



Regional Equity and the Quest for Full Inclusion

by Angela Glover Blackwell and Sarah Treuhaft

Introduction

Throughout history, there have been discrete moments when our nation is poised for change. We are at such a moment. Demands for change are everywhere. Record numbers of voters are participating in the 2008 presidential election. Conversations about poverty and inequality are heard among politicians, the media, and the public. Not since the 1960s have young people been so involved in the political process. In this election year, national and global economic, political, and demographic trends are converging in an unprecedented way, challenging the status quo and calling for a different course of action, guided by a new agenda for change, paving the way for a movement for economic and social equity.

This movement must be based on a hopeful vision for the future. A vision that is big enough to match the magnitude of the challenges we face and innovative enough to turn these challenges into opportunities. A vision that incorporates fundamental American values of freedom, equality, and mobility. A vision compelling enough to inspire people everywhere to work toward its implementation.

The beginnings of this movement can be seen in activities already underway across the country. In urban, suburban, and rural areas, residents and activists are creating communities of opportunity that provide everyone with the jobs, transportation, schools, social networks, services, parks, grocery stores, and other essentials for social and economic success. People working in all sectors of society are forging the elements of a national agenda for equity and inclusion, reaching across class, race, and ethnicity to find the uncommon common ground to sustain and nurture a growing movement. To advance, advocates, funders, organizers, policymakers—and everyone who recognizes that economic and social equity is critical for the nation's future—must join together to work for a common vision and agenda.

This paper contends that the regional equity framework anchors our collective efforts and provides a platform for societal transformation. It begins by providing a snapshot of regional equity in 2008, then describes how major national and global forces are creating unique challenges and opportunities for achieving equity. The final section articulates a vision for full inclusion and sustainability and outlines key elements of an agenda for realizing that vision.

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Where We Are Now: Regional Equity in 2008

In the broadest sense, regional equity is a framework for social change that is nestled within, and inseparable from, the quest for economic and social justice in America. Regional equity brings a unique perspective to the broader equity movement: a deep understanding of how metropolitan development patterns structure the life chances and social and economic opportunities of residents, and the ways in which uneven spatial development reinforces old racial and class divides, while creating new ones. The goal is to ensure that everyone—regardless of the neighborhood in which they live—has access to essential ingredients for economic and social success: living-wage jobs, viable housing choices, public transportation, good schools, strong social networks, safe and walkable streets, services, parks, access to healthy food, and so on.

As a framework for action, regional equity offers an *analysis* of the root causes and dynamics that create and perpetuate inequity and a *toolkit* of strategies, principles, and methods for advancing equity and opportunity in regions. Proponents of regional equity use several key levers for making change happen: effecting institutional and policy change, mobilizing political and public will, and building community power and voice—not only to participate in the political debate, but also to set the terms and frame the issues in that debate. They direct their efforts at multiple levels, from neighborhoods to counties to states to the nation. Regional equity is also a *field of practice* comprising people and organizations that have to some degree incorporated the analytical and practical tools of regional equity into their work.

The regional equity concept emerged in the late 1990s as social justice advocates recognized the role of metropolitan development patterns in maintaining and exacerbating racial and economic disparities in income, wealth, health, and opportunity. Fifty years of post World War II sprawl—the movement of jobs, people, investment, infrastructure, and tax base away from central cities toward the farthest edges of metropolitan regions—left cities without needed investment while consuming exorbitant amounts of land and resources. As opportunity shifted to the suburbs, communities of color were almost completely left behind in isolated, distressed inner-city neighborhoods or rural communities.

The hypersegregated postwar metropolis did not result simply from market forces and preferences for suburban living. Federal and state policies provided powerful incentives for suburban growth. The Federal Housing Administration, for example, subsidized white suburban homeownership by insuring private bank loans, but the agency's explicitly racist underwriting standards systematically denied these subsidies to African American households and neighborhoods. Between 1930 and 1950, fewer than 2 percent of FHA loans went to homebuyers who were not white.¹ A host of factors—exclusionary land use practices in the suburbs that prohibit the building of affordable homes, continued racial discrimination in housing and employment, and political fragmentation within regions—conspired to lock in the geographic, racial, and class inequities created by sprawl.

