

Implementing Targeted Universalism

Case Study: King County, WA

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The Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, formerly the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, is a vibrant hub of researchers, community leaders, policy-makers, artists, and communicators that advances research, policy, and work related to marginalized communities. It engages in innovative narrative, communications, and cultural strategies that attempt to reframe the public discourse around marginality and inclusion and respond to issues that require immediate and long-term action.

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of a jurisdiction’s racial equity work should be to eliminate racial inequities and improve outcomes for all racial groups. To achieve our aspirations and to get to different outcomes, we will need to fundamentally transform government. This requires high level leadership, committed action teams, supportive community leaders, and effective structures and practices. But what guides this change? ... Racial Equity Action Plans can put a theory of change into action to achieve a collective vision of racial equity. Plans can drive institutional and structural change. However, the goal we seek is not a plan. The goal is institutional and structural change, which requires resources to implement: time, money, skills, and effort. It requires local governments’ will and expertise to change our policies, the way we do business, our habits, and cultures.

—“Racial Equity Action Plans: A How-to Manual,” by Ryan Curren, Julie Nelson, Dwayne S. Marsh, Simran Noor, and Nora Liu

LOCAL AND MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS anchor the day-to-day lives of US residents. Thousands of city and county governments across the US have an important role to play in building and sustaining equity for their residents. Local governments are a locus of policy making and resource distribution. Thus, they are in a critical position to shaping equity and opportunity through investment and decision-making in transportation, housing, public health, small businesses, and more. Additionally, local governments are uniquely positioned to align or coordinate with — and also be challenged by — advocacy and activist groups in the community.

What is local government?

Local government exists in most states across the United States in two forms — municipal and county. Counties may be divided further into townships. Municipal-level local governments can have multiple types of jurisdictions including city, town, borough, and village. Some rural or suburban areas have no local government below the county-level.

What are meta-goals?

In Targeted Universalism (TU), universal goals are established and targeted strategies are crafted to achieve those goals. A universal goal is one that everyone has yet to reach. For example, the hope isn't that everyone's high school graduation rate should be equal to that of white able-bodied males. It is that everyone's graduation rate is such that all students leave secondary education with the educational resources to lead a meaningful and successful life.

However, the next set of analysis considers very different change strategies that will help groups whose current outcomes are better or worse. Targeted universalism allows for groups that are experiencing greater suffering and harm to receive more attention and resources while still acknowledging that everyone has room to expand and improve in outcomes.

This begs the question of how “big” the universal goal should be — how ambitious can it be? Targeted Universalism in its fullest sense can be arranged in a hierarchy of goals.

The universal goal of a Parks and Recreation project may be for all residents to live within two miles of a public park. It may seem overly modest for a city with very generous resources. It may seem too innocuous or symbolic a goal for city residents facing extreme public health threats associated with homelessness or vast food deserts. If we start to look at meta-goals — the goal of the goals — we can begin to see how a project of acquiring new land for parks in particular neighborhoods could align and compliment change strategies in other government departments or with other advocate and community-based organizations. The goal of walkable park access can further a more ambitious goal of creating improved networks for public transportation or better location strategies for attracting grocers.

Paying attention to what the goal of a goal can be — a meta-goal — can create the alignment needed to respond to community concerns, namely that long-standing and durable structural change is necessary and urgent.

In 2015, King County, Washington — home to over 2 million people in the Seattle metropolitan area — adopted major updates to its first-ever County Strategic Plan, originally created in 2010. A core goal of the updated Strategic Plan within the theme of Health and Human Potential is to “provide equitable opportunities for all individuals to realize their full potential.”¹ With that goal in mind, in 2016 King County's newly-created Office of Equity and Social Justice (OESJ) launched a six-year Equity and Social Justice (ESJ) Strategic Plan “centered on promoting equity internally and [in] the community.”² The plan involves investing in employees, communities, and upstream interventions such as housing, transportation, health and human services, the justice system, and the environment.

