



Bringing an Equity Lens to Collective Impact

By Junious Williams and Sarah Marxer
Urban Strategies Council

Like many who have devoted their careers to social justice, we at Urban Strategies Council find the promise of large-scale change that collective impact offers inspiring. After all, who among us came to this work hoping to make minor change? Because collective impact holds such promise, it is imperative that this emerging field recognize and correct a crucial omission in the model: an analysis of equity and power, particularly around race.

Inequities along the lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other background characteristics shape the complex problems that collective impact initiatives aspire to change, from the educational to the environmental, from economic to health related. Without rigorous attention to persistent inequities, our initiatives risk ineffectiveness, irrelevance, and improvements that cannot be sustained. We argue that [an explicit equity lens](#) is an essential component of all five characteristics of collective impact initiatives.

An equity lens asks what disparities exist among different groups; takes into account historical and current institutional and structural sources of inequality; and takes explicit steps to build the social, economic, and political power of the people most affected by inequities in order to narrow gaps while improving overall outcomes.

What does an equity lens bring to each of the five collective impact elements?

Common agenda: Every community contains myriad groups whose interests sometimes diverge. Deliberately attending to the racial, economic, gender, cultural, and geographic forms of inequity within a community by asking how different parts of the community are affected by an issue and ensuring that the voices of those most affected are included in setting the agenda for change will improve the agenda itself as well as deepening support for it. Providing resources to support the involvement of those people for whom participation in multiple meetings is a substantial financial burden is critical. The Oakland-Alameda County Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, which we convene, has a principle that youth should be paid for their time and expertise, so our local Opportunity Youth Initiative (which grew out of the Alliance) compensates the young adults involved in leadership and work groups.

Shared measurement: Bringing an equity lens to the development of shared measurement systems means thinking carefully about how data will be disaggregated to reveal disparities by neighborhood, race/ethnicity, income level, gender, disability, language, age or generation, and other characteristics

important in a community. In some cases, such as examining inequities facing the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community or undocumented immigrants, important data will be scarce; a commitment to equity will enable the initiative to compensate for gaps in data by drawing on the experiences of members of those groups. In our local work, we have a commitment to disaggregating data by race/ethnicity and gender simultaneously (e.g. looking at the well-being of African American males and females, Latino and Latina students) because doing so helps tailor strategies to address, for example, the disproportionate suspension rates of African American male, African American female, and Latino male students.

Mutually reinforcing activities: In the development and continuous improvement of mutually reinforcing activities, a commitment to equity means rigorous examination of who is being engaged and for whom efforts are most effective. Without an equity lens, initiatives may be tempted to focus on improving outcomes for those who already are closest to, say, reading at grade-level by third grade, graduating from high school, or enrolling in college – leaving behind those who face the greatest barriers. The Oakland-Alameda County Opportunity Youth Initiative, for which we serve as the backbone organization, is tailoring activities to engage both the broader population of opportunity youth (young people in their late teens and early twenties who are neither in school nor working) and a particular subset of opportunity youth who face particularly large barriers: disconnected young men of color who have been involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

Continuous communication: Infusing communication practices with a commitment to reversing inequities includes ensuring that communication is accessible (in vehicle, language, etc.) and that the content of those communications disrupts rather than normalizes persistent inequities. For example, we and our partners in the Oakland-Alameda County Alliance for Boys and Men of Color take great care to communicate the potential of boys and men of color and the structural conditions that produce the inequities affecting them, alongside statistics that otherwise can be numbing or reinforce existing stereotypes.

Backbone support: To ensure that a deep commitment to racial, economic, and other forms of equity is built into an initiative, backbone organizations need to have credibility with the communities most affected by inequities, staffing that reflects the diversity of those communities; the skills and resources to engage communities and develop leadership and power within them, and the humility to follow that leadership as it emerges.

We at Urban Strategies Council continue to explore equity issues and develop tools to address them. We look forward to hearing from other collective impact practitioners and funders about what you are learning about



how to use collective impact to address longstanding disparities and achieve equitable outcomes for everyone.