

From the Director's Desk

By Juliet Ellis, Executive Director

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hen Urban Habitat was founded in 1989, we were one of the only regionally-based environmental justice organizations in the country. We worked regionally because it provided a frame of reference to more effectively deal with the systemic causes of many of the issues facing local communities. What we experienced was that decisions on transportation, land use, or siting of industry usually took place in arenas far larger than a particular neighborhood. We saw that poor air quality from idling diesel trucks did not stop at the border of West Oakland but traveled across neighborhoods, cities, and counties. More importantly we discovered that local organizing wasn't "big" enough to challenge the sources of these sorts of problems.

Over time an intentional "movement" for regional equity has taken hold. There are now many organizations that experience the benefits of framing their work within a regional equity framework. Groups that may previously have been operating in geographic, sector, or issue silos now look for opportunities to link their work across these boundaries. For example, through the work of the Social Equity Caucus, a regional coalition of 75 Bay Area organizations coordinated by Urban Habitat, groups are uniting across nonprofit, public, and private sectors to develop a shared regional agenda for environmental, economic, and social justice. Organizations working on issues such as tenant right's in Marin are able to connect with groups doing similar work in Oakland and San Francisco. "Going regional" is not always easy especially when local day-to-day work requires an immediate response. But as this issue of *Race, Poverty, and the Environment* demonstrates, there is a growing number of organizations using this model as both a theory and a practice.

Next month, Urban Habitat and the Social Equity Caucus will host the first inaugural State of the Region conference, where we will examine political, economic, environmental, and social trends that are impacting low-income communities of color throughout the Bay Area. Leaders from labor and the private and public sectors will be participating in this day-long event to deepen our understanding of these forces and to build partnerships and alliances across sectors, issue areas and geography.

In closing, I want to share my excitement over the fact that the country has elected the first black President. As many of you know, President Obama was trained as a community organizer by the Gamaliel Foundation and absorbed many crucial lessons about organizing that have since served him well. At the United States Mayors Conference in June of this year, Obama assured the mayors that he knew the challenges they face, saying, "I will never forget that the most important experience in my life came when I was doing what you do each day—working at the local level to bring about change in our communities." He went on to promise that once he is in the White House he will partner with local government to "promote strong cities as the backbone of regional growth." Further, he explained, "We need to stop seeing our cities as the problem and start seeing them as the solution. Strong cities are the building blocks of strong regions, and strong regions are essential... That is the new metropolitan reality and we need a new strategy that reflects it."

While the challenges the country currently faces are unprecedented, we now have national leadership that shares our values and commitment to regional equity. This should inspire all of us to work even harder to ensure that this vision becomes reality for the communities about which we care the most. ■



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