Building Bridges is not Enough
Regional Equity Agenda for the Bay Area

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The new Eastern Span of the Oakland to San Francisco Bay Bridge, with its signature single tower and 7 billion dollar plus price tag, is rising out of the bay waters, strengthening the connection between two of the region's core cities. But even as the Bay Area adds another legacy architectural landmark to its skyline, questions about who benefits from this and other massive public investments remind us of the challenges we face in ensuring everyone's right to enjoy the great resources and beauty that the Bay Area has to offer.

The annual Gross Regional Product (GRP) for the Bay Area is approximately $487 billion, the third largest in the country after Los Angeles and New York. Much of that economic activity is shaped and channeled by public policy decisions by government agencies at the local, state and federal levels. For example, in addition to construction of the Bay Bridge and the new San Francisco Transbay Transit Terminal, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) and Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) are currently in the process of deciding where and how $277 billion in public money will be spent over the next 28 years. These expenditures will shape everything from the frequency of bus service to the extent of suburban highway expansion.

Allocating these public investments is a highly political process. Over 7 million people live within the Bay Area's nine counties. Within those counties are over 100 different cities, each with its own identity, demographics and political culture. Decisions about who gets what are made by a complex web of regional agencies that intersect with state and federal funding mandates and specific interests of elected officials.

Urban Habitat has been studying the formulas, analyzing the composition of decision-making bodies, and following the money trail for a decade. Based on our research, one thing we can say with absolute confidence: these investments are not being shared equitably among all the Bay Area's population. Low-income people and communities of color are systematically excluded from the benefits of these investments and continue to be saddled with the burdens.

It takes more than architecturally elegant bridges to overcome the divides of wealth and race that keep our communities from equal economic and political participation. We need to change the locus of power. We must have access to, and inclusion at, the decision-making tables. Communities like Richmond, East and West Oakland, Bayview-Hunters Point, East San Jose, and East Palo Alto, among others are not receiving a fair share of transportation, economic development, environmental restoration, and housing dollars. Regardless of the jurisdictional level at which these investment decisions are taking place, the key to winning a more equitable future is active participation of all of the Bay region's peoples.

If we don't take action, we will continue to live with the same disparities and increasing gaps between our communities. And future generations will not be able to enjoy all that the Bay Area has to offer—good jobs, affordable housing, reliable transportation, and a clean and healthy environment. More urgently than ever, we need to build the kinds of regional coalitions that can lift up the equity agenda into actionable policy in the local, regional, state, and federal arenas.

State of the Region
At Urban Habitat's April 2012 State of the Region conference keynote speakers Mitchell J. Silver, president of the American Planning Association, and
Bertha Lewis, president and founder of The Black Institute, delivered exhilarating and passionate calls to action. They spoke about the changing demographics in the United States and how to ensure that low-income people and people of color have the infrastructure and policies in place to support their success.

One thing we have learned is that the shift in the numbers is not the entire story. Becoming a so-called majority minority nation does not mean that we will be able to call the power structures, the systems and public institutions, our own. We must continue to build power for equity and sustainability or it will not matter what the racial and ethnic numbers are or how the demographics change.

Victories for the Equity Agenda

Recent victories, modest though they may be in the face of the enormous challenges ahead, give us hope that a long-term strategy for change can make a difference. A few examples:

- In 2011, Urban Habitat was the lead plaintiff in a successful suit against the city of Pleasanton, which requires the city to zone for sufficient affordable housing to meet its state-mandated housing allocation (See: urban-habitat.org/18-2/rein). In May of this year, working with Public Advocates (our attorneys in the suit) and in coalition with Youth United for Community Action and Peninsula Interfaith Action, we recently leveraged that success in another city. The Menlo Park city council agreed to a settlement providing for: (a) the adoption of an affordable housing plan by early 2013, (b) rezoning of sites in and around downtown to promote the development of affordable housing near jobs and transit, and (c) providing local funding for nonprofit housing developers. This is particularly important because Menlo Park (home to Facebook headquarters) is experiencing strong job growth but has very little housing for low-income people. Ending the spatial mismatch between affordable housing and employment opportunities is a key step towards achieving equity.

- In Richmond, we reached another important milestone. The Richmond Equitable Development Initiative (REDI), of which Urban Habitat is a founding member, led a five-year campaign to revise the city’s general plan so that needs of residents will be met as the city permits building of new businesses, housing and public services. Working with community-based REDI partner groups, Urban Habitat educated and mobilized hundreds of residents to engage in the lengthy planning process. We succeeded in getting many of their core priorities embedded in the new General Plan, which puts community health at the center and sets a policy framework for developing Richmond on a more equitable basis.

- In response to a two-year campaign aimed at free transit for all youth, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Board of Directors voted unanimously on April 17 to make public transit free for the city’s low-income youth. The effort was organized by a broad cross-section of community groups that included People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER), the Chinatown Community Development Center (CCDC), the Jamestown Community Center, the San Francisco Youth Commission, the San Francisco Organizing Project, and Urban Habitat.

- Other campaigns that are reshaping access to jobs and opportunities in the Bay Area include, a jobs policy framework for the Oakland Army Base redevelopment won by Revive Oakland; and effective implementation of San Francisco’s local hire policy, particularly for the America’s Cup race through the leadership of Brightline (See page 82).

For all Californians to live up to their highest potential and for our communities to break out of the geographical and economic isolation in which they have been confined, we need a public investment strategy that puts equity at the core of the decision-making process. We need people to think locally and act regionally.

By lifting up new and under-represented voices to become strong advocates and by uniting these leaders with social justice organizations working to advance equity, we can build the powerful movement needed to win a prosperous California.
Race, Poverty and the Environment (RP&E) is Urban Habitat’s national journal of social and environmental justice, founded in 1990.

For over two decades we have covered how low-income people and communities of color are organizing to win equality and justice. Multiracial, multi-issue organizations capable of uniting constituencies for social justice action have never been more critical. RP&E is a longtime and crucial connection point for advocacy groups, regionally and nationally.

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