Let us begin with a defining image from Hurricane Katrina. We see a family stranded on a rooftop, their home surrounded by flood waters, the deadly currents raging below. The men, women, and children upon this rooftop appear exhausted and terrified. As a helicopter news crew hovers above, the family unfolds a hand-scrawled banner: HELP US.

When this devastating picture is conjured up, one cannot help also considering its metaphorical weight. Foremost, of course, we are speaking about real people struggling to survive amid forces they cannot control. Yet the residents of New Orleans, victims of the hurricane, flood, and inept governmental response, also tragically represent the plight of untold millions of Americans. Like the people on the rooftop, these Americans are poor, disenfranchised, prey to the turbulence of economic, environmental, and demographic convulsions on a massive scale, unable alone to grapple with their plight and alter their circumstances. As important, they are largely ignored by those agencies and organizations equipped with the privilege and power to help them.

But our image of Katrina’s wake is also deceptive – important for what it fails to show. We cannot track the line of policy decisions that have allowed the levees to breach. Our eyes cannot focus on the decades of neglect that have encouraged poverty to fester, opportunity to flag, neighborhood, city, and regional potential to dissipate and wither. And while many observers have correctly noted that Katrina suddenly and dramatically swept aside the veil shielding poverty from the view of the American mainstream, the subsequent national discussion regarding the myriad causes of and potential strategies for addressing such profound inequities have proven more than disappointing.

One reason for our failure to confront the problems illuminated by Katrina involves the sheer size and scale of the determinant forces. Katrina, after all, did not strike New Orleans alone. Rather, the storm—followed by a second hurricane, Rita—swept through the Gulf Coast, pummeling a long, winding string of environmentally fragile communities in unequal measure. Indeed the entire coast is characterized by extreme vulnerability as depicted in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Because the most damage and potential loss of life in these coastal areas is caused by storm surge (Figure 2), assessing that level of risk is also essential to developing policies that decrease the vulnerability to natural disasters.
Because of these risks and the lack of preparedness, the failure to provide immediate and effective relief occurred not just within the municipality, but at every level of government—the inaction of FEMA being the most notorious and decisive. Yet to grasp the full dimension of the forces in play, we need to step back and expand our focus even further.

The inequities that characterize New Orleans’s Ninth Ward, the city as a whole, and the state of Louisiana, are also reflected in conditions of the entire Gulf Coast, one of the nation’s most impoverished areas. The entire region shares common history of racial segregation and inequity with low-income levels often corresponding with concentrations of African Americans shown in Figure 3. In the storm’s aftermath, this shared history of social, economic, and racial inequities of America’s largest wetlands region led to widespread neighborhood displacement, job deflation, and collective despair—further undermining living conditions in Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama, as well as Louisiana. Longstanding pockets of concentrated poverty fell even further behind more affluent outlying communities. One crucial lesson of Katrina is that in order to address individual human needs and the lapsed opportunities in neighborhoods and cities, we must fashion strategies for ensuring equity that fit the scale of the megaregion.

Megaregions do not address the needs of individuals in communities. What megaregions can do is connect areas with large concentrations of low-income people of color, and the cities, suburbs, and surrounding areas where they live to a much larger geography. The sheer scale of megaregions offers the potential for positioning the areas within them to be competitive in a way that can provide benefits to everyone within its borders. Regional equity—which seeks to create communities of opportunity that afford residents access to good schools, affordable housing, transportation, jobs, supermarkets, healthy air quality, and a range of other economic and social amenities—would allow residents of low-income communities and communities of color to thrive.
The Case for Equity in Megaregions

