

Getting on the Right Road: Up-Front Assessment is Key

by Maya Wiley



What does it mean to measure the transformation of race? Funders and grantees are increasingly asked to predetermine measurable impacts and quantify them. We are asked to develop strategies, relationships, and outcomes in a linear equation. We assume, we do and we report. But the structural racism lens, a form of racialized “systems thinking,” draws us to multidimensional, complex institutional and social relationships, policies, and practices. It’s more of a constellation than an equation. It’s the stars, not algebra.

The organization I head, the Center for Social Inclusion (CSI), is a strategy developer and implementer. Working with organizations in the field, funders and grantees, we strive to think through evaluation that helps us develop and shift our strategies over time, determining if we are on the road to racial reform – transformation to a nation where racial disparities not only disappear, but we have raised the floor beneath which no resident of this nation will fall.

Given that we are working with great complexity, it is a challenge to determine measurable outcomes before we start the work. Rather than conform to existing evaluation protocols that work for more linear strategies, particularly given the interlocking and evolving nature of racialized structures, we may be better off creating new approaches.¹ To conduct a really good (meaning strategic) evaluation, we must do an up-front assessment that helps shape our work, establish how we will measure performance and begin to develop impact measures. This is a point that both grantees and foundations sometimes miss. A friend often reminds me, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there.” All three of these stages of assessment, performance measurement and impact analysis, whatever we or the evaluation field might term these stages, must work together to help us get where we are trying to go. Where are we trying to go, how do we think we’ll get there and are we right? The point of evaluation should be to help us become more effective and impactful.

We often make unexamined assumptions. Assumptions may be right and they may be wrong. We need to know why we are successful or why we fail. For example, we might assume that to win we need facts and data. If we don’t examine that assumption and we lose, we might come to the wrong conclusion that we need more facts and data. But what if the truth is that the facts don’t matter nearly as much as how our audience feels? Without examining our assumption, we will evaluate our progress inaccurately. Our best intentions can be thwarted by presumptions and our failure to examine what we have done, and this may be particularly true when it comes to the work of racial transformation.

In addition, knowing where we are trying to go and surfacing our assumptions about how we will get there, we must decide what we are measuring over time. Structural transformation of race really has several indicators of systems change:

1. meaningful educational opportunity;
2. the ability to form networks and relationships across race;
3. the ability to live in a community with decent housing, schools, amenities and that are sustainable;
4. democratic participation.

These outcomes help to provide direction for our work, but we need to go further with the articulation of our goals and benchmarks for meeting them. Consider the post-Hurricane Katrina fight by black public housing residents to save public housing. They complained that they were forced to move, or required to make decisions without adequate information or meaningful choices.

It would be easy to assume that moving people of color from cities to suburbs is transformative. But academic research shows that not all suburbs are growing in opportunity. Some are in decline. If inner-city public housing residents moved to a suburb in decline, they don’t necessarily fare better. Some folks who are disabled or have additional challenges need networks of support

that do not necessarily exist in the suburbs. An assumption that moving the residents will improve their lives may be well intentioned and may be wrong.

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In the case of Katrina-affected New Orleanians, making decisions “for their own good” would be counter to a definition of structural equity for many of us. Transforming race means transforming the participatory structures of our society so that people of color are helping to shape what those structures are, enter them and have a say. An even better indicator of structural transformation for public housing residents would be whether they have mechanisms that enable them to define what affordable housing options might work for them and ensuring that they are connected to jobs and services, both in New Orleans and in other cities.

Race-Conscious Evaluation Tools

Such indicators – absent in many traditional forms of evaluation – are more likely to emerge when we use race-conscious evaluation tools. We need race-conscious tools to build policy advocacy strategies and mount arguments for racially just transformation funding. Strategy and evaluation should work alongside each other. Some tools can be modified or combined for these purposes. At CSI, we use our own three-dimensional matrix of questions, along with several decent, widely accepted tools that we actively racialize, adding the systems lens to make them work for us. For example, for our assessment work we are borrowing the military’s “after-action review” process, which includes a before-action review set of questions. We add to it our assumptions about how race is operating and how we think we might be shifting it. We need race-conscious evaluation tools to help us:

- ▲ assess trends and forces that influence the particular problem we are trying to solve, including the role that race is playing within them;
- ▲ identify the multiple institutions, including the actors, who directly and indirectly influence that change and the racial status quo we must challenge;
- ▲ evaluate the relationship between actions or inactions

of “the field” (policy organizations, research institutes, community groups, lawyers, etc.) and the outcomes we can observe.