Change agents working in different arenas—community developers, elected officials, labor, faith-based organizing groups, researchers, and policy advocacy groups like PolicyLink—envisioned a new course of inclusive regional development. Our efforts, though diverse, seek the same outcome: ensure that regional growth and development benefits everyone living in a metropolitan area, especially those people passed over by previous waves of prosperity.

At PolicyLink, we have promoted *equitable development* as the pathway for achieving shared prosperity in regions. Equitable development requires thinking intentionally about equity impacts at the front end of political processes and implementing strategies to make certain that disadvantaged communities participate in and benefit from decisions that determine the course of development in their neighborhoods, communities, and regions. Four principles undergird equitable development: 1) the integration of strategies that focus on people with those focused on improving places; 2) the reduction of local and regional disparities; 3) the promotion of investments that are equitable, catalytic, and coordinated; and 4) ensuring meaningful community participation, leadership, and ownership in change efforts.²

Over the past decade, there has been enormous momentum and change within the regional equity movement. For example:

- **Equitable development models** are rebuilding distressed neighborhoods, while connecting residents to jobs, transportation, good schools, and grocery stores. The revitalization of West Garfield Park in Chicago through the activities of Bethel New Life; the Murphy Park school-centered, mixed-income neighborhood development in St. Louis; and Market Creek Plaza in San Diego's Diamond neighborhoods (where residents now own shares of stock in the \$45 million commercial and cultural center built on the site of an abandoned factory)³ are some of the most mature models of true community transformation in the country.
- **Innovative strategies have diffused and grown in sophistication**, taking hold in new locales, producing lessons learned from implementation, and generating deeper questions for the field.
 - The *community benefits movement* is spreading and evolving. Since the strategy emerged in Los Angeles a decade ago, dozens of communities have negotiated community benefits agreements to ensure that large-scale development projects meet community goals for jobs, housing, services, facilities, and more.
 - *Transit oriented development (TOD)*, which promotes dense, mixed-use development around a transit stop to create vibrant, walkable neighborhoods—was little known beyond small circles of planners and transportation advocates just a decade ago, but has now become a standard development “product.” Advocates in Portland, Seattle, and Denver are rising to the challenge of ensuring that TOD is truly equitable: creating sustainable mixed-income neighborhoods and benefiting current residents.
 - *Reclaiming vacant and abandoned properties* is increasingly seen as critical for neighborhood revitalization and long-term regional economic development. Strong government leadership, policy change at the state and local level, community advocacy, and grassroots innovation have empowered communities to rehabilitate blighted, often dangerous properties. Michigan's Genesee County Land Bank, founded in 2002, has become a national model, as have neighborhood-based efforts such as greening and community gardens, community land trusts, and “healthy neighborhoods” reinvestment strategies.
 - *Inclusionary zoning* has been widely embraced, and more than 200 communities now have local or county policies that require or encourage private developers to include affordable units in their market-rate developments.⁴ The strategy has recently made inroads in cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, where private development has surged over the past few years and some neighborhoods are beginning to see rising housing costs.
 - *The co-location of housing, transportation, and jobs* is gaining traction as states provide financial incentives for employer-assisted housing and attach regional equity criteria to affordable housing funding streams. Illinois, for example, offers state tax credits and matching funds for employer-assisted housing; includes “live-near-work” criteria when reviewing Low Income Housing Tax Credit applications; gives additional economic development subsidies to businesses locating near existing infrastructure; and provides a school funding bonus in municipalities that advance the state's affordable housing and smart growth goals.
 - *Intersections between land use, development policy, and public health* have become a burgeoning area of research, community action, and policy innovation. In Pennsylvania, the obesity crisis inspired efforts to locate food retail projects in underserved communities, assisting 32 supermarket developments across the state through federal New Markets Tax Credits along with state, city, philanthropic, and private funding. Similar strategies are underway in California, Illinois, and Louisiana.