Is it feasible to talk about a megaregion approach to equity? The sheer size of megaregions would at first seem to suggest too great a variety of circumstances and modes of organization to make possible a common set of strategies. Framed by gigantic networks of integrated labor markets, infrastructure, and land use systems, the ten megaregions identified in the America 2050 initiative appear initially to emphasize contrasts and oppositions – with nearly a half-century of demographic, economic, and infrastructure changes countering any attempt to prescribe simple behavioral models. Indeed, the primary equity indicators – income, education, housing values, and poverty levels – vary greatly between megaregions. Inter-regional inequity is starkly visible in the comparison of Northern California, where 20.2 percent of its population earns more than $100K per year, and the Gulf Coast where a mere 7.4 percent does so. The average value of a home in the Texas Triangle, which is $73,967, is less than half of a price of a home in the Northeast ($176,431). Finally, the Northeast and Northern California, both with 30 percent of their populations holding four-year degrees, rank well above the two least-educated megaregions, Florida and the Gulf Coast, with 22 percent and 18 percent respectively. Moreover, since megaregions extend beyond spatial, economic, and temporal dimensions to constitute a set of relations between people, institutions, and the natural and built environment, we must inevitably ask how much the culture of Cascadia, with its attendant and peculiar riches and privations, shares with Florida. Or the Arizona Sun Corridor with the Midwest. Or Northern California with the Gulf Coast.

Yet megaregions also express commonalities. Growth rates for both employment and housing prices are more highly correlated among metropolitan areas within megaregions than with those in other parts of the United States. And research conducted by Edward Glaeser (2007) has shown that “the same forces associated with growth and productivity at the metropolitan scale, particularly density and human capital, appear to take place at the megaregion scale as well.”

The nation’s ten megaregions also differ in many ways from one another, and each requires an approach to equity consistent with its unique character and challenges. In their very breadth – the world of the city magnified and multiplied into a universe of interlinked metropolitan regions – we can find ample opportunity for the promulgation of consistent approaches to advance the cause of equity.

Figure 3: Average Household Income and Concentrations of African American Population by Zip Code

Source: Developed using 2000 U.S. Census Bureau data.
From Regional to Megaregional Equity

The quest for equity within regions is a relatively new phenomenon, binding together coalitions of community activists, scholars, planners, economic development specialists, and government officials. To better understand the movement’s potential, it may be helpful to review the history of related, smaller-scale campaigns.

Following the Second World War, the suburban housing boom coincided with urban deindustrialization to reshape the nation’s residential communities. Transportation policies favoring the automobile over public transit, and federal mortgage guarantees, pushed waves of new residents to low-density suburbs, draining from the cities a sizeable portion of its tax base, along with neighborhood political power. Poverty increasingly concentrated within the cities and racial segregation intensified.

The federally-funded Urban Renewal projects of the 1960s and 1970s aimed to address the consequences of fleeing capital and residents. But large-scale revisions of longstanding neighborhood boundaries often ended up undermining functional local economies and devastating the built environment. High-rise public housing littered the urban landscape, with neighborhoods divided and isolated by new highway construction designed to route traffic quickly in and out of the commercial core. Large numbers of minority residents, mostly black, were displaced, neutralizing the influence of potent community institutions, such as churches, neighborhood schools, and local hiring halls, and diluting electoral power that might champion candidates with equity aims.

In response to the failure of Urban Renewal, two parallel strategies evolved for revitalizing low-income neighborhoods. For some of us, the successes of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s provided a logical departure point as we forged community development associations. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, we organized neighborhood coalitions to combat restrictive zoning practices, fight redlining, restore housing stocks, attract capital to local businesses, and empower residents to devise their own strategies for cultivating greater community assets. With time, we strengthened our position to negotiate with municipal government, attract foundation support, and secure some leverage with decision-makers outside of our neighborhoods.

After decades of neighborhood work, it became obvious that the unit of analysis and action needed to be larger. In the 1990s we began crafting a metropolitan political strategy. Working outside the neighborhood borders, activists joined with policy analysts and select government officials to strike alliances between cities and inner-ring suburbs. As urban problems migrated to the suburbs – and jobs, capital, and housing opportunities drifted further towards the exurbs – cities and inner suburbs began to recognize their common cause. This approach also had mixed success, with interest recently renewed among scholars, planners, and some national political figures.

