

Building Community Leadership and Power to Advance Racial Justice

by Terry Keleher

In a society highly organized around racial inequality, we need to strengthen and support social change models that hold the most promise for transformative results. Grassroots models – community organizing, civic engagement and social justice movement building – are well suited for advancing racial justice because they emphasize empowering the disadvantaged, uniting different communities, challenging prevailing patterns of power, and striving for systemic change. To rise to their potential, these approaches must adopt new equity frameworks and practices that more directly, systematically and strategically challenge structural racism.

The Occupy movement illustrates both the challenges and opportunities related to addressing racial equity. Occupy successfully popularized our society's deep divisions due to economic inequities and political exclusion. Often missing from the Occupy narrative and strategy, though, is a clear challenge to structural racism. While some Occupy activists and allies have found effective ways to be mindful of race, many still struggle with how, or even why, race must be addressed.

We're missing opportunities to unite the 99 percent and more fundamentally challenge structural inequality. We need racial inclusion and unity to build sufficient power to win equitable change. And we need equitable processes to foster inclusion and unity. Indeed, equity is a moral and strategic imperative. Thus, it must become both an aspirational and operational framework. For years, the prevailing organizing model was to identify common interests and avoid divisions.

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Ideology and “identity politics” were shunned. Substantive critiques of White supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism were avoided. Action was preferred over analysis. Pragmatism prevailed over principled purity. Majoritarian politics – appealing to the majority and “moveable middle,” instead of “minority” and marginalized communities – were embraced for perceived winnability.

While some successful models fusing community organizing and racial justice have operated for years, we are still a ways from seeing wide-scale integration. But now there is more openness and less active resistance. The conversation has shifted from “Why do this?” to “How do we do it?”

Full integration of a racial equity framework into grassroots social change models touches every facet of these approaches, as Table 1 highlights.

Funders and technical assistance providers supporting racial justice organizing can encourage equity-focused practices. I will elaborate with some examples, then suggest criteria for assessing the integration of a racial justice framework for grantmaking and capacity-building purposes.


Vision and Values

Racial equity is the opposite of structural racism. Thus, we need a clear vision of racial equity – fairness in opportunities and outcomes across race. It is important to distinguish racial *equity* from *diversity*. Diversity is an essential tool to get to equity, but it is not the end goal. A clear and shared vision of racial justice helps keep efforts proactively focused.

The Maine People's Resource Center – a sister organization to Maine People's Alliance, a 30-year-old grassroots community action organization – began using racial equity as a leading lens in developing its statewide

TABLE 1: ORGANIZING WITHOUT VS. ORGANIZING WITH A RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK

| ORGANIZING FACET | ORGANIZING WITHOUT A RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK | ORGANIZING WITH A RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Visions and Values | May address diversity (variety), but silent on racial equity (fairness). | Prioritizes racial equity as a core value and vision. |
| Problem Analysis | Uses a “power analysis” to identify targets, allies and opponents. | Uses a “systems/structural racism analysis” to inform a power analysis. |
| Issue Framing | Issues framed around class. Race frames seen as divisive. | Racism, racial equity and racial impacts are addressed <i>explicitly</i> , not <i>exclusively</i> . |
| Solutions Development | Focus on “universal” solutions to “lift all boats”; prioritizing short-term winnability. | Solutions highlight “targeted universalism.” May pursue long-term “wins,” but with short-term gains (e.g., ideological, infrastructural, cultural change). |
| Leadership Development | May strive for diverse organizers and leadership, but not necessarily those with competency in equity. | Leadership of color and multiracial leadership are systematically developed. Equity competency is developed across organization. |
| Alliance Building | Values relationship-building, but emphasizes short-term tactical allies and/or single-issue coalitions. | Develops multiracial and multi-issue alliances, long-term strategic partners, and movement-building connections. |
| Internal Education | Avoids “identity politics” and anything internally divisive; emphasizes commonalities. | Engages in “difficult conversations” about race and identities to build trust and unity; uses differences as an asset. |
| External Communications | Media messages may echo dominant frames if palatable to the majority. | Messages interrupt dominant/racist frames, and highlight equity, unifying connections and marginalized voices. |
| Culture and Practices | Implicit bias is unexamined in practices, politics and culture. | Equity tools and practices are used to counteract implicit bias. |