This cannot be a race-neutral evaluation. These core elements require an understanding of racialized nature of dynamics in relationships, biases and capacities. We have to use a matrix that includes intended and unintended consequences, attitudes and biases, and capacities related to making the restructuring we seek informed by how race operates, not just what race is. CSI’s three-question matrix helps us to assess what we should be doing, how we might do it, with whom and to what end. The matrix includes questions of impact, influences, forces, trends and people:

Impact and influences

What are our intended impacts on racial inequity and what unexpected events, interactions, or outcomes are emerging or might influence our intended impacts?

Forces and trends

What institutions, policies and actors influence the racial inequity problem we are trying to solve?

Who

Who must we be in relationship with to make progress on impacts and what do those relationships need to produce?

This is a learning approach. Benchmarking should be iterative. Asking and getting answers to these questions could provide information for a more dynamic, informative, and strategic and evolving approach.

It is worth noting that when CSI uses this approach, it is often without financial support. As management consulting from the private sector increasingly influences nonprofit and foundation evaluation, program officers and grantees are more often being asked to demonstrate success by predetermining quantifiable outcomes. Often these requests come without any additional resources and without any thought to development of the right kind of measures, some of which may be more qualitative. If we are to do this work well, we will need to customize the evaluation, which requires time and careful thought. Funders who request it should also provide funding to support us to conduct the work.

Can Broadband Access Be Transformational?

In creating our racial equity work focused on economic recovery, assessment helped us create strategy. For example, we knew that government makes inadequate “infrastructure” investments – transit, schools, etc. – in communities of color. We asked,

“Which pots of money, properly directed, could close the racial opportunity gap?” Educational quality, health care access and economic development (multiple institutions that collectively embody an opportunity model) all depend on high-speed Internet access. Communities of color do not have sufficient broadband access in many places. We made an assumption that if we and our partners influence more money for broadband expansion in communities of color, it would be transformational in a structural way because its impact would be broader than Internet access.

We cannot assess race neutrally. A tenet of “systems thinking” is that systems work to maintain their stability. In a racialized systems theory, that means systems work to maintain their racial status quo, often without doing so consciously. Telecommunications firms might control public infrastructure money, their monopoly, and push for infrastructure investment that matches their business models and maximizes their infrastructure. This will maintain a racialized status quo of disconnected poor communities of color without making a conscious decision to discriminate. The assessment requires us to identify racialized “patterns.” Where and how are communities left out of important systems? Which ones are we focusing on for intervention and why?

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We had to ask these questions because if we were to get broadband to communities of color, the communities would not enjoy meaningful access if the broadband was not affordable. We also needed to know what would ensure that the infrastructure would be put to opportunity-building uses. We focused then on a model of community-scale broadband infrastructure that was more affordable to build and would be directly used by and benefit the community. The model would expand public spaces with high speed Internet and spaces that could be hubs for uses such as telework centers and computer training labs. Building the infrastructure is not enough if the partnerships and capacities do not exist to translate the infrastructure into educational, health and economic opportunities because those systems are lacking in communities of color. So partnerships were critically important to not only winning money for the community-scale infrastructure model, but having the right community support.


A funder then asked CSI for two-year outputs and benchmarks for driving American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA, or stimulus) dollars to communities of color. At CSI, we set annual

and 5-year benchmarks to help our strategy development, learning, performance and impact evaluation processes. The funder pushed us for “quantifiable” benchmarks that could demonstrate how much money got to communities of color as a result of our efforts. It made clear that it was equating our “impact” with “money to communities” and our value as a grantee with how much money we influenced. The funder was asking about “output” and “scale,” implying that the amount of money moved would determine the significance of our work. We had some steps that we thought we could quantify tied to the broadband infrastructure and adoption application we were supporting in the Mississippi Delta region. ARRA provides \$7.2 billion in broadband infrastructure and sustainability funding. Output and scale questions are legitimate.

