
Breakthrough Communities

Sustainability and Justice in the Next American
Metropolis

edited by M. Paloma Pavel

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Introduction

M. Paloma Pavel

A new civil rights movement is emerging in communities throughout the United States. This metropolitan regional equity movement presents a vibrant range of vision and voice—a counter to the national, and increasingly global, story of urban sprawl and concentrated poverty. Bold regional organizing and advocacy efforts are linking sustainability and justice through innovative partnerships and policy reforms. New alliances are creating models for the next American metropolis. They demonstrate what is working—and what is possible—through building alliances between inner cities, suburbs, and rural areas within metropolitan regions across the nation. Breakthrough practices and leadership strategies that support healthy communities are transforming policies that affect housing, jobs, land use, and transportation.

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

Sustainability and Justice

Drawing from the concept of sustainability and the theory of living systems, metropolitan regions can be considered as whole systems that contain a nested hierarchy of subsystems (Macy 1998). Historically, natural

forces such as mountains, harbors, and rivers shaped human settlements. Rivers were often the site of the earliest villages and habitat clusters. Maria Kaika's book *City of Flows* expands this historical reference to underscore the interconnected ecology of natural resources that must flow within regions for human survival, including the flow-through of our water, food, and air (Kaika 2005). These biological principles of living systems deepen our understanding of the interconnection of human settlements that form the metropolitan region.

Today, downtowns, multiple centers of older and newer suburbs, as well as rural areas and the surrounding wilderness are connected to their local, community-based organizations as well as to their larger national and global contexts (Leccese and McCormick 2000). Neighborhoods, whole within themselves, are also part of this larger metropolitan system. To understand metropolitan regions, it is critical to account for their fixed elements such as ecological contexts, buildings, infrastructure, and well-defined patterns of municipal government. It is also necessary to map the dynamic connecting elements such as the flow of people through commuter and migration patterns and the flows of information, capital, energy, resources, and "wastes." Finally, it is important to consider the role of human agency as seen in capital investment, class conflict, and social movements in structuring and restructuring metropolitan regions (Edwards 2005; Feagin 1998; Gottdiener 1985; Hallsmith 2003; Harvey 1983; Susser 2002).

If the quest for sustainability is to be a genuine force for metropolitan transformation, the quest for social equity—and, by extension, the struggle for racial justice—must be integral to the concept. This quest has far-reaching consequences. When taken seriously, it sparks among environmental and racial justice advocates a new public dialogue about the many applications of racial justice and how shared objectives might be realized. Second, it promotes a reexamination of the concept of "smart growth" to ensure that projects receiving wide public acceptance incorporate social equity along with environmental goals. Third, it lays the groundwork for explicit performance standards for equitable development, to be widely shared by the development industry as well as by the general public. Finally, working at the metropolitan scale in the United States, it should create a road map of short- and longer-term strategies, indicators, and policies for how to get to regional equity.

The historic Brundtland Commission Report (1987) provided the first international recognition of the need for sustainable development, defined

as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This compelling but elusive concept of sustainability inspired extensive research and development of innovative methods for measuring human impacts. One such innovator is Mathis Wackernagel (1996), who provided key leadership in developing the “ecological footprint” model. The footprint is a measurement of the amount of land necessary to support a defined economy at a particular material standard of living. According to Wackernagel, “Modern cities and whole countries survive on ecological goods and services appropriated from natural flows or acquired through commercial trade from all over the world. . . . The Ecological Footprint, therefore, also represents the corresponding population’s total ‘appropriated carrying capacity.’” In part II of this volume, various case studies demonstrate the application of the ecological footprint and other tools, including geographic information systems (GIS) mapping, to make sustainability visible to communities and compelling as a factor for urban planners and decision makers. Promising efforts in applying measurable social equity indicators that advise governance are also described.

Sustainable communities have also been defined by the “three e’s”: economically prosperous, environmentally sound, and socially equitable (Wheeler and Beatley 2004). For metropolitan regions to be relevant in the twenty-first century, they need to plan for the future in a way that takes into account all three forces. While the economy was originally the historic driver of urban planning, the second half of the twentieth century saw the rise in “green planning”—creating parks, preserving wetlands, and recognizing the value of open space both to the economy and to the sustainability equation. These ecological conditions that support life have come to be acknowledged and valued as part of the economic competitiveness and social desirability of a region.

Social equity is still too often undervalued or left out of the equation of sustainability. The accepted definition provides a powerful global context for addressing issues of concentrated poverty in the United States. However, environmental organizations in industrialized countries have often misinterpreted the concept of sustainability, ignoring social equity (Portney 2003, 157–175). The Brundtland Report, aptly titled “Our Common Future,” explicitly refers to goals of reducing poverty and inequality as central to sustainable development.

