Igniting Change:
The Real Role of Community in Changing Government Policy

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Let me take a moment to tell you how completely honoured I am to be here, how thrilled I am that you're having a conference like this, Communities in Control, and how exciting it is, given the work that I do with communities and community-based organisations all over the United States, to see how similar the issues are, and how much we have in common as we think about how to create a society in which everybody can participate and everybody can prosper.

I want to emphasise that it's a great honour for me to be here. I have so much that I'm going to take back home with me, to talk about how much we have in common and how large the community of advocates really is that's working to achieve the same kinds of things.

I want to give you some background information about myself, particularly my love for and commitment to community. I grew up under circumstances that, when I describe them to you, might not sound like rich and hopeful circumstances. But they were.

I'm sure you know how difficult it is for people who are African-American to be able to fully participate in the United States. I'm sure that you know something about the history of legal discrimination, and how even though those legal structures have been broken down there continues to be extreme disadvantage if you are African-American in the United States.

I grew up in St Louis, Missouri, which is the Mid West. It's not in the Deep South, which is the part of the United States that people associate with slavery a long time ago, and continuing discrimination into the 20th Century. St Louis, Missouri is an area that did not have slavery, but it is the place where the Dred Scott decision was decided. The Dred Scott decision was very important because people who were in slavery often tried to run away from it. They hoped that if they got to a state where slavery did not exist they would be free. During the time of slavery, which of course ended in 1865, a man named Dred Scott managed to escape from slavery and he got to St Louis, Missouri, and he thought that he was going to be free. But his owner came there and got him, and there followed litigation about whether or not if you

were able to get out of a state that had slavery you were able to be free.

The Dred Scott decision was a very sad moment in the development of the United States, because the courts decided that if you were owned by another person, that ownership extended even when you were out of an area of slavery. And Dred Scott was returned to the south.

I mention that because I want you to get a sense of the place where I grew up. No, it wasn't in the south, but it's the place where the Dred Scott decision was decided.

I grew up in the 1950s and the early '60s in St Louis, Missouri. I lived in a completely segregated community. The schools that we went to, the churches that we went to, the places where we volunteered, the places where we got our first jobs – all of those places were black.

But even though the neighbourhood that I lived in was all black, I have often said that it was the most diverse community I ever lived in, and I have lived many places since. The reason why it was the most diverse community I ever lived in is because *everybody* who was black lived in that community. We had variations of incomes, we had variations of the kinds of work that people did – people were as diverse as you can possibly imagine, outside of the fact that they were all black.

In many of the communities that I've lived in since, people may have been racially diverse, but they all pretty much had similar jobs, similar incomes, similar interests. And so I really treasure the diversity that I experienced within the community that I grew up in.

For most of the time I was growing up, the legal barriers to integration were starting to break down. It was after the 1954 decision that integrated the schools, but our community remained all black, and the surrounding community was filled with a lot of racism and a lot of difficulties for people who were black or African-American.

My experience, however, was really devoid of being exposed to any of that racism, because the adults who were part of my world did everything they could to surround us with protection. It was as if the adults spent 24 hours a day making sure that their children were not going to be exposed to the sting and burn of racism.

That community, under those circumstances of discrimination, was the most important element for the development of children and adults. I have come to think of community as the scaffolding that allowed people to be able to move up and realise their full potential, even as they were isolated from the mainstream. Community was absolutely essential.

I went away to college and I never moved back to St Louis since leaving when I was about 17 years old. It's only looking back that I recognise how important community was, because at the moment that I was living in it, when I was growing up, I felt very watched as a child. I thought that I had very little freedom. I felt that I really needed to break out of this community in order to find out who I was. But when I look back at it I can see how powerful it was, how important it was.

I went on to do many things. I went on to be a community organiser, a community builder, a public interest lawyer, a foundation executive, a policy advocate. I have often reflected that I've had many jobs, but only one project: to do something about injustice and inequality.

In doing that work, I have never forgotten that community matters. Community *really* matters, because it's there that you get your grounding, that you learn how to interact with people, that you learn the things that make a difference in life beyond the services, beyond the jobs, beyond the education. It's that civic engagement that gives you the strength and the sense of responsibility, both to others and to yourself, that allows you to be able to do something and to give back.