In the late 1990s and into the new century, the regional equity movement blossomed from these roots, embracing tools and perspectives from both earlier models. Organizers tapped the grassroots political power residing in community groups. At the same time, they framed development issues within a regional context, adapting planning models in pursuit of equity goals. This blend of practice and theory – street-wise politics nurtured by rigorous policy research – has over the past decade spurred on comprehensive strategies for planning, transportation, public finance, and zoning.

Regional equity is not about grabbing a greater piece of the pie for one’s own neighborhood, city, county, race, class, or constituency. Rather, it’s about healthy and vital interdependency within a web of relationships. The movement is predicated on an expansive recognition of mutual interests, with the future of the cities linked to the fate of the suburbs, business dependent upon a skilled and committed workforce, and the middle class thoroughly implicated in the conditions and potential contributions of the poor. It seeks in the most generous sense to embrace the American promise: the best possible environment for everybody to work, learn, and raise families, regardless of race or class.

Advancing regional equity requires the reduction of social and economic disparities among individuals, neighborhoods, and local jurisdictions within a metropolitan area. It means fostering economic opportunity and expanding access to living-wage jobs; securing healthy, mixed-income neighborhoods with affordable housing distributed throughout the region; building responsive institutions to facilitate civic engagement and ensure that all residents have a voice in the decisions shaping their lives; helping low-income residents to build assets; and assisting the least affluent, educated, and influential to become beneficiaries of public and private reinvestment strategies so that they may emerge as agents for positive change within their communities. Finally, regional equity involves broadening our tax base in order to fairly distribute resources for quality schools and other public services – a necessity in stabilizing equity achievements.

The regional equity movement recognizes that poverty, disenfranchisement, civic alienation, and loss of opportunity are not “natural” results of a free market economy. Rather, they stem from public policies; they can be reversed through citizen action. But unlike neighborhood or metropolitan strategies, the regional approach for achieving equity must, from the outset, confront a telling question. *Who*, exactly, should advocates prod, pressure, lobby, negotiate, and ultimately collaborate with? Instead of facing entrenched and possibly hostile powers at the local level, regional advocates soon discovered that they lacked both traditional adversaries and potential partners in government. Sprawl and disinvestment, for example, are regional problems, but most regional government – when it exists – exercises authority over a discrete and limited number of intra-metropolitan functions, such as transportation, air and water quality, and sanitation. Decision-makers – again, when they can be identified – quickly transform into “moving targets,” forcing equity advocates to sort endlessly through a thicket of local jurisdictions, state governments, and special districts in search of individuals and agencies armed with authority and the willingness to assume responsibility for decisions that are almost certain to spark opposition from some quarters. Frequently, the breadth and complexity of problems undermines conventional approaches to civic engagement. Advocates concerned about development must move beyond municipal boundaries to confront equity issues common to regional economic clusters. Environmental issues are better addressed within bioregions than county lines. And many social issues, such as poverty and youth violence, cut across a patchwork of neighborhoods within a zigzag of contiguous communities.

For many community-based organizations accustomed to addressing equity issues at the local level, the need to deal with faceless players and absentee authority can prove particularly challenging. Equity advocates who have cut their teeth in the hurly-burly of city politics, with each campaign punctuated by elections and decisive appointments to public office, may find they do not have the resources to engage in protracted regional planning and policy discussions. Nor will they necessarily be
PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE
ON THE MEGAREGION SCALE

In recent years, PolicyLink has joined forces with activists to employ a framework for equitable development throughout the United States. Our research and experience indicates that development efforts must be guided by four principles. These principles may have applicability at the megaregional levels.

1. Integrate Strategies Focused on People and Places.
Equity is achievable only when development and revitalization policies take into account the built and natural environments, and the people inhabiting them. Policies must support the basic welfare and civic engagement of all community members, particularly families, while simultaneously devising place-based strategies to stabilize and improve the physical environment.

