

From Hope to Change: The New Equity Movement

By Angela Glover Blackwell

A movement for equity is blooming in America. We see evidence of this everywhere, along with signs that the public wants change. Record numbers of voters participated in the 2008 election, a campaign that on its face challenged outmoded notions about race in this country. Young people are more involved in politics than at any time since the Sixties. Diverse voices, from Catholic Charities to the United States Conference of Mayors, have endorsed comprehensive policy agendas to end poverty. Millions of people are working hard every day to ensure that all of us live in fair, inclusive, and opportunity-rich communities.

What exactly do such communities look like? What does equity mean, and how can advocates working on disparate issues, such as healthcare, education, housing, community development, prison re-entry, job training, and the environment, make sure that equity and inclusion are at the heart of their efforts and goals? An equitable society is one in which everyone can participate and prosper. In short, equity creates a path from hope to change.

Regional equity is at the core of this broad, hopeful vision for full inclusion and sustainability and provides a roadmap for change. The regional equity concept recognizes that communities are the building blocks of vibrant, competitive regions and ultimately, a healthy, prosperous nation. America faces unprecedented challenges in the 21st century as we become a nation without a single predominant racial group. We cannot thrive if communities of color continue to be neglected, disinvested, and isolated from economic opportunity. As a framework for action, regional equity offers a toolkit of principles, strategies, and tactics for advancing opportunity for everyone.

Regional Equity Comes of Age

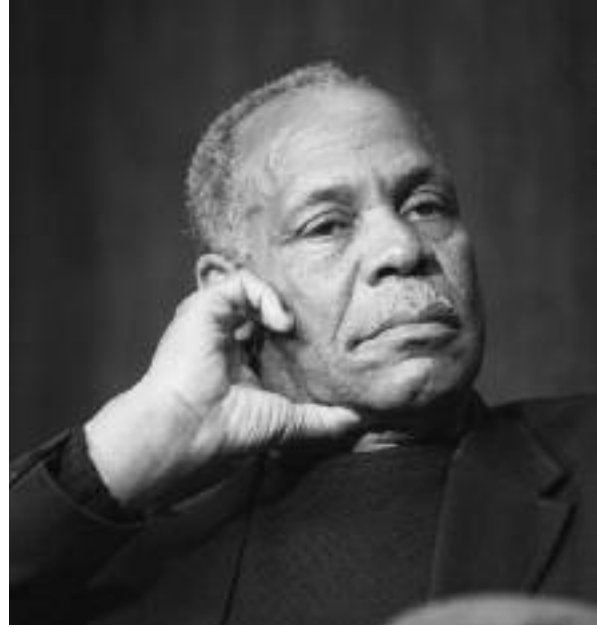
In March 2008, nearly 2,000 equity leaders working in communities, government, non-profit organizations, foundations, and universities gathered in New Orleans at Regional Equity '08: The Third

National Summit on Social Justice, Smart Growth, and Equitable Development. The paramount theme of the conference was how to build a more inclusive society and a more inclusive movement for social and economic change.

The regional equity concept emerged in the late 1990s, as social justice advocates recognized the role that metropolitan development played in maintaining and exacerbating racial and economic disparities. Fifty years of sprawl—the movement of jobs, people, infrastructure, and tax base away from cities toward the farthest edges of regions—left cities struggling for investment and consumed exorbitant amounts of land and resources. As opportunity shifted to the suburbs, communities of color were almost completely left behind in isolated, distressed neighborhoods.

The goal of regional equity is to ensure that all people—particularly low-income people of color—have access to the essential ingredients for success in our society: high-quality schools, living-wage jobs, transportation, strong social networks, decent housing, safe and walkable streets and parks, healthy food, an environment free of toxics and pollution, services, and infrastructure. The path to shared regional prosperity is equitable development, which stands on four principles:

1. Integrate people-focused strategies with those focused on improving places;
2. Reduce local and regional disparities;



3. Promote investments that are equitable, catalytic, and coordinated;
4. Ensure meaningful community participation, leadership, and ownership in change.¹

Equitable development requires thinking intentionally about impacts at the beginning of political processes and demands a particular focus on people of color, who have historically been excluded from political conversation and decision making. Only through authentic wrestling with issues of diversity and difference can we respond to the monumental forces that are reshaping our country and our world.

