

# Rigorous Self-Assessment Helps Keep Us on Track

## Interview with Miami Workers Center

**Gihan Perera (GP)** and **Badili Jones (BJ)** of the Miami Workers Center (MWC) reflected on evaluation of their organization's work in relationship to its deep neighborhood and community organizing over the last 10 years and how evaluation will fit into plans to organize statewide with the "Build a Fair Florida" campaign. MWC is a strategy and action center that builds the collective strength of working class and poor black and Latino communities. They work to increase the power and self-determination of these communities by initiating and supporting community-led grassroots organizations that confront poverty, racism and gender oppression.

**PRE:** *How are you able to measure and assess whether your work is having an impact, especially in view of the many barriers our communities face?*

**BJ:** First of all, I think these are long-range strategies. What's needed in the long term includes questions such as: Has there been a change in the public discourse and debate? Is the issue of targeted resourcing being discussed more in the media? Are people taking up those issues? Are policy demands being brought forth on a local level that impact the community in a positive way?

**GP:** My starting point would be: The best example of structural racism we've addressed has been the welfare reform attacks that happened in the mid-1990s. The attacks on welfare were explicitly racial and structural – explicitly racialized against black women in particular and explicitly structural and multi-issued in the sense that they were against Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – but the impact was on every public institution that there was. In our public housing reform work in the late 1990s we were in the direct aftermath and continued impact of attacks on poor black people that came out of welfare reform. We were trying to see three things as successful:

- ▲ Moving the public debate and shifting consciousness around the right for people to be able to get public support. There was a strong prevailing ideology in favor of privatization [of federal programs] and a line that said that people receiving AFDC were "welfare queens." We were trying to shift the public debate to the structural reasons people need support, to historical causes for people's predicaments, rather than focusing on the

individual. Our indicator was the degree to which we were able to get communities allied and media support of that position.

- ▲ Halting the destruction of public institutions and policies that supported low-income or black folks – maintaining public housing and public commitment to welfare. We were successful in that time. For example, one of our earliest successes was to be able to stop the destruction of 850 units of public housing that were at the center of the African American community. It was a huge victory in terms of consciousness and in policy terms.
- ▲ Putting representatives of impacted communities at the center of the debate to speak in their own voices and turning around a cultural, structural view that people either had no agency or didn't deserve to have agency or weren't smart enough. The indicators there were the degree to which impacted people were their own spokespeople; whether other initiatives gave more democratic rights to people for them to speak and advocate on their own behalf in public institutions and settings, and policy gains.

**Your first indicator about influencing the broader thinking around the structural approach – do you have any ways of measuring that?**

**GP:** It shifted, it evolved. Even as we talk about it going forward we're still learning. Initially we thought it was successful – we almost measured success by the number of media hits and were saying if we're able to get this voice out there and this becomes a central public issue then that was an indicator that we were being successful and shifting the consciousness around that.

The second iteration was to say: “No, if we’re getting in media, but always from a framework of being positioned as progress stoppers, victims, or the opposition, that isn’t the same as successful moving.” We began shifting to: “Was our viewpoint being presented in the media? To what degree have opinion makers visibly sided with our side of the argument? Does the Miami Herald put out an opinion piece that supports our analysis and policy recommendations?”

### **What caused you to spend the time to reflect on this and then make the change in how you determined what was success?**

**GP:** We – the staff, our leaders and our constituents – always had a practice internally of reflection. We went to the reflection and said, “Yes we got media hits, but we are still losing – we’re getting more exposure and more alienation – so what explains that? Is the media exposure winning over enough allies to be able to actively have enough power to win on the policy outcomes?”

We recognized that the way that we were being framed in the media hits was alienating rather than building. We began reaching out to different communications consultants to help us. We did a media audit.

We both recognized through that process how racialized media and media framing was. But in some ways we felt that the consultants almost chose to avoid explicit race demands and campaigns because of how disadvantaged the terms of the debate were within traditional media. We learned a lot from the analysis and how it worked, but had a difference with the consultants about naming either gentrification or race in our messages.

We recognized that we were painting ourselves into a corner while the opposition was painting themselves as the future and progress, so we started a real process of trying to figure our communication front out on our own – which transformed our view of our organizing. We understood that we were organizing within a particular political context but also within a geography, ethnicity and so forth – and that our frame had to be bigger than that.

### **What do you feel are some of the barriers and challenges that you’ve had in measuring and reporting on these different indicators?**

**BJ:** Overall there still is a lack of common language or discourse – when you say “structural racism,” not everyone’s on the same page. That’s a real barrier in measuring what’s going on.

**GP:** Similarly, what we’re trying to measure versus what other people consider indicators is sometimes incongruent. The indicators were which policies you’d won, or what material

gains – we were driven a ton by funders to figure out how we claim progress in the work.