2. Reduce Disparities at Geographical Levels.
Metropolitan areas that pay systematic attention to both regional growth and central city, suburban, and rural poverty issues are more likely to be competitive for national and international economic opportunities. Strategies become solutions only when they simultaneously improve outcomes for low-income communities and build healthy metropolitan regions across state boundaries.

Equity must prove attractive to all parties for development efforts to succeed and multiply. Public and private investments should offer fair financial returns for investors and benefits for citizens in the form of jobs, affordable homes, and expanded business opportunities.

Community members and organizations must have access to sophisticated tools, knowledge, and resources to become fully engaged in analyzing and influencing development decisions. The continuing education and empowerment of low-income communities is crucial to forging and sustaining the multi-ethnic, cross-class alliances required in multi-region organizing.

Transportation

For decades, transportation outlays have fueled highway construction, suburban sprawl, and the isolation and decline of central cities and older suburbs. Metropolitan transit investment remains geared towards suburban commuters, ignoring “reverse commute” routes that enable less affluent workers to travel to entry-level jobs outside their neighborhoods. Families earning less than $12,000 per year spend over one-third of their income on transportation, while public investment for roads, freeways, and rail frequently leave their neighborhoods “divided, isolated, disrupted” and burdened with additional economic, environmental, and health problems.

An equitable transportation system – a cornerstone to access and opportunity across regions – would ensure meaningful public involvement in the planning process; meet rigorous standards of public accountability and financial transparency; favor projects revitalizing low-income communities; and require both benefits and burdens (e.g., jobs and pollution) to be distributed across all income levels.

Housing

According to the National Housing Conference, approximately 13 million families nationwide spend more than half of their income on housing or live in “severely substandard” conditions. The lack of sustained investment in affordable housing stock lies at the heart of this crisis. Federal low-income housing
programs peaked in 1978, and then declined precipitously in the early 1980s when the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) terminated almost all public housing development.

To achieve housing equity, we must increase supply, distribute affordable units throughout metropolitan areas and suburbs within the megaregion; include affordable housing as a key component of any urban revitalization strategy; and develop mixed-income housing to build diverse, inclusive communities. To date, the most dependable tools in this area have been: 1) inclusionary zoning placing affordable housing across regional jurisdictions; 2) fair share housing programs promoting the equitable distribution of affordable units; and 3) regional housing trust funds created by legislation or ordinance to dedicate reliable revenue sources for the construction and purchase of affordable homes and apartments.

Economic Opportunity

While many Americans benefit from our economy, countless others struggle ceaselessly. Cities and older small towns have lost industries that once offered dependable livelihoods. Declining tax bases prompt budget cuts, further reducing the quality of urban schools, infrastructure, and services. In some regions, public dollars have subsidized private investment in low-wealth communities through tax credits, loan guarantees, and other mechanisms — but rarely with protections to ensure that benefits accrue to current residents. As a result, the revitalization of neighborhoods and entire regions often promotes escalating property values and the displacement of the poor.

Building economic opportunity within a context of megaregion equity depends on redirecting investment to a web of inner cities and older suburbs and providing concrete and tangible benefits to current residents. This aim can be pursued by 1) ensuring access to the education and skills necessary to participate in growth industries; 2) attracting jobs that pay a living wage; 3) securing local hires for public projects; 4) increasing the assets of individuals, families, and communities through ownership and wealth-building opportunities.

Land Use and Infrastructure

Poor land use choices yield a plethora of unwise and inequitable consequences: the formation of auto-dependent suburbs, the isolation of low-income urban workers from entry-level jobs, increases in commute times and pollution, and the destruction of more than one million acres of parks, farms, and open space each year, including more than 100,000 acres of wetlands vital to the health and safety of outlying communities.11

Wiser land use and infrastructure arrangements alternatively enjoy tremendous potential to promote equity. Policies should encourage investment in the urban core, ending the cycle of decline in older communities; promote compact growth patterns that form balanced and integrated communities and reduce the need for costly new infrastructure; insulate open space and farmland from the pressure to convert to other uses and thereby protect air and water quality. These ends are best met by: 1) smart growth initiatives funneling state resources to revitalize cities and towns and conserve natural resources and open space; 2) commercial linkages tying economic development to the construction and maintenance of affordable housing and other community needs; 3) regional tax revenue sharing to reduce disparities between the richest and poorest communities; 4) municipal zoning changes to encourage physically compact development with prices set to attract a range of household incomes — located on urban “infill” sites rather than on undeveloped land in the suburbs.