And so I came into the world of work valuing community, and now that I work in an organisation called PolicyLink, which actually tries to link community wisdom to the worlds of policy, I can see how my experience growing up and learning to value community, and in each

one of my jobs as part of my life's project, have helped me to understand with more depth what it actually takes to be able to identify and create the kind of sustainability that is important for the change that we want.

I started off as a community organiser, working first in New York City, then in Los Angeles, to try to understand what it was that people in communities wanted to improve their lives – helping people to be able to organise their voice for change; helping people to identify a problem and understand that it's their power that's going to really lift up that problem in an authentic way that's likely to get a solution that will make a difference.

I spent a lot of time standing on street corners or soap boxes at rallies talking about what people should be outraged about, to try to get them passionate about change. After a while it became rather obvious to me that I needed a few more skills, because the ability to be able to get people passionate seemed not enough. I wanted to be able to take that passion and target it towards solutions that would make a difference.

This was about the time the civil rights movement was in its heyday, and public interest lawyers had been at the vanguard of making change. It seemed to me like the thing to do was to get a law degree, and so that's what I did.

I joined not a civil rights law firm, but a general public interest law firm, where we worked on consumer issues and employment discrimination and health issues. Usually we represented whole groups of people trying to bring about systemic change.

After doing that for a while I felt that I was moving too far away from community, that too often the lawyers were working with other lawyers and the issues were getting put in the hands of lawyers and taken out of the hands of people.

I've heard people talk about individuals who are able to live against all odds when they're in an accident – until they get to the emergency

room, when they put their lives in the hands of doctors, and sometimes die, because it was their energy that was needed to get well. Sometimes it was like that with communities. They would struggle against the odds and then put their issue in the hands of a lawyer. But by the time the lawyer was able to get some kind of resolution, the community was no longer organised enough to be able to keep it going forward.

So I moved from doing the public interest litigation back to community, joining with some colleagues to start the National Community Building Network, a community building organisation that brought the engagement of people back into the struggle for change.

But it seemed that while we were learning so much about change at the community level, it wasn't getting translated into policy. So when I went to the Rockefeller Foundation, I really tried to take the wisdom about community building and infuse it into policy making. What I discovered was that while we had lots of policy groups all around the country, they didn't work closely with community-based organisations, they worked more at the federal level, with elected officials, with policy makers. They were part of a conversation that was separate from that important wisdom that comes from working on the ground.

And so that's how PolicyLink began, to try to literally be a bridge from the wisdom, voice and experience of people working for change in their local communities to the world of policy. What we try to do at PolicyLink is to advance a new generation of policies that build a fully inclusive society, a new generation of policies that build economic and social equity, and we are committed to doing that in partnership with people who are working for change in their local communities.

But why policy? Why is it that it's not enough just to be able to do the work? To be able to address the problems? To provide the services? Well, we think that policy is important because without policy you often have a disconnect between vision and implementation. You might have a vision for what you want to do, but without a policy platform, implementation is often inconsistent. What happens is that success, when it comes, is often sporadic and unsustainable. The policy

process itself is forever adversarial. The process of trying to create change is forever adversarial. If we don't have a policy platform on which to stand, every time you're trying to make change you end up in a fight again.

As a public interest lawyer, I'm ready to take on a good battle as quickly as anybody else, but forever adversarial seems to be a bit much. At some point we ought to have something that we agree on so that we can move to the next stage. Without policy, the systems of change are forever fragmented. We never have anything that actually pulls together completely.

As we think about how to move from good practice to good policy and on to the next issue, we've realised that most of the things that we want for people – access to really good quality public education, access to good quality jobs that allow people to be able to support their families with dignity, access to an environment that produces really good health outcomes, and access to health care when you need it – in order to get all of those things we have realised that we need to have a much sharper focus on the places where people live because in many ways, in our country, and I think this might be true here as well, where you live is often a proxy for opportunity. It's literally where you live that determines whether or not yet get to go to a good school; whether you live near jobs; whether you live in a healthy community.

We need to learn more about how to integrate the things that we want with the people in the development process. We have come to call this 'equitable development'. Equitable development really pulls together all of these aspirations under one umbrella.

