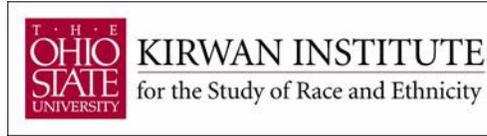


Opportunity Communities: A Pathway to Sustainable and Livable Communities

Position Paper by The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity



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Distressed cities, fragmented open space, damaged ecosystems and climate change are vivid and powerful reminders of the unsustainable development patterns and policies which have produced harm to both our society and our planet. Sprawling development and the continual movement of opportunities, investment and people away from our city centers destroys rural and natural landscapes, while accelerating long auto commutes which accelerate CO2 emissions. In our cities, continual disinvestment and the flight of resources to the urban fringe produced extreme isolation for marginalized communities, resulting in segregation into distressed unhealthy environments where they are isolated from the critical life sustaining opportunity structures needed to survive and thrive in our 21st century society. While farmland is being paved over for new housing and roadways, poor marginalized communities can't find access to healthy produce. A massive investment in new infrastructure is occurring for suburban growth, while existing infrastructure is neglected in our urban areas. New housing and commercial construction on the urban fringe, contrasts sharply with neighborhoods pockmarked by vacant homes and abandoned businesses. Local policy, jurisdictional fragmentation and interregional competition interact with all of these processes, often working to promote unsustainable growth and unhealthy communities. The development model which has fueled our economy in past decades and reshaped our communities, the nation and the globe, represent a broken and unsustainable system which must be reshaped to produce sustainable development, sustainable livable communities and an equitable healthy society.

Given this pressing need for a new model of sustainable development, the sustainability movement has accelerated in the United States and globally. Global challenges, like climate change have added new urgency and awareness of the need for a new model for our communities, nation and the globe. As planners, advocates, and policymakers look to produce more sustainable communities, we face multiple interrelated challenges. We face environmental challenges in mitigating the environmental harms produced by certain types of development. We must address social, racial, and geographic inequities, as certain communities are deprived of investment and opportunity. And we must also work to create a vibrant economy, attract investment, and stimulate economic growth that is beneficial to all residents.

Given that these objectives sometimes conflict with each other, perhaps the greatest challenge facing sustainable development, or “smart growth” planning, involves the need to balance these different interests—indeed, balancing these interests is the fundamental premise behind the sustainable development movement. In doing so, sustainability advocates argue that development decisions must be guided by three goals, often referred to as the three “E’s” of sustainability: Environmental protection, Economic prosperity, and social Equity (**Figure 1**).ⁱ While advocates committed to sustainable development ought to consider all three “E’s” in advocating for sustainable development policies, these goals are not always given equal weight, producing unintentional conflict. Most notably, social equity is often the forgotten “E,” as many sustainability initiatives focus more on addressing environmental concerns, or balancing environmental and economic conflict, while ignoring or missing equity concerns.