But the benchmarks the funder wanted would not measure several other indicators of success towards racially just transformation. For example, questions like: Are more black communities and leadership engaged in the fight for broadband and how? Are there new relationships between these leaders and communities and decision-makers and other organizations and institutions? Are they engaged in finding other strategies to get broadband and make use of it? These are important questions because the answers may suggest that there is more to build upon to meet the goal of broadband access and adoption in the longer term, even if the stimulus grant is not a large sum or the grant is not approved. Also, these questions help to capture CSI’s added value and recognize the role of actors that the funder and other funders were not supporting and perhaps should to reach their goals. Equally, if not more importantly, these questions help both the grantee and funder become more effective. From the outside looking in, it feels as if funders could, but often do not, think about how to ask for evaluation that helps the grantee think about and improve strategies and effectiveness. Too often, the evaluation seems to be about a more narrow accountability than longer-term effectiveness and success. Funders have a tremendous stake in the success of their grantees. This stake is a real opportunity to see evaluation as a strategy and effectiveness tool and not simply an accountability tool. And the good news is the funder will still know and be able to hold the grantee accountable with this approach.

Layered Approaches

Creating and implementing solutions requires attention to as many of these multiple layers as possible. This means that we must build relationships with others who can address broadband adoption, who work on telecommunications reform, who are community based and working on the social benefits of broadband adoption, who can fund or accomplish some of the other work that must be done that CSI cannot and should not do.



Southern Echo, a leadership training and organizing group based in Jackson, Mississippi, offers an on-the-ground example of an up-front assessment, whether or not they called it that or thought of it as assessment, that shaped work and performance measures with a structural race lens. Southern Echo's project started with a campaign to redistrict in order to bring about school reform. Voting rights was the entry point to improve education and it was a beginning, not an end. The process they used includes what I would call "assessment" of the landscape to choose the entry point. But it also tells Southern Echo and its funders what to measure in the short run and what to try to understand and change for next levels of work toward educational excellence for all Mississippi's children. "Systems thinking" of structural racism tells us that if the problem is with our schools, causes will include housing, tax structures and a web of policies and practices. I don't know if Southern Echo used any of these terms, considered its work in the context of evaluation or employed any tools that the field of evaluation would recognize. What I know is that they did great assessment-level evaluation work; that they, and many others, have some impressive performance measures that have not been called performance measures; and that the work has had a structurally meaningful impact. In particular, it has opened up the opportunity for many more successes on the road to structural transformation.

Most of what I have described as assessment, or strategy development, evaluation also directs our attention to our measures of performance. Where does that lead us on impact evaluation? In our view, impact evaluation should tell us two things:

- ▲ Did we produce some measurable, group-based equity?
- ▲ Did we create systems that not only help produce, but begin to reproduce (as oppose to undermine) that equity over time?

Our work in pursuit of racial transformation is, I argue, an iterative quest and none of us can do it alone. We are all stars in a constellation.

Next Steps

- ▲ Program staff at foundations could do more to examine their portfolios in conjunction with the foundation's other grants and the work of others influencing racial equity.
- ▲ Foundations and grantees could help answer the two questions by surfacing our assumptions about existing racial conditions, mapping them and seeing which ones prove true and which ones untrue.

Maya Wiley is the executive director of the Center for Social Inclusion, a policy and advocacy organization that works to transform structural inequity and exclusion into structural inclusion. A civil rights attorney and policy advocate since 1989, Maya has worked for the ACLU, NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the Open Society Institute. She has contributed to *Growing Smarter: Achieving Livable Communities, Environmental Justice and Regional Equity*. www.centerforsocialinclusion.org

¹ Wigboldus, Seerp, Jim Woodhill, Irene Guijt. "Navigating Complexity: Introduction. Presentation. Innovation Dialogue on Navigating Complexity." 26-27 May 2008. Wageningen International Programme for Capacity Development and Institutional Change. Available online at [http://portals.wi.wur.nl/files/docs/File/navigatingcomplexity/Navigating%20Complexity%20Intro%20\[Read-Only\].pdf](http://portals.wi.wur.nl/files/docs/File/navigatingcomplexity/Navigating%20Complexity%20Intro%20[Read-Only].pdf).