

Mobilizing for Racial Justice: A Current Snapshot

by Lori Villarosa

Projections of demographic shifts in the United States are clear: it is a matter of years before the majority of the population is composed of people of color. Yet cautionary comments remind us that “demographics are not destiny.” We have only to look around the world today to see that deep structural and racial inequalities can co-exist with varied population demographics. It will take intentionality, creativity, strategic thinking and resources to build a deep, sustainable and informed movement adequate to achieving a more egalitarian, multiracial democracy.

The history of social change indicates that such a movement will be made up of many strands – political, cultural and analytical – but at its heart, the source of its power, there will have to be strong grassroots organizations of people of color, leading the fight against structural inequality. One of the great challenges facing us today is in helping shape the conditions in which such a movement can flourish, or to put it simply: how to put the “mass” in mass movement. That challenge is the focus of this issue of the Critical Issues Forum.

Widespread changes have occurred that can impact and be impacted by community organizing – from the flourishing of social media to the contradictions today in voter participation and exclusion. While the changes may be well-known and understood within their own spheres, as in so much of the nonprofit and funding worlds, even when there is clear reason for overlap, we often find ourselves in separate conversations. Those conversations need to come together in order to craft strategies that integrate the many necessary strands with grassroots movements, so that both a racial justice lens and a focus on structural change can galvanize our social justice movements.


In grassroots community organizing, there are new developments worthy of study. New alliances and growing numbers of leaders of color with national influence have emerged, along with stronger multiracial coalitions and the increased participation of immigrant groups. Several traditional organizing networks that were

previously ideologically wed to race-neutral approaches are now open to change. In a recent interview, veteran community organizing funder and current executive director of Interfaith Funders Network Kathryn Partridge noted that while many organizing networks in the past operated with a “colorblind” lens, today there are increasingly explicit efforts to integrate a structural racism analysis into their work.

In the civic participation world, there is greater attention to the value of integrated voter engagement and the growing body of work that is connecting community organizing, voter engagement, public education and policy year-round, not simply parachuting in with “Get Out the Vote” efforts every two or four years. That should mean that significant resources are being deployed not by outside organizations, but instead by those rooted in communities of color, and used for leadership development and capacity building as part of civic engagement efforts. In the realm of labor, organizations such as SEIU and AFL-CIO have recently created positions to specifically build and strengthen political capacity in communities of color beyond short-term efforts that were typically more characteristic of their engagement in the past.

Nationally, the conversation on race has also changed rapidly, becoming more complex and engaging broader audiences in many arenas. There is a spreading awareness and understanding of structural racism and racialization within parts of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, and more ability in recent years for community change agents to understand differences between individual, intentional discrimination and the cumulative effects of inequities long built into systems regardless of current intent.

Other positive changes include more policy think/action tanks being led by people of color, who are using a structural racism analysis and recognizing the mutual value of partnering with communities to strengthen policy framing.



Finally, of particular importance to the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), is the increasing number of foundations beginning to recognize the value in supporting racial justice work and helping to support needed infrastructure in ways that are having a broader impact.

The campaign to disrupt the conservative lobbying group the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is one recent example where the ability to recognize the racial implications of policy and to directly engage communities of color had significant impact. Common Cause and other campaign finance reform advocates have long challenged ALEC through litigation and advocacy, effectively raising awareness within some progressive circles.¹ But in the wake of the killing of unarmed 17-year-old African-American Trayvon Martin, Color of Change, Center for Media and Democracy, and other national organizations made a more direct link showing the connections between ALEC and the “Stand Your Ground” gun rights law that appeared to allow the teen’s killer to initially go free.² Importantly, their efforts further elevated the clearly racialized impacts of that and ALEC’s other draft legislation, which included anti-immigrant policies and voter identification laws that would have disparate impacts on communities of color, seniors, youth and low-income communities. While a number of progressive organizations have long been trying to shine a spotlight on the moneyed political ties of this heavily corporate-funded entity, the mobilizing power of an online campaign targeting communities of color and their allies effectively pressured at least 30 corporations³ to end their support to ALEC.

And yet in spite of some of these promising changes, new practices and lessons being learned, struggles remain because the work is incredibly challenging and complex, because financial resources are still too limited, and, of course, because of the nature of structural transformation itself. Because institutions are too often conservative and resistant to change, most interventions are likely to be absorbed with little significant movement. This ability to resist transformation is even more extreme in cases dealing with race. Backlash can be severe, as evident by four years of vitriolic attacks against President Obama, and by the sharp public divides in racial perceptions concerning not only the killing of Trayvon Martin, but virtually every other high-profile “racial issue.”

