# Guide to Applying an Equity Lens

Using an equity lens for a project is a means to actively insert racial equity into your decision-making process from project design through project evaluation. The steps include finding shared language to talk about race and institutional inequities; analyzing data about who will benefit or be burdened by an initiative; setting a concrete goal for a specific improvement in racial equity; engaging internally and with the community, especially those most impacted, in developing strategies to spread benefits or mitigate burdens; staying focused on equity throughout implementation; making communication and evaluation of progress in advancing equity a priority throughout the initiative; and taking the time to figure out how to institutionalize what has worked in your process to advance equity.

## What makes a good project?

Projects should focus on putting ideas into action. This can be done via a brand new project or it can be via an intentional shifting of work you currently have underway. Factors that will influence the quality of a project are as follows:

1. Clarity and specificity – Good projects are easily described and understood. They specific, concrete goals and progress indicators for both communitywide impacts and reducing racial inequities.
2. Ability to impact racial equity – Good projects identify and address specific racial inequities, whether through the adoption of racial and social impact criteria in decision-making processes, by producing specific benefits and/or mitigating burdens for communities of color, and/or through more authentic, long-term engagement of communities of color in program design and implementation.
3. Capacity building – Good projects include specific strategies for building the capacity of your team to advance racial equity. You should have internal and/or external partners identified that will support development and implementation of the project. If you do not have current partners, expanding capacity and engagement should be a key part of your strategy.
4. Institutionalizing – Good projects will aim to institutionalize equity on a long-term basis so that the project doesn’t become a “one-off.” This can be done by embedding in institutional policy a decision-criteria to promote equity or a requirement to use a racial equity lens in program development. While opportunities to institutionalize equity will likely emerge throughout the course of implementation, if you are thinking about it from the beginning, the likelihood for success will increase. Ultimately, the more you can embed consideration of equity into operations, the more influence you will have.

### **What are examples of good projects?**

Good projects will vary in scope and scale, depending on local conditions. The following list of examples of types of projects is intended to reflect the variation we expect to see.

* Developing and adopting an overall racial equity strategy for a planning or environmental department -- Some cities start down this path by adopting a racial equity policy, including goals, decision criteria, and progress metrics for advancing racial equity that all projects and programs must meet. This process needs to begin with a shared understanding of the history and persistence of racial inequity and shared language for talking about a new approach. The overarching policy can be continually refined using lessons learned in applying it to new projects.
* Undertaking a neighborhood planning process that is inclusive of communities of color – Too often city-led planning has not included the voices or priorities of communities of color. For example, engaging people most affected by growth and potential displacement provides the opportunity to develop anti-gentrification strategies so that people currently living in a neighborhood benefit from anticipated growth and reinvestment. Likewise, community-targeted climate resilience or adaptation planning efforts will be more successful if it includes the long-term engagement of residents from all neighborhoods.
* Integrating equity into an existing effort, such as a program that encourages city residents to walk or bike – Some existing sustainability programs may unintentionally better meet the needs of white residents. Conducting an assessment of program objectives, gaps and opportunities could allow teams to expand or re-design an existing program to make programs work for everyone and actually advance racial equity.
* Developing a new sustainability or climate action plan using an equity lens – As equity has become more prominent in sustainability and climate action, cities have begun to apply an equity lens to the development and, as important, the implementation of these plans. With capacity building, the equity lens can be more rigorously applied and is more likely to open up opportunities for institutionalizing equity into core city government operations and work plans.
* Bringing equity into implementation of an existing sustainability or climate action plan – A city may already have a rigorous sustainability or climate action plan that it is actively implementing and want to bring a stronger equity lens to its implementation by undertaking an equity self-evaluation and bringing an equity lens to program implementation for each program.

## Desired Results, Outcomes, and Data Evidence

* It will be easier to build support (and counter opposition) if you have a clear, simple, measurable and easily understood goal for the project and for how the project will advance racial equity.
* Data disaggregated by race and neighborhood related to your project will help you to find equity gaps.
* Both quantitative and qualitative data should be used to assess and track community conditions over time.
* A general outcome of “increase racial equity” is harder to explain or achieve than a specific change in opportunity for people of color. A specific change could be increased access to a program, reduced burdens from a policy change, a program design that is tailored to work for a community, and/or a greater voice in the decisions about the program.
* USDN Member Example: Reuse vacant and abandoned properties throughout the city in a way that involves residents in reuse decisions, doesn’t displace neighbors, and allows existing residents to participate in investment programs and local hiring.

## Collaboration and Engagement

* Community engagement is often designed for those who have historically had access. You will need to be intentional to engage diverse communities that have not historically been well-served by government
* Too often, inclusion and engagement efforts don’t support long-term relationships. Too often community members have been repeatedly consulted, but not heard. Success depends upon committing to long-term engagement that builds capacity and trust.
* Trust is built by approaching each neighborhood with an open mind; accepting that you may not understand community concerns and may be surprised to find what they are; recognizing that what community members care about may not be what you want to work on; trying to find the connection, but being prepared to meet community members where they are; finding ways for community members to take the lead; and following through on commitments.
* USDN Member Example: Work with residents in three neighborhoods to figure out what city programs could help increase access to health care and active living, energy efficiency, and affordable quality housing.

## Strategies

* We tend to think about projects in isolation, aka, a transactional approach. For us to maximize impact, we need to consider opportunities to use our projects to address structural barriers to opportunity within our institutions.
* We typically have the greatest influence within our own institutions, but racially inequitable outcomes are perpetuated through systems and structures. Think about how you can work cross-sectors to enhance your ability to target structural racism.
* USDN Member Example: Develop a model Transit Oriented Development (TOD) or Community Benefit Agreement policy that includes decision criteria for the allocation of benefits and burdens to communities of color.

## Communication, Education, and Capacity Building

* Review Video 2. Communicating about Equity and Video 3. Building Shared Understanding of Equity.
* Your team will need continuous training and capacity building on what racial equity is and how to use an equity lens.
* Include education about the history of how your community arrived at current conditions related to your goal and what past choices may be contributing to racial inequities.
* Be aware of the tendency of many people to want to focus on individuals. This awareness can help you to make clear connections between individual experiences and institutional and structural barriers and opportunities.
* USDN Member Example: Will identify a project that involves multiple departments so all can learn together how to make sure programs work well for all residents. For example, community gardening on public land where residents are expected to purchase their own equipment doesn’t work for low-income neighborhoods.

## Evaluation

* Evaluation is a key part of accountability.
* Make sure you take time to share lessons learned. This will not only facilitate mid-course corrections, but also help to create more opportunities to advance equity.
* This work can be hard. Make small wins. Think about how you can you take time to celebrate success and recognize progress.
* USDN Member Example: For a project to bring an equity lens to the update of a climate action plan, there will be an equity goal for each action for each neighborhood, not just citywide. Every neighborhood will have a target for improvement that will be tracked and shared.