

The Meaning of Equity in US Equity Action Plans

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According to the Executive Order No. 13895 (2021, par. 5), equity is defined as “the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals” regardless of racial, personal, social, or economic factors. In particular, the Order emphasizes a pursuit of equity for “underserved individuals” who have previously been treated inequitably. Since neither the State Department nor the General Service Administration’s Equity Action Plan explicitly define equity and as these plans were written in response to EO 13985, presumably these plans adopt the Order’s definitions. While these definitions are extremely broad, the wording of both the Order and the departments’ individual action plans shows a particular priority given to racial equity through repeated specific references throughout each document. The State Department’s Equity Action Plan (2022), for instance, repeatedly cites “racial equity and support for underserved communities” as their goal, explicitly mentioning race and then addressing all other forms of inequity through a wide-casting net of “support.” The General Services Administration does not have a specific definition for equity established in their action plan, but they do identify the purpose of their equity approaches. For example, in their first deliverable, GSA acknowledges that “Small Disadvantaged Businesses (SDBs) are disproportionately vulnerable to compounding obstacles and negative impacts while competing for Federal Government contracts and obligations” (GSA Equity Plan, 2022). GSA assumes that the reader has previous knowledge regarding what equity is and why it is implemented. Interestingly, GSA does an adequate job of breaking down how previous programs have contributed to the inequities when detailing the future plans but lacks a basic definition in their plan.

Building on the framework of equitable sustainability developed by Leach et al. (2018), this project uses qualitative coding methods to pick apart the framing of the Action Plans and identify the form of equity being targeted by the construction of action. The three key questions included in this process are equity *of what*, equity *between whom*, and equity of which *typology* (Leach et al., 2018). The broad definitions given in the Order span each of these categories inclusively but can be interrogated in relation to the particular goals of individual action items. In order to pursue this path of analysis, the following sections examine the problem formations and domain of equity addressed in the Equity Action Plans developed by the Department of State and the General Services Administration in response to the Order. This analysis then allows for a critical comparison between the plans’ definitions and constructions.

U.S. Department of State

The United States Department of State is responsible for foreign affairs and international policy and diplomacy. Their mission statement explicitly aims to promote Americans and American interests abroad (*About the U.S. Department of State*). When considered in the context of pursuing equity, this mission appears exclusionary and prompts the question: under this overarching goal, how committed can this department actually be to promoting equity? In other words, this Action Plan is pursuing equity *between whom*? Surprisingly, in examining this question two of the five key priorities in the State Department’s Equity Action Plan identify one of the primary beneficiaries of the action item as global or foreign individuals. Does the statement of these intended beneficiaries contradict with the apparent values of the organization? If so, perhaps it becomes necessary to first pursue recognitional equity action

before it is possible to consider distributional or procedural equity. This aligns with the action items identified by the state, as four out of five can be considered in the typography of recognitional. However, the specific actions outlined in this plan generally aim to recognize barriers in an internally focused context. Three of the primary beneficiaries are internal.

This internal orientation does, perhaps, lead to the near total emphasis on procedural equity rather than distributive equity. Even an action item focused on the “Department’s Procurement, Contracts, and Grants” is aimed at altering the review and approval process for grants rather than focusing on a particular distributive equity goal (DOS Equity Plan, 2022, 12-13). This action only begins to enter into distributional equity in relation to monitoring if the procedural change is successful. While this particular action item gives a small amount of historical context, the majority of the document, specifically the other four action items, do not provide any significant historical contextualization. In the context of the State Department’s seemingly narrow mission and long history of not pursuing equitable practices, this seems to be a large oversight. Perhaps this indicates that these actions, which are mostly internally focused and almost all involve a recognitional element through active monitoring and data collection, could be more similar to a series of symbolic gestures than actively pursuing equity.

U.S. General Services Administration

The General Services Administration (GSA) states a large focus of their equity plan is based on identifying areas and preexisting procedures that portray discriminatory methods for small business owners and entrepreneurs. The GSA’s plan seems to follow a consistent pattern in addressing the potential equity obstacles in their organization by first establishing the foundation and history of the problem and attempting to identify where the gaps or inequitable policies exist. For example, in their first deliverable, *Advancing Equity & Supplier Diversity in Federal Procurement*, they establish there are five barriers to access for small, disadvantaged businesses. Each of these barriers pinpoints a specific policy or procedure that disproportionately affects businesses with fewer resources available devoted to taking advantage of the agencies’ programs. GSA then explains how it was able to identify the barriers through its internal review systems and discusses how the agency attempted to address and create policy alternatives. These equity assessments provide a baseline for the agency and allow them to have a common ground moving forward. The baseline is crucial for setting up their future plans; without it, GSA would have a difficult time analyzing if their equity plans are performing as intended. In the final step, GSA sets up a variety of short, medium, and long-term monitoring and tracking initiatives to help them follow their action plans. This allows the agency to be flexible with its programs and provides the opportunity to alter the plan depending on the status at each time mark.

The GSA’s equity plan is different from the Department of State’s in the way that they technically do not provide definitions of terms like equity, but instead, identify how their internal procedures contribute to inequities. They contextualize the history not through the people, but more through how their agency has made it inequitable for the different domains. A great example of this is in the second deliverable “Advancing Equity and Diversity Through the Public Buildings Footprint”. GSA is honest and states that they know there are barriers in

their system that negatively affect communities where federal facilities are located, but they are still unsure of exactly what policies “impede (the agency’s) ability to fully assess the community impact of its real estate portfolio” (GSA Equity Plan, 2022). They identify the economic and environmental justice what-domains but not how exactly it affects the whom domains. It is notable for an agency or organization to admit that they do not know exactly what or how they are contributing to inequitable policy, especially considering the commitment they make in later paragraphs to working to identify these gaps. They stress the importance of bringing in the affected communities to work with them to find a solution together. Although each deliverable follows the same pattern, each one is situational with some deliverables already identifying damaging programs and others still trying to find the source.

The GSA could be virtue signaling with these plans, but I do not believe so. Before all the deliverables, GSA reveals the progress and updates from their 2021 equity action plan. This is something that I do not recall was included in other agencies’ plans; it breaks down last year’s plans in a brief one-pager that describes what they did and the measurable result. For example, GSA identified that blind and low-vision users did not have the resources to navigate their platform. After partnering with Source America and Knowability, they were able to commission a field test of the new updates. After reviewing the results and discussing them further with members of the organization, they implemented the changes directly onto their website and plan to continue discussions and monitoring. These efforts show an attempt and motivation to change their organization internally so that they can provide better programs externally.

Discussion

Both the Department of State and the General Services Administration lack properly defined definitions for equity terminology. They provide limited contextualized history regarding whom they are attempting to address but instead focus on their own internal procedures. Both agencies have established their main goals of combatting inequities by removing barriers to access that are currently implemented through their own internal systems. Additionally, they also both recognize the importance of working with the targeted population if they are already identified. They are unique in the way that they both set up varying methods of review throughout the different stages of their programs: short, medium, and long-term. They are aware that it is through their own policies that they are causing harm; the question remains, is it enough? In the short term, perhaps not. There is a need for many of these changes to happen sooner than later, but it is notable that both agencies are committing to long-term goals. This may be to avoid creating additional inequities through short, not completely understood programs. It is important to remember that the purpose of implementing these policies is to create a more well-rounded and fair system for everyone to access. Considering the most recent updates, further review is required to analyze the success/failure of their action plan’s deliverables.

References

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