Changing demographics, evolving organizing sectors, and emerging lessons have provided us at PRE an opportunity to engage a range of players involved in community organizing, civic engagement and in the analysis of and fight against structural racism. In an effort to bring more of the conversation into the same space, we convened organizers and activists, issued a call for papers, and engaged a number of leading thinkers, including funders and intermediaries, in various reviews or interviews. We wanted to know what they see as their greatest challenges and opportunities. And importantly for the focus of PRE’s work, where and how foundation resources can more effectively support evolving work and respond to the new challenges.

Deepak Bhargava of the Center for Community Change notes that the nation is in “a liminal period – a confusing, contradictory and highly unstable period of transition in which many futures are now possible – and aspects of those very different futures are manifest in our present. The confluence of the economic crisis, demographic change and the radicalization of the right have created a highly volatile situation ... [but] neither the hope for an inclusive, just world nor the prospect of a brutally unequal and racialized one are fantastical – they are both here, right now.”⁴

Bhargava’s optimism for this potential and his caution regarding deepening inequality both signal the critical importance of movement organizing work, especially work that clearly considers the question of structural racism and racialization. One of the issues this volume asks: “What needs to happen to truly meld an analysis of structural racism into community organizing strategies?” Community organizations are in good company here, because while the analysis of structural racism is being accepted by an impressive range of organizations, many of them are still grappling with how to operationalize it.

“Over the last 10 years, community organizers have begun to engage racial justice explicitly,” explains Rinku Sen of the Applied Research Center and a PRE board member. “In the next phase, the field needs resources to move an agenda that goes beyond reversing policies with a disproportionate impact on people of color to proactive solutions that expand access to rights and resources. These include time and space to strategize, access to new technologies, communications capacity, and leadership development tools.”

There are clearly a number of outcomes that both organizers and philanthropists would like to see; and while there are many promising efforts and experiments, it would be false to claim that we know unequivocally how to achieve all of these outcomes in light of many continuing challenges. We have thus framed a series of questions that grantmakers should consider as they work with the field to illuminate lessons and consolidate innovations at the intersection of community organizing practice and structural racism analysis.

Questions funders seeking to mobilize communities toward racial justice should ask themselves:

- 1) **How can activists, funders and others work together to define outcomes that strengthen a community's ability to tackle longer-term structural issues?** Many grassroots groups and policy organizations have been trained to work on short-term, transactional issues that can have immediate impact on their members' lives. Yet, many problems require fundamental change that is harder to win. As Rinku Sen⁵, John A. Powell⁶, Manuel Pastor⁷ and others have argued, we need to help align transactional work with transformational struggles that can lead to significant advances in racial justice.
- 2) **How can we best make investments for the deep, transformational relationships required for communities to build power together in a sustainable way?** There is an increasing recognition that culture, history and some of the personal engagement that might have previously seemed too "squishy" to organizers and funders alike are all critical to movement building.⁸ Such relationships need to engage groups, but in ways that utilize popular education tactics and other tools that centrally involve individuals in telling their stories and in building relationships with others.
- 3) **As we are strengthening support for multiracial alliances, how do we ensure resources for organizing within each community?** Alliances can only be as strong as its individual members. We can't skip over the specific interventions required to build power in all communities. For example, given their unique role in this nation's racial history and their importance to the larger multiracial movement, the field must (and, in fact, has begun to) address the dearth of African American-led community organizing.
- 4) **How are we supporting efforts to engage White constituencies with a structural racism analysis?** White people are critical to the fight for racial justice,

for their own sakes, but also as strategic allies. But their involvement cannot displace the efforts of people of color. The field needs to develop new models for multiracial engagement that includes White people, so they are neither imposing their biases on communities of color, nor unable to contribute the best of their own ideas and leadership.

