

# Social Policy

Organizing for Social & Economic Justice ■ Summer 2014 ■ Volume 44 Number 2



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# Equitable Development Moves Forward in the Nation's Capital

By GREGORY D. SQUIRES, DOMINIC T. MOULDEN AND KALFANI N. TURE

**“Tell me your zip code and I’ll tell you your expiration date.”**

—Angela Glover Blackwell, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of PolicyLink

**S**ocial justice advocacy in Washington D.C. took a giant step forward on March 27, 2014, at George Washington University (GW) at a symposium, “Is Equitable Development Possible in the 21st Century? Prospects and Possibilities for Washington D.C.” ONE DC (Organizing Neighborhood Equity in D.C.) and GW brought together over 150 people including organizers, developers, union representatives, small business owners, students, faculty, seniors, public housing residents, and many others who voiced their concerns about gentrification and displacement in their neighborhoods and uneven development of the D.C. region. While many of the ideas that were proposed were not new (most in fact have been implemented at least to some extent in communities around the country), the litany of progressive ideals and initiatives discussed would constitute a nice anthology of equitable development policies and practices. A primary objective of the symposium was to begin a process that will further inject equitable development ideas into mainstream community development policy debates and actions in D.C. and the nation’s metropolitan areas generally. More problematic, and the central challenge for the immediate future, are the politics for turning good ideas into concrete policies and practices that change people’s lives.

This conference actually grew out of a piece two of us wrote for *Social Policy* in the Fall of 2012. ONE DC is

a membership-led organization in the gentrifying Shaw neighborhood of Washington D.C. in which, as the organization’s web page states, “people within movements for social change, those directly affected by the issues, make the decisions related to the campaign or movement, minimize hierarchy within their organization to maximize shared power and equity of voice; and utilize direct

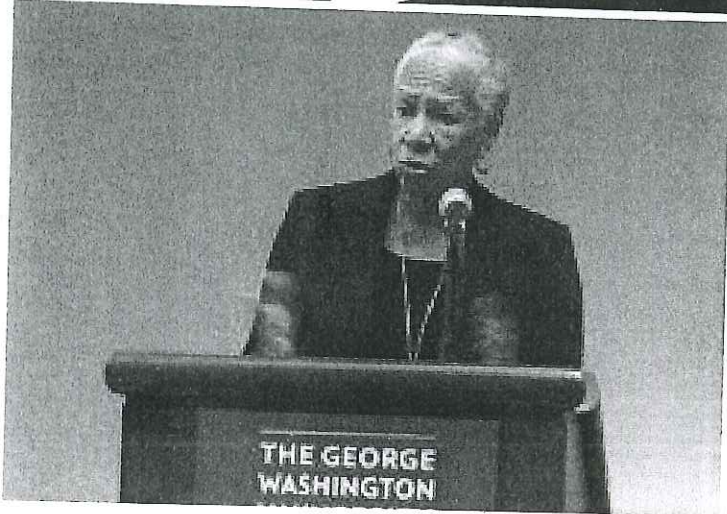
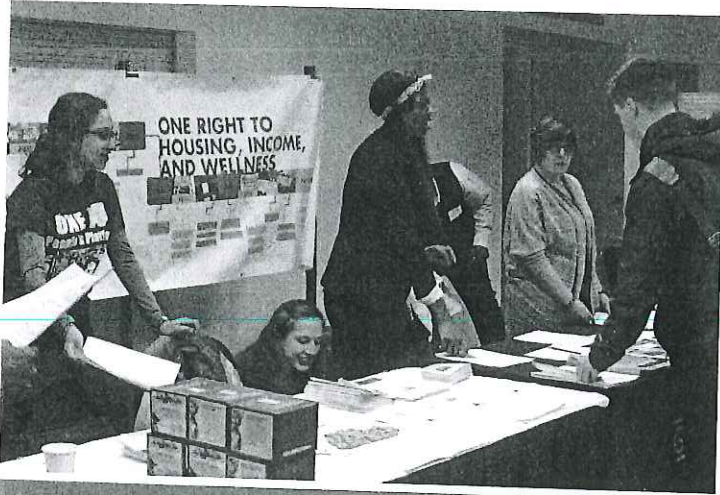
action as an effective means to compel decision-makers to implement decisions made by the community.” Under GW’s new strategic plan the university is seeking out opportunities to engage and serve the broader D.C. community in collaboration with a wide range of business, government, and non-profit organizations.