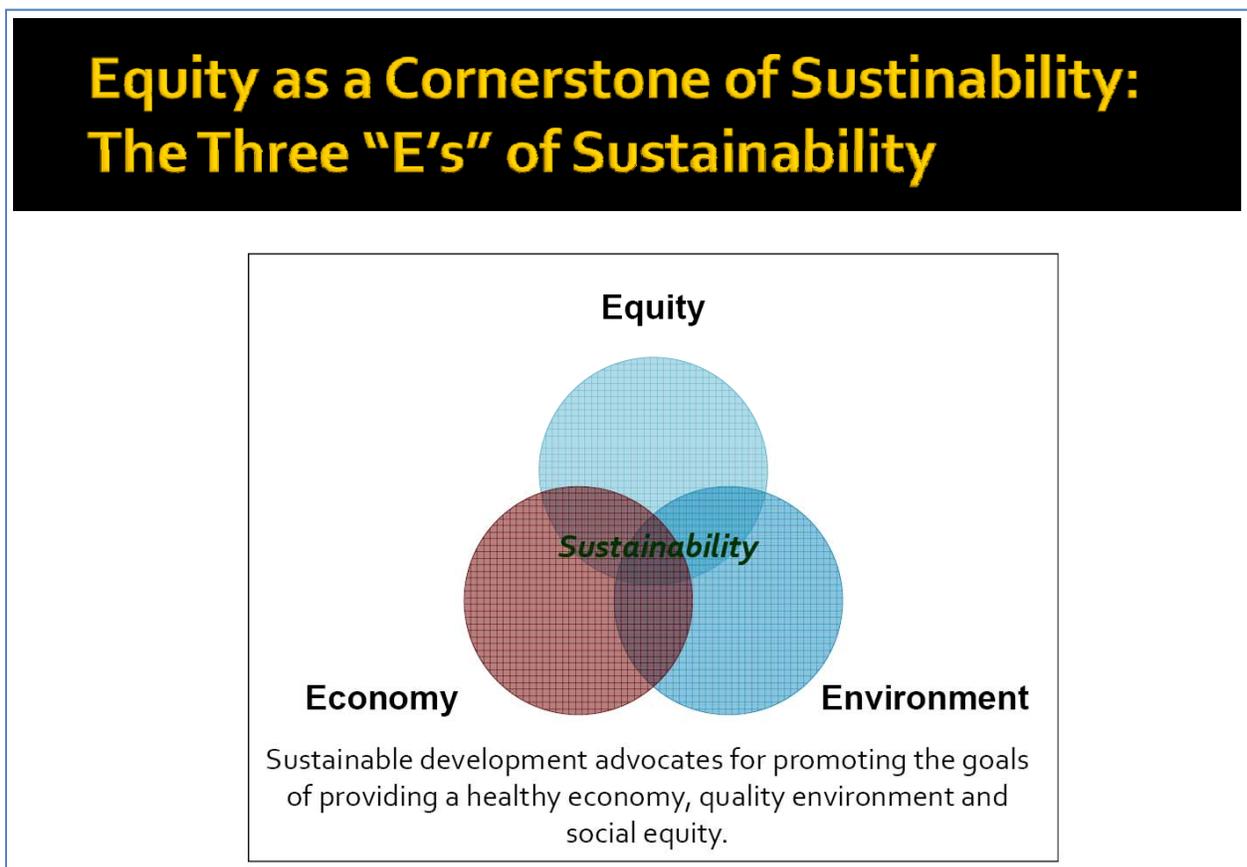


Figure 1: The Three "E's" of Sustainability

The sustainability movement must openly embrace equity, and work to link together different interests, stakeholders, and communities as they shape development policy. Though difficult, these linkages are critical to successful sustainable development. For example, many of Chicago’s recent affordable housing initiatives in the region’s suburbs have been spurred by the business community.ⁱⁱ In Michigan, environmental advocates and racial justice advocates united to advocate successfully for more equitable transportation investments that would direct more spending to urban communities and limit road

development in undeveloped areas.ⁱⁱⁱ This kind of broad-based coalition brings together a sufficient number of different stakeholders so that attention to each of the three “E’s” is properly balanced. After all, conflict between the three principles of sustainable development is not inherent; environmental protection and social equity can work extremely well in concert. For example, Portland’s urban growth boundary helps support both equity and environmental goals, protecting open space while redirecting investment back into urban neighborhoods. Another example is Minneapolis’s revenue sharing policies. Revenue sharing provides an incentive for local governments to stop competing for new housing and commercial development, resulting in a zero-sum outcome, while simultaneously addressing the fiscal disparities impacting many urban communities of color.^{iv} From these examples it becomes clear that successful sustainable development requires a broad-based coalition committed to equity. Only by building diverse coalitions of business, environmental, and social justice interests, is it possible to generate the public and political will essential to convincing policy makers to adopt an ambitious agenda for a more sustainable future.

Focusing on Equity as a Pathway to Sustainability: The Community of Opportunity Model

To bring a more robust equity lens into the sustainable development movement, our Institute has developed a conceptual framework for sustainable development that reflects the goals of producing a vibrant economy, equitable development, and an environmentally healthy community. We refer to this framework as “Communities of Opportunity” and have used this model to successfully organize and inform community leaders and policymakers in adapting more sustainable policies to achieve sustainable communities.

The fundamental premise behind Communities of Opportunity is that policy should foster social and economic opportunity within neighborhoods and should proactively connect all residents to such opportunities throughout broader metropolitan areas.^v As a result, marginalized residents will have access to the resources and opportunities they need to succeed; in turn, the entire region will realize social, environmental, and economic improvements that will benefit all residents. The model is based on decades of research and policy experience, which support the concept that opportunity matters, and that systematically denying opportunities to certain populations and communities drives sprawl and harms everyone.^{vi}

The Communities of Opportunity model has two goals: to bring opportunities to opportunity-deprived areas; and to connect people to existing opportunities throughout the metropolitan region. The model emphasizes investments in people, places and linkages (**See Figure 2**). We need to build human capital through improved wealth-building, educational achievement, and social and political empowerment. We must invest in places by supporting neighborhood development initiatives, attracting jobs with living wages and advancement opportunities, and demanding high-quality local services for all neighborhoods, such as local public schools that perform. We must also encourage better links among people and

places, fostering mobility through high-quality public transportation services and region-wide housing mobility programs. In addition, the model advocates for managing sprawling growth, in order to reduce the drain of jobs and resources from existing communities. The Communities of Opportunity model advocates for a fair investment in all of a region’s people and neighborhoods -- to improve the life outcomes of all citizens, and to improve the health of the entire region.

