

Decision-Making Tree for Prioritizing Racial Equity in Resource Allocation

Abstract

Within University of Minnesota Extension's health and nutrition program area, we created and are using a decision-making tree to prioritize our work with communities of color through equitable decision-making practices. The tool is currently used to help grant administrators winnow down a pool of applicants for a participatory grant-making program called the Action Learning Seed Fund. In this article, we draw on our experiences with creating and using the tool to explore its potential application for advancing equitable decision making in other areas of Extension work.

Keywords: [equity](#), [financial disparities](#), [grant making](#), [decision making](#)

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Introduction

As Extension seeks to respond to the challenges of the 21st century, staff from University of Minnesota Extension's health and nutrition program area are embracing racial equity as a core focus of our systems change work. We believe that racial equity is an integral part of work across Extension services and that we must improve our capacity to serve Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) community members. Consider, for example, how health and nutrition are connected to disparities in food access, agriculture is connected to disparities in land access, and access to youth programming is connected to disparities in graduation rates in BIPOC communities as compared to predominantly White communities (Hassel, 2004; Horst & Marion, 2018; Raja et al., 2008; Ratkos & Knollenberg, 2015). In Minnesota, this is especially significant, given the state's ranking as one of the worst in the nation in terms of racial inequality (McCann, 2020).

To level the financial playing field for BIPOC communities within Minnesota's food system, we launched a participatory grant-making program called the Action Learning Seed Fund (ALSF) in 2019 (University of Minnesota Extension, n.d.). We raised \$50,000 from multiple sources to fund the 2019 ALSF. The goal of the program is to allocate funding to organizations and individuals seeking to create a more healthful and just food system that are not well resourced and that have leadership from within BIPOC communities. We used a racial equity lens to develop the ALSF Decision-Making Tree (DMT) to help determine which organizations could be considered well resourced and therefore not qualified for ALSF assistance. In this article, we describe the utility of the DMT and its potential use for prioritizing racial equity in decision making in other areas of

Extension work.

A Primer on Participatory Grant Making

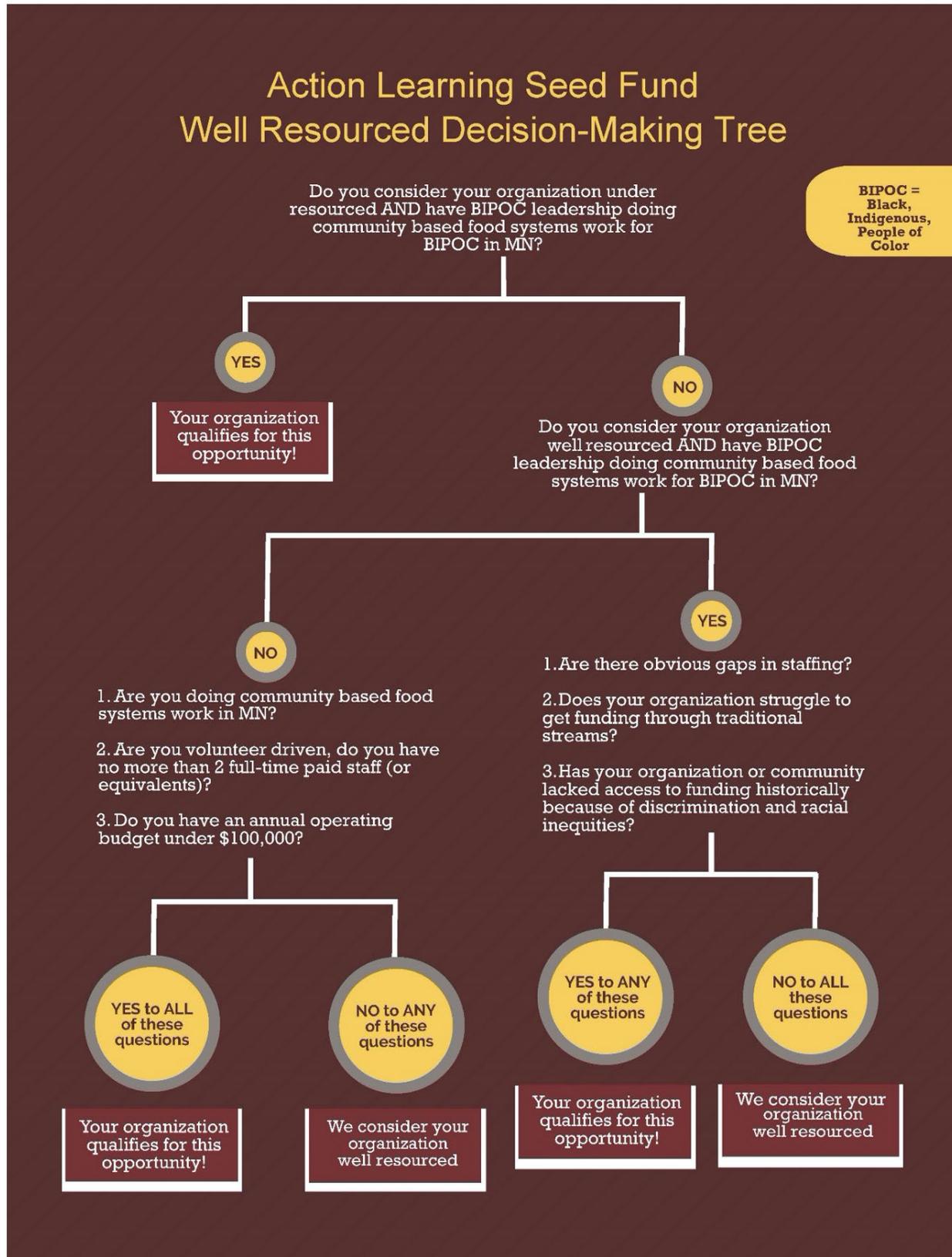
The ALSF is a participatory grant-making program. Participatory grant making emphasizes decentralized decision making by those who are receiving funds (Gibson, 2017). Thus, participatory grant making is a way to shift the traditional power dynamic of grant decisions away from funding organizations (often large, well resourced, and led by White people) and toward the people who are intended to benefit from funding (often marginalized and historically underresourced communities). In his book, *Decolonizing Wealth*, author Edgar Villanueva (2018) articulated how shifting power in this way is especially important in grant making because of the over \$800 billion in assets foundations in the United States hold, only 5% is being invested into grant making. Of that 5%, only about 7.5% is being invested into BIPOC communities despite the fact that these communities often face the greatest disparities (Villanueva, 2018).