This plan was not created in a vacuum. In 2008, then-county executive of King County Ron Sims

launched the county's first Equity and Social Justice Initiative (ESJI), beginning the first in a long series of efforts to fight inequality through better governance.³ However, this initiative was only within the county's executive branch. It was not until 2010 under the new executive Dow Constantine that the county council voted to pass an ordinance embedding the goals of the initiative into all county offices, departments, and agencies.⁴

A robust array of community-based organizations and advocacy groups played a critical role in shaping, influencing, and critiquing the function of local government. These entities drew attention to challenges faced by different groups of residents in the county area.

King County also has a long history of cross-sector, public-private partnerships to address the legacy

The turn to the local level

In the last several years there's been a notable increase in local-level political change efforts that corresponded with the results of the 2016 national elections. A turn to local strategies to create political change is accompanied with calls to engage more deeply with local interest groups and local or nationally-networked advocacy groups. For example, a poll showed that "more Americans said 'progress ... on the biggest challenges facing the country' was more likely to come through initiatives from 'business, local governments, non-profits, and Americans themselves' or 'individuals taking action in their communities' than by 'electing a president you mostly agree with on the issues'."

In light of this shift, it is critically important to explore: the options and potentials that exist in local politics; the capacity of local governments to intimately interface with community needs and demands; and the way local change can jump scale to national politics. These threads can influence the structural change which pushes a flow of resources to state and local governments that only the federal government can provide.

of institutionalized racism. A history of racialized policies resulted in — among other disparities — a life-expectancy differential of eighteen years between the wealthiest, whitest parts of the county and the poorest areas to the south populated predominantly by people of color.⁵ Such disparities attracted the attention of Minneapolis/St. Paul-based Northwest Area Foundation and Seattle-based Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation who have invested heavily in equity-focused K-12 education STEM and access to financial capital initiatives in southern King County.⁶ In fact, a key component of the plan includes a Region Equity Collaborative, which focuses on engaging stakeholders across sectors to sustain change.

However, philanthropic investment — no matter the size — is limited in its ability to drive change. The underlying structures and policies that reinforce inequity, built and maintained by local governments, are often left out of change strategies. Structural transformations and redistributive practices must be leveraged within local governments in order to achieve the vision of a city that attends to the needs of its constituents.

King County's Targeted Universalist Approach

WHILE LOCAL GOVERNMENTS may consider themselves fair and just, people of color and non-dominant groups continue to fare worse than relatively privileged groups on many fronts: housing, employment, education, justice, and health. Current day racially-predictable disparities are just as bad – and in some cases worse – than they were before the Civil Rights era. Since then, most governments have not made significant strides in improving social welfare outcomes for employees and residents of

color, even with years of effort. Local government – and the public sector as a whole – should be held accountable and responsible for the public good as current levels of racial and other inequities are destructive and threaten liberal democratic processes.⁷

In the case of King County, the 2015 revision of the County Strategic Plan provided the new Office of Equity and Social Justice (OESJ) an opportunity to think critically about the principles and meta-goals

Creating a Targeted Universal Platform



guiding the county’s approach in adopting a targeted universalist (TU) approach to social justice and equity. The county settled on a vision or meta-goal of “a King County where all people have equitable opportunities to thrive,” which aligned with goals in the county’s larger strategic plan from 2010 as well as the updated 2015 version.⁸ Compared to the initial 2008 Equity and Social Justice Initiative (ESJI) which was limited in scope to the executive branch, the much broader 2016 ESJI embeds the vision and meta-goal throughout all branches and offices of the county government. With a mandate for all levels of the county to approach their work through a lens of racial equity, the new plan has the potential to have an exponentially larger impact.