- **The organizational backbone of regional equity has expanded and deepened.** Early proponents have increased their capacity and sophistication, and new partnerships, coalitions, and organizations have formed. National organizing networks such as the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), and the Gamaliel Foundation are setting regional goals for cross-county issues, building urban/suburban coalitions, and partnering with labor unions. Community developers are implementing regionally informed strategies. And regional equity coalitions and partnerships are working for community and policy change in Boston, Detroit, and Washington, D.C.
- **New knowledge is informing regional organizing and action.** A host of data analyses has examined the relationships between poverty and inequality within regions and regional economic prosperity, generally concluding that reducing inequality has positive benefits for all.⁵ Within the health field, many studies are examining the ways in which the physical, social, and economic conditions in communities contribute to disparities in obesity, asthma, and other health problems.
- **Practitioners are developing strategies and approaches to match the specific political, economic, and cultural contexts of regions.** Many regional equity strategies were formulated around the year 1999, when the nation's economy was booming. But the rising tide did not lift all boats: in many places, low-income residents' wages did not keep pace with rising housing costs, and people faced gentrification and displacement pressures as their neighborhoods improved. Hot real estate market conditions created multiple points of leverage for community advocates who sought

to channel investment and development in ways that benefited low-income working families. At the same time, many other places—such as older industrial cities, inner-ring suburbs, and rural communities—were still struggling with economic decline, housing abandonment, and neighborhood distress rather than rapid growth. Over the past few years, the field has developed a great deal of knowledge and a host of strategies for advancing regional equity in regions with weaker market conditions.⁶

- **Lessons learned from ongoing rebuilding in the Gulf Coast after hurricanes Rita and Katrina have pushed advocates to develop strategies that can work in the wake of disaster.** Building community and government capacity, ensuring that federal and state funding allocations benefit low-income residents and renters, and connecting displaced residents to resources via the Internet and telephone are just a few of the many strategies that have developed in the Gulf Coast. The lessons learned from this disaster are being used across the country to ensure that future disasters do not disproportionately affect poor communities and communities of color.

The learning curve has been steep as the regional equity framework has been stretched and adapted for different regional contexts. There have been growing pains, but the end result is a more robust regional equity toolkit and field of practice. The confidence these insights inspire will be needed as we face a very different stage in the business cycle—as indicated by the current spate of mortgage foreclosures, the housing market downturn, and the threat of economic recession. The ability to adapt strategies to work within different market conditions is more important than ever.

The window of opportunity

Every so often, events and trends converge to shift collective consciousness and pave the way for a social movement to arise. The rejection of second-class citizenship by black soldiers returning from World War II; the entrance of the United States into international cold war politics; and Ghana's success in winning independence—followed by that of other former European colonies in Africa—all set the stage for the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties. The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the "earthrise" photograph from the 1968 Apollo mission awakened a new environmental awareness, and propelled the environmental movement.

In both instances, events and circumstances moved people to join together and demand change. They formed the organizations, networks, and collectives that would become the organizational infrastructure to effect major civil rights and environmental legislation that transformed American society.

Many signs suggest we are now living within a similar watershed moment.

The mandate for a new direction in national policy is clear. As billions of taxpayer dollars have been squandered on an unpopular war and tax cuts for the wealthy, confidence in the American economy has waned, our nation's educational system and public infrastructure are crumbling, the middle class is disintegrating, and the social safety net has unraveled. The American public is demanding change.