Equity in a Changing World

Once in a great while, events and trends converge to shift collective consciousness and pave the way for broad social movements. 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 the successful independence struggles of former European colonies in Africa set the stage for the Civil Rights movement. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the "earthrise" photo from the 1968 Apollo mission awakened awareness about our natural resources and spurred an environmental movement. In both cases, large numbers of people formed the organizations that secured new laws, rights, and protections to achieve lasting social change. We are living in such a watershed moment.

Confidence in the American economy has waned: our education system and public infrastructure are

crumbling, the middle class is disintegrating, the social safety net has frayed, and poverty is increasing. With more than two million people in prison—one in 15 black men is behind bars—the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. The need for a new direction in national policy is clear.

At the same time, four major forces of societal change—globalization, rising inequality, shifting demographics, and the environmental crisis—are giving new urgency to the principles of equitable development and demanding new approaches in every sector, from community-based programs and advocacy alliances to foundations, governments, and businesses. More than ever, regions are becoming the critical geographic unit and the locus for developing inclusive, equitable, sustainable solutions.

Globalization. The rapid development of transportation and communication technologies have sped up the diffusion of ideas, information, goods, capital, and people across the globe, creating vast entrepreneurial opportunities. But the benefits of globalization have accrued mostly to the new transnational elite, leaving behind the middle class, the working class, and the poor. The global economy has also changed the nature of competitiveness, with regions now vying for jobs and investment on a tough international playing field. Economic restructuring has devastated some industries in the United States and weakened the economies of entire cities and regions, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest. Low-wage service and retail jobs have replaced unionized blue-

Photos:

(Left) A New Orleans jazz band plays at the 2008 Regional Equity Conference in New Orleans.

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(Right)
Danny Glover, Actor
and Chair of the
Vanguard Foundation
reflects on the 2008
Regional Equity
Conference in New
Orleans.

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collar manufacturing jobs, hollowing out the labor market and limiting opportunities for upward mobility. The growing dominance of multinational conglomerates with dispersed operations makes it harder to hold companies accountable for their labor and environmental practices.

Rising inequality. The gap between rich and poor has widened since 1980, and is larger than in any other advanced industrial country. The United States also has one of the highest rates of poverty in the industrialized world—12 percent, or one in eight Americans. In 2006, 24 percent of African Americans and 22 percent of Latinos lived in poverty, compared with 10 percent of whites. But the geography of poverty and opportunity within regions is also changing. After a half-century of suburban flight the affluent are increasingly locating to cities, pushing working families and low-income blacks and Latinos to aging outlying communities. For the first time, suburban poor outnumber the urban poor.² The lack of affordable housing near jobs forces working families to cope with ever-higher costs for transportation, and the financial pressures are growing as fuel prices soar.³

Shifting demographics. We are moving toward a future of greater diversity and more complex, nuanced race relationships. One in three residents is a “minority.” Four states and the District of Columbia have no single dominant racial or ethnic group. While the nation’s citizenry is rapidly aging and married couples with children 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. Although immigrants remain heavily concentrated in the nation’s largest cities, they are dispersing to smaller cities, towns, and rural areas leaving local governments, school districts, and businesses grappling with culturally diverse and sometimes linguistically isolated constituents, students, and clients. In many places, the influx of people from varied ethnic backgrounds sparks conflict fueled by economic insecurity.

