
Dismantling Structural Racism: A Racial Equity Theory of Change

What is a Racial Equity Theory of Change?

The Racial Equity Theory of Change (RETOC) proposed here is a step-by-step guide designed to help community groups define the necessary interim and early outcomes required to reduce racial disparities in neighborhoods and regions in the long-term. It is a prerequisite for understanding the scope and nature of the activities that will be necessary to bring about racial equity in a particular context. In other words, the RETOC is a first step in developing **civic capacity**. More will be said about civic capacity below.

The basic premise of the RETOC is that chronic racial gaps in important opportunity areas, such as education, employment, housing, and healthcare, are strongly associated with

Structural Racism

This refers to the many factors that work to produce and maintain racial inequities in America today. It identifies aspects of our history and culture that have allowed the privileges associated with “whiteness” and the disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt within the political economy over time. It also points out the ways in which public policies, institutional practices and cultural representations reproduce racially inequitable outcomes.

structural racism. Consequently, the RETOC focuses principally on the critical aspects of structural racism’s “hardware” and “software.”

Structural racism’s hardware consists of *public policies* and *institutional practices* that reproduce outcome disparities in fairly obvious ways. Its software includes *cultural representations*, and a

built-in system dynamic best described as *progress and retrenchment*.

By setting long-term outcome targets and identifying the early and intermediate preconditions that are logically associated with those targets, groups “unpack” a change process and identify systemic and institutional barriers that must be addressed

The process laid out by the RETOC is not intended to be a “cookbook,” but rather a set of logical questions intended to help community planners describe their problems structurally, craft appropriate goals, and zero in on targets that hold the most promise for structural change.

Why use the RETOC?

The RETOC process adds value to traditional “brainstorming” about community change in these important respects:

- It suggest directions for action and interim goals that may not come out of planning approaches that are race-neutral, and less meticulous about “unpacking” planners’ assumptions at every level.
- It encourages ecological, rather than ‘siloes’ thinking: that is, exploration of the webs of mutually reinforcing policies and practices that are behind all chronic racial disparities.
- It challenges planners to give equal attention to cognitive sources of racial disparities – to the racial images, stereotypes, frames, etc. that everyone carries within them.
- It helps planners take the likelihood of sociopolitical retrenchment into account as they design action strategies.

The RETOC methodology gives priority to the ways institutional and cultural forces (such as school systems, employer practices, state policies, media images, etc.), as opposed to individual-level forces (such as negative behaviors and values), contribute to negative community outcomes and racial inequities.

This does not mean that it dismisses personal responsibility. Individual-level behaviors, attitudes, and prejudices also contribute to community and group outcomes. However, since we tend to overemphasize individualism in America, there is no shortage of tools and resources for change at that level. Far fewer aim directly at changing structures that can limit individual progress. Accordingly, the targets for intervention that emerge from the RETOC application are more likely to be institutional, cross-sectoral, systemic and cultural, rather than individual and/or family oriented.

Things to remember when using the RETOC.

Know that at the end of the RETOC process there will still be a lot of work to do. The RETOC is a prerequisite for developing a useful strategic plan; it belongs at the beginning of the strategic planning process. The RETOC's outputs can inform the civic and other actions that must be designed and carried out to eliminate unjust racial disparities, but they won't necessarily specify those actions.

The RETOC points to WHAT must be changed, and offers a general sense of the CAPACITIES that might be needed to do so. However, it does not automatically convey HOW any particular local policy change might be effected, institutional practice reformed, cultural representation neutralized, or political backlash

prevented. These can only be designed by local stakeholders intimately familiar with all aspects of the local civic, institutional, leadership, and racial context.

Secondly, since racial disparities result from the cumulative effects of multiple, integrated systems, the RETOC will sometimes bring to our attention factors that seem only indirectly related to the desired long-term outcome. However, it is important to remember that achieving the desired long-term outcome may require attention to those factors.

Since the RETOC will likely uncover many potential areas for intervention, it is doubtful that any single organization could effect change on its own. Much of what would need to be done is likely to be beyond their capacities. Therefore, participants in the RETOC process should do a realistic appraisal of their individual, organizational, and other capacities, and be prepared to enlist other *stakeholders* with the resources and capacities that they lack.

Summary of the RETOC Steps

The RETOC is designed to do two things:

- To assist community-level actors in unpacking the root causes and dynamics of problems, and
- To help them begin thinking about action strategies likely to effect structural changes.

