

# Breaking Through to Regional Equity

By M. Paloma Pavel

A new civil rights movement is emerging in communities throughout the United States. It presents a vibrant vision and voice in contrast to the usual story of urban sprawl and concentrated poverty. Through bold regional organizing and advocacy efforts and innovative partnerships and policy reforms, new alliances are creating working models of metropolitan regional equity in inner cities, suburbs, and rural areas across the nation.

Too often, low-income residents and communities of color are saddled with polluting facilities that contaminate air, land, and water. These communities typically lack access to grocery stores, libraries, parks, banks, and vibrant public spaces. Most have no living-wage jobs near where they live, and often no transit options that would make employment elsewhere in the region a viable option. This skew in distribution of resources and opportunity can be attributed in part to spatial racism—policies that reinforce inequitable structures even when individual attitudes of prejudicial behavior may have shifted.

Because the dynamics that create poverty in our urban cores are regional in scope, solutions must take into account the region as a whole. Even when extensive resources are directed to lifting a pocket of concentrated poverty, this action alone will not solve the problems. In today's fragmented geographic and political landscapes, multi-sector coalitions are working to ensure that all communities in the metropolitan region can participate in and benefit from their region's economic growth and activity. Groundbreaking practices and strategies are transforming policies that affect housing, jobs, land use, and transportation.<sup>1</sup>

Public policies have reinforced, and in some cases caused, racial segregation and neighborhoods of concentrated poverty in America's cities and suburbs.<sup>2</sup> Increasing fragmentation of municipal governments within metropolitan regions has contributed to the development of opportunity-rich areas whose residents wall themselves off from the rest of the region.<sup>3</sup>

This separation leads to vast disparities in housing, schools, tax bases, transportation, and wealth between inner cities and suburbs.

Moving toward equity requires a deeper understanding of the disparities that unravel our social fabric. The isolation of those residing in America's hollowed-out urban cores, as well as the social costs of sprawl, are exacerbated by outmoded policies that need to be reexamined. Public policies that result in racial segregation and isolation are also responsible for haphazard low-density development, duplication of public services in the suburbs, traffic congestion, destruction of critical habitat, squandering of energy, and related air and water pollution.<sup>4</sup>

Through the lens of regional equity, the jurisdictional geographic focus of metropolitan planning expands the definition of "urban" to include not only the inner core of a city but also its surrounding suburbs and rural areas. From this regional perspective of concentric and interdependent rings it becomes apparent that the problems of sprawl, vacant properties, and lack of affordable housing are all interrelated, as are their solutions.<sup>5</sup>

## The Quest for Sustainability

If the quest for sustainability is to be a genuine force for metropolitan transformation, then social equity and the struggle for racial justice must be integral to the concept. Building on the work of social scientists Julian Agyeman, Robert Bullard, and others, we call this the quest for just sustainability.<sup>6</sup>

This quest has far-reaching consequences. When taken seriously, it sparks a new dialogue among environmental and racial justice advocates and strategic thinking about how shared objectives might be realized. Secondly, it promotes a re-examination of the concept of “smart growth” to ensure that projects receiving wide public acceptance incorporate social equity, as well as environmental goals. Thirdly, it lays the groundwork for explicit performance standards for “equitable development,” to be adopted by the development industry and embraced by the general public. Finally, this work at the metropolitan level in the United States should create a road map for regional equity including short range and longer term strategies, indicators, and policies.

Sustainable communities are often defined by the three “E”s: economic prosperity, environmental soundness, and (social) equity.<sup>7</sup> Twenty-first century metropolitan regions need to take all three forces into account as they plan for the future. While the economy was the historic driver of urban planning, the second half of the 20th century saw the rise of “green planning”—preserving parks, wetlands, and open space. The ecological conditions that support life have come to be acknowledged and valued as part of the economic competitiveness and social desirability of a region.

Environmental organizations in industrialized countries have often misinterpreted sustainability, ignoring social equity.<sup>8</sup> The 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, explicitly refers to reducing poverty and inequality as central to sustainable development.