In addition, four major forces of change—globalization, rising inequality, shifting demographics, and ecological crisis—are now converging. These complex forces play out at all levels, from the local to the global. They are challenging the status quo within nearly every field—from urban development to public health to neighborhood revitalization—and calling into question the efficacy of our current strategies and approaches. Those of us working for social change must be aware of these trends and issues and how they affect our work; we must think creatively about how to retool our efforts to be effective in a changing environment.

Globalization. Contemporary globalization is radically reshaping our world. The rapid development of modern transportation and communication systems has sped up the diffusion of ideas, information, goods, capital, and people across the globe—creating new entrepreneurial opportunities and making us all more interconnected. But the benefits of globalization have accrued mostly to a new transnational elite, leaving behind the middle class, working families, and the poor.

In the global economy, metropolitan regions—cities and their suburbs—are the critical geographic unit and where inequities are manifest.⁷ Regions around the world now vie for jobs and investment on a fiercely competitive global playing field. This process of global economic restructuring has devastated some industry sectors and weakened the economies of entire cities and regions—for example, older industrial communities in the Northeast and Midwest. Economic insecurity has increased as workers from across the globe can compete for American white-collar, service, and manufacturing jobs. Unionized blue-collar manufacturing jobs have been replaced by low-wage service and retail jobs, hollowing out the labor market, leaving fewer middle-class jobs, and limiting opportunities for upward mobility. Globalization has altered the factors that make regions economically competitive, with regional success increasingly dependent on innovation, entrepreneurship, learning, and economic specialization.⁸ In addition, the growing dominance of multinational corporations and the dispersion of production processes across the globe have made it harder for workers and community members to hold businesses accountable—for their labor practices, their environmental and community impacts, and the quality and safety of their products.

The imperative for economic and social justice advocates is to craft strategies that make globalization work for—rather than against—working families and their neighborhoods. Awareness of the regional economy as the crucial setting for creating economic opportunity is critical. Regional coalition-building is important, but seemingly local efforts—job training programs, support for the survival of local businesses in a failing (or gentrifying) commercial corridor—are also

integral to building strong, sustainable, equitable regions. Advocates can also build upon the alignment that exists between the strategies that increase regional economic competitiveness in the knowledge-based economy and their agenda for social and economic inclusion. Integrating the inner-city poor into the regional economy not only serves to increase equity but also is necessary for the long-term growth prospects of the nation. Other essential elements of a twenty-first century urban economic development agenda—modern and efficient infrastructure, educational and workforce development systems that produce a skilled workforce, livable neighborhoods, small business development programs, high-quality educational and research institutions—are critical strategies for fostering inclusion as well as competitiveness.⁹

Rising inequality. Inequality and poverty are growing in America. The gap between rich and poor—whether measured by wages, household income, or spending—has widened since 1980, and is larger than in any other advanced industrial country.¹⁰ In 2005, nearly 38 million Americans lived in poverty, up from 34 million in 1999, and 90 million Americans lived below 200 percent of the poverty level.¹¹ The geography of poverty and opportunity within regions is also changing. The wealthy increasingly isolate themselves in gated communities, administer their own tax and service districts, and send their children to exclusive schools. Working families now cope with higher housing and transportation costs than ever due to a lack of affordable residential construction near job centers.¹² Poverty is spreading outwards: 2005 marked the first year that the suburban poor outnumbered the urban poor.¹³ And while the concentration of poverty remains a huge problem in American cities, older suburbs, and rural areas, even more extreme forms of marginality also exist. Hundreds of unincorporated communities, from California's Central Valley to the colonias along the Mexico border to North Carolina, lack basic physical and service infrastructure: water and sewer systems, police, fire, emergency response, and health care.

Inequality and uneven development have long been the targets of regional equity advocacy efforts, but the new extremes call for a broad nationwide agenda to reduce poverty, create pathways for upward mobility, retain and create middle class jobs, and plan for more access to communities of opportunity. The changing geography of poverty

requires us to advocate strongly for the proven strategies that can alleviate poverty and create economic opportunity. It also requires crafting new policies and strategies, expanding support systems and services into communities that need them, and building broader alliances and coalitions.