To help facilitate group deliberation, we have come up with guidelines for building a pathway of change by working backwards from a desired long term outcome to the earliest outcomes in the path that leads there.

Public policies are laws that directly allocate public resources and indirectly influence the distribution of private resources. (e.g. Increased prison construction; “Three Strikes” sentencing)

Institutional practices are the cultural norms, and decision-making and standard operating procedures of public and private institutions that may seem race-neutral, but generate racially biased outcomes. (e.g., aggressive street crime and “quality of life” law enforcement)

Cultural representations are frames, popular images and stereotypes of people of color that, though damaging to their prospects for achieving genuine equality of opportunity, are widely seen as “unbiased” or “harmless.” (e.g. Asian frame of “perpetual foreigner,” Latino “gang-banger” stereotype, image of black male as disinclined to work).

Progress and retrenchment describes the dynamics of the struggle for racial equity. Historically, racial equity gains in specific areas have always been threatened or eroded by efforts to reinforce white privilege in other areas. (e.g., Federal fair housing laws bar race discrimination but local zoning laws prevent affordable housing construction).

Step 1: Define the desired Long Term Outcome (LTO) and its Dimensions

This is the specific racial disparity to be reduced or eliminated in a given place and timeframe. The long-term outcome is generally a broad vision, so planners need to take it apart carefully and identify its most important dimensions.

e.g. Elimination of racial wealth disparities region wide by the year 2050 may be the desired LTO. Its dimensions could include “proportionality in minority homeownership rates, business ownership, and stock ownership.”

As the example shows, elimination of regional wealth disparities linked to race implicitly assumes that its dimensions -- homeownership rates, business and stock ownership -- no longer show racial disproportionately.

Step 2: Identify Necessary and Sufficient Preconditions (NSPs)

For each dimension of the long-term outcome, identify the minimum requirements for moving in that direction -- in other words, what are the essential prerequisites, or what’s “necessary”, to achieve the goal. As you begin to identify a list of necessary preconditions, narrow your scope by focusing only on the combination that would be “sufficient” to achieve the stated goal.

e.g. for the “...homeownership” dimension of the above LTO, “adequate access to prime mortgage lenders” might be one Precondition. Another might be “protection from predatory (subprime) lenders.”

Step 3: Describe Specific Public Policy, Institutional Practices and Cultural Representations (PPRs)

For each precondition, determine the public policies, institutional practices, and cultural representations that could influence the production of the preconditions specified. These are particular policies, practices and representations that community-level actors must influence or change to create the preconditions for long-term outcome.

e.g., For the homeownership Preconditions mentioned above, some targeted policies, practices and representations might be federal fair lending mechanisms, local zoning processes, and real estate market “steering” practices.

This is an attempt to encourage planners to push themselves beyond individual-level changes to the types of institutional or systemic outcomes that would be preconditions for equity.

Step 4: Develop a Comprehensive Power Map

Identify key powerbrokers, stakeholders and gatekeepers associated with the PPRs you consider to be directly associated with your desired LTO. These are the elected officials, interest groups, government bureaucrats, business executives, media and entertainment organizations, unions, opinion leaders, and other important local/state actors who must be (a) engaged to bring about change, and (b) monitored, either because they have opposed such change historically, or can be expected to oppose this proposed change.

Early assessment of potential sources of opposition to your desired LTO is an important step in limiting retrenchment.

To be comprehensive, remember to look closely at the organizations and individuals within the government, business and civic sectors as you complete your Power Map.

Step 5: Understand the “Nuts and Bolts” of Local Power

After you identify the key power “players” and alliances associated with a particular policy, practice or representation, identify the processes and dynamics that actually produce or maintain them. Without this knowledge, it will be hard to know where and how to intervene to make change. Be prepared for a challenge here, since much the bargaining and influencing that takes place among power elites can be informal.

Some aspects of a government agency contracting process, for example, can be formal, transparent, and accessible, while other aspects can be obscure. For instance, public agencies may have a standard process for soliciting and evaluating public responses to requests for proposals (RFPs). But at the same time, it can be hard to know when such RFPs are issued if, say, agency and business elites informally agree to limit public notification. Informal deals are also

routinely made to craft RFPs in ways that favor particular applicants.