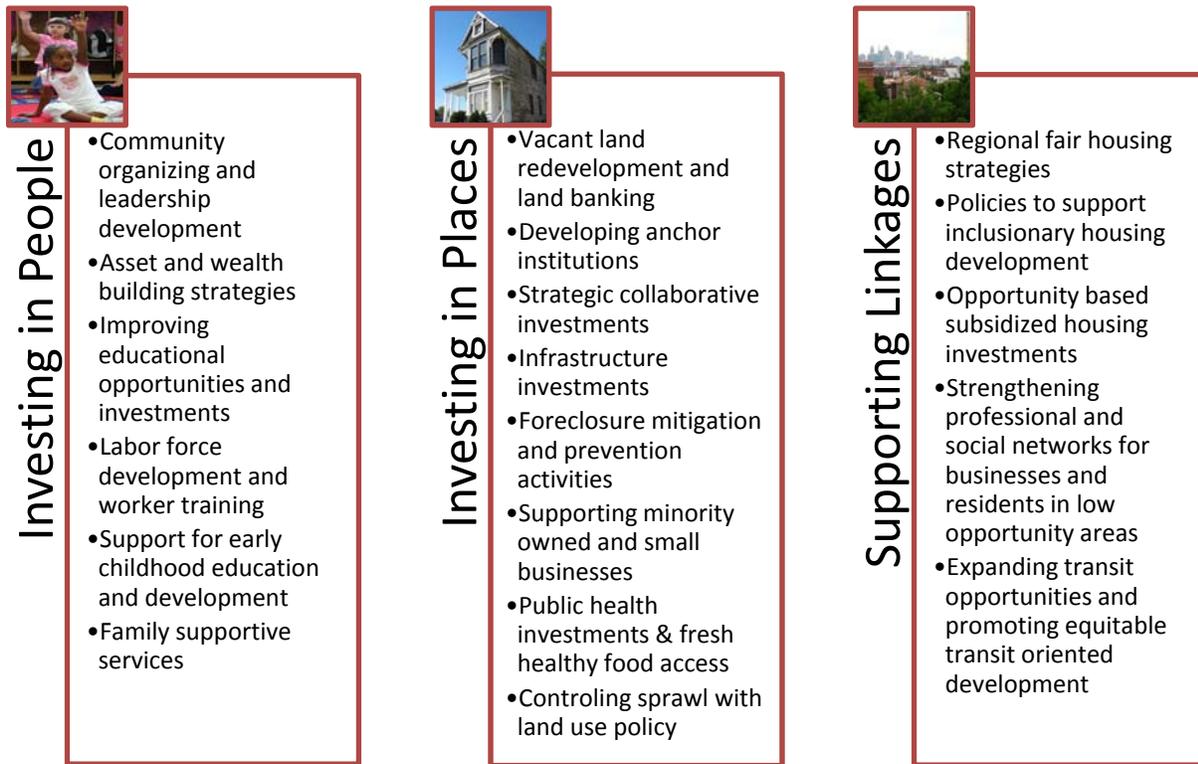


Figure 2: The Community of Opportunity Model in Action - Supporting People, Places & Linkages

The community of opportunity model also supports sustainable and responsible growth, primarily through directly bringing an equity lens into analysis. Sustainable growth should seek to reduce barriers to reaching sustainable employment for low- income workers and families. Equally important is a need to ensure residents have access to other critical opportunity structures that are needed to survive and thrive in our society, such as safe communities and high- performing schools. Sustainable and responsible growth principles should ensure that housing policy does not support concentrated poverty. Sustainable growth should also ensure that the fair housing rights of all residents are upheld and that low- income families, especially families of color, do not find their housing options reduced to only a few segregated, distressed neighborhoods. Our opportunity model seeks to balance the priorities listed above, to both revitalize distressed communities while also providing life changing pathways to opportunity for marginalized families and communities. This is a model which supports the principles of sustainable planning and long term responsible growth

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ⁱ The President's Council on Sustainable Development, *Sustainable America: A New Consensus for Prosperity, Opportunity, and a Healthy Environment* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996)

ⁱⁱ Business leaders in the Chicago region have been instrumental in recent advocacy for housing reform through the Chicago Metropolis 2020 initiative. For more information about the initiative and the corporate pledge, please visit: "The Metropolitan Principles Corporate Pledge FAQ." http://www.chicagometropolis2020.org/10_20faq.htm

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