Defining a vision or meta-goal is an essential part of targeted universalism, as it weaves together a common theme through the rest of the approach and establishes the importance of moving all groups forward in outcomes and towards equity. However, meta-goals are insufficient in driving change. More specific goals that are “SMART” in nature — in other words, goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound — require an understanding of the actual disparities and differences in outcomes that specific subgroups in a community face. This is the crux of a TU approach (see acyclic graphic below). Local governments must create goals that are **universal** and aspirational in nature, then implement **targeted** strategies to close the gap between groups and to move all people forward.

King County’s work towards equity started in an official capacity as early as 2008, and each year the county published annual progress reports on the goals it set. However, these sub-goals and strategies were not static. They have evolved and changed over time, pointing to the iterative process of identifying gaps between subgroups, deciding on goals, implementing strategies to reduce those gaps, and revisiting the goals and strategies in future equity assessments. The evolution of the county’s plans can be thought of as recursive revolutions around the cycle of implementing a TU framework.

Preparation: Building the Table

BEFORE IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC GOALS and developing strategies, however, King County's OESJ recognized the importance of laying the groundwork for change. This preliminary stage primarily involves: the communication of the upcoming work; the assembly of people, structures, and resources within the government necessary to develop and enact a racial equity action plan (REAP); and the beginnings of involving and engaging the broader community. This stage is an essential step in ensuring the infrastructure is in place to support the equity action plan team and the development process.

In King County, the executive office laid most of the internal foundation for racial justice and equity work at the county level through launching the ESJI in 2008. The 2016 ESJ Strategic Plan, which has a much broader reach, was a culmination of planning led internally by the executive office, engaging employees at all levels of county government, as well as building support among community residents and organizations.⁹ Major takeaways from King County's experience centered on these points:

- Deeper engagement with employees, residents, and other stakeholders leads to more meaningful data collection in the plan development phase
- Planning is exhausting — not exciting — and crucial for success
- Support from elected officials at the highest levels is necessary

In the King County experience, elected officials in the executive office were the driving force behind planning and building support for the racial equity

action work; however, this is not sufficient by itself. The entire community must be involved and engaged to make the planning and execution of racial justice work impactful.

Although preparation is not covered explicitly as a step in the target universalism framework, it is an important part of the implementation of TU philosophy in practice. Planning and community engagement are essential steps to understanding potential vulnerabilities. In particular, TU aims to protect policies from attack by those who claim they are unfair. The King County experience shows that preparation, stakeholder engagement, and resource identification help create the necessary conditions for a successful equity strategic and action plan.

Research & Information Gathering: TU Steps 2–4

After laying the preparation groundwork with stakeholders inside and outside of government, the meat of the TU process begins: steps 2, 3, and 4 in the TU framework. In this part of the process, the team decides what information exists and what is needed: they gather and analyze the information to identify what *actually* needs to happen to achieve racial equity. Preparation for this step is critical. After first insights are generated, it may be necessary to pause and gather more information, and grant more stakeholders an influential place at the table.

During the development of the 2016 ESJ Strategic Plan, King County's OESJ met with over 100

community organizations, philanthropic funders, and education, business, and labor groups, in addition to engaging over 700 county government staff at all levels through interviews and focus groups.¹⁰ The county was able to draw on rich information from data and the experiences of a network of community-based organizations, community development financial institutions, national policy organizations, and foundation-funded research.

The OESJ also drew on US Census data from 2000 and 2010 and the American Community Service. This data made evident clear patterns of local inequities that the local government can address. These included the following findings, highlighted in Sims' 2008 Equity and Social Justice Initiative Report:¹¹

- A child in south King County was more than twice as likely to drop out of high school as one in east King County.
- A worker making between \$15,000 and \$25,000 a year was ten times less likely to have health insurance than one making \$50,000 or more per year.
- A youth of color was six times more likely than a white youth to spend time in a state or county correctional facility.
- A southeast Seattle resident was four times more likely to die from diabetes than a resident of Mercer Island.
- A Native American baby was four times more likely to die before his or her first birthday than a white baby.