Angela Glover Blackwell set the tone in her keynote address when she called for a new national narrative on community development; one based on current demographic

and economic realities, not just morality. She noted that a majority of children born in the U.S. today are non-white, and that by 2030 a majority of the working-age population will be people of color. Recognizing the continuing racial and class segregation of cities she focused a laser on the significance of place in shaping the nation’s opportunity structure. She reminded the group how neighborhood determines quality of education for local kids, access to medical care and healthy foods, inclusion in (or exclusion from) employment related networks, safety and security of families’ homes, and virtually all aspects of the quality of life, including life

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expectancy itself.

Contrary to much conventional wisdom, she demonstrated that regions where economic inequality is lowest are those where economic growth is the greatest. She cited a recent IMF study (“Redistribution, Inequality, and Growth,” February 2014) finding that income inequality and economic growth are inversely related across industrial nations, a pattern also found among U.S. cities by her colleague Manuel Pastor at the University of Southern California (*Just Growth: Inclusion and Prosperity in America’s Metropolitan Regions*, Routledge, 2012). Observing that equitable development means all residents have access to all parts of the metropolitan region in which they live and all neighborhoods are high opportunity neighborhoods, she forcefully concluded that equitable development is the most effective and only realistic national economic growth model.

Following Blackwell’s keynote, speakers from a variety of organizations including Empower DC, Good Jobs

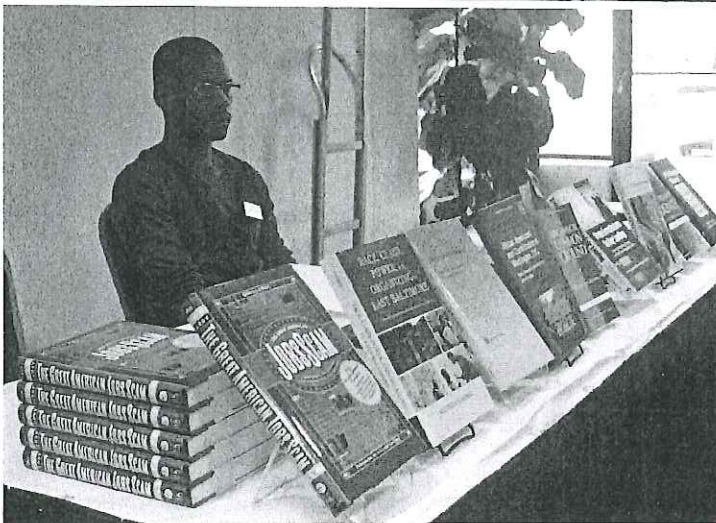
First, DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Social Health Concepts and Practice, and several universities offered a litany of equitable development proposals. They included stronger inclusionary zoning requirements, a minimum wage of at least \$15 per hour, greater transparency and accountability

**But generating ideas for equitable development is the easy part. More challenging are the politics.**

in economic development subsidy programs and in campaign contributions particularly where those donors also receive such subsidies, community benefits agreements, one-for-one replacement in any housing redevelopment where residents are temporarily displaced, and guarantees for a right to return, more progressive tax schemes, creation of more worker-owned cooperatives, a guaranteed basic income to bring all families out of poverty, an additional \$100 million for a D.C. housing trust fund, cessation of the sale of public land to private entities, and other proven policies.

But generating ideas for equitable development is the easy part. More challenging are the politics. The following two key questions were raised. First, how are equitable development ideas to be more effectively injected into





mainstream community development policy debates? Second and more importantly, how are those ideas to be translated into actual policies and practices that have the intended results of creating racial and economic equity, opportunity communities throughout the nation's metropolitan regions, and concrete improvements in the lives of current residents, in place of plans that do little more than attract different (wealthier and whiter suburban) residents. Some ideas were mentioned, including more effective union organizing, direct action disrupting business as usual, and engagement in traditional electoral politics. In fact, Washington D.C. has a mayoral election in November, and ONE DC, proposed "The People's Platform" — a political agenda focusing on the community's needs generated by way of a resident-led process that crafted solutions for currently underserved neighborhoods. Public housing leader Phylissa Bilal presented highlights of "The People's

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Platform" indicating ONE DC and its allies will support candidates who favor the Platform which included many of the ideas discussed at the conference.

Still, as is often the case at such events, generating ideas for equitable development policies proved easier than coming up with strategies for their implementation. Politics, questions of power and process that address structural inequity and nurture systemic change, remain key challenges. And they will be taken up on March 26, 2015 when, as the conference organizers announced, the second annual symposium on equitable development in DC will be held.

*Gregory D. Squires is a Professor of Sociology and Public Policy and Public Administration at George Washington University. Dominic T. Moulden is a Resource Organizer with ONE DC. Kalfani N. Ture is a Doctoral Candidate at American University, Washington, D.C.*