But you asked earlier, “How much of the win is stopping more bad from happening?” We’ve been in a deteriorating material condition instead of an improving one but we’ve always had to report that things keep getting better as a result of what we did.

### **Have you seen any change in funders’ understanding around that? What’s the challenge for any organization that believes its work to be in partnership or coalition? How do you attribute it to your role versus your collective?**

**GP:** If we’re really honest – us and most organizations – the truth would be when we got material wins it happened because we were in the right place at the right time. Almost no organization was in place that had enough independent power in relationship to all the bad things that were happening.

All around people were trying to claim whatever they could and in some ways it moved a lot of people’s work towards what they claim they could win, rather than what was strategic.

We’ve always been good at saying who our coalition partners are. What affected us more was that we almost misstated how much the work had to do with all of the other dynamics that were at play. It wasn’t that it was lies – it was distortion that didn’t help the field find out what was really happening and more than anything could have really thrown off people’s internal assessments of what was working and not working.

### **What do you feel helped you to keep from getting sucked into that trap?**

**GP:** We just had a ritualistic commitment to our internal process. We saw reporting to the funders as a necessary evil. As my relationship with funders got better, I felt less pressure, less concerned that reporting was what dictated the relationship. We could talk about what was really important.

### **Are funders more open to changing?**

**GP:** Yeah, I just don’t think it’s as cut and dry – not so much: “You said you would win this. Did you win this?” as a measure of whether you were successful. It feels much more complicated – not in a bad way, but in a way of: “Describe what happened. What did you learn?” We’ve turned the corner to a new metric, to a new common language.

The other thing that was really challenging was having a really good internal analysis of race and how it relates to your messaging, to policy outcomes and so forth. Most of the really good advanced racial justice work had a really strong explicit analysis on race and strategy to deal with race that guides our work within the group. But when it came to messaging and demands – our external work – almost all of it was implicit.

Most of our reporting was all about external, implicit outcomes. These indicators weren't connected to our strategies on race internally. And there was never the choice of why and when to have implicit strategies versus explicit ones and how to message those. That never has been that clear.

***Are you saying that often you use an implicit strategy, but then your measures weren't looking at the difference between that approach as opposed to a more explicit approach? Were you still looking at explicit racial outcomes and trying to assess the progress on those?***

**GP:** When we were measuring the results of our demands, we were measuring them against our internally explicit expectations. For example, in the welfare system and public housing: What we wanted were 850 homes for 850 black families – our external demand was “equal affordability and some return rights” which we understood given the context was all about rights for African American families.

At the end of the day we never compared the two, all of our work and the success of it ended up revolving around our external implicit demands. We never really were that deliberate or had the measurements of how many of those were black families. We assumed that by the nature of the constituency that they'd all be black and that it was automatically checked.

***You don't really know if the implicit strategies have the affect for the constituency that you wanted, because you stopped measuring that?***

**GP:** It may have been correct to have the implicit demand, but our evaluation and benchmark as we went through these demands never brought along our internal evaluation. We went with the external benchmark.

Going forward we'd start with our internal analysis and goal. We can then choose how to explicitly make demands on those externally.

For example: a big myth or reality that we're trying to figure out is to what degree legally we can demand race-based job placement through government contracting or funding. We

know internally we have an explicit goal of both minority contracting and particularly even more for African American males. We understand there's a racial justice outcome we want out of that. To get to the policy outcome the best way might not be to say we want to set aside programs for African American males for government funding. A number of different reasons might make that untenable or impossible. We may decide we can message explicitly but the policy can't be explicit. Either way we want to get to the same outcome.

Moving forward we'd want our explicit outcomes to be clear to us regardless of how we chose to move that in the work.

***Are there particular things that could help – tools, resources that would make it easier or more likely that you'd be able to come back to those explicit outcomes – or is it just a matter of making the decision that you've got to remember to do that?***

**BJ:** What's been helpful in terms of the work around stimulus and recovery is that we have people who are skilled in analyzing the data in terms of what's happening on the ground so we can get down to what the concrete numbers are. We can look at that in terms of what jobs are reaching communities of color? What levels of resources are reaching people of color? Has our message really come forth in terms of concrete results in the community?

**GP:** That's exactly right – and part of the reason that we hadn't done that before wasn't that we hadn't chosen it. We have very limited resources, the two things we thought we could put our resources into were figuring out how to communicate and figuring out what we were demanding and whether we would win the policy.

***What do you feel needs to happen to build foundation and organization capacity to evaluate efforts aimed at reducing structural racism?***

**GP:** What we've been unique about is understanding that we needed help and support and to utilize other skills besides just our own. Foundations, when they've done it well, have been able to put those resources under our control rather than vice versa. We were able to reach out to them, rather than us having to go to one of their trainings or have them come in with some mandate that was outside of our own initiative.