The data-gathering phase requires teams engaged in the work to (1) define subgroups of the population with differing outcomes (e.g.: people of color, veterans, children, residents of certain neighborhoods, etc.), (2) understand how far apart the various subgroups are from each other and from any existing goals in respect to outcomes of interest, and (3) identify existing structural barriers preventing equitable outcomes among the subgroups. Goal-setting will be described in greater detail in following sections.

Racial Equity Action Plans can put a theory of change into action to achieve a collective vision of racial equity. Plans can drive institutional and structural change. However, the goal we seek is not a plan. The goal is institutional and structural change, which requires resources to implement: time, money, skills, and effort. It requires local governments' will and expertise to change our policies, the way we do business, our habits, and cultures.

—“Racial Equity Action Plans: A How-to Manual,” Executive Summary, page 4.

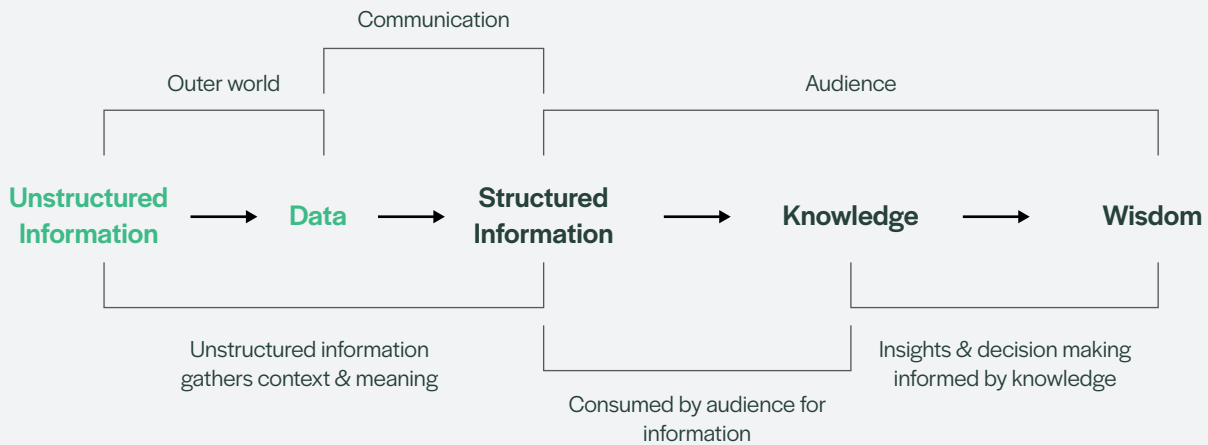
To assist local municipalities embarking on the process of addressing racial disparities and building equity, the Government Alliance on Racial Equity (GARE) has created a **racial equity action plan (REAP) “How-to Manual”** which provides a particularly helpful framework for government bodies working to identify disparities and set universal goals that go beyond disparities data.

Given the potentially vast amounts of data that can be leveraged for racial equity work, figuring out where to start may be intimidating. The REAP manual recommends beginning the analysis of equity data within the following domains:

1. Jurisdiction workforce demographics, hiring, retention, and promotion
2. Contracting practices
3. Jurisdictional commitment, leadership, and management
4. Community access and partnership
5. Community-level data disaggregated by race in housing, jobs, education, criminal justice, health, etc.

These domains are only recommendations — county and municipal governments taking on a racial justice and equity initiative will need to determine what is most relevant for the local context. Deciding what

“From Reality to People’s Brains”: Data, information, knowledge, wisdom



Source: Cario, Alberto. 2012. *The Functional Art: An Introduction to Information Graphics and Visualization*. New Riders Publishing

data to use and how to appropriately analyze it are critical parts of embedding TU principles into policy. It is important to realize that using data to inform policy development through a racial equity lens can sometimes lead to myopic, exclusive focus on disparities data. TU philosophy cautions us against doing so, however. While it is important to disaggregate data and to understand where different groups have differential outcomes, closing racial disparities is not a sufficient goal. The universal goal we strive for should involve improvements in outcomes for all groups. This is why, ideally, users of REAPs should start first with a universal goal before performing data analysis and disaggregation, otherwise bias based on the existing data may creep into and taint the goal-setting process.