Change agents may need to master very arcane “policy knowledge” to engage power elites effectively. This is often the crucial advantage they hold over the general public. For example, public resources such as education are typically allocated according to complicated funding formulas known only to experts. Those experts and a few legislators may also be the only ones who know the timetables and processes for changing those formulas.

Step 6. Gearing Up for Action

You are now ready to assess what you need for achieving racial equity. Remember, this is essentially the coalitional strength and resilience to exercise collective power in pursuit of a particular PPR outcome. Some writers call this “civic capacity.”

For practical purposes, you can consider four “sub-capacities” as you do your assessment. These are organizational, programmatic, networking, and communicative capacities for building and sustaining collective power to influence long-term racial equity outcomes.

Organizational capacity is the ability to collect data, conduct research, transfer information, disseminate knowledge, and do strategic planning.

Programmatic capacity refers to an organization’s stature, expertise, and influence in its area of specialization. This includes influence with elected officials, public and private sector stakeholders, and community organizations and residents.

Networking capacity includes the ability to develop, participate in, and actual membership of, formal and informal networks. It also refers to an organization’s ability to acquire resources through those relationships.

Communicative capacity is the ability to use media to frame and convey information in effective and timely fashion.

With the help of the **diagnostic questions** related to each of these capacities (attached below), you should take note of important gaps in your capacities.

Next, develop a list of stakeholders with the capacities you lack. Identify specific groups and organized interests that are likely to have a stake in the structural changes sought. Be sure to consider likely stakeholders in the local government, business and civic sectors. These are potential strategic allies. (Here there may be some overlap with powerbrokers identified earlier).

Now you are better prepared to define your organization's role and develop a plan for fulfilling it. With this sense of what you can contribute to the civic capacity necessary for reaching the LTO, you can develop a realistic action plan.

Let's say that you are a small community-focused organization concerned about chronic racial disparities in youth outcomes. Your biggest resource is your influential position in an extensive network of peer organizations, and your credibility as a youth development organization with foundations and businesses that support your work.

Your desired long-term outcome is elimination of racial disparities in juvenile sentencing in the region you serve by the year 2011. You believe that two important dimensions are racial disparities in juvenile arrests – and thus, disproportionate entry by youth of color into the justice pipeline – and judicial over-reliance on prison sentences for youth in certain jurisdictions.

Applying the early RETOC steps, you recognize that a combination of aggressive policing in communities of color -- born of public perceptions that they are dangerous and gang-infested – and

harsh statewide sentencing policies, guarantees that these disparities will persist.

You conclude that any prospect for change in this status quo will hinge on at least four preconditions.

- *Change in public perceptions that young men living in “the ‘hood” are all thugs who don't value education or work and so must be controlled by police and prison.*
- *A wider menu of positive recreational options for local youth.*
- *Alternative sentencing options for local judges: options that are more proportionate to the crimes committed, and that take the devastating community impacts of mass incarceration into account.*
- *A policing shift toward more preventive foot patrolling and fewer random quality-of-life “sweeps” and arrests.*

Having identified the specific youth sentencing guidelines, policing practices, and local media biases that must change to produce the above preconditions, you develop a picture of the local actors most instrumental in sustaining these PPRs. You also map out the local political and civic interests most likely to resist the reforms you favor.

However, you are not really familiar with the process for defining citywide policing priorities, with how sentencing regulations are crafted, or with the decisionmaking environment relating to funding for, say, playground improvement and maintenance, or afterschool programs.

Realizing that a concerted and sophisticated political effort by progressive reformers (i.e., civic capacity) is required, you put together a plan for leveraging your networking and programmatic capacities in this direction. Your immediate goal is to assemble and sustain, (or, if one already exists, join and enhance) a coalition of local

tenant organizers, race-conscious criminal justice experts, youth development advocates, concerned parents, business leaders, and others.

A pre-existing coalition may already be operating from a racial equity perspective, and with a commitment to building the necessary civic capacity. In that case, your main contribution might simply be your extensive peer network, your additional convening power, your credibility with local leaders, etc..

If this coalition does focus on race, but hasn't really adopted a power/civic capacity analysis, your most important contribution could be in that area.

Should no prior coalition exist and you initiate one, you may first need to revisit some or all of the RETOC steps with the group to build consensus around goals and priorities. Once this is accomplished, the coalition can then design and implement the action strategies it deems necessary to produce the desired long-term outcome.

