

Funders Discuss Approaches to Organizing Against Structural Racism

by Ronald White

Because structural racism is mostly hidden, philanthropic support for community organizing efforts that explicitly names and fights the problem has been rare. There are some important exceptions, however, as revealed by the following conversation with several key funders. Among the voices in this article are leaders of foundations operating within a spectrum of work contributing to racial justice and community engagement. Here, they discuss challenges they continue to face, offer lessons recently learned, and share wisdom taught by some of their grantees.

Leaders in countless community organizing projects have de-emphasized the extent to which race factors into their organizing strategies for fear that being explicit may alienate funders. “Many used to have to twist themselves to not mention race in their work, especially to funders,” said Kafi Blumenfield, executive director at the Liberty Hill Foundation in Los Angeles. “But we’ve been building [toward integrating and promoting a structural race analysis]. We’re diversifying our board not just by color, but with people bringing a racial lens in their analysis. I would say all of our staff and board now share this analysis.” Victor Quintana, of the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, is among several key program officers calling for fellow grantmakers to support community organizing as it attempts to “carve out a program that goes beyond transactional change to one that impacts root causes [and fights for] transformational change.”

The question remains as to what extent funders who support community organizing view structural racism as a root cause. Nat Chioke Williams, executive director of the Hill-Snowdon Foundation, argues that community organizing strategies and structural race analysis are “indelibly connected.” But, he added, “The real question is how conscious and conscientious are we [as funders] about it? It probably is easier on a pragmatic basis to get [foundation] board[s] to be supportive of the social justice and organizing work we do with the understanding that we are doing this work in part to deal with the racial disparities and social injustice; but I think such a pragmatic approach ultimately leads to a type of avoidance.”

Debating how explicit to be about structural racism in community organizing is a contrast to philanthropic communities that are relatively disconnected from the issue or weak in their understanding of how structural racism operates in American society. “We know the underlining reasons for the disparities facing those communities are due to structural racism,” Williams continued. “But we don’t necessarily have an explicit language around it, and we aren’t as explicit about holding our grassroots partners or our grantees to account for how their campaigns involve a structural racism analysis.” Lori Bezahler, president of the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, agrees. “Unless structural bias is made explicit,” she argues, grantmaking meant to address racial justice “can end up with a perverse effect in public policy and ultimately ... a negative impact.”

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The challenge of how explicit to be about a structural racism lens is made even more difficult in regions of the country with reputations for being far less cordial to a racial justice agenda. Tamiaka White, program officer at the Southern Partners Fund, contends that, “We don’t have enough foundations or funders – particularly in the South – that understand the importance of having this type of framework.” White explained the foundations’ reluctance to their relationship with donors: “It’s my personal take that some foundations are, for some reason, steering away from that analysis. Sometimes I wonder if it’s because they are driven by their ability to secure and maintain relationships with large donors who may not fundamentally believe in systematic change or being a true change maker.”

However, as Gayle Williams, executive director of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, suggests, foundations can



no longer sidestep the issue. “What’s staring us all in the face is the increasing inequities in wealth,” she said. “This is getting some attention but the question is how to use this growing attention and alarm in a productive way to do a structural analysis of racial disparities. This is not about ‘playing the race card’ and is not exclusive [as, for example, lower-income Whites will be pitted against lower-income people of color]. For funders, the question is ‘How do we develop a structural analysis of racial disparities across all categories of low-wealth people?’”

According to Blumenfeld, the challenge may be “less a matter of getting grantees to acknowledge and incorporate a structural racism lens in their organizing than to explain what they mean by structural racism and how they are operationalizing it. Ultimately, we do tend to focus on outcomes, even though this is always challenging in organizing, since tracking outcomes for racial justice can be just as elusive. We have an assessment tool that measures their approach to racial justice but we don’t require it. But if their analysis is strong, it may result in a larger grant.”

At the Akonadi Foundation, most grantseekers are aware that the foundation began with an explicit and deliberate focus on addressing racism when launched in 2000. Quinn Delaney, who founded Akonadi, noted, “We tend to pre-select organizations oriented toward a racial analysis.” But Delaney added that this focus does not mean grantees no longer require additional support to strengthen their ability to operationalize it. “Over the years we’ve also offered capacity-building grants to help organizers integrate structural race analyses into their campaigns.”

Bezahler shared the challenges for grantees of integrating a structural racism analysis: “It is about how organizing groups want to talk about race externally, how they frame campaigns. We aren’t saying there is only one way to get at the change we are looking for. We want to see a racial justice analysis in organizing that is movement-based, Alinsky-based and congregation-based. This is

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important for all of them. So a more Alinsky-based style of organizing may not use a methodology that is explicit about race, but they are very important organizations and I think many of them do really great work. I don’t want to dismiss them and say they aren’t working on racial justice because I think they often are.”