policy agenda.¹ In 2011, they released the Maine Racial Justice Policy Guide, highlighting “fair treatment, equal opportunity and successful achievement across all communities.” Similarly, in 2010, the Chicago-based United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations, a multi-ethnic human rights alliance, released the Grassroots Human Rights Policy Guide for Racial Equity.² These and other groups are using a racial equity framework to make policymakers aware of the racial impacts of issues such as voter enfranchisement and funding human services.

Structural Racism Analysis

Community organizers begin campaigns with a “power analysis” to identify decision makers to target, as well as allies and opponents. A “structural racism analysis” is distinct and complimentary. Good questions for a systems analysis include “What institutions are interacting and contributing to the inequities? Which policies or practices are unfair? What are the impacts on different racial groups, and who benefits and who is hurt most? What historical developments have contributed to the inequities? What cultural norms or dominant ideas reinforce the inequities?” This analysis provides context and, most importantly, surfaces the causes of inequities, not just the *effects*. It shifts the focus from *symptoms* to *systems* of inequity.

Blocks Together, a Chicago neighborhood organization, applied a structural racism analysis to its campaign for a new branch library. Suspecting their neighborhood was being underserved due to its racial composition, they discovered and documented the inequities. The Chicago Tribune highlighted the group’s findings, reporting that the closest library “serves students from 27 schools in a predominantly African American neighborhood. By contrast, some libraries in other parts of the city serve families from as few as seven area schools.”³ Now the community group had a new issue frame: the Chicago Public Library was distributing its services inequitably. The group still had to mount a strong organizing campaign for several years, but their racial analysis was critical to the opening of a new branch library in 2011.⁴

Equitable Solutions

Countless racial disparity reports and the “politics of grievance” have their limits. It is not enough to critique structural racism; community groups must propose equitable and viable solutions. These can have wide-ranging benefits but should specifically and sufficiently address the needs of those most disenfranchised, especially people of color. Combining a “universal” and “equity” frame (“targeted universalism”⁵) is a formula for success.

Advocating for universal preschool is a worthy proposal, but adding mechanisms that prioritize services to low-income children of color to address long-standing disparities makes the proposal equitable.

The Vermont Workers’ Center helped pass legislation making it the first state to enact a universal health care system. Director James Haslam described the effort:

A last-minute amendment for excluding undocumented workers from the health care system was introduced in the full Senate and passed with a large bipartisan majority. Fortunately, through our past anti-racism and organizing trainings, and our emphasis on the human rights principle of universality, our campaign leaders were crystal clear on this issue: When we say universal, we mean everyone!⁶

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Racial Justice Leadership

Racial justice leadership emphasizes the empowerment of people of color. *Empowerment*, which goes beyond *engagement*, involves leadership and decision-making power. Systems for developing strong leadership of color and multiracial leadership are needed (unless a group strategically seeks to be monoracial). A pluralistic model of leadership, where different perspectives are uniquely and fully represented, is the preferred practice to avoid tokenism and assimilation.

Racial justice leadership addresses the *composition* as well as the *competencies* of an organization's leadership and membership. *Cultural* competency is important, but perhaps even more critical is “*equity* competency” – the ability to model and promote equitable, inclusive and unifying practices. Examples include having self-awareness of privilege and oppression; being respectful of differences; being humble, open-minded and accountable; and having a willingness to share power and make equity an ongoing priority. Racial justice leadership involves infusing equity-mindedness across all facets of the organization.⁷ People of all races – including White people – can be effective racial justice leaders if they develop and conscientiously practice equity competencies.

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For example, Alliance for a Just Society, a national coalition of state-based community organizations, has a Justice Leadership Academy, a year-long program for community organizers and leaders. The program is designed to “expand the training and organizing capacity of the Alliance’s affiliate organizations and educate grassroots members across a wide geography about economic justice issues with an emphasis on the role that race plays in creating and worsening inequities.”⁸ Through deep and systematic training, the Alliance’s affiliates are leading state and national campaigns addressing race issues in health care, immigrant rights and economic justice.