Our collaboration with the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity has been the breakthrough. We're really focusing on outcomes. That relationship and understanding happened because we were able to have the grant money come through us and contract with Kirwan, which really changed the relationship dynamic.



Most recently we've been starting to work with Center for Civic Participation – we're sending all of our annual plans to them to be able to figure out how we can run test and control experiments on all of those benchmarks.

It's an iterative thing. We've built a lot of relationships and impacts on the organizations that work with us by doing that. I think people are used to walking into a relationship largely as an intermediary and then walking away – we have ended up building much longer term relationships.

**Any last things that you want to share?**

**GP:** The learning curve has been messy – hasn't been linear or even a nice curve – the process of learning leading to evaluation has had lots of twists and turns. What's been consistent is a culture of reflection and evaluation – making sense of it all has been less consistent. We're clearer and have some intention, but it's not complete.

**BJ:** That's part of the human terrain. We didn't expect, for example, the Citizens United decision [on corporate political advertising] coming out of the Supreme Court. What does all that mean for example? It's important to have some way to accommodate quick changes in the terrain as well.

A lot of times when people talk about evaluation there's sometimes a fixation on the technical – this tool versus that – when I think for us we've shapeshifted quite a bit as we've learned. The absorption rate of organizations really has to do with their cultural aptitude to create the space and to take reflection seriously.

**Do you see more of our peers going down that path in recognizing that?**

**GP:** People are starting to create evaluation and reflection – but the form and consistency widely varies. There's overall a much deeper sense of its meaning and of taking the time to do it.



Gihan Perera is Miami Workers Center's cofounder and executive director and one of the cofounders of Right to the City – a national alliance of over 30 grassroots organizations, legal service providers, academics and policy groups. He is a member of the PRE Advisory Board.



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# Foundations Share Approaches to Evaluating Racial Justice Work

by Soya Jung

To learn more about how foundations are evaluating racial justice work, Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) convened a day-long discussion meeting of program officers and an informal conversation with funders from the Seattle region in 2009. As a consultant to PRE, author Soya Jung also reviewed written materials and conducted follow-up interviews (see Appendix) to develop this article.

Conversations with several foundation program officers whose institutions are designing racial justice evaluation methods show significant challenges in developing these methods, but also reveal commitment and potential for moving forward. Through these discussions, three critical components in evaluating racial justice efforts surfaced: shared racial justice language and definitions, a clear theory of change based on movement-building principles and a way to capture and disseminate the stories of racial justice.

None of the foundations that PRE consulted for this article had yet established a comprehensive evaluation approach for racial justice work, and few had fully adopted a structural understanding of race in the U.S. Still, all foundations were somewhere in the process of formulating racial justice evaluation methods and had important concerns and promising ideas to share. The most well-defined efforts have been explicitly grounded in structural racism language and definitions, and have yielded examples of how to understand, support and lift up strategies to uproot the underlying causes of racism.

## The Challenges

### What Do We Mean by Racial Justice?

Among foundations there is little agreement on what racial justice is and how to achieve it. For foundations committed to supporting racial justice work, this is perhaps the single greatest challenge for evaluating the impact of their racial justice grantmaking. Without consensus on what racial justice work is, the prospect of measuring progress becomes murky.

“Part of the challenge is defining racial justice,” said Jocelyn Sargent, program officer at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. “How do you know when the work you’re supporting effectively contributes to racial justice? How do you know when you’re done?”

In order to define what racial justice is, foundations first need to establish a shared understanding of how race operates in the U.S. – one that takes into account how racism has been embedded into U.S. institutions, systems and culture such that its dimensions reach far beyond individual intent or behavior. This is particularly critical now, in an allegedly “post-racial” era when public discourse presumes that race no longer matters. But the reality is that within most foundations, staff members operate without a shared understanding of race, and hence, without common terms and definitions for talking about racism.

To help address this challenge, the Akonadi Foundation recently published *From the Roots: Building the Power of Communities of Color to Challenge Structural Racism*, which lays out the foundation’s basic understanding of the relationship between race and social change. The report states, “Real and lasting progress – in jobs, education, housing, immigration and health care – requires the rooting out of racism that is structured into every facet of American life. Without a conscious and sustained focus on structural racism, the impact of social justice will always be limited and short-lived.” The foundation’s view of how race operates in U.S. institutions, systems and culture assumes that no social change effort will be successful without an intentional focus on racism. This perspective is consistent across its programs, regardless of what issues a particular grant is addressing.

Melanie Cervantes, Akonadi program officer, offers this explanation of how the foundation defines racial justice:

Akonadi sees racial justice as the ability of communities that have been locked into segregated spaces to self-determine their futures, to have basic human rights in terms of food, housing, shelter, education, etc., and the ability to live in a way that is sustainable and healthy... Racial justice should not