Taking stock of existing data is an important first step, however there is a strong chance that data needed for racial equity planning may not yet exist. Some of these initial findings, though, were not anticipated. Realizing that so much of their area had clear geographic concentrations of obesity that correlated with geographic concentrations of lacking

paved sidewalks and parks located within 1 mile of a residence led them to engage more carefully and consult again with the department of parks and recreation and the public health department, and seek the input of advocacy groups and commissioners.

The TU process suggests that research, group identification, and sub-group disaggregated analysis should be iterative processes that inform each other. Ideally this should include a discussion of how, in a REAP setting, this takes place by engaging the community stakeholders defined in the “preparation” stage to share findings from the research, gathering feedback to ensure that data analysis reflects community reality, and then repeating the process to refine it.

Universal Goals

UNIVERSAL GOALS are the visionary part of a TU platform. The list below serves as the explicit universal goals included in the King County plan. Note that some of the aspirations within the categories are very broad and ambitious. These may be described as meta-goals that will create a framework for specific goals for individual targeted projects as policy and strategy are developed. For example, consider the goal within economic development and jobs: “Ensure that all people are prepared to participate in the workforce.” This is a universal goal that nearly everyone, including employed people, will benefit from if it is achieved. Consider a government department that wants to contribute to this goal and has the opportunity to do so within appropriating funds for education programs at college job opportunity and small businesses development centers. The scope of this work is comparatively small; it could be discouraging to think that this work cannot contribute to improving the status of an entire city. However, TU mobilizes smaller strategies, which are more immediately practicable, in coordination with each other so as to achieve more ambitious, larger-scale change.

When the implementation of TU is as broad and ambitious as that reflected within the county’s plan, the framework will exist at different stages of development within different sectors. For example, consider the description within the justice system category. That passage includes three targeted strategies: “stop the school-to-prison pipeline, address major upstream needs that predict criminal system involvement, and improve law enforcement relationship with the community.” This sector of the plan and the department it touches have listed

targeted strategies where others have listed explicit universal goals. This suggests that departments and programs working in the area of the justice system are well into the process of TU and are now deep into implementing strategies. This type of platform of a racial equity plan encompasses an exceptionally broad and diverse range of governmental activities. Because of this, a statement that outlines goals may also lead departments to list strategies, the goal of which being to implement these strategies. Rather than being inconsistent within TU, the presence of a department focused on implementing strategies reflects the desire to realize the whole strategy and that some focus areas will be at different stages of development.

King County’s universal goals included:

- **Child & youth development:** Provide access for all parents to the resources needed to raise healthy, happy children. Ensure that all children remain connected to their families and communities as they grow older, have plenty of opportunities for development, and are staying healthy and avoiding risky behaviors.
- **Economic development & jobs:** Ensure that all people are prepared to participate in the workforce. Create economic (employment and contracting) opportunities that are accessible to all groups, pay family support wages, and have upward mobility. Foster a welcoming environment for all kinds of businesses, not just large corporations.
- **Environment & climate:** Include the perspective and participation of all residents in decisions re-

lating to climate/environment/sustainability governance. Enhance climate resiliency for all groups, not just those that are well-resourced.

- **Health & human services:** Prioritize and improve the health of the entire population. Make sure that all voices are heard and all people are included. Support and draw upon the wisdom of the community.
- **Housing:** Finance, build, and ensure access for all people to quality housing that is strategically located, and [ensure that] that nobody is at risk of experiencing homelessness.
- **Information & technology:** Ensure all people have access to digital technologies and services to participate fully in information exchange and engagement.
- **Justice system:** Stop the school-to-prison pipeline, address major upstream needs that predict criminal system involvement, and improve law enforcement relationship with the community.
- **Transportation & mobility:** Ensure that all people can get to and from the places they need to be without major issues, in a reasonable timeframe, and at reasonable cost, regardless of car ownership or rural living situations.