To highlight the importance of equity, Agyeman coined the term “just sustainability,” defined as “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, while living within the limits of supporting ecosystems<sup>9</sup>.” A viable and sustainable economic future calls for healing the land, maintaining or restoring its vitality, and dismantling our toxic legacies.<sup>10</sup>

### **Achieving Equity at the Regional Level**

Addressing concentrated poverty in the United States in the 21st century requires a shift in geographic consciousness among advocates of fairness,

opportunity, and full participation of disadvantaged populations.<sup>11</sup> The 20th century perspective of the city as a compact urban space within municipal boundaries is no longer adequate. Formerly, poverty was isolated in a few African American inner city neighborhoods, and in rural areas like Appalachia. Although poverty persists in many urban and rural neighborhoods, a study of 15 metro regions by the Institute on Race and Poverty found that by 2000, roughly half of the African American population and more than 60 percent of Latinos lived in financially stressed suburban areas. Immigrants arriving in the United States in the early 20th century typically settled in inner city enclaves. In the 21st century, many immigrant populations are bypassing older cities altogether and moving directly to the suburbs, where poverty is now spreading. As David Rusk points out in his influential book *Cities without Suburbs*, “the city is now the region.”

To be effective, organizers must come to terms with this new metropolitan landscape. The goal of regional equity is to reform those policies and practices that create and sustain social, racial, economic, and environmental inequalities among cities, suburbs, and rural areas—and to integrate marginalized people and places into the region’s structures of social and economic opportunity.

Substantial spatial separation—enforced by policy—continues to divide humans across racial and economic lines; however, the biological reality is that we are all part of an interconnected living system. While “across the highway” has replaced “across the tracks,” the myths that foster separation persist, inscribed in the architecture and design of our cities. A metropolitan regional perspective enables us to acknowledge the reality of differentiation and subsystems, while also seeing the wholeness of the living system. Linking these interdependent geographic rings, thereby challenging spatial divisions by race and class, has proven to be a powerful regional equity strategy.<sup>12</sup> The quest for regional equity links economically isolated and racially segregated residents with opportunity structures throughout their region, revitalizing inner city and suburban neighborhoods and urban markets—the assets and key building blocks of a healthy region.

## Building Community in the 21st Century

We tend to think of building new neighborhoods or rebuilding older ones as constructing buildings, planting trees, paving sidewalks, and engaging in other activities to improve the physical appearance of an area. But building a community should be, first and foremost, a social activity based on restoring trust, solidarity, confidence, and faith in the capacity of individuals and groups to implement change. This requires healing the scars of internalized racism, separatism, cynicism, and resignation. It also means restoring awareness of the relationship between human communities and the life support system of the planet upon which they depend.

Events of the final four decades of the 20th century undermined the sense of social cohesion among large sections of the American population. Although the civil rights movement challenged the legacy of racism embedded in United States history, it also stimulated a national backlash and a retreat from engagement followed by an overemphasis on individualism, reinforced by consumerism.

In the opening decade of the 21st century, social movements play an increasingly visible and important role in building and rebuilding a sense of community in America's cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Given the disruptions of the global economy, and the technological transformations of the information age, social movements often provide the basis for new forms of identity.<sup>13</sup> Neighborhoods, groups, and communities, building on their ethnic, class, or territorial awareness, come together to fight their common opponents: big-box industries like Wal-Mart, toxic dumping, and other issues affecting survival and local quality of life. Now, groups that previously forged a shared identity through saying "no" are building new regional power alliances and creating proactive, positive alternatives for the future.

The regional equity movement creates remarkable new opportunities for community building among an astonishing range of metropolitan social justice actors: environmentalists, labor and blue-collar organizers, clergy, civil rights advocates, community organizers, immigrant activists, and African Americans.