Step SIX: Gearing Up For Action

Four Elements of Civic Capacity for Racial Equity & Diagnostic Questions

Programmatic Capacity	Organizational Capacity
<p>Programmatic capacity refers to an organization's stature, expertise, and influence in its area of specialization. This includes influence with elected officials, public and private sector stakeholders, and community organizations and residents.</p>	<p>Organizational capacity refers to the ways organizations and collaborations effectively collect data, conduct research, transfer information, share knowledge, and engage in strategic planning.</p>
<p><i>Programmatic capacity diagnostic:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What programmatic area(s) are strongest? • Do these programs have a local and regional reach? • How are racial disparity data being collected and utilized within these programs? • What public policies and institutional practices directly influence how programs function? • Is racial equity a crosscutting organizational theme that shapes the way work is organized? Or, is racial equity a more narrowly defined programmatic strategy? • In what ways, if any, are programmatic goals or objectives explicitly intended to address issues of racial equity? • Within current programs, is there room to apply the racial equity analysis? • How would applying a racial equity analysis affect the program? • Would you expect the racial equity analysis to lead to different outcomes? • Among the current supporters (staff, residents, funders, policymakers), do you anticipate resistance to a racial equity analysis? Why? • Where do you expect to gain the most support for a racial equity analysis of programs? Where do you expect to have the most resistance? • Is your organization respected by elected officials and public administrators? By the business community? • Do community members consider your organization legitimate? 	<p><i>Organizational capacity diagnostic:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the organization known as one that addresses issues of race and racism? • What type of racial disparity data does the organization collect? • What type of longitudinal data does the organization collect? For what period of time and what geographic areas? • How is the data used? Is the data shared and disseminated? In what ways? • Has the organization clearly defined racial equity goals and objectives? • Is it important that potential collaborators have racial equity goals? • Have staff received training related to racial equity? • Do staff members see the merit in applying the racial equity analysis to their work? • Are staff members in general agreement regarding the effect of race and racism on community level outcomes? • Do staff members generally agree that racial disparities in community outcomes are related to structural processes? Do staff members tend to focus on individual causes to racial disparities?

Networking Capacity	Communicative Capacity
<p>Networking capacity includes the ability to develop, participate in, and actual membership of, formal and informal networks. It also refers to an organization's ability to acquire resources through those relationships.</p>	<p>Communicative capacity is the ability to use media to frame and convey information in effective and timely fashion.</p>
<p><i>Networking capacity diagnostic:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does your organization participate in formal and informal networks? What types? With whom? ▪ Is your organization situated to tap into new formal and informal networks? ▪ Are these networks useful for sharing information in a timely manner? ▪ Does your organization have convening power? Among which groups? ▪ Has your organization effectively built networks of trust with community residents, the media, policymakers, funders, other community organizations? How? ▪ Among your current networks, are issues of racial equity addressed? By whom and how? ▪ As you expand your networks, does it make sense to lead with a racial analysis? Why or why not? How can racial equity be incorporated into the agenda? ▪ Does membership in organizational networks or alliances prohibit actions related to achieving racial equity? If so, how can these obstacles be overcome and the racial equity objective be achieved? ▪ How well is the organization connected to resources such as policy analysts, philanthropic organizations, the media, and elected officials? ▪ What types of resources does the organization have available to address issues of racial equity? Do these resources reside within the organization, a collaborative, or in other areas? ▪ Are you able to leverage <i>material</i> and <i>human</i> resources to meet racial equity goals? 	<p><i>Communicative capacity diagnostic:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is your organization structured in a way that facilitates sharing of information? What systems are in place to ensure open communication and sharing information, for example web-based listservs, meetings, newsletters, etc.? ▪ Is your organizational message relatively clear and consistent across programmatic areas? ▪ What types of media do you use to disseminate your message? Newspapers, newsletters, public radio, television, magazines, video, worldwide web, others? ▪ In what ways are these media used? ▪ Are there other media that may also be effective but are not utilized? Why aren't they being utilized? ▪ Do you consider your organization to have a public voice? What is your public message? ▪ Have you ever used your public position to advocate for issues related to race or ethnic disparity? When and what were the issues? ▪ Can your organization convey a racial equity analysis in an audience appropriate way to potential collaborators? ▪ How could a racial equity analysis be incorporated into current communication strategies? ▪ Where would you get the most support? Where would you realize the most resistance? What resources/ strategies could you draw on to overcome the resistance and continue to convey a racial equity framework?