- 5) **How do we effectively combine direct services with community mobilization?** Groups that provide services can engage constituents in defining the problem, advocating for change, and mobilizing others. Bridges and advances are being made through efforts such as National Council of La Raza's Latino Empowerment and Advocacy Program (LEAP), which works primarily with service providers to engage unregistered and newly registered voters in strategic electoral efforts.⁹
- 6) **How can we support the communications strategies of grassroots organizations that reframe debates, refocus attention on race, and promote a vision of structural change?** In the age of the 24-hour news cycle and dramatic new media tools, opportunities to reframe debates and influence action are more numerous than ever, as evidenced by the Color of Change campaign described earlier. Storytelling is key to this as well as to the direct relationship-building; but to be most effective, we also need strong distribution methods for those stories.
- 7) **What are we learning from the emergence of several local and statewide efforts that are creating ongoing electoral infrastructures to build for grassroots power and influence policy beyond the levels of their individual base-building work?** Investments should be made in both the innovations and documentation of these strategic alliances led by organizations of color with a track record of integrating smart racial justice analysis into their campaigns. Examples include Oakland Rising¹⁰, a local coalition launched in 2006 by several executive directors of color from social justice organizations in Oakland, Calif., or the more recent state level efforts such as California Calls, Virginia New Majority or Florida New Majority, as 501(c)(4)s with 501(c)(3) arms.

Vast changes in society have generated both momentum and urgency, especially at the intersection of race and organizing. Sharing the successes and challenges experienced by a variety of community organizations not only opens a dialogue, but also provides a floor plan for

new strategies. Community organizing clearly doesn't have to start and stop at small-scale neighborhood issues like stop signs and speed bumps. It has the capacity to take on the biggest questions confronting society. Innovative funders, like innovative organizers, can help the field and the "new majority" grow in such a way as to unleash all its potential for influencing debates and building a truly just society.

Lori Villarosa is the executive director of Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), which is intended to increase the amount and effectiveness of resources aimed at combating institutional and structural racism in communities through capacity building, education, and convening of grantmakers and grantseekers. For further information about PRE, including links to many related resources and organizations, please visit our website, www.racialequity.org.



- ⁷ Pastor, Manuel, Jennifer Ito, and Rachel Rosner. "Transactions, Transformations, Translations: Metrics That Matter for Building, Scaling, and Funding Social Movements." Los Angeles, Calif.: USC Program for Environmental & Regional Equity, 2011. Print. dornsife.usc.edu/pere/documents/transactions_transformations_translations_web.pdf
- ⁸ Zimmerman, Kristen, Neelam Pathikonda, Brenda Salgado, and Taj James. "Out of the Spiritual Closet: Organizers Transforming the Practice of Social Justice." Oakland, Calif.: Movement Strategy Center, 2010. Print. movementbuilding.movementstrategy.org/media/docs/6450_Out-of-the-Spiritual-Closet.pdf
- ⁹ "LEAP: A Model for Increasing Latino Civic Participation." Washington, D.C.: National Council of La Raza, 2012. Print. www.nclr.org/index.php/publications/leap_a_model_for_increasing_latino_civic_participation/
- ¹⁰ "History: A Project From the Heart for the Progress of Our People." *Oakland Rising*. Oakland Rising, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://oaklandrising.org/about/history>>

¹ Nichols, John. "With ALEC Exposed, Common Cause Demands an IRS Audit of Corporate-Funded Group's Gaming of State Lawmaking." *The Nation*. The Nation, 15 July 2011. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.thenation.com/blog/162043/alec-exposed-common-cause-demands-irs-audit-corporate-funded-groups-gaming-state-lawmaki>>

² McIntire, Mike. "Conservative Nonprofit Acts as a Stealth Business Lobbyist." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 21 Apr. 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/us/alec-a-tax-exempt-group-mixes-legislators-and-lobbyists.html?pagewanted=all>>

³ "ColorOfChange Applauds Walgreens' and General Motors' Decisions to End their Membership in ALEC." *ColorOfChange.org*. ColorOfChange.org, 26 July 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.colorofchange.org/press/releases/2012/7/26/colorofchange-applauds-walgreens-and-general-motor/>>

⁴ Bhargava, Deepak. "Social Justice Movements in a Liminal Age." *Poverty & Race* 21.3 (2012). Print. prac.org/newsletters/mayjun2012.pdf

⁵ Sen, Rinku. "Where are We Going with That? Use Transformational Goals to Measure Racial Equity Work." *Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity Critical Issues Forum* 3.1 (2010). Print. racialequity.org/docs/CIF3/SenCIF3.pdf

⁶ "A Beginning Dialogue. Marking Progress: Movement Toward Racial Justice." Washington, D.C.: Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, 2010. Print. racialequity.org/docs/Beginning_Dialogue.pdf