

# Food System Racial Equity Assessment Tool: A Facilitation Guide

Lexa Dundore

## KEY DEFINITIONS

### INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Policies, practices, and procedures that work better for white people than for people of color, often unintentionally.<sup>1</sup>

### RACIAL EQUITY

A reality in which a person is no more or less likely to experience society's benefits or burdens just because of the color of their skin.<sup>2</sup> This includes the elimination of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce or fail to eliminate differential outcomes by race.<sup>3</sup>

### STRUCTURAL RACISM

Racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, used to the advantage of one race and the disadvantage of other races.<sup>4</sup>

### WHITE PRIVILEGE

"An invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks."<sup>5</sup>

### WHITE SUPREMACY

"An historically-based, institutionally-perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege."<sup>6</sup>

The food system is a network in which conscious and unconscious racism creates different outcomes across groups. Racial inequities in the food system create unfair differences in access to fresh and culturally appropriate foods, increase the disproportionate prevalence of diet-related diseases, create barriers to owning land and starting food or farm businesses, and limit the voice and power of those most impacted in policy-making processes.<sup>7</sup> A racial equity assessment tool specific to the food system is a critical addition to the range of tools available to advance racial equity.

Racism at individual, institutional, and structural levels produces inequalities across life chances for people of color in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Racism on an individual level, including bias, discrimination, or prejudgment based on race, as well as internalization of racism, has profound impacts on both interpersonal relationships and the formation of policies that perpetuate racism on a wider scale.

**Structural racism** and **white supremacy** are two sides of the same process that concentrate power among white citizens and institutions to the detriment of communities of color. The difference between **white privilege** and white supremacy can be understood as a matter of scale (individual to systemic). Given the embedded nature of **institutional racism**, dramatic inequities can result from policies and programs even without the intention to create different outcomes.

The national equity organization PolicyLink estimates the majority of the United States' population will be people of color by 2042.<sup>9</sup> However, transfer of power, resources, and opportunities will not automatically shift to reflect these demographic changes. Extension educators, nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations, and local governments can all play a role in prioritizing **racial equity** and creating outcomes that are fair for all. Policy making, planning, and programming related to the food system are made stronger and more effective by emphasizing racial equity as a core concern from the beginning.<sup>10</sup> This dedication is a necessary step toward remediating past injustices and building a more equitable future.

Leaders such as Race Forward<sup>11</sup> and the Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE)<sup>12</sup> have paved the way by creating sample racial equity assessment tools for organizations and local governments. The act of using a racial equity assessment tool serves as an equity prime: a reminder to consciously consider race, class, and gender impacts during an important choice point, thereby helping to counteract unconscious bias.<sup>13</sup>

By using racial equity assessment tools in planning, groups can look carefully at how their decision-making processes can influence outcomes. Racial equity assessments encourage critical thinking and context setting before resources are spent on policies or programming that do not advance racial equity in the food system. We are less likely to maintain an inequitable status quo when we take time to consider racial equity at every

step. Broadening our perspectives can open our programs to new possibilities for working in a more equitable way.

Creating assessment tools that aid in planning and decision making is the first step, but tools alone cannot transform society. Communities most impacted by inequities need to be put at the center of these processes with opportunities to lead, challenge, and create goals and visions for change.<sup>14</sup> Too often the voices of people targeted by programming and decision making are not considered. Changing this may mean engaging partners and allies in planning and assessment processes who are not part of the group's organizational structure, or who do not consider themselves to be working on food system issues. These partners have valuable perspectives on who needs to be at the table, what assets, vision, and expertise communities already possess, and the ways that different social spheres intersect to create and perpetuate inequities.<sup>15</sup>

What follows is a detailed overview of how to use one such tool: The Food System Racial Equity Assessment (FSREA) tool. The FSREA tool draws heavily from the "Equity and Empowerment Lens with a Racial Justice Focus" created by the Multnomah County Office of Diversity and Equity.<sup>16</sup> This tool is similar in its focus on how programs, policies, or plans can be evaluated from the perspectives (or "lenses") of people, place, process, and power. The FSREA tool adds to this four-lens approach by focusing its questions on the specifics and complexities of the food system. By planning for equity across these four lenses, it is possible to assess the impact of program plans on racial equity goals, and to focus work so that it improves equity. This tool focuses on organizational decision making and the programs proposed by an organization, agency, or other defined group. As such, it is not an appropriate tool for broader public engagement processes.

Since the FSREA tool is not itself a training on racial equity, it is important that potential assessment participants spend time developing their own critical analyses around race and privilege prior to sitting down with the tool. This critical consciousness can be borne of personal experiences with racism, learning how racism evolved in the United States, reading or watching pieces aimed at raising consciousness regarding the different ways that racism is expressed in our society, and through a variety of other experiences. Education on race and privilege will help practitioners ground themselves in histories of resilience and struggle, and understand important data on how racism affects life chances for people of color.

