

Defining a Shared Priority

AN INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A SHARED PRIORITY?

A shared priority is the North Star that guides collaborative work on community investment.* It has two parts: an aspiration for how to use investment to bring racial equity to your community and a result that names the specific change and outcome you will work to achieve in service of your aspiration. The aspiration reflects the values of the people who live and work in a place, and the result is accomplished through specific community investment strategies.

Moving from values to aspiration to result to strategies is a collaborative process that involves local residents, organizations, institutions, and public agencies. It requires time, deep relationship building, and trust, which are essential to shifting power and advancing equity. A smaller group that includes people with lived experience in the community generally holds this work, but at every stage they seek broader input and buy-in (see below).

As the examples below suggest, the two elements of shared priorities—aspiration and result—are the core of the collaborative work it takes to move from community values to strategies that will achieve what the community seeks. A strong shared priority serves as a call to action and a guide to decision-making that keeps people focused on what they hope to achieve together.

	Historic Valley	Triangle Square	Northern State	
Values	Everyone matters and belongs.	People have a right to stay in their homes.	Everyone should have fair access to opportunity.	
SHARED PRIORITY	Aspiration	Ease housing cost burden for Latinx families making less than 80% AMI* in nine cities across Historic Valley *Area Median Income	Maintain housing affordability for longstanding Afro-Caribbean residents in the Triangle Square neighborhood	Close the racial wealth gap for small business owners in the northern part of State
	Result	We will produce and preserve 10,000 units of affordable housing in the next ten years.	We will preserve 1,200 units of affordable housing in the next five years.	Developers and contractors of color will receive 20% of government contracts in six major cities over the next three years.
Strategies	Build a fund Build a pipeline Shift cities' policies and capacity	Activate right of first refusal policies Maintain expiring properties Create a fund for home repairs that serves homeowners, landlords, and tenants	Build a fund and back office to support developers of color Help contractors qualify Build an accountability system to ensure fair access	

*Definitions of these core terms can be found on the final page of this brief.

A strong shared priority has an aspiration and a result that are:

- 1. Legitimate and widely embraced:** The **aspiration** should be informed, agreed upon, and broadly shared by the people it directly affects (as well as the people who can help make it happen). Deciding upon a shared priority requires hearing directly from community members and taking the time to build authentic relationships, trust, and shared commitment among a broad coalition of individuals, institutions, and organizations so they can have the hard conversations needed to tackle deep-rooted inequities. Often, community members and groups have already identified their priorities in community plans and other documents, so a crucial part of this process is surfacing that history along with the community's current conversations.
- 2. Focused on racial equity and the system:** Because structural racism is a primary cause of disinvestment,* transformational community investment must be rooted in racial equity. This means the **aspiration** and **result** should explicitly focus on removing barriers and creating opportunities to directly benefit and advance communities of color most affected by disinvestment. It is critical to understand your community's history and the norms, policies, and practices that created the racialized disadvantage we see today in order to make sure your shared priority will contribute to correcting it.
- 3. Straightforward:** The **aspiration** and **result** should be easy to say, easy to understand, and visible to everyone involved in the work as well as the general public. The phrasing should be specific enough that you can use it to make decisions.
- 4. Appropriately specific:** The **result** should not be so broad that it is impossible to achieve nor so narrow that achieving it will not make a difference. Rather, it should be focused on advancing racial equity for a specific population in a specific place (an entire state is too big; a single building or block is too small). It should also be large enough to require a [pipeline of projects](#).
- 5. Timely:** The **result** should address current issues, take advantage of current opportunities, and cover a specific time period (generally 3-10 years).

A shared priority is inevitably a work in progress. Community needs and preferences may evolve, funding and other resources may shift, new opportunities may emerge, and there may be changes in the institutions and people involved in the work. You should periodically review your shared priority to determine whether it still fits the moment or needs to be revised.

WHY DO SHARED PRIORITIES MATTER?

Shared priorities are the foundation of the capital absorption framework. A community's shared priority determines what deals and projects* belong in its pipeline. We work to strengthen the [enabling environment](#) so that we can better accomplish our shared priority. Without clarity on what matters most to the community, none of this work will move the needle for investment and racial equity.

The capital absorption framework emerged in part out of too many painful and racist experiences where developers and investors have entered communities without considering their histories, needs, and plans for

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themselves. Too often, the result has been failed deals, displacement, or unwanted development, all of which have brought further harm to the people living in the community.

In contrast, when community partners come together around a shared priority, they can proactively seek out investors and developers who want to support it—and they can resist investment and development that is not aligned with it. Your shared priority can be a guiding tool for making decisions about competing needs and priorities, allocating resources, and keeping a laser-sharp focus on racial equity. And it can galvanize a wide range of community members, organizations, institutions, and businesses to join the cause and find ways to contribute to the vision, planning, and implementation of the work.