Design Targeted Strategies to Supplement Universal Goals

KING COUNTY'S STRATEGIC PLAN is very clear in its ambition and understanding of the need to respond effectively to its residents.

To become pro-equity in our County practices and governance, we need systems and standards that build on our best practices and learnings from our equity journey to date. We need both to lead as necessary and to respond consistently to our residents, partners and employees.

In our different areas of government, we need to ensure that our decisions, policies and practices produce gains for all, while targeting many of the benefits where needs are greatest.

We need new processes that are inclusive and open, and in particular raise the voices and power of those in the community and our organization who have been historically sidelined by those who have traditionally exercised power. This is why the solutions in this plan are defined by those affected.

We are also challenging business as usual. The journey toward equity is necessarily disruptive. We must question existing systems of power and privilege by undoing the systems that have perpetuated unfair outcomes, and creating new spaces for learning and growth.

—King County, Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan 2016–2022, page 4.

The plan's targeted strategies are nested under the broader, universal goal. For example, see the targeted goals under the universal child & youth development goal from the previous list:

Child & youth development: Provide access for all parents to the resources needed to raise healthy, happy children. Ensure that all children remain connected to their families and communities as they grow older, have plenty of opportunities for development, and are staying healthy and avoiding risky behaviors.

- *Invest early:* Prenatal to 5 years of age. Highlights include supporting new parents, families and caregivers through community-based programs, peer support and home visiting. Ensuring parents and caregivers have access to health screenings, and resources to obtain treatment for any identified complications.
- *Sustain gains from 5 to 24 years of age.* Highlights include building resilience of youth and reducing negative risky behaviors. Helping youth stay connected to their families and communities, meeting the health needs of youth, stopping the school-to-prison-pipeline, and helping young adults transition into adulthood, including re-engaging in education opportunities and job skills development.
- *Communities of opportunity.* Highlights include supporting priorities and strategies of place-based collaboration in communities with much to gain. Engaging multiple organizations in policy and systems change, and fostering innovations in equity through a regional learning community.

Similarly detailed, granular goals accompanied with specific strategies are associated with each of these areas. Often, setting universal goals requires

What Is Racial Equity? What is Equity 2.0?

In the context of racial equity action plans for local governments, the Government Alliance on Racial Equity uses the following definition of racial equity: “Racial equity is realized when race can no longer be used to predict life outcomes, and outcomes for all groups are improved.”

The TU framework can lead us down a path towards belonging. Another way of thinking about TU is as an upgraded form of equity, call it Equity 2.0. In this model, all people, including those traditionally left out of planning, have a seat at the table to co-create the society they want. Co-creation is a means to extend power and influence to people who are otherwise asked only to “contribute” to a vision that is determined and defined by others, rather than to be part of the creation of that vision. Targeted universalism to achieve belonging carries with it this important dimension of power sharing and co-creation. In short, TU is the means through which government sets the conditions for a society built on belonging.

pursuing a long and robust constellation of targeted strategies required to reach out and benefit the full array of groups within a city or county. Setting and reaching universal goals benefits a large group of people, not only groups experiencing great harm, but also groups that experience more privilege in their relationships to structures and systems. In this process, decisions related to setting priorities, distributing resources, and choices between targeted strategies becomes a reality.

In this way, King County has responded by deepening engagement with what they describe under the category of “Plan Implementation.” Firstly, they plan for two- and three-year cycles, meaning they organize with interim landmarks at two or three years.