A helpful list of readings, trainings, and organizations engaged in racial justice and food justice work compiled by the UW-Extension Community Food Systems Team can be accessed at <http://fyi.uwex.edu/cfsi/equity-in-food-systems/21-day-challenge-resources>.<sup>17</sup>

This link includes information on participating in a 21 Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge. This activity can be undertaken at any time, and can be a beneficial learning experience both for individuals and for groups. While participants don't need to consider themselves "experts" before using the FSREA tool, they do need to commit to deepening their understanding of racism.

It is important to recognize that other types of inequities also play out in the food system, based on income, gender, citizenship status, and other factors. While this tool focuses on racism, the analysis developed by this process can help develop critical consciousness about how to address inequities across intersecting forms of oppression.

### Suggested ground rules

- Show respect for one another
- Try on ideas
- Both/and thinking
- It's OK to disagree
- Use "I" statements—speak from personal experience
- Share the air; step up/step back
- Own our impacts
- Challenge the statement, respect the person
- One mic
- Active listening
- Lean into discomfort

### What you will need

- An initial proposal, outline, or identified issue
- An interval of 3 to 4 hours, perhaps more than one session
- Flip chart paper or a white board
- Markers

While the FSREA tool can be adapted to meet the particular needs of the assessment group in question, attention to the participants and emphasis on racial equity as a core concern are nonnegotiable. Although working together through all five "steps" of this assessment process is recommended, groups with trust and shared understanding of how racism operates in the food system may be able expedite their analyses. This would mean skipping steps 1 and 2 (**Visioning an equitable food system** and **Building a shared language**, respectively), to focus on the heart of the FSREA process: Using the tool's question set to critically evaluate a proposal and reflect on what to do next (steps 3–5). The shorter version of the assessment process typically takes 2–3 hours to complete.

## Who you will need

This may differ depending on the context and goal of the assessment process. To be successful, the leadership and staff of your organization must be supportive and champion the racial equity assessment. If you have a large group (more than 8 people), you may want to split into two smaller groups for discussion and merge your key observations and questions later. It is important to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to share their ideas. Be sure to include:

- Staff or organizers involved in the project or program
- Leaders from the group or organization
- Key stakeholders from participant or target audiences
- Partners from other groups or organizations

Some groups may struggle with the idea of including “outsiders” from the group or organization in what may be a sensitive assessment process. Remember that doing things differently and incorporating multiple perspectives are key goals of the FSREA. Engaging stakeholders from target audiences and the organizations that represent them is especially critical for predominantly white organizations. To ensure that this is not token participation, it is important to develop long-term relationships, provide incentives for participation, and work toward increasing representation and diversity within the organization with future hiring decisions.

Depending on the makeup of the group and participants’ familiarity with one another, facilitators may want to warm up with introductions and an icebreaker activity. This can help to cultivate some casual acquaintance and initial trust if group members do not know one another well. Agreeing on ground rules that facilitate respectful communication may also help groups navigate challenging conversations.

# Using the Food System Racial Equity Assessment tool

## STEP 1

### Visioning an equitable food system

Think about the kind of organization we want to have, community we want to be a part of, or world we want to live in. In developing this vision, we can see how our proposal helps move us toward realizing that vision.

- Make sure all participants are on the same page about what is meant by **equity**. PolicyLink defines equity as “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.”<sup>18</sup>
- Note the difference between what is meant by **equity** versus **equality**. Equity, as defined above, is about each person getting what they need to be successful. Equality is focused on each person getting the same, regardless of difference. A program or policy can provide equal access or support while still producing dramatic racial

disparities and other gaps because not all people or groups have the same needs.

- Does this definition of equity work and make sense for folks?
- Now, put that vision into practice:
  - Write, draw, or map your vision of what an equitable food system looks like. Choosing the scale for your vision can be tricky: Whole production and distribution systems? On a neighborhood, municipal, or state level? Focusing on a smaller scale is more practical for this activity (e.g., town, city, or neighborhood). Once you establish your baseline vision, you can make note of broader connections as needed. Your visual may not be able to include all components of the food system, but try to represent your core ideas about what is important for a food system to be fair for all. Give participants 5–10 minutes to work on their vision.
  - How do visualizations of this concept of an equitable food system compare? Where are there similarities and differences? Are any important components missing?



**EQUALITY** doesn't mean **EQUITY**

**STEP 2**

**Building a shared language**

Begin building a common language and shared understandings to provide your planning process with a strong core.

- Brainstorm to identify the key terms, ideas, and language used in the discussion. Do we have similar understandings of key words (e.g., “food justice,” “food desert,” “low income”)? Write out common acronyms (e.g., USDA, WIC, AMI) and define terms that need explanation. The group can add terms to this list throughout the assessment process.
- Are there other definitions or clarifications that are critical to an effective discussion and assessment of your program or project proposal? Spend time at this stage to establish a shared language.

