

Regional Equity Atlas

The Regional Equity Atlas is a research, education, and organizing project dedicated to promoting stronger, healthier, and more sustainable communities in the Pacific Northwest.

Currently in development, the Regional Equity Atlas 3.0 will include **an online mapping tool** and **interpretive website**, which will enable us to understand how well different neighborhoods, communities, and populations across our region are able to access the resources and opportunities they need to meet their basic needs and advance their health and well-being.

The project is guided by a **vision of research justice**¹, which seeks to amplify and emphasize the voices of those most directly impacted by institutional racism – in particular, people of color – in the work of making our communities equitable. Public policy advocates and other political decision-makers rely heavily on data, research, and analysis to build power and make change. Unfortunately, many communities are denied the right to their own knowledge or ways of knowing by mainstream research practices, which in turn perpetuates systemic inequities.

The Regional Equity Atlas starts instead from the proposition that **communities are experts in their own lives**, possessing **experiential, historical, and cultural knowledge** which is often delegitimized by mainstream research practices. Our goal is to build a tool which **empowers community members to collect, analyze, and disseminate data** that they consider vital to achieving their objectives.

Ultimately, the Regional Equity Atlas is more than a collection of maps: it's designed to equip communities and community-based organizations to **enable them to advance community-generated solutions** in public policy and other forms of decision-making. We will not collect, analyze, and present data for its own sake – instead, the Regional Equity Atlas is designed to be a tool to **catalyze lasting social change**, and to **support grassroots community organizing** toward that end.

The Regional Equity Atlas is guided by a project team led by the Coalition of Communities of Color. It includes Ecotrust, 1000 Friends of Oregon and Futurewise.

Regional Equity Atlas: Visions and Values for Research Justice

Public policy advocates and other political decision-makers rely heavily on data, research, and analysis to build power and make change. Unfortunately, many communities are denied the right to their own knowledge or ways of knowing by mainstream research practices, which in turn perpetuates systemic inequities. The Regional Equity Atlas must be a tool to achieve racial and social justice. As such, Regional Equity Atlas project partners set out the following values guiding our work and our vision for the long-term impact of the project:

¹ See our explanation of research justice as a strategic framework in Vision and Values for Research Justice.

Audience and definitions

When we say “communities,” we refer broadly to underserved communities, such as communities of color, low-income folks, rural residents, queer and trans people, and immigrants and refugees.

We center communities of color (specifically and individually, as opposed to an amalgamating catch-all) in our vision and our work. We believe that an approach rooted explicitly in racial justice – and, concomitantly, one which highlights racial disparities – is critical to building a community-owned tool that serves both urban and rural communities of Oregon and Washington in meaningful ways.

Decolonizing data and research

Communities are experts in their own lives, possessing experiential, historical, and cultural knowledge which is delegitimized by mainstream, white-dominant research practices. The Regional Equity Atlas project must work to combat that delegitimization by advancing research justice in the service of decolonizing data and research. We believe that decolonizing data and research by empowering communities of color as experts of their experience and having the right to research, the right to know, and the right to be heard is a crucial part of transformative change. The following visual outlines our research justice framework.

Changing systems

The Regional Equity Atlas can and must be a tool to center community-based and created knowledge and expertise, advancing both research justice in its methodology as well as equitable outcomes in public policy. It must also support grassroots organizing which builds power to achieve those equitable outcomes.

Community ownership, transparency, and accountability

Project partners commit to a transparent process in project design, research and data collection, and the dissemination of findings and research tools. Partners will remain accountable to the community after the publication of the next Regional Equity Atlas, by tracking how it is used to advance research justice and policy change.

Community Priorities and Sustainable Capacity

The Regional Equity Atlas elevates the expertise of communities of color, emphasizing community strengths, and addressing self-determined community priorities through research. It commits to building long term and sustainable capacity among communities of color to develop their own expertise, define priorities, and propose meaningful solutions that go beyond a single study.

Equitable partnership and meaningful engagement

Communities and community-based organizations are equitably and meaningfully involved in the research process. That includes, but is not limited to, setting project goals; identifying data metrics and indicators for non-community-generated data; and planning for, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting community-generated data. Communities and the community-based institutions that serve them must be at the forefront of designing, executing, and utilizing the Regional Equity Atlas.