Shifting demographics. Profound demographic changes are underway in our country. While the citizenry is rapidly aging and married couples with children now constitute a shrinking portion of total households, the population will continue to grow largely due to immigration and the higher birth rates among fast-growing racial and ethnic groups. Diversity is increasing, and within the next half-century we will become a nation of minorities with no single racial or ethnic group predominating. Immigration is changing the face of communities: while immigrants remain heavily concentrated in the nation's largest cities, they are dispersing to smaller cities, towns, and rural areas, often in response to economic opportunities they hear about through family and social networks. With these new levels of diversity, race relations in communities are becoming ever more complex and nuanced. Local governments, school districts, and businesses grapple with culturally diverse and sometimes linguistically isolated constituents, students, and clients. In many places, the influx of people from varied ethnic backgrounds sparks competition and conflict—a trend that is magnified by the greater economic insecurity and competition for low-wage jobs being ushered in by globalization.

These demographic changes have major implications for the housing market, for urban and regional development strategies, and for organizing efforts. The aging of the population and reduced proportion of families with children suggests a renewed demand for dense, mixed-use neighborhoods in urban centers, and for greater housing choices in the suburbs. The deepening of diversity in more and more communities calls for efforts to include newcomers and minority groups in the economy and in social and political life. Organizing efforts and planning processes need to acknowledge demographic change in communities, expand opportunities for the participation of all groups represented in the area, and put strategies in place to work through the complexities of race dynamics and the cultural and language barriers in diverse communities.

Ecological crisis. While the issue of sustainability—ensuring that we leave enough resources to sustain future generations—is not new, the climate change warning call and the environmental crises in rapidly industrializing nations have increased its salience and urgency. Overwhelming evidence exists that global warming is occurring. Researchers on seven continents predict that, without intervention, temperature increases will lead to drought, heat waves, food shortages, disease—and ultimately, war, social upheavals, and economic instability.¹⁴ Society’s most vulnerable people will shoulder the greatest burden, even though they contribute the least to the greenhouse gas emissions responsible for the warming. African Americans and Latinos even now are more likely to live in polluted communities where they are more likely to suffer from environmentally-triggered health complications like asthma and will be among the most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Low-income families are also the least equipped to move to safety when disaster strikes, with inadequate transportation, and fewer savings and assets to help them recuperate after disaster. The need to grapple with the ecological crisis presents an opportunity to build on the agenda of environmental justice advocates who, for decades, have been fighting for a healthier, more sustainable, equitable society. Media attention has increased, and public and political will to find solutions has grown dramatically. To date, 28 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation or adopted standards requiring electricity derived from renewable sources.¹⁵ Over

750 U.S. mayors have signed a pledge to reduce greenhouse gases by 2012.¹⁶ Green sectors of the economy—energy retrofiting, green building, solar panel manufacturing—have begun to boom. Equity advocates must link the growing green economy to the renewal of low-income communities. These sectors can produce many “green collar” jobs that pay living wages and offer skills development and career ladders and have few barriers to entry. Major advocacy campaigns and investment strategies, such as the Green for All Campaign and the Green Jobs Act of 2007, illustrate how forward-thinking advocates can connect disadvantaged workers to new opportunities in the emerging green economy.

Together, the national political moment and the four forces of change add up to something bigger: a clarion call for a new course of development in America. Equity and inclusion are no longer issues confined to the advocates for the poor, and sustainability is no longer an issue that belongs only to advocates for the environment. These trends are increasing the interdependence of different communities—cities and suburbs, employers and workers, the middle class and the poor. This will become even more apparent as our population and workforce grow increasingly diverse. We must find a way to grow together, or we risk falling apart. The prosperity of all hinges on our ability to seize the political opportunity in front of us, put forth a new vision and agenda for the future, and inspire others to join in a movement for change.

