and so I think they get that piece. Numbers are very important – but in terms of this kind of evaluation it’s next to meaningless. In evaluating the impact on structural racism – it’s a totally different methodology. And yet because that’s in vogue and it’s a field where people can produce numbers, there’s a push to measure that backwards and forwards.

DP: Here’s one question that I would throw back on funders: How in the past you have used the information that you have gathered from evaluations to change how you do your work? Give us places where you have used that info, studies, grant reports in ways that have changed the kinds of grants you are actually making. From the standpoint of evaluatees it goes into a void. Some of it can be useful if it gets you to think about your work intentionally – but I think people don’t have a clue on where the information goes and how it’s being used.

I see cases where rigorous evaluation can contribute to a group’s tactical and strategic success. Separate from that, I’ve found that evaluation is such a fetish among funders but it’s unclear to me what the payoff is other than employing consultants and steering money into it.

I'm not clear on the real benefits of it and in fact there may be harm if all the money starts going into evaluation.

KK: Our movement has to do a better job of doing local case studies that explain how this looks at a local level and show how this kind of framework actually advances the kind of solutions that are achievable for local organizations. Foundations need to understand that there are different roles that different organizations play around structural racism.

Evaluation tools need to be developed with an eye toward core questions of constituency and leadership.

I think for some of the organizations that have gone through a transformational process – that have been perceived of as primarily white – there's a different kind of support that needs to go to them. They need support in developing an analysis of the issues they work on in ways that are connected – not just structurally framed, but actually connected – to communities of color. That's a different kind of work than the work that needs to happen to support organizations based in communities of color doing structural racism and racial justice work who may be seen as “playing the race card.” And it is a different kettle of fish for an organization of color to hold an elected official of color accountable than for a primarily white or multiracial organization to do that.

We need to have ways that our evaluations understand that who the organization's base is, what their history of working on issues is, and what their historic analysis on race is really impacts how those organizations can take a structural racism approach. Some of our evaluation tools need to be developed with an eye toward these core questions of constituency and leadership in a way that they're not now doing a very good job of capturing.

Western States Center is trying to do a better job of framing racial equity and structural racism goals within all of our programs, not just our “race” ones. We're asking groups to look at their civic engagement work with a racial equity lens. We're looking at our leadership development programs closely to understand how we engage organizers in talking about race and organizing around it.

Another evaluation question is: Do we have reasonable expectations of the types of change that can be observed at

different points in the transformative change process? We need a series of benchmarks that can be observed if an organization is going to successfully transition to looking at race in a way that's useful to them:

- ▲ Is there a willingness of leadership to engage in the conversation?
- ▲ Is the whole organization able to articulate why racial justice and structural racism matter to the issues that they work on? Can they then translate it into the solutions they're proposing?
- ▲ Do they consistently track, evaluate and monitor those wins and the ways in which the outcomes are shifting in their communities around racial disparities?

There are markers in the transformative change process and we need to a better job of identifying what those markers are so that they can see themselves on a path.



Dan Petegorsky has been executive director of Western States Center since 1996, and previously worked for eight years as Western regional director for the Peace Development Fund in Seattle. He has worked in social justice organizations on a wide variety of domestic and foreign policy issues since the late 1960s.



Kalpana Krishnamurthy directs the Western States Center's Gender Justice and RACE programs. From 2002 to 2005, she was the director of the Third Wave Foundation, and she has also worked extensively on issues of reproductive health and justice and young women's empowerment. She is a PRE Advisory Board member.

www.westernstatescenter.org