To highlight the importance of the equity dimension, social scientist Julian Agyeman coined the term “just sustainability,” which he defines

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” (2005).

Sustainability, as seen through the lens of social equity, also requires healing the land, caring for its vitality, and—in many regions—transforming toxic legacies of someone else’s making in order to create a viable economic future (Bullard 2005). The “triple bottom line”—economy, environment, and equity—is not an abstract principle of accounting, nor is it simply a new turn of phrase. Rather, a commitment to the three *e*’s results in policies aligned with conditions that improve the quality of life for all citizens in the future as well as in the present.

Breakthrough Communities

We often think of building new neighborhoods or rebuilding older ones in terms of bricks and mortar, constructing new buildings, planting trees, paving sidewalks, and engaging in other activities to improve the physical appearance of an area; but building a community is first and foremost a social activity based on restoring trust, solidarity, confidence, and faith in the capacity of individuals and groups to implement change. Accomplishing 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 we all depend.

In this book, breakthroughs are described as achievements of community organizing and building solidarity across lines of race, class, and municipal jurisdictions. These achievements are presented through journalistic stories that invite the reader into the lived experience of community advocates and through brief and compelling strategy pieces that summarize issues that need to be addressed and tools needed to bring about change. Wherever possible, the strategy pieces are written by policy analysts who are nationally respected for their research and knowledge and their contributions to the field.

The stories in this book show the ways in which people from many of these communities are working together to reverse the destructive patterns of metropolitan development and to build healthy neighborhoods for all of our communities—urban, suburban, and rural, alike. Like the breakthroughs of scientific discoveries, the innovations described are located at the intersection of many fields (Johansson 2004) because sus-

tainable development is understood as an integration of goals of environment, economic development, and social equity. This frame provides a unifying context for work in fields related to metropolitan land use—ecology, landscape planning, housing, infrastructure, public facilities, workplace planning, parks and open space planning, and growth management. The breakthrough stories in this book also draw from the crosscutting fields of advocacy planning, equitable development, and environmental justice, as defined by the emerging social movement of regional equity.

These stories mark both a continuity with and a radical shift from the worldview prevalent in struggles for racial justice in the 1960s. In that period, Martin Luther King Jr. adapted Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence to confront the United States' legacy of Southern racism and to move the nation to enact new civil rights legislation. The civil rights movement created a partnership between the federal government and the local urban and rural African-American communities. This phase of the movement was based on the belief that an expanding industrial society could provide opportunities for the African-American population while promoting the welfare of everyone.

Today, most people believe that racial integration is a good idea, but our metropolitan regions—neighborhoods, schools, employment centers, and the prison system—have become resegregated on a vast scale (Bullard 2007a). The federal government has retreated from its historic role of promoting racial justice. We live in a challenging new postindustrial era. Humanity is poised on the brink of unprecedented global transformation, with profound implications for racial and economic justice in the United States (Lane 2006) and beyond. The dynamics of globalization, advancing technology, increased communication, and destruction of the environment are leading to a greater sense of interdependence and vulnerability in local communities.

The Next American Metropolis

Until recently, when people thought of urban areas, they thought of the traditional city, a dense settlement with a single municipal government. But in the second half of the twentieth century, urban settlements have grown more fragmented and decentralized, spreading over a much larger area than the core city (Gottdiener and Hutchinson 1999). Typically, the metropolis in the United States is an urbanized region possessing many

jurisdictions and including several geographic rings from the inner city core to the inner suburbs, outer-ring suburbs, and exurbs to agricultural areas at the urban edge. Some analysts expand these rings to include the concept of wilderness, a dwindling but important resource upon which metropolitan regions depend (Katz 2000).

Addressing issues at the metropolitan scale is essential for achieving sustainability. The air shed, like the hydrological cycle, crosses jurisdictional boundaries. Air pollution, caused by stationary as well as mobile sources, does not stop at the city line. Biotic resources become fragmented by the process of suburban sprawl. Patterns of metropolitan development have profound effects on traffic congestion, energy use, and climate change. Metropolitan regions are also the building blocks of the global economy because information, money, people, and goods cross national boundaries (Scott and Storper 2003).

Addressing concentrated poverty in the United States in the twenty-first century requires a shift of geographic imagination and consciousness among advocates of fairness, opportunity, and full participation of disadvantaged populations in the society as a whole (Anthony 2006a). During much of the twentieth century, advocates concerned with race and poverty thought of the city as a compact urban place contained within municipal boundaries. Such a perspective is no longer adequate. Formerly, poverty was isolated in a few African-American inner-city neighborhoods and in rural places like Appalachia. Although poverty persists in many urban and rural neighborhoods, a study of fifteen 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 twentieth century typically settled in inner-city enclaves. In the twenty-first 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 quest for “regional equity” seeks to implement “just sustainability” at the metropolitan regional scale. The goals of regional equity are 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 despite the biological reality 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 region as a living system. Linking these interdependent geographic rings, and thereby challenging spatial divisions determined by race and class, has proven to be a powerful regional equity strategy (Orfield 2002). Thus, the quest for regional equity engages in revitalizing inner-city and older suburban neighborhoods and urban markets as assets and key building blocks of a healthy region. It reforms local, regional, and state policies and practices in order to advance social and economic equity within a region. And it links the needs of economically isolated and racially segregated residents with the opportunity structures throughout their region.