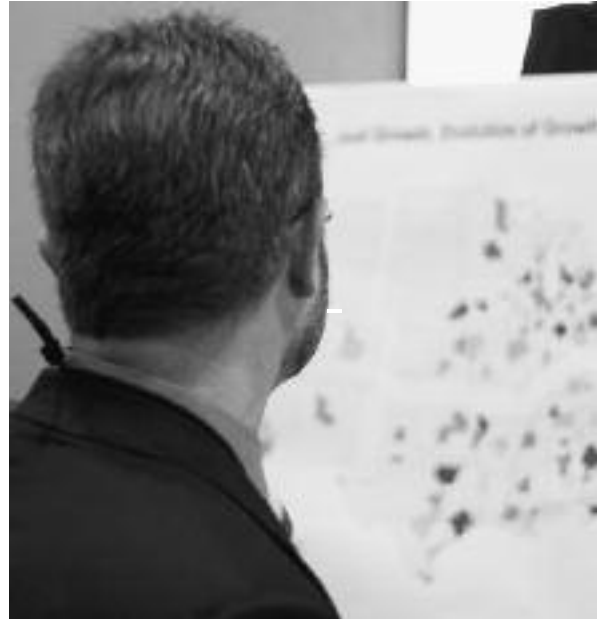
Environmental crisis. The issue of sustainability—ensuring that we protect resources for future generations—is not new, but climate change has increased its salience and urgency. Researchers on seven continents predict that, without intervention, climate disruption will lead to drought, heat waves, food shortages, disease, and ultimately, war, social upheavals, and economic instability. Society’s most vulnerable people will shoulder the greatest burden, even though they contribute the least to the greenhouse gases responsible for global warming. African Americans and Latinos in the United States already are more likely to live in polluted communities and suffer from environmentally triggered health complications, such as asthma. As Hurricane Katrina made shockingly clear, low-income families often lack the means to move to safety when disaster strikes, and have fewer savings and assets to help them recover.

Photos:

(Left) Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and chief executive officer of PolicyLink, presents at the 2008 Regional Equity Conference in New Orleans.

(Right) Paul Cobb, Publisher of the *Oakland Post*, with Joe Brooks, chair of the Urban Habitat board of directors.

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An Agenda for Change

The future of our nation depends upon everyone participating in its economic, social, and political life and the sustainability of our economy and natural resource base. The regional equity framework provides guidelines for dealing with the new challenges of crafting a national agenda for full inclusion and sustainability to engage communities that have traditionally been excluded from economic and political decision-making.

Globalization demands that economic and social justice advocates develop strategies that make the new economy work for, rather than against, working families and their neighborhoods. Advocates can build on the alignment between social and economic inclusion, and regional (and therefore national) competitiveness. We must pursue an agenda for shared economic prosperity, which includes:

- Growing a sustainable high road economy that produces jobs with family-supporting wages and career ladders;
- Fixing our crumbling roads, bridges, and other public infrastructure to connect low-income neighborhoods to their regional economies;
- Investing in human development and building a strong, high-skilled workforce;
- Increasing economic security of working families;
- Improving the quality of existing jobs;
- Managing the downside risks of globalization by providing retraining opportunities, and establishing strong standards and protections for labor and the environment.

Regional equity advocates have long focused on alleviating poverty and expanding opportunity. The changing geography of poverty now requires us to craft new policies and approaches, expand support systems and services to communities that need them, and build broader alliances and coalitions.

Shifting demographics have major implications for housing, development strategies, and organizing efforts. An aging population and the shrinking American family, combined with the rising costs of energy suggests a renewed demand for dense mixed-use urban neighborhoods. Advocates and policymakers must anticipate these market forces and mitigate gentrification at the front end by ensuring long-term affordability, economic opportunities for residents, and a community voice in the planning. The deepening diversity in more communities calls for efforts to include newcomers and minority groups in economic, social, and political life and strategies to work through language barriers, cultural differences, and the complexities of race relationships.

The environmental crisis presents an imperative to build on the agenda of environmental justice advocates who, for decades, have fought for a healthier and more sustainable society for all. Climate change has brought unprecedented media attention to our energy use and natural resources. The public and political will to find solutions is growing. In addition, the emerging green economy is projected to boom in the coming years, creating “green collar” jobs that offer living wages, skills development, and career ladders. Advocates need to ensure that these opportunities

Photos:

Participants view posters and conference materials at the 2008 Regional Equity Conference in New Orleans.

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have few barriers to entry and are linked to the renewal of low-income communities.