Twin Pillars of the Equity Vision: Full Inclusion and Sustainability

In the twenty-first century, the well-being of our nation will depend on ensuring that everyone—including low-income people and people of color—participates in economic, social, and political life, and focuses on guaranteeing the sustainability of our economy and natural resource base.

Full inclusion begins with principles of fairness and justice and is sustained by attention not only to the process used to engage communities and residents but especially to outcomes achieved. Achieving full inclusion requires conducting an equity analysis at the front-end of decision-making processes—asking the questions: Who benefits? Who decides? Who pays? And it means making choices and building systems and structures that do the most for those traditionally left behind.

Sustainability is based on principles of land and resource stewardship, energy efficiency, and waste and pollution reduction. It means preserving our environment for future generations through innovative solutions and conscious action.

Realizing this vision will require reconfiguring our economy and renewing our democracy. Shared economic prosperity and participatory democracy should be our overarching goals.

Shared economic prosperity. High levels of inequality and poverty conflict with American values, strain our social fabric, and are fundamentally bad for the economy as they undermine regional (and thus national) growth and competitiveness. We must increase inclusion to be competitive and prosperous in the global economy. Everyone living in the United States should have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the economy and contribute to regional and national economic prosperity. An agenda for shared prosperity would integrate all groups into the economy, reduce income disparities across racial/ethnic groups, and expand the middle class.

Our public policies, investments, and entrepreneurial efforts must be aligned toward this goal. Key elements of this agenda include:

- **Grow a sustainable, high-road economy that produces jobs with family-supporting wages and career ladders.** Urban and regional economic development efforts should

make regions strong magnets for good jobs in growing industry sectors while promoting compact, energy-efficient development patterns. In addition to attracting outside investment, strategies should foster indigenous entrepreneurship and business development, particularly among communities of color, to build strong local economies. Raising the minimum wage, supporting local living wage laws, implementing sectoral workforce development strategies and regional industry partnerships, engaging employers, and nurturing labor unions and labor-community partnerships can all help improve wages and benefits for workers.

- **Fix our crumbling roads, bridges, and other public infrastructure.** Efficient and high-quality infrastructure is more important than ever for building strong, inclusive regional economies, but we currently face an enormous public investment deficit. Federal agencies estimate that it will take over \$600 billion annually over the next 20 years to renew and repair our national systems of bridges, roads, water, and sewers.¹⁷ Infrastructure investments are needed to foster innovation and job growth, improve connectivity, and link low-income people and their neighborhoods to regional economic opportunities. These infrastructure projects would also, if done equitably, create hundreds of thousands of jobs that pay good wages and cannot be outsourced.
- **Invest in human development.** Educational policy must reduce inequities in access and opportunity by investing in a twenty-first century K-12 education system and significantly broadening access to higher education for everyone. We must also improve health—by making health care available to all and building healthy communities for everyone—to ensure a strong, productive workforce. Creating pathways out of poverty and implementing workforce development programs are also critical to integrating unemployed, underemployed, and dislocated workers into the economy.
- **Increase the economic security of working families.** Asset-building strategies are needed to counter increased economic instability associated with globalization and events like the mortgage foreclosure crisis. Policies and

programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and matched savings accounts should be implemented to help low-income workers weather economic fluctuations and begin to build assets. Employers should be involved in this area of work; they increasingly recognize that training, asset-building, and career ladder opportunities are win-win strategies for their employees and the bottom line.

- **Manage the downside risks of globalization.** Providing a strong safety net and retraining opportunities for dislocated workers are essential. Our upstream trade policies need to analyze the risks to vulnerable people and the environment (not just in the United States but elsewhere as well) and put standards and protections in place.