Education

Educational inequity is one of the most appalling consequences of sprawl. School districts with the greatest number of low-income students receive $966 less per student than wealthier districts — with attendance at racially isolated, high-poverty schools severely reinforcing low student achievement.12 The siting of schools also subverts equity. A new suburban school may act as a magnet, drawing residents from the urban core. Similarly, under-performing schools in older neighborhoods can push families out to new suburbs.

To improve educational equity within megaregions, we must reduce residential racial segregation, equalize per-pupil spending across school districts in each state, and build smaller neighborhood schools that can serve a variety of needs. Achieving these goals will require collaboration among neighbors and parents, with intensive megaregional and even national participation by education, civil rights, community development, and smart growth advocates.

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice and regional equity are inextricably linked. Residents of low-income communities find themselves at greater risk to the toxic excesses of unregulated growth. They are less able to influence environmental decision-making processes, resulting in ineffective regulation of industrial waste and the placement of dumps, incinerators, and waste-generating industries in their midst. Low-income families are also more likely to live near freeways, industrial plants, and diesel traffic suffusing their communities with poor-quality air. The environmental justice movement is tackling these inequities by lobbying for ethical, balanced, and responsible uses of land and renewable resources. Advocates insist on participating as equal partners at every level of decision-making — needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation. Grassroots activists and community leaders have utilized the data developed by researchers to confront corporations and state and federal agencies over unwanted sittings of toxic facilities. In addition, they are pursuing civil rights litigation in combination with community organizing strategies — all of which require support at the largest possible geographic unit, making it ideal for a megaregion approach.

Health

Much innovative work around equity is presently occurring at the intersection between health and transportation, housing, economic opportunity, and other areas. For example, the lead paint on walls and windowsills inside older houses in urban neighborhoods is now recognized as a severe hazard for children. Poorly constructed low-income housing may also foster mold, triggering asthma attacks. Residents without transportation to stores offering affordable, nutritious foods are less likely to eat in a healthy fashion and more likely to suffer from obesity and diabetes. An abundance of neighborhood bars and liquor stores have been linked to higher levels of pedestrian accidents and may also be implicated in elevated drinking rates.
Neighborhood revitalization projects, urban and roadway design, transportation improvements, economic development, and land use planning that consider these challenges can improve the health of low-income people. Indeed, health professionals are increasingly looking toward “upstream” interventions even as equity advocates commit to broadening their own conception of public health benefits. This intermingling of equity factors with health outcomes offers advocates an opportunity to persuasively make their case and influence policy decisions on both a state and national scale.

Tying It All Together

While each of these seven targets may be approached separately by equity campaigns, they are indisputably interrelated. Entrenched wealth at the megaregional level and sprawling regional development patterns create racially concentrated poverty, social and economic isolation, disproportionate exposure to toxic waste and poisonous air emissions, lack of accessible jobs, inferior quality schools, and negative health consequences. In the past decade, advocates for smart growth, affordable housing, civil rights, and the environment have begun working together so that improvement in one area can galvanize actions in another. Better regional public transit, for example, can improve access to jobs. Distributing affordable housing more equitably across regions can expand educational opportunities for low-income residents. More judicious land use— for example, building compact, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods instead of auto-dependent developments on the urban fringe — helps reduce childhood obesity and improve health. These connections speak to the potential of multi-issue coalitions that can bridge isolated concerns, constituencies, neighborhoods, cities, regions, and even states — the blood and muscle of our megaregions.