HOW CAN WE DO THIS?

A shared priority is only as effective as the collaborative process that creates and holds it. It takes time to engage the community, understand its past, build trust, and gather widespread support. It requires ongoing commitment to develop and implement the strategies that will accomplish the shared priority, as well as to regularly revisit both the shared priority and the strategies (which will inevitably evolve as you make progress and learn what works).

There are several stages to identifying and confirming a shared priority. Where you begin will depend on the discussions and relationships that are already happening in the community:

- 1. LOOK AND LISTEN:** Surfacing what the community has already voiced, as well as what is currently bubbling up, involves learning its history, understanding its values, uncovering the local impacts of structural racism and disinvestment, listening to the lived experiences of its people, and studying past and current local plans and budgets. Use what you surface to articulate an initial version of the aspiration that includes who will benefit, where they are located, and a headline for the focus (see chart above for examples).
- 2. REACH OUT:** Test this version of the aspiration with a broad set of involved community members to align it with their vision and goals, assess their support and excitement, and begin to explore the result that would help achieve it. Your top priority should be talking to the people and organizations who are already working to build on the community's assets and meet its needs.
- 3. CONFIRM:** Incorporate the conversations you've had and community input you've received to refine the aspiration and decide on the result. This process will likely include continued discussions with community members who have already been involved in the process as well as new participants.
- 4. COMMIT:** Providing opportunities for individuals and organizations who participated in the first three steps to decide how they will commit to the final version and carry it out together is critical to solidifying community support and ownership. This may involve creating formal language, spaces, or events to actively affirm and maintain the momentum of the commitment (for instance, a celebration, an opportunity to sign on, publication, circulation in media and social media), as well as developing the strategies they will contribute to implementing.
- 5. HOLD EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE:** Once the shared priority has been adopted and embraced, it is essential to create collaborative structures, identify roles, and establish accountability mechanisms to realize the collective commitment to maintaining and carrying it out.

TIPS

Understand history and power dynamics: Your shared priority will likely rest on a foundation of years, even decades, of ongoing efforts to build health, wealth, and racial equity through investment. That work has taken place across the country, and while some of it has successfully benefited communities of color most directly impacted by disinvestment, some has not. Individual and institutional power (the ability to plan and achieve a desired purpose through laws, policies, and investments that shape people's lives) play a direct role in whether investment and development succeed in benefiting the communities where they take place. The questions and tools in this [resource](#) can help individuals and groups reflect on personal, institutional, and historical power and how it shapes their development and implementation of a shared priority that advances racial equity.

Build community power through engagement: Community engagement is how we involve relevant local groups and individuals in setting, shaping, and refining shared priorities from beginning to end.

- The first step in authentic community engagement is making sure there are real decisions at stake; asking people to engage without an outcome undermines the process.
- Creating clear rationales, roles, and expectations for partner and community engagement is important for establishing trust and allowing partners to define their place in the work. It is difficult to develop broad support for a shared priority when participants do not understand the scope of their influence and control over its development and implementation.
- These [tips](#) can help you design a community engagement process that achieves these outcomes and meets local needs.

To learn more about shared priorities, read our brief, [Defining Shared Priorities](#).



Core Community Investment Terms Defined

Community investment finances projects whose primary goal is to improve social, economic, and environmental conditions by meeting community needs—like good jobs, affordable homes, healthy food options, and climate resilience—rather than making a lot of money. It is designed to support projects and places that mainstream investments usually avoid (because they tend to be more complicated, expensive, and perceived as financially risky).

Disinvested describes communities that have lost (or never had) sufficient investment to meet the economic, educational, health, and social needs of their residents. In the United States, **disinvestment** is largely caused by two factors: 1) systemic racism, its practices (such as historical redlining and contemporary discriminatory loan practices), and its effects (such as segregation and white flight); 2) national and local business trends and policy changes (such as US industries moving abroad and the decline of family farms). As a result, most disinvested communities are communities of color and/or low-income communities.

A **deal** is a financial transaction that brings together investors, who supply money, with people who have a need for that money. Deals may be done directly by the people or organizations who supply and use the money, or they may involve intermediaries, like banks or community development financial institutions, whose role is to connect the suppliers and users of money. Deals result in **projects**, which are the actual things being funded, like a block of townhouses, a supermarket that will train and employ local residents, or the expansion of a local business. The words deal and projects are sometimes used interchangeably.

About the Center for Community Investment

The **Center for Community Investment** at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy works to ensure that all communities, especially those that have suffered from structural racism and policies that have left them economically and socially isolated, can unlock the capital they need to thrive. Our work is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and JPMorgan Chase & Co.

For more resources, visit centerforcommunityinvestment.org/resources.