DMT

The DMT (shown in Figure 1) walks users through a series of questions to help them determine whether their organization qualifies for the ALSF. The DMT contains a racial equity lens that is meant to level the playing field for BIPOC communities. Therefore, the DMT helps prioritize organizations that

- have BIPOC leadership and consider themselves underresourced,
- have BIPOC leadership and could be considered well resourced but also have experienced significant funding gaps due to racial bias, or
- do not have BIPOC leadership but are considered underresourced and are doing community-based food systems work.

Figure 1.
Action Learning Seed Fund Decision-Making Tree



BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, People of Color

Implementation of the Tool

During the ALSF application process, we share the DMT publicly through a link on the landing page of the program website to help prospective applicants determine whether they are well resourced. After the application process ends, the DMT is one of the tools we use to narrow the number of viable applicants. Additionally, we review each proposal relative to whether the grant seeker's service or project meets the following funding criteria:

- creates a more healthful and more equitable food system;
- demonstrates significant leadership from BIPOC;
- builds new connections across communities, organizations, and networks; and
- bridges differences such as race, geography, sector, and perspective.

For proposals that clearly demonstrate alignment with all the funding criteria, we accept the applicants into the ALSF. If it is unclear whether the criteria are met, we offer the applicants a virtual meeting to discuss the proposal and decide together whether they are a fit for the ALSF. Of the 30 applicants for the 2019 ALSF, 12 moved forward automatically and two more advanced after a phone conversation. One of the applicants that moved forward following the virtual meeting was an organization that was led by BIPOC individuals but could have appeared to be well resourced. During the conversation, all parties agreed that the organization lacked resources due to funding discrimination and therefore should qualify for the ALSF. This scenario demonstrates that both the DMT and follow-up conversations can be instrumental in our decision making related to the ALSF.

Discussion

In Minnesota, our development and use of the DMT is a response to a system-wide effort in Extension to go "beyond civil rights" (through a required training of the same title) to ensure that equity and racial parity are integral considerations in programming decisions and marketing (Bradley, 2018). This effort is part of a national trend across Extension to prioritize equity in our work as evidenced, for example, by the emergence and popularity of the Racial Equity in the Food System Workgroup that is part of the eXtension Community, Local, and Regional Food Systems Community of Practice (Michigan State University, n.d.). The purpose of this workgroup is to be a community of Cooperative Extension professionals and community stakeholders who connect, learn, and collaborate to facilitate change within institutions and society to build racial equity within the food system.

The DMT is a useful tool for the ALSF and helps us take a pragmatic approach to addressing structural and systemic racism in the food system. We have received multiple emails and comments from community members expressing gratitude for creating such a valuable tool. Because of the utility of the DMT as an effective, equity-based screening tool for the ALSF, we believe this resource could be adapted and used in other areas of Extension work. Doing so would further enable Extension stewardship of public resources by focusing limited staff time to those communities that need it most and supporting the prioritization of racial equity. From nutrition programming to agricultural education to 4-H clubs, this tool could be used and adapted

to prioritize the audiences and partners Extension staff choose to work with in order to advance racial equity and reduce racial disparities in their work.

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