**STEP 3**

**Introduce the proposed plan, policy, or program**

Set the stage for the assessment by providing an outline of the proposal under consideration.

- Ask proposal leaders to provide an overview of the plan, policy, or program. This includes answering questions about who is involved with planning and implementation, where efforts are focused, why this particular approach is being taken, what will happen over the course of this project, and how will we accomplish our goals. Note that many of these elements will be reviewed again during the assessment process. At this step, simply set the stage and provide the information necessary for all group members to engage in a thoughtful and critical analysis.

**STEP 4**

**Using the Food System Racial Equity Assessment tool**

Get to work: Use the tool questions to guide a critical discussion around the proposal.

- Review the Food System Racial Equity Assessment tool questions on the next page.
- Highlight the idea of purpose (e.g., “The proposed shared purpose is that we all want a food system that works for everyone and for the planet.”).
- Discuss each question with regard to your plan, policy, or program. You may discuss each section of the tool one at a time, or jump around and draw lines to connect issues or ideas across categories. The questions in the tool provide a starting place to analyze a proposal from the perspectives of people, place, process, and power—you may add additional questions as necessary. The organization of the tool into these four lenses is not meant to separate the ways in which these aspects are interrelated, but instead to offer us a way to organize areas of analysis.

**STEP 5**

**What happens next?**

Conclude the assessment by connecting the dots and planning the next steps.

- As you wrap up your analysis with the tool, consider these questions:
  - What commonalities came out across conversations?
  - What else strikes you as important about the conversations and ideas that came out of using the tool?
  - What (or who) was missing from the conversation and why?
  - What do we not know?
  - How do we get the information we need?

- Reflect on how the plan, policy, or program helps or does not help to achieve the vision of an equitable food system as outlined in step 1. Does it move us closer to part of that vision for the future?
- How does the group feel now, having concluded the assessment and outlined the connections, resources, people, questions, and potential gaps in the current proposal? What changes need to be made in order to promote racial equity as part of this program, policy, or plan? Does the current plan, policy, or program need to be scrapped or shelved until additional learning, relationship-building, input, or research happens? Does it make sense to take a step back to work toward a smaller foundational step that will make accomplishing large goals more feasible in the future?
- If revisions or additional planning is in order, work with your partners to plan the next steps, responsibilities, and an adjusted timeline.

In many ways, this is the most important step in using the Food System Racial Equity Assessment tool: Now that we know what we know (or what we don’t know), how do we move forward? Unfortunately, it can also be the most difficult aspect to quantify or name. There is no hard and fast rule, no score sheet that could encompass the nuance necessary to determine how each project should proceed. Honest and serious consideration of the appropriateness and value of the proposal in its current state and how it could be changed to advance racial equity is crucial, or use of an equity tool has little value. Critical questions raised and gaps identified through this process are important learning steps toward accountable and inclusive programming and policy making. While groups may not always like the answers to these final evaluation questions, they help us see exactly where we need to focus to make an impact.

# Food System Racial Equity Assessment Tool

## PURPOSE:

We align around creating a food system that works for every person and for the planet.  
We commit to advancing racial equity, social justice, and sustainability in this work.

### PEOPLE

- Who is positively and negatively affected by this issue and how?
- How are people across racial and social groups uniquely situated in terms of the barriers they experience?
- Which stakeholders do we have relationships with who could collaborate in developing and implementing this P/P/P? Who could we develop relationships with?
- Who is missing from this conversation?
- What people, organizations, or groups already support equity, justice, and sustainability around this issue?
- How do we support cultural relations to food through this work

### PLACE

- What is the geographic area that will be impacted by this P/P/P?
- What is the history of this issue for different racial and social groups in our community and region?
- What are the policy or legal standards and barriers we face around this P/P/P?
- What are the local or regional resources that could be leveraged?
- How are we considering environmental impacts and connecting with environmental justice?
- What physical connections or barriers impact access for communities of color?

### PLAN, POLICY, OR PROGRAM

Define the goal or problem and how the actions presented by this P/P/P address that goal or problem.

### PROCESS

- How are we meaningfully including those who are most impacted in identifying issues, proposing solutions, and making decisions?
- How are we going about considering the voices and priorities of all affected racial and social groups?
- What policies, processes, or relationships contribute to the exclusion of individuals and communities most affected by inequities?
- What data and other information do we need to form our P/P/P with consideration for racial equity?
- How will we measure, track, and evaluate the impacts of this P/P/P for its contribution to racial and social equity?