Which brings us back to the Gulf Coast, and the need to construct a megaregional strategy that will ultimately impact the lives of people across several states, within multiple metropolitan areas, amid hundreds of neighborhoods — right down to the metaphorical and all-too-real family we first met stranded upon their rooftop.

FASHIONING AN EQUITY AGENDA FOR THE GULF COAST

The combined impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita created a zone of destruction that ranged from East Texas across all of coastal Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. As such, there was the potential for the multi-state Gulf Coast megaregion to be viewed as a whole and for the task of recovery and rebuilding to be addressed in an integrated way, but more conventional politics and loyalties prevailed. The states, particularly Louisiana and Mississippi, competed fiercely with each other for federal aid and took very different approaches to the recovery process, with Mississippi gaining far more federal funding per capita. The chance to address equity issues common to the several states was not seized.8

What might an equity strategy for the Gulf Coast entail? Drawing on research by Dominique Duval-Diop, Kalima Rose, and Victor Rubin, PolicyLink recommends the following seven principles in line with our key target issues.13

PRINCIPLE 1: Ensure the ability of all Gulf Coast residents to live in communities characterized by opportunity.

More than two years after the storm struck, Katrina’s lingering influence continues to batter the Gulf Coast’s housing stocks. The U.S. Census reports that over one-third of Louisiana renters spend more than half of their household income on housing – an intolerable and unsustainable situation echoed throughout the region. Almost 96,000 displaced households still reside in FEMA trailers or use other temporary housing assistance in Louisiana alone. Rents have climbed in urban areas along the coast. And now the sub-prime mortgage crisis threatens the stability of families whose homes were not initially wrecked by the hurricane.

The entire Gulf Coast cries out for a crash course in state-of-the-art affordable housing with substantial resources dedicated to creating attractive, safe, and affordable structures in opportunity-rich neighborhoods. By leveraging federal funds and providing incentives for developers and their partners in government to place new housing near transit, good schools, and services, the states can directly improve the lives of thousands of citizens — while stimulating economic growth through a regional construction boom, despite the downturn in the housing market nationwide.

PRINCIPLE 2: Invest equitably in infrastructure improvements.

The Gulf Coast’s infrastructure suffered painful neglect long before Katrina. Indeed, the storm’s damage was profoundly aggravated by obvious gaps in infrastructure planning, with the losses visited most heavily on the poor. According to Driving Louisiana Forward, the state must now contend with 6,000 miles of bad roads. Report Card of America’s Infrastructure reports that Mississippi’s infrastructure for drinking water requires $1.36 billion over the next 20 years, while 21 percent of Texas’ bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete and the upgrading and modernizing of individual dams in disrepair could run $1 million or more.14

The Gulf Coast requires substantial improvements in waste water treatment systems, parks, schools, bridges, dams, and roads not only to make communities livable, but to stimulate local and regional economies. And because infrastructure repairs necessitate significant capital outlays, contracting with local and minority firms can produce double bottom-line benefits for lower-income workers and their communities. By coordinating infrastructure investment and land-use policies throughout the region, we can address coastal restoration, discourage sprawl, and bring quality parks, schools, and transit to all the residents of the Gulf.

PRINCIPLE 3: Leverage rebuilding expenditures to create living wage jobs.

Prior to the 2005 storms, the Gulf Coast faced significant obstacles to opportunity and prosperity, including low levels of income, savings, education, and a paucity of living wage jobs. Attempts at revitalizing the Gulf Coast economy continue to founder on these problems. Indeed, reduced business
demand, flagging revenues, and barriers to credit have led to a dramatically high closure rate for small businesses owned by African Americans. Rather than the continued enrichment of non-local corporate interests, the Gulf Coast needs massive investment in job training, with regional development efforts planned to increase assets for residents and small businesses.

PRINCIPLE 4: 
Prioritize health and safety concerns in all communities throughout the Gulf coast.