This burgeoning movement demonstrates a community-building process in which participants respond to an imminent threat, build organizational and leadership capacity, acquire zoning and litigation tools, and engage in a community visioning process, thus acting to produce positive assets for the region as a whole. It is building a new context for multiracial, multiclass, and gender-balanced leadership for a practical vision that may well prove attractive, even essential, to established metropolitan elites and decision makers. ■

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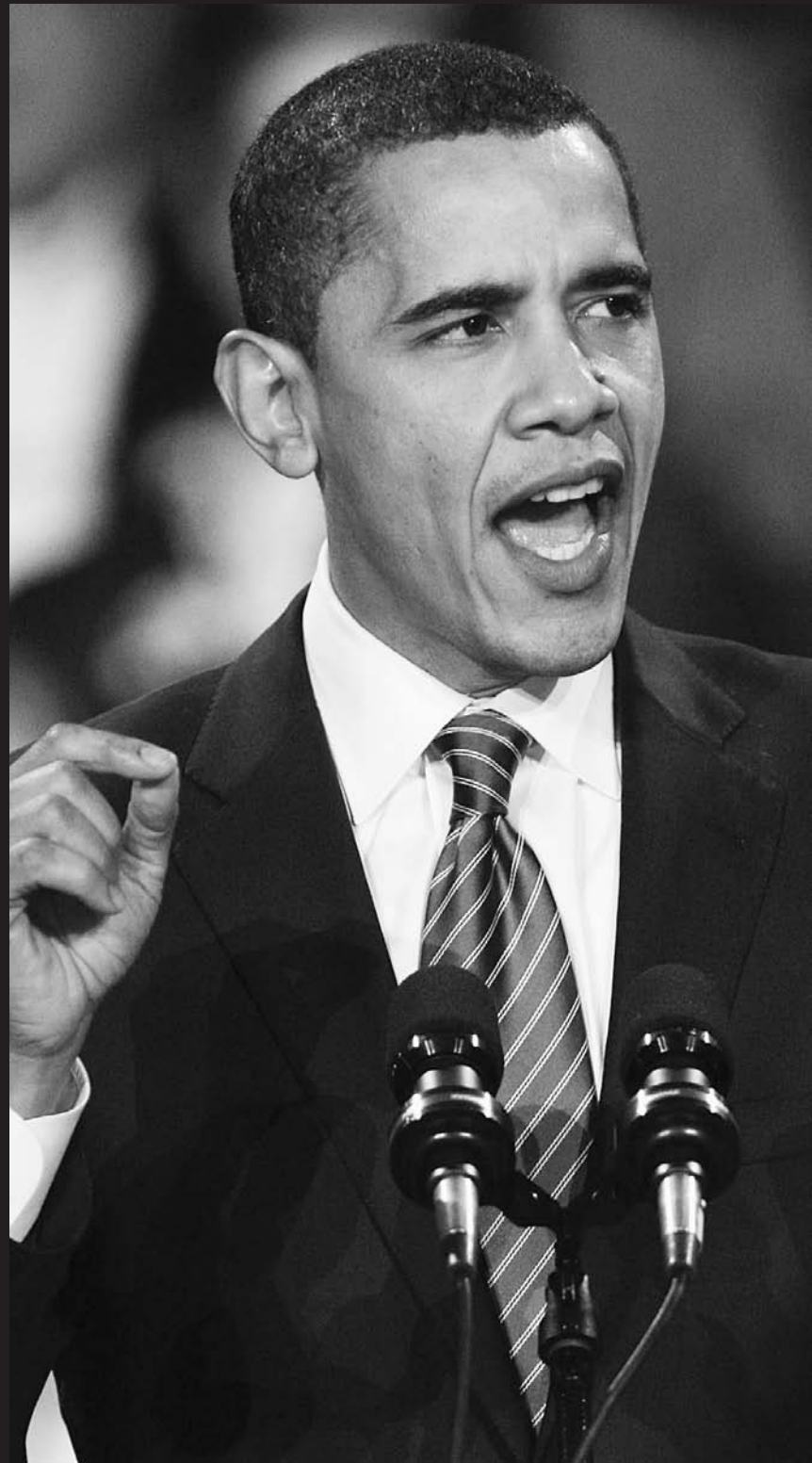
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