Strategic Alliances

Structural change will require a broad-based racial justice movement, just as it has in the past. Organizations that are multi-issue and multiracial have the ability to make strategic connections across different issues and constituencies, which can provide the basis for broad-based and long-term power building necessary to produce substantive change.

The Excluded Workers Congress connects workers who by law or practice have been excluded from the right to organize in the U.S. The network creatively and strategically unites farm workers, domestic workers, day laborers and guest workers, taxi drivers and restaurant workers, workfare workers, and formerly incarcerated workers.⁹ These alliances exemplify the multiracial and racial justice infrastructure that needs continued development.

Internal Education

To address racism, community organizations need to embrace an “engagement” rather than “avoidance” model. Engagement begins with creating the relational and analytical space for conversations about race and identity. Organizers and leaders can learn how to make these conversations constructive and strategic. Because racism is such a dominant part of many social issues and institutions, racial equity needs to be prominently and continually addressed when building organizational culture and organizing campaigns.

When people most directly affected by the problems share stories of their lived experiences, they can explore connections and patterns. Structuring learning opportunities into the life of actual issue campaigns creates a powerful iterative process between learning and action. It is where the direct-action, organizing model popularized by Saul Alinsky meets the popular education model for social transformation popularized by Paulo Freire. Add in some analysis about how race interacts with gender, class and other dynamics, and people can begin to discover even more connections and options for strategic alliances and action.

For example, Dream Activist, the undocumented students’ action and resource network, has linked thoughtful analysis with shared narratives of racism, heterosexism and anti-immigrant policies into a bold strategy of “coming out” as “undocumented and unafraid.”¹⁰ The Dreamers have advanced the federal DREAM Act to give immigrants more access to college and successfully pressured President Obama to sign an executive order relaxing deportations of young immigrants.

Strategic Communications

With the dominant discourse on key social issues so racially loaded and coded, strategic use of media and technology to advance alternative messages and frames is now vital to racial justice efforts. Conventional organizing models have relied on the power of organized people and action to try to match the power of organized money. Grassroots organizations need to ramp up another kind of power: the power of ideas. Notions of justice, inclusion, unity and dignity – key racial justice values – are widely shared and deeply felt. These ideas are some of our most powerful assets when projected in ways that reach people’s hearts.

ColorofChange.org and Presente.org have built effective virtual forums for grassroots organizing. By mobilizing hundreds of thousands of activists to confront racism, they’ve successfully challenged the corporate advertisers sponsoring the racist commentaries of Lou Dobbs¹¹ and Pat Buchanan.¹² They are also creating new cultural standards for acceptable race discourse. These groups understand that cultural change – including the shifting of popular messages and messengers – must often precede policy change.

Organizational Culture and Practices

A new horizon for advancing racial justice is in addressing implicit bias by instituting consciousness-raising mechanisms such as Racial Equity Impact

Assessments¹³ and equity-driven planning that can help decision makers prevent unintended consequences. Implicit bias can be counteracted with “explicit equity” measures that prime the consciousness of decision makers at key “choice points.” Tools for priming equity-mindedness can be used by institutions, community groups and philanthropic organizations.

The Education Equity Organizing Collaborative in Minneapolis succeeded in getting their school board to utilize an equity impact assessment in their district planning, resulting in saving a school serving the Somali immigrant community from closure.¹⁴ Citizen Action of New York, a grassroots multi-issue organization, used a race lens to critique the 2009-10 executive budget proposal and to advocate for equitable public revenues.¹⁵ These groups are moving the focus from institutionalized racism to “institutionalizing racial equity.”

Funders, technical assistance providers, and partners of community organizing and civic engagement efforts can also centralize a racial equity framework in their own practices and decision making. For example, Table 2 lists considerations grantmakers can use for assessing the racial equity practices of current or prospective grantees.