More than ever before, community organizing efforts are focused on underlying causes, and on increasing strengths of important networks and alliances for greater impacts. According to Bill Vandenberg, director of the Democracy Fund of the Open Society Foundation, many of these groups “are led by really great local organizers, and are nearly all led by people of color, often from immigrant backgrounds and often by women of color. There are some examples, like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, that have taken off and are really impressive.” However, he added that some issues of capacity and the lack of immediate policy wins could create challenges for continued support of some other organizations who are at earlier stages of development. “There are others that have a really great analysis, but the work hasn’t always happened,” Vandenberg said. “So I felt like we’ve taken some steps to invest in new and emerging efforts, and at the same time I feel that sometimes that has weakened my hand internally when [wins] haven’t materialized. I think some funders are pulling back when perhaps we should invest more.”

There was also considerable discussion among these key funders about the role that Whites play in the organizing work against structural racism. “We funders have to figure out how to extend the proverbial battleground,” said Vandenberg. “Part of a structural racism analysis is also about how White people can be both a barrier and possibly an opportunity. This, at least, has to be talked about.” Esther Nieves, program officer at the Kellogg Foundation, agreed. “We need to have cross-community allies, and that includes White communities and leaders, and people in power positions,” Nieves said. “We need to be able to have these conversations in a transparent and intentional way. We can’t move conditions in neighborhoods and communities unless we are able to cross the street and talk with those who may not have had conversations with us in the past.”

Bezahler shared the example of ISAI AH, a new grantee in Minnesota that organizes congregations, many of which are predominantly White. “As an organization they are doing explicit work on racial equity and education. It’s

very important to us [as funders] to think about how White people engage in that [work], and for me personally as a White person leading this foundation, I am very happy to have found an organization like this really trying to figure it out, because I do think that ultimately the work has to be multiracial to be effective and sustainable.”

Nat Chioke Williams talked about funding the Alliance for Justice Society (formerly the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations). Although the Alliance organizes in predominantly White-populated states like Idaho, Montana, Washington and Oregon, “they spoke of injecting into the Affordable Care Act more support for rural clinics and doctors, because it is in rural areas where there is extreme lack of access and where people of color are much more numerous. So part of what they did was have a campaign that talked about racial disparities by saying, ‘We have to create a solution that addresses that disparity specifically.’ I remember this group because that was one of the times when I asked, ‘How does your stuff look differently?’ and they were able to give a response.”

Ultimately, however, even though foundations will not be able to engage in racial justice organizing without encountering White-led organizations in communities of color, the necessary grantmaking strategy is to make certain that the right questions lead to situations where there is greater leadership and direction from people of color. “We ask about the internal organizational diversity and leadership,” said Cristóbal Alex of the Ford Foundation. “Some organizations need the funder to ask them this question in order for them to have the power to navigate the internal political process and make the necessary changes.”

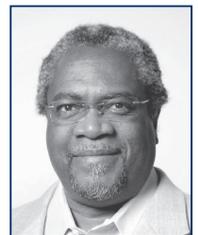
Tamiaka White observed that organizing has had to change over the years to adjust to new challenges, new conditions, and advancement in techniques learned from on-the-ground experience and experimentation: “The models of organizing that got us through the civil rights movement may not necessarily work in the same way in our current day.” At Hazen, Bezahler noted, “We don’t want to ask [grantees] to change their whole approach to organizing; and so for us the challenge is to figure out how your approach to organizing and your methodology can move a racial justice agenda that names race and talks about it in ways that are productive and get at underlying root causes.”

In summary, it should be noted that even foundations committed to a structural racism footing in their community organizing grantmaking are learning as they

go. From the sampling of funders interviewed for this article, there are key lessons to be learned and shared:

- 1) Foundations with a commitment to social justice and concern for communities of color can be explicit about engaging directly with a racial justice lens.
- 2) Funders can effectively help their community organizing grantees address structural racism by supporting their efforts to deepen capacity, recognizing that even if the will is there, the complexity of the work may take added technical assistance and financial resources to test new approaches.
- 3) A structural race analysis works to impact grantmakers’ own practice and can lead to supporting leadership development efforts in community organizing grantees.
- 4) An analysis of structural racism critically shows how and why Whites, especially those who are low-income, can and should be allies in racial justice work.
- 5) Community organizers and funders must work together to define which measures are meaningful toward transformation, particularly when indicators that are defined purely by a policy win (regardless of potential for lasting change) can be a barrier to reaching long-term outcomes yet may be predictor of future support.
- 6) Even those foundations with a social justice or perhaps racial justice commitment may need a more formal set of internal questions and policies to ensure they are matching their values in their actual grantmaking.

Ronald White has over 30 years of experience in the field of philanthropy and has held positions with foundations, from program officer to senior executive levels, with a specialization in community organizing. He is the founder and principal consultant to Building Utopia Consulting LLC, which has carried out work for the past 10 years for numerous foundations and nonprofits focused on progressive philanthropy and community organizing. He is currently interim executive director of Southern Partners Fund and a board member of the Peppercorn Fund.



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