### POWER

- What are the barriers to achieving our goal in an equitable and sustainable way?
- What is the decision-making structure?
- What “links” of the food chain are connected to this proposal? How are we accounting for the ways these group interests may differ?
- How is the P/P/P shifting power dynamics to better integrate voices and priorities of those most affected?
- Who is accountable to upholding racial and social equity in this P/P/P?
- How are public resources and investments distributed?
- Who owns \_\_\_\_\_ (the land, seed, equipment, livestock, processing facilities, points of sale, etc.)?

What do we not know?

How do we get the information we need?

## References

1. Nelson, J. "Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity." Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity. 2015. [www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/GARE-Racial\\_Equity\\_Toolkit.pdf](http://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/GARE-Racial_Equity_Toolkit.pdf).
2. Aspen Institute: Round Table on Community Change. "Glossary for Understanding the Dismantling of Structural Racism/Promoting Racial Equity Analysis." <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/rcc/RCC-Structural-Racism-Glossary.pdf>.
3. W. K. Kellogg Foundation: America Healing. "Racial Equity Resource Guide: Glossary." [www.racialequityresourceguide.org/about/glossary](http://www.racialequityresourceguide.org/about/glossary).
4. Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative. "Race and the Food System: Glossary." <http://growingfoodandjustice.org/race-and-the-food-system/glossary>.
5. McIntosh, P. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." 1989. <http://code.ucsd.edu/~pcosman/Backpack.pdf>.
6. Martinez, E. "What is White Supremacy?" [http://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/What\\_Is\\_White\\_Supremacy\\_Martinez.pdf](http://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/What_Is_White_Supremacy_Martinez.pdf).
7. Alkon, A. H. and Agyeman, J. "Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability." MIT Press, 2011.
8. Nelson, J., Spokane, L. Ross, L., & Deng, N. "Advancing Racial Equity and Transforming Government: A Resource Guide to Put Ideas into Action." Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity. 2015. [http://racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/GARE-Resource\\_Guide.pdf](http://racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/GARE-Resource_Guide.pdf).
9. Treuhaft, S., Glover Blackwell, A., & Pastor, M. "America's tomorrow: Equity is the superior growth model." PolicyLink. 2011. [http://nationalequityatlas.org/sites/default/files/SUMMIT\\_FRAMING\\_WEB\\_20120110.PDF](http://nationalequityatlas.org/sites/default/files/SUMMIT_FRAMING_WEB_20120110.PDF).
10. See note 1.
11. Race Forward. [raceforward.org](http://raceforward.org).
12. Local and Regional Government Alliance on Race and Ethnicity (GARE). <http://racialequityalliance.org>.
13. Keleher, T. 2014. "An Introduction to Racial Equity Tools: Governing for Racial Equity." <https://racc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/An-Introduction-to-Racial-Equity-Assessment-Tools.pdf>.
14. Sweeney, G., Rogers, C., Hoy, C., Clark, J. K., Usher, K., Holley, K., & Spees, C. "Alternative Agrifood Projects in Communities of Color: A Civic Engagement Perspective." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 5.4 (2015): 69–75. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.005>.
15. Holley, Kip. "The Principles for Equitable and Inclusive Civic Engagement." Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. 2016. <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ki-civic-engagement.pdf>.
16. Balajee, Sonali S., et al. "Equity and Empowerment Lens (Racial Justice Focus)." Portland, OR: Multnomah County Office of Diversity and Equity. 2012. <https://multco.us/diversity-equity/equity-and-empowerment-lens>.
17. University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension, Community Food Systems Team. "Learning About Equity: A Resource List." 2016. <http://fyi.uwex.edu/cfsi/equity-in-food-systems/21-day-challenge-resources/>.
18. PolicyLink. "Equity Manifesto." 2015. [www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl\\_sum15\\_manifesto\\_FINAL\\_4app.pdf](http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl_sum15_manifesto_FINAL_4app.pdf).



© 2017 University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents and University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension. All rights reserved.

**Author:** Lexa Dundore is the Community Food Systems assistant at UW-Extension Dane County. Cooperative Extension publications are subject to peer review.

Image on page 3 courtesy of Saskatoon Health Region.

**University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension**, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin counties, publishes this information to further the purpose of the May 8 and June 30, 1914, Acts of Congress. An EEO/AA employer, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title VI, Title IX, and ADA requirements. If you have a disability and require this information in an alternative format, please contact Cooperative Extension Publishing at 432 N. Lake St., Rm. 227, Madison, WI 53706; [pubs@uwex.edu](mailto:pubs@uwex.edu); or (608) 263-2770 (711 for Relay).

**This publication is available** from your county UW-Extension office ([counties.uwex.edu](http://counties.uwex.edu)) or from Cooperative Extension Publishing. To order, call toll-free 1-877-947-7827 or visit our website at [learningstore.uwex.edu](http://learningstore.uwex.edu).