Events of the final four decades of the twentieth 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 U.S. history, it also stimulated a national backlash and abandonment of the vision of inclusive communities. Subsequently, we experienced an overemphasis on individualism, reinforced by consumerism, which propped up the illusion that social isolation is sustainable. Conflicting trends of globalization and identity in the opening decade of the twenty-first century are reshaping the everyday lives and relationships of men and women, the elderly, and children in our cities, suburbs, and rural areas (Castells 1997). Persistent poverty is well documented in our inner cities and older suburbs, with associated challenges of joblessness, crime, delinquency, drug trafficking, and changing family structures. New research suggests that these trends are also connected to rising insecurity, loneliness, depression, isolation of the elderly, and stunted development of middle-class children in the nation’s newer sprawling suburbs (Morris 2005).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, social movements are playing 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 wrought by the information age, social movements often

provide the basis for new forms of identity (Buechler 2000; Castells 2003). Neighborhoods, groups, and communities—building on their ethnic, class, or territorial awareness—come together to fight their common opponents, confronting big-box industries such as 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 positive and proactive alternatives for the future.

The Lens of Regional Equity

The regional equity movement is creating remarkable new opportunities for community building among an astonishing range of metropolitan social justice actors—environmentalists, labor, blue-collar ethnics, clergy, civil rights advocates, community organizers, immigrant activists, and African-Americans. This burgeoning movement is aggressively challenging institutional racism in the metropolitan landscape and building a new context for multiracial, multiclass, and gender-balanced leadership based on a practical vision that may well prove attractive to established metropolitan elites and decision makers. It is demonstrating a community-building process in which participants respond to an imminent threat, build organizational and leadership capacity, acquire policy-making and litigation tools, and engage in a community-visioning process to develop assets for the region as a whole.

Solutions must take into account the region as a whole because the dynamics that create poverty in our urban cores are regional in scope. Even when extensive resources are directed to lifting a pocket of concentrated poverty, this action alone will not solve the problems. The situation cannot be addressed without taking into account the regional dynamics that result in predictable poverty and other resource inequities (Orfield 2002).

In response to this fragmented geographic and political landscaping, the regional equity movement’s multisector 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. Ground-breaking practices and strategies are transforming policies that affect housing, jobs, land use, and transportation. The ultimate goals are to reverse unequal social, racial, economic, and environmental policies and to transform inequitable planning practices in inner cities, suburbs, and

rural areas. To build sustainable metropolitan communities, new policies are needed that improve the quality of life in ways that are fair for present and future generations, within the limits of viable ecosystems.

Public policies have reinforced, and in some cases caused, racial segregation and neighborhoods of concentrated poverty in America's cities and suburbs (Jargowsky and Steiner 1997; Massey and Denton 1998). Increasing fragmentation of municipal governments within metropolitan regions has contributed to the development of opportunity-rich areas of residents walled off from the rest of the region (Pastor, Benner, and Rosner 2006). This separation creates vast disparities in housing, schools, tax bases, transportation, and wealth between inner cities and suburbs.

Through the lens of regional equity, the jurisdictional geographic focus of metropolitan planning expands this broader definition of urban to include not only the inner core of a city but also its surrounding outer rings that reach into suburbs and rural areas. During the 1970s and 1980s, as these areas became part of the metropolitan region, many of the older city centers were left behind with few or no resources and could no longer flourish. Job losses and suburban flight left many inner cities abandoned. From this regional perspective of concentric and interdependent rings, it becomes apparent that sprawl, vacant properties, and the lack of affordable housing are all interrelated—as are their solutions (Katz 2000).

Progress in 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 better understood. Public policies that have resulted in racial segregation and isolation have also been responsible for haphazard growth of low-density development, duplication of public services in the suburbs, destruction of critical habitat, and development of strip malls as well as increased traffic congestion, squandering of energy, and related air and water pollution (Wolch, Pastor, and Dreier 2004).

American cities have seen ebbs and flows of urban rise and demise (Jacobs 1961). Broad demographic forces such as population growth, increased immigration, and domestic migration are changing settlement patterns, lifestyle choices, and consumption trends. Simultaneously, economic forces of globalization, deindustrialization, and technological innovation are restructuring our economy. Together, these complex and interdependent forces are reshaping metropolitan communities.