Participatory democracy. We must renew and strengthen democracy in the context of difference and the political complexities that have come with globalization. The democratic ideals of popular sovereignty, individual freedom, and equality were formulated in much more homogenous and less complex societies. These concepts need to be rethought to work in a country that is increasingly diverse and affected by forces operating outside the realm of national politics. For everyone to have the opportunity to participate in the political and institutional decision-making processes that affect their lives, the nation must commit to eliminating structural racism—the embedded inequality flowing from centuries of racism, neglect, and institutional favoritism.

An agenda to expand American democracy would include:

- **Increased participation and representation.** Civic engagement and participation—not just voting but community organizing and engagement in policy advocacy to influence decisions such as regional transportation and land-use planning, national economic policy, and international trade agreements—is essential for crafting creative solutions and ensuring that public policy is responsive and accountable to communities. People of all racial, ethnic, and social groups—including immigrants—need to be able to contribute

their authentic voices to planning and decision-making processes that affect their cities and their communities. We need to create more democratic forums and arenas for discussion and deliberation.

- **Community building.** Civic institutions—community-based organizations, block groups, organizing networks, mission-driven nonprofit organizations—are also critical to realizing participatory democracy. These institutions help advance collective goals and assert community values. They hold government accountable and guide market activity toward more equitable outcomes. Unions, regional labor councils, and community-labor partnerships, for example, are needed to renew the social contract between workers, businesses, and communities.
- **Global citizenship.** Globalization also compels us to think and act as global citizens, considering the well-being of natural and human communities located outside of our borders but linked to us through trade, culture, and social networks. More and more of our challenges are connected to activities, companies, and institutions that are transnational in nature and defy traditional political boundaries. Global warming, labor conditions, immigration, and corporate accountability are examples of issues that cannot be addressed through national politics alone.

The regional equity movement has invaluable contributions to make to realizing this vision and planning the agenda for full inclusion and sustainability. Its framework offers a critical new perspective on the root causes of inequality and the methods for creating more equitable and inclusive communities. The understanding of the role of metropolitan development patterns and the role of community in shaping social and economic opportunities are absent from most current social change efforts and policy agendas. Regional equity embraces the understanding that where people live determines their opportunities for health and well-being, economic success, and civic/political participation. The framework is established upon the principle that to increase equity we must strengthen communities physically, economically, and politically.

Organizing for Change

Regional equity is part of a broad and hopeful vision for full inclusion and sustainability. But vision alone will not suffice. Our vision must be backed by a concrete plan of action.

To realize the vision of full inclusion and sustainability, we need to craft a compelling national agenda infused by our collective wisdom, knowledge, and creativity. This agenda must articulate principles and policy proposals that have the power to transform the political debate in the media, in legislatures, in boardrooms, in the streets, and in living rooms.

The movement's agenda must span multiple levels of policy action—federal, state, regional, and local—and include institutional change as a primary target. It also must cover key arenas of action including economic development, infrastructure, transportation, workforce development and education, housing and neighborhoods, health, land use, fiscal and tax policy, and energy and the environment. It must cut across the bureaucratic silos and encourage holistic thinking and practices. And it must describe win-win solutions: the ways that stakeholders working in different sectors—government, community organizations, funders, the business community—can carry out their specific missions while working toward shared goals.

While the focus of the agenda should be on policy change, it must be backed by an explanation of what is needed to make these changes occur. Experience, time, and reflection have taught us that community engagement and empowerment lead to stronger, more meaningful policy reform and social change. It is only from that place of authentic wrestling with issues of diversity and difference that we can incubate new solutions to disseminate far and wide. All residents must feel that the endeavor for change enhances rather than compromises their political power, social cohesion, and sense of place—particularly those communities that historically have been excluded from participation in decision-making.

This agenda does not need to be drafted from scratch. Many of its elements are in motion, being carried out by leaders in hundreds of communities, institutions, and agencies across the country. The examples, practices, models, and insights highlighted in this paper reflect the strategy, depth, and momentum required to spur the movement forward. Our activities already add up to much more than the sum of our individual efforts.

Notes

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