The field of community organizing is adopting new tools, terms and tactics for challenging structural racism and infusing racial equity into civic action. While many

TABLE 2: CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING RACIAL EQUITY PRACTICES

1. Is there an articulated commitment to racial justice, equity, inclusion and unity?
2. Is a systems analysis used to identify patterns, impacts and causes of racial inequities?
3. Are issues framed with an explicit focus on racial equity?
4. Are concrete equitable solutions proposed, with viable strategies for achieving them?
5. Are people of color fully engaged and empowered in all facets of the organization?
6. Are equity competency and equity leadership developed and infused organization-wide?
7. Are there ongoing practices to unify people across racial and cultural lines?
8. Are there ongoing educational opportunities to strategically talk about race issues?
9. Are there effective efforts to expand public understanding of racism and racial justice?
10. Are explicit equity practices routinely prioritized and operationalized?

of these equity tools and strategies need to be further developed, disseminated and evaluated, they hold the promise for helping to support and sustain a growing grassroots movement for racial justice. Community organizers and leaders can become the visionaries and architects of a new social order, building strength and structural integrity from the infused values of racial equity, inclusion and unity.

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- ⁸ "Trainings." *Alliance for a Just Society*. Alliance for A Just Society, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://allianceforajustsociety.org/trainings/>>
- ⁹ "Who We Are." *The Excluded Workers Congress*. The Excluded Workers Congress, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.excludedworkerscongress.org/congress>>
- ¹⁰ "Our Stories." *Dream Activist*. Dream Activist, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.dreamactivist.org/about/our-stories/>>
- ¹¹ "Lou Dobbs has Resigned." *Presente.org*. Presente.org., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <http://orig.presente.org/campaigns/dobbs_resignation>
- ¹² "Update: Pat Buchanan Out at MSNBC." *ColorofChange.org*. Color of Change, 16 February 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.colorofchange.org/blog/2012/feb/16/bye-bye-pat-buchanan-officially-parts-ways-msnbc/>>
- ¹³ Keleher, Terry. "Racial Equity Impact Assessment Toolkit." *Applied Research Center*. Applied Research Center, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.arc.org/content/view/744/167/>>
- ¹⁴ "EEOC History: 2008 Minneapolis Public Schools Referendum." *Education Equity Organizing Collaborative*. Organizing Apprenticeship Project, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.oaproject.org/initiatives/eecoc/eecoc-history>>
- ¹⁵ "Race Matters: Impact of the 2009-10 Executive Budget Proposal." *Citizen Action of New York*. Scribd, Inc., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/14561165/Race-Matters-Impact-of-the-2009-10-Executive-Budget-Proposal>>

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- ¹ "Race Matters." *Maine People's Alliance*. Maine People's Alliance, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<https://www.mainepeoplesalliance.org/content/race-matters>>
 - ² *United Congress of Community and Religious Organizations*. United Congress, n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://unitedcongress.org/>>
 - ³ "Plea Goes Beyond Books." *Chicago Tribune* 18 June 2003. Print.
 - ⁴ "West Humboldt Park Library Celebration." *Blocks Together*. Blocks Together, 26 Oct. 2011. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.bchicago.org/west-humboldt-park-library-celebration>>
 - ⁵ "Universal Programs and Their Impact." john a. powell speaks to the California Endowment about targeted universalism, structural racialization and implicit bias. Recorded 11 May 2011. YouTube video uploaded by Kirwan Institute at OSU on 08 June 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTckYRo8ViQ>
 - ⁶ Haslam, James. "Lessons from the Single-Payer State." *In These Times*. In *These Times Mag.*, 27 October 2011. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/12122/help_wanted_lessons_from_the_single-payer_state/>
 - ⁷ Keleher, Terry, Sally Leiderman, Deborah Meehan, Elissa Perry, Maggie Potapchuk, john a. powell, and Hanh Cao Yu. "Leadership & Race: How to Develop and Support Leadership That Contributes to Racial Justice." Oakland, Calif.: Leadership Learning Community, July 2010. Print. <http://leadershiplearning.org/new-publication-how-develop-and-support-leadership-contributes-racial-justice>