Gulf Coast residents cope with all the health problems that beset most poor communities: a dearth of neighborhood groceries stocking fresh fruits and vegetables, limited transportation to large food outlets, dilapidated and dangerous housing, high levels of diabetes, hypertension, and obesity, and limited access to health care. Many of these problems have been exacerbated by the storms. Since Katrina, the Gulf Coast also faces a deluge of toxic materials that have washed through or settled within metropolitan areas. While this megaregion has for decades been subject to toxic spills, dumping, and ground water contamination from the petro-chemical industry, the situation has only grown more dire.

PRINCIPLE 5: 
Restore and strengthen the capacity of community-based organizations throughout the Gulf Coast.

Prior to Katrina, the nonprofit sector ranked as a major economic force in both metropolitan and rural areas throughout the Gulf States. Rebuilding the intra-regional nonprofit infrastructure is as critical to equity as rebuilding public facilities. However, the resources that strengthen organizational capacity—consultants, training programs, management support organizations—do not exist at the neighborhood level. The appropriate scale to nurture nonprofit infrastructure must take into account regional and megaregional opportunities spanning several states. This is beginning to happen as national groups such as Oxfam America, Enterprise Community Partners, LISC, Neighborworks America, and Habitat for Humanity, as well as state government offices, and local foundations such as the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, assume responsibility for strengthening nonprofit capacity along the Gulf Coast. Yet much work remains.

PRINCIPLE 6: 
Create wealth-building opportunities for individuals and families.

The Gulf Coast has the highest poverty rates of the ten megaregions. In Louisiana alone, child poverty between 2000 and 2005 increased to over 28 percent, household incomes fell, and the annual income gap widened between whites ($44,300) and African Americans ($23,238). Half of the state’s counties remain persistently poor. Throughout the entire region, thousands continue to struggle each month to meet basic needs, risking debilitating hunger when faced with job loss or medical emergencies.

PRINCIPLE 7: 
Strengthen the political voice of dispersed and low-income residents.

In February 2007, some 21,000 Louisiana voters were purged from the roles—victims, once again, of the displacement that has characterized their lives since Katrina. According to FEMA, postal records, and surveys, as many as 200,000 Louisianans still remain unsettled in temporary accommodations. Without access to the polls—or vigorous community-based advocacy organizations—these citizens have little hope of participating in the decisions shaping the future of the Gulf Coast.

Indeed, disconnection from the policymaking process has reinforced the historic disengagement and disempowerment of residents in poor areas throughout the megaregion. Public participation in state and federal policymaking is critical.

BEYOND THE GULF COAST: 
The Future of Megaregion Equity

In our discussion of the Gulf Coast, we have already detailed the primary requirements for equity organizing. What will we need to sustain and extend a megaregion approach over years and even decades?

» Research analyzing the results of multiple campaigns

» A civic infrastructure to create public support for equity action

Continued research must focus on developing clear and precise measures of progress in terms of both process and outcomes. We need to know what’s working, where, for which populations, at what cost and across what timeline. We must understand which organizing techniques lead most quickly to our goals. And we must understand how efforts to advance megaregional equity help strengthen the economic and social ties in the megaregion in a positive way that ensures economic prosperity for all.

We must simultaneously reach beyond short-term, tactical coalition-building to establish institutions that can galvanize, lobby for, conduct, and finally help evaluate equity campaigns. While this task seems daunting on the megaregion scale, we already have useful models and resources. Megaregion campaigns will necessarily tap the power of community organizing networks branching through and across state lines. We should also ally ourselves with central labor councils and activist unions linked-up through their own organizing grids. With time, we can share best practices from the field, enabling organizers in one megaregion to profit from both the successes and informative errors of distant peers. In the end, the continuing conversation between research and activism will inform and reshape both.

One thing is unquestionably true: We have not yet begun to fully exploit the potential for advancing equity while encouraging economic growth within regions and megaregions. Until we do, too many of our fellow citizens will remain stranded in perilous waters, hoping and waiting for help to arrive.
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