Compass for Transformative Leadership

The successful organizations documented in this book are employing new patterns of transformative leadership that connect grassroots communities to emerging opportunities in the field of regional equity. These new leaders understand the power of collaboration and demonstrate the capacity to represent their own communities, to change the rules of the game, and to provide leadership in the larger society.

Dominant institutions often have entrenched opposition to change and a substantial interest in maintaining the status quo. Even when such institutions would support change, they often do not know how to go about it. People from more privileged backgrounds may feel helpless, overwhelmed, or unprepared intellectually, emotionally, and politically for confronting the complexities of social and environmental change. Disenfranchised communities often lack role models for bringing about change. They may be torn between goals of their own racial group, those of the larger society, and those of family and community. They may lack confidence, communication skills, or resources for producing effective documents to educate others about their cause. After years of disenfranchisement, some may even feel they do not deserve success.

How can the model of transformative leadership help address these challenges? First, it acknowledges the need for internal transformation within the consciousness of each individual, along with the need to change institutional structures in the larger society. It also encourages learning and critical thinking and nurtures a sense of belonging to a place and a community. Finally, it acknowledges that people from all walks of life have the potential for leadership.

Increasingly, disenfranchised communities are aware of the strengths and limitations of their efforts during the past several decades and are seeking political strategies that can lead to fundamental change. They are open to reexamining social and economic assumptions and exploring new approaches to learning and action. As this book was taking shape, a four-part pattern in the formation of successful grassroots organizations became apparent.

1. The players initially came together in the process of saying no to forces destroying their community.
2. The next stage involved becoming organized and grounded in their unique geography and facing the new dynamics of the twenty-first century.



Figure I.1
Compass for Transformative Leadership.

3. As the group or movement stabilized, members began to explore new horizons of sustainability, metropolitan scale, and patterns of transformative leadership.

4. During the next phase, which I call “getting to yes,” groups built creative collaborations that produced long-term benefits for their communities.

Navigating these important leadership challenges prepares participants to develop flexible, long-lasting, and highly effective campaigns and collaborations. The introduction to part II describes the process in more detail. The Compass for Transformative Leadership helps leaders from community organizations identify their own location on a path of learning and action and supports them as they develop projects that help create sustainable and just metropolitan communities.

Plan of the Book

This book is about social justice activists, labor unions, community organizers, environmentalists, and policy advocates joining together to form the emerging regional equity movement. These coalitions are challenging economic and institutional structures that shape spatial injustice in America’s metropolitan regions. The stories documented in this anthology are of leaders and organizations achieving breakthroughs by

1. engaging in the discourse and practice of sustainability as an arena for racial and economic justice organizing;
2. linking neighborhood, workplace, and region as a context for social action;
3. developing new models of inclusive leadership for a durable future; and
4. achieving tangible benefits for their primary constituencies while contributing to the long-term health and viability of the regions where they are located.

The anthology is divided into three parts.

Part I provides a historical and conceptual context for the field of regional equity. It describes geopolitical and demographic shifts that have influenced the readiness of various regions to undertake the coalition-building and organizing work needed to win victories in the field. Chapter authors document the struggles of converging movements in transportation justice and environmental justice over several decades. Place-based roots include policy efforts, legislation, and litigation in urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Several of the chapters describe challenges facing this movement, which are philosophical and psychological as well as political. Part I establishes the foundation for the strategies and practices presented in parts II and III.

Part II explores breakthroughs being achieved in metropolitan regions across the United States. The case studies are written by people engaged with issues on the ground. The stories are accompanied by analyses, strategies, and tools being used to achieve specific changes and goals. In part III, visionary voices reflect on how we can best move forward to achieve a more just future, informed by a regional equity perspective.

In 1900, less than 10 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas; today, nearly half do. This trend represents a staggering rise from 1950, when only 30 percent of the global population was urban. By 2030, it is predicted that 61 percent of the world's population will live in urban regions (Davis 2006). As we begin the second decade of the 21st century, our cities and regions face a new set of challenges at a global scale with the threat of global economic collapse, massive extinctions, and climate change. Transformative leadership for sustainable communities will be needed more than ever. Given this rapid expansion, we need a shared understanding and a set of strategies that make it pos-

sible to achieve rapid and significant breakthroughs in creating sustainable and socially just metropolitan communities (Satterthwaite 2005).

This book provides a guide to practical, collaborative, and inclusive leadership strategies that can humanize the environmental movement and reverse the dominant narrative of racial segregation and concentrated poverty in our metropolitan regions caused by decades of sprawl and unequal allotment of public benefits. It sheds light on concepts emerging in the regional equity movement around the United States—concepts grounded in the stories and strategies of thinkers and actors on the front lines who are making history as they improve the quality of life in their communities.