The TU framework is a way to build belonging through the bridging of different individuals and the interests of different groups of individuals. This suggests that it moves beyond race as a single focus of difference that must be addressed within analysis of disparate outcomes and injustice. As we have suggested here and in the [Targeted Universalism Primer](#), TU offers the potential to not only realize procedural equity but to make transformative change in rearranging institutional relationships and dramatically extending the distribution of power within social networks. It is not only that realizing Equity 2.0 would achieve similar life outcomes for everyone, but that the characteristics of that lived existence are precisely what each individual needs and what each individual is able to articulate and define. This move beyond equity is one that closely adheres to the alignments for short- and long-term durable changes that can arise within a TU framework.

Ultimately, their plans stretch far longer than three years, but they check-in for progress along the way. The county is also deeply involved with other regional planning efforts and carry with them this equity plan. The principles that guide their implementation plan include deep listening, identification of root causes, adapting practices based on insights gathered, and regular co-learning and sharing. This is an institutionalized practice, not simply an occasional engagement, that becomes an integral, routinized part of the function of their government. These four principles of the implementation plan also are iterative and produce new insights to inform the government’s function.

Belonging and TU in Local Government

FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS have failed to serve the interests of those it governs, in particular communities of color, women, immigrants, and those in poverty, too often. These shortcomings are the core of a growing lack of trust in the government and the simultaneous growth of political polarization. These are fundamental forces which deepen social cleavages and grow support for retrograde governments. King County and other local governments' attention to using TU to choreograph government-wide short- and long-term plans may seem too modest to counter these forces. Quite the contrary.

By giving the deliberate and serious investment exemplified by the case of King County there is profound potential to rebuild the relationship between government and those it governs. There is profound potential for local government to create bridges between government and the governed, and for government to provide a platform for communities to bridge among themselves. The government cannot in and of itself create belonging in their community, but local government can play a significant role in doing its part by shifting structurally so it can better fit with the organized communities it serves.

Local Governments, Targeted Universalism, and Belonging

The Government Alliance on Racial Equity has stated that “government played a primary role in the creation of racial inequities, including laws, policies, and practices that created racial inequities. Our ideas of ‘equality and justice’ have shifted over time, and we now have collective values for a more inclusive democracy.”

Efforts to build the capacity of local government to expand racial justice has taken place with tools similar to and including the racial equity action plan. Many local governments, including King County, have made great strides to reaffirm the role of government to ameliorate any historical negative impacts the state has created across history.

The role of government has changed dramatically in recent decades. These changes are often described as “limiting the role of government.” It is more precise to describe this as a shift or restructuring the role of government. A deliberate political strategy was executed to change the function of government away from one that provided services to people to one that primarily provides services to the private sector. This was a deliberate political strategy whose success was dependent upon fomenting racialized language that tapped into stereotypes and discourse that associated government with services to groups that were vilified as being in need due to individual shortcomings. The strategy to make government part of the problem rather than the solution rendered government to better serve corporate interests.

Because of this, government has failed to center its democratic aspirations. The private sector — including not- and for-profit firms as well as philanthropists — has attempted to step in where government’s role was rolled back. However, there will always be shortfalls in this approach because government’s financial power will always outmatch private sector dollars regardless of the private sector’s ostensible efficiencies.

Due to the inevitable shortfall of the private sector to address problems formerly addressed by public dollars, profound social problems have gone unaddressed. All the while government has restructured itself to erode popular and political support to restore the role formerly played by government in the day-to-day lives of individuals and communities.

This has fomented a profound and growing distrust in government while also fomenting popular support for government to more fully restrict its role in public services. Governments at all levels must address this fundamental problem. As local governments move forward with work to build equity in their communities they should do work with a deliberate effort to rebuild trust in government and its appropriate and vital role in serving those it governs.

Endnotes

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The Othering & Belonging Institute brings together researchers, community stakeholders, and policy-makers to identify and challenge the barriers to an inclusive, just, and sustainable society in order to create transformative change.