Organizing for Action

In cities, suburbs, small towns, rural areas, and tribal nations across the United States, momentum is growing for broad, equitable change. From community leaders pushing for affordable housing, to neighborhood residents advocating for healthier food options close to home, to elected officials bringing positive change to scale, we see sophisticated strategies being developed as they lay the foundation for a national agenda for equity and inclusion.

Equitable development models are rebuilding distressed neighborhoods, connecting residents to jobs, transportation, good schools, parks, 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 own stock in the \$45 million commercial and cultural center built on the site of an abandoned factory.⁴ These are among the most mature models of true community transformation.

Innovative strategies are taking hold everywhere. The community benefits movement, which emerged in Los Angeles a decade ago, is spreading and evolving. Dozens of communities have negotiated agreements to ensure that large development projects meet community goals for jobs, housing, services, and

infrastructure. Transit Oriented Development (TOD), which promotes dense mixed-use development around a transit stop to create vibrant and walkable neighborhoods, has become a standard development "product" and advocates in the San Francisco Bay Area, Denver, Portland, and Seattle are implementing strategies to ensure that TOD benefits current residents and businesses. Inclusionary zoning has been widely embraced, and more than 300 cities and counties now require or encourage private developers to include affordable units in their market-rate developments.⁵ And efforts to improve the built environment to increase the health of vulnerable populations are gaining traction among researchers, policymakers, and advocates.

The organizational infrastructure that supports the regional equity movement has expanded. National organizing networks are building urban/suburban coalitions, and regional equity coalitions are making strides in Boston, Sacramento, and Washington, D.C. Research is shaping the direction of organizing and action. Data analyses have shown that poverty and inequality within regions harms economic competitiveness. Policy analyses describe how creating avenues for low-income residents to build income and assets promotes long-term regional and national prosperity.⁶

Lessons learned from hurricanes Rita and Katrina have pushed advocates to develop strategies to ensure that future disasters do not disproportionately affect poor communities and communities of color. Building government and community capacity, making certain

Photos:

(Left) Conference presenter Scott Roberts, discusses the documentary *Trouble the Water*, which portrays his battle for survival in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

(Right) Carl Anthony, co-founder of Urban Habitat, observes the proceedings at the 2008 Regional Equity Conference in New Orleans.

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that federal and state funding allocations benefit low-income homeowners and renters, and connecting displaced residents to resources are just a few of the many approaches inspired by the rebuilding efforts in the Gulf Coast.

Needed, a Roadmap of Collective Wisdom

All of us now must join together to move forward on the path from hope to change. We must create a roadmap based on our collective wisdom and knowledge. We must articulate principles and policy proposals that have the power to shape the political debate in the media, in legislatures, in boardrooms, in living rooms, and in the streets.

Our efforts must span all levels of policy action—federal, state, regional, and local—and include institutional change as a primary target. We must work in the key areas of economic development, infrastructure, transportation, workforce development, educa-

tion, housing and neighborhoods, prison re-entry, health, land use, fiscal and tax policy, and the environment. The movement must cut across bureaucratic silos and encourage holistic thinking.

Experience has taught us that community engagement and empowerment lead to stronger, more meaningful policy reform and social change. Everyone—particularly people of color, who have historically been excluded from participation in decision-making and previous reform waves in America—must have confidence that the movement for equity enhances their political power, social cohesion, sense of place, and prospects for the future. ■



Photos:

Participants in informal discussion circles at the 2008 Regional Equity Conference in New Orleans.

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Endotes

1. For background on equitable development, see *Promoting Regional Equity: A Framing Paper*, Oakland, California. PolicyLink, 2002; Fox, Radhika and Blackwell, Angela Glover. *Regional Equity and Smart Growth: Opportunities for Advancing Social and Economic Justice in America*, Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities, 2004; *Advocating for Equitable Development*, Oakland, California, PolicyLink, 2005.
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This article is based on *Regional Equity and the Quest for Full Inclusion*, by Angela Glover Blackwell and Sarah Treuhart, presented at *Regional Equity '08: The Third National Summit on Social Justice, Smart Growth, and Equitable Development*.

See <http://www.regionalequity08.org/>

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