

# Growing Together: Community-building and the New Regionalism

*Manuel Pastor, Jr.*

Over the last decade and a half, there has been increasing despair over the state of our nation's central cities. Concentrated poverty, especially amongst blacks and Latinos, rose through the 1980s and, despite the recent national-level economic recovery, pockets of depression plague inner cities. At the same time, the political will for an urban agenda, briefly revived in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest, seems nearly absent in Washington; instead, slashing the welfare safety net without a clear strategy for new employment has become a new bipartisan sport.

In this context, antipoverty activists and community developers can perhaps be forgiven a tendency to turn inward: when no one is listening, it makes little sense to waste one's time talking. Yet the hope for an American antipoverty agenda—like the hope for the U.S. economy in general—lies in a shift toward a new audience, one which has embraced the paradigm of regional-level policy making and politics.

Why should those concerned about poverty add yet one more thing—in this case, regionalism—to their plate? The rationale is partly pragmatic. As eloquently documented in William Barnes and Larry Ledebur's *The New Regional Economies*, regions are where the economic action has, and is, headed. Reducing poverty naturally involves acquir-

ing and redirecting resources; with the federal government tapped out and central cities themselves often under fiscal strain, community developers who want to stay one step ahead financially must also be one step ahead analytically and politically. Regional development is exactly that next step.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the rationale for incorporating regionalism into the antipoverty agenda goes far beyond such simple accounting; the themes of the new regionalism are extraordinarily consistent with the newest efforts to ameliorate concentrated poverty. After all, the new regionalism stresses building social capital—or “ties that bind”—between municipalities. The notion is that disparate cities, when properly organized, will recognize their common interests and pull together for a more hopeful future.

## **Antipoverty Strategy**

Such linking of interests and opportunities is also at the heart of the new antipoverty strategy of “community-building.” As reported in a Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored study, *Stories of Renewal*, community builders have recognized the sterility of the old debate between place-based or people-based development, that is, between the bricks and mortar approach of revitalizing neighborhood infrastructure and the

individually-targeted attempts to push the “talented” to escape. Instead, they stress that a key missing element in poor communities is what might be termed “bridging” social capital: people often have few ties to networks of employment and their organizations likewise have limited connections to political and economic influence. The best way to build such ties, they argue, is by first building community organizations and social “fabric” at a neighborhood level and then partnering neighborhood groups with their regional counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

The benefits of building and bridging are abundantly evident. As Ben Harrison reported in a 1995 study for the Ford Foundation (Harrison, 1995), job training which is linked to regional dynamics tends to have been more effective at placement, and those community development corporations (CDCs) which have learned to partner with other regional actors have found their ability to construct affordable housing, attract retail, and find residents employment greatly improved. Reaching out has its individual benefits as well: programs which enhance housing mobility (such as Gautreaux-style experiments) or improve transport connections to work (such as the HUD-sponsored Bridges to Work program) tend to have large positive impacts on participant income. Given these trends, it is little wonder that the January 1996 meeting of the National Community Building Network was entitled “Linked Future: Building Metropolitan Communities” and focused on how best to connect low-income communities with emerging regional initiatives.

The gains, however, are not simply one way: the new regionalists stand much to gain from making poverty reduction a central focus of their efforts. Again, part of the rationale is pragmatic: targeting poverty can actually help regional growth. Building on the work of Richard Voith, Hank Savitch, William Barnes, and Larry Ledebur, and

others, I and a group of colleagues from UCLA and Occidental College examined 74 different metro areas in the U.S. and found that those regions which reduce central city poverty in fact grow faster—even accounting for the fact that growth itself will reduce poverty and inequality. The reason, we suggest, is simple: since poverty diminishes human capital and inequality erodes social capital, the competitive advantages of a region are lessened.

New regionalists also have a pragmatic political rationale for placing antipoverty efforts high on their agenda. Myron Orfield’s work has demonstrated that inner-ring suburbs share many of the difficulties of the central city; he suggests fortifying the political calculus of regionalism by bringing the two together in coalitions against the low-tax, high-resource, outer-ring suburbs.

The potential partners in the neighborhoods are there. Our own research on 10 poverty areas in Los Angeles County revealed that community leaders often had a very clear idea of where the regional economy was headed and would certainly have much to contribute to a policy discussion. Unfortunately, the same leaders were far less cognizant of various regional initiatives, mostly because they had not been invited to the appropriate tables. New regionalists, in short, may be missing the political boat by not reaching out to natural allies.

## **Top Performers**

Of course, there are some model efforts. In the course of our own research, we devised an index which ranked metro performance by regional income growth, reduction in central city poverty, and residential integration of the poor. Among the resulting list of “top performers” were Charlotte (North Carolina), Boston, and San Jose. Each represented a different path to success:

- Charlotte stitched together its region by merging city and county functions and benefited from a business class which took a lead in tackling poverty in the inner city;
- Boston enjoyed a progressive local tradition and strong community organizations which forced the private sector to recognize the need for affordable housing and job linkage strategies; and
- San Jose was helped by an extraordinarily conscious group of entrepreneurs who recognized that their own individual survival was dependent on that of “Silicon Valley” in general—and who are now using the organization they created, *Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network*, to make a dent in the area’s problems of working poverty and underperforming educational systems.

What should be done by each side—the new regionalists and the new community builders—to create alliances? Clearly, regional initiatives should be reexamined through the prism of equity—if only because positive efforts, such as the trade-enhancing Alameda Corridor project in Los Angeles County, inevitably become ensnared in lawsuits brought by disadvantaged communities who feel left out of “the plan.” The best first step in this direction in many areas is to have groups such as regional associations of government spend time learning about the efforts of low-income community developers and brainstorming how regional-level strategies around transportation, economic development, and other matters could be more helpful to empowering low-income individuals and neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

## Think and Link

Community developers will also have to learn to “think and link” to the region. As I and my colleagues have pushed this message in talks across the country, many com-

munity activists have complained that this is yet one more item on an oversubscribed task list. I may sympathize but I also proselytize: this may be extra but it is definitely not secondary. Still, bringing community-based organizations (CBOs) and their staff up to speed on these issues will require time and training: foundations should step up to the plate by providing the monies for capacity-building and, as Jeremy Nowak suggests, regionally-based businesses, educational institutions, and others could help. One model effort in this regard is the Community Development Technologies Center based at the Los Angeles Trade-Technical College which, among other things, teaches low-income advocates how to understand regionally-based business clusters and target them for job development and placement.

I have been rather pragmatic above, stressing the material gains of alliance for both the new regionalists and the new community developers as well as the concrete next steps once there is a full embrace of the continuity between regional and community development. Yet beneath the pragmatism and political calculus which may bring people to the same table lurks a more fundamental reality: Americans are tired of being fragmented by class, race, and geography, and they are angry at the isolation and division spawned and sustained by our current political and economic systems. Against this angst, new regionalism appeals because it stakes a lonely claim to the common good; community-building resonates because it seeks to mend a torn social fabric. My “one idea” is simple: instead of growing apart, we should be growing together. ■

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## Notes

1. See Swanstrom (1996) for more on the politics of tying urban revitalization to the regional movement.
2. From a slightly different perspective, Jeremy Nowak (1997) makes an eloquent case that traditional place-based developers will be "managers of decline" unless they link their communities to regional economic dynamics.
3. For more specific suggestions on how to improve the equity effects of regional approaches, see Bollens (1997) and Pastor, Dreier, Grigsby, and Lopez-Garza (1997).

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