Transformative action and civic innovation

The Regional Equity Atlas' next iteration must enable communities and community-based organizations to advance community-generated solutions in public policy and other forms of decision-making. We will not collect, analyze, and present data for its own sake – instead, the Regional Equity Atlas is designed to be a tool to catalyze lasting social change, and to support grassroots community organizing toward that end.

III. Project Plan and Timeline

The Regional Equity Atlas will implement a pilot phase in Washington County as a next step after the completion of the CCC-led community based participatory research project about the lived experiences of communities of color living in that county. This pilot phase will operationalize the three rights of research justice -- the right to research, the right to know, and the right to be heard, by building research capacity among communities of color in Washington County. The Regional Equity Atlas foresees and plans a process where communities most impacted by racial equity will be at the center of and driving the data collection and analysis process and the design and development of the tool per se.

The project activities with related timeline are described below.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Identify cohort of community researchers in Washington County

The Coalition of Communities of Color will leverage its partnerships with communities of color in Washington County, especially culturally specific community based organizations, to identify up to 15 community members who will form a 'researchers in training' cohort. We envision this cohort comprising a mix of demographics, and may include ordinary residents, students, staff at culturally specific organizations and so on. They will be resourced to go through a training in research justice and equity as well as conducting research. These research projects will be funneled into the Regional Equity Atlas pilot in Washington County.

Curriculum development and training

The Coalition of Communities of Color and Ecotrust will develop curriculum for research capacity training with the identified cohort in Washington County. The community cohort will

work through sessions about research justice and how to develop and conduct research including developing a research question; data collection methods such as survey design, focus groups, and GIS; data analysis including a beginner level statistics training; and dissemination of findings.

Conducting research

The cohort of community researchers will implement their research projects with technical assistance from the Coalition of Communities of Color and Ecotrust. The cohort will be supported with a stipend.

TOOL DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Tool design with existing Washington County data

The objective is to create an interface that demonstrates a variety of data visualization techniques using existing Washington County data. At a minimum, the interface will include mapping and graphing functionality. The interface will be used to work with the steering committee to identify appropriate features to advance in the following tasks. Ultimately, the process will be used to facilitate design of functional workflows and ensure appropriate integration of the Washington County data and backend analyses.

Tool development (User Interface prototype development)

Ecotrust will develop a UI prototype that will be used in research/data equity training to visually demonstrate the workflow a typical user would experience. This prototype will cover 2-3 potential use cases from basic map browsing to advanced analysis and reporting. The UI prototype development process will be coupled with the development of research training curriculum to ensure the tool can be used to facilitate the training sessions.

Tool design with cohort

Ecotrust will work with the Coalition of Communities of Color and the Washington County cohort to develop a detailed approach for the design, development, testing and deployment of the mapping tool. At this point we will adapt the training tool (UI prototype) to meet specific research needs of the cohort. This may include advanced reporting / analysis, data collection workflows and/or map printing.

Alpha tool development

The alpha development and release represents the first draft of the research tool as adapted for the cohort. The version will include the required features described by the cohort as well as the data management system, initial datasets, analyses and content management system. At this time, a long-term curation solution needs to be considered so training can coincide with the development of the backend management systems.

Beta tool development

The beta development of the platform is an ongoing process that starts prior to the alpha release and carries through with regular updates. The beta phase of the tool will include only minimal new feature development, rather focusing on bug fixes and optimizing alpha features. The beta release will be followed by a beta testing period.

Beta testing/feedback

This phase of the project will include a process where Washington County stakeholders will be able to use the tool and provide feedback. The beta testing process includes “pushing” new code to beta users seamlessly to ensure beta users are not hindered by bugs.

Launch REA tool

After the beta testing period, the Regional Equity Atlas team will work with the Washington County cohort to determine feature upgrades, content edits, usability workflows and bug fixes identified by the beta testers that should be addressed. A preliminary content package will need to be co-developed which should include stories of research, data examples, site navigation tools and contact information and links to resources not found on the site.