What are the main tenets of equitable development? Well, the first is that we need to integrate the strategies and the practices focused on people with those focused on place. We tend to work in silos – we work on health issues and early childhood education and people issues in one silo, and then we work on transportation and housing and environmental issues in another silo.

Our failure to integrate them often keeps us from achieving the outcomes that we're seeking, because when we work on building affordable housing and we don't simultaneously work on making sure that the people who need it are prepared to be able to live there, we may have attractive affordable housing, but the people who are living there aren't the people who needed it most. When we work on transportation issues and we're not constantly thinking about the job training programs and getting people ready for jobs, we may have an elegant transportation system, but there is a mismatch between where people live who need to get to those jobs and where the jobs are actually located. So the first tenet is to integrate the strategies focused on people with the strategies focused on place.

The second is in developing ways to reduce disparities. We need to try to develop ways to produce a triple bottom line – a financial return for investors, because that's why they're involved at all, but also social benefits for the people who need it, and environmental sustainability as well. We need to work on all three of those things simultaneously and look for those results in whatever we do.

And lastly, equitable development demands that the people whose lives are going to be impacted are involved in the decision making every step of the way. People must be allowed a voice, allowed to participate, and given the ability to become an agent for change on their own behalf.

PolicyLink is advancing that sort of equitable development by helping local community-based organisations to be effective advocates for policy change. I want to give you a few examples of how we do that.

What we try to do at PolicyLink is to not only help to identify the problems that need to be addressed, but to identify the community-based organisations that have a lot to bring to addressing those issues. We work to help those groups to develop their capacity to be effective advocates; we help them to frame the issues in ways that build broad coalitions; and then we help them to negotiate for the sort of change that they want.

As I mentioned earlier, where you live is often a proxy for opportunity; it determines your access to opportunity. At PolicyLink we have been trying to promote more affordable housing in opportunity-rich communities, in the places that have the good schools, the good jobs, the parks and the grocery stores and all of those things.

A member of my staff at PolicyLink gave me an article about an attempt in Brisbane to have an inclusionary zoning policy. I understand that if they get it that it will be the first one in Australia. In the United States we have also been working on inclusionary zoning, a requirement that when housing developments are built, a certain proportion must be affordable so that people who have low incomes are able to live in these communities that are being built with all the amenities that we want to have.

This is the opposite of exclusionary zoning, which we often see in communities where you don't have any rental, where the houses have to be of a certain size, and people who are lower income can't afford them.

Washington DC is a place that has really had this problem. What you have been referring to here as gentrification and people returning to cities has been happening in Washington for a long time. For many years Washington DC had a lot of affordable housing but it was in the context of what I would call slums – you had affordable housing, but it was not in desirable neighbourhoods. Then people began to realise that it was a very nice thing to live in the city, to live near the cultural institutions, to live near transportation, and so the neighbourhoods began to gentrify, they began to improve. The housing started to improve, the services got better. You had coffee shops and grocery stores and all the things you would want.

The sad part is, the people who had lived there during the bad times were not able to stay and enjoy the good times. They were being pushed out. And so a number of community organisations contacted PolicyLink and said, "We would like to develop an inclusionary zoning policy that will keep some housing affordable."

We were first contacted by a community organising group called Acorn. And what we said to Acorn was, “In order to get this policy in place, you’re going to need to broaden your coalition – you need to bring in labour, you need to bring in the faith community, you need to bring in the civic community so that you’ll have lots of people asking for it.” And they went back and they did that.

Then PolicyLink did a report looking at inclusionary zoning all over the country, because in lots of different places it already existed, and we analysed how much more affordable housing they would have had in Washington DC if they’d had inclusionary zoning for the past 15 years. And the community used that document to make a demand on the City Council to get an inclusionary zoning ordinance.

Then, working with us and others, they did a media campaign, getting letters to the editor, getting reporters to write about it, and they held a series of demonstrations about the need for inclusionary zoning.

Within a two-year period they were able to get a mandatory inclusionary zoning ordinance.

This ordinance is going to be so important, because during the four-year period leading up to this, housing costs had increased four times more than income; rental costs three times more than income.

Community-based organisations had been able to make some real progress in bringing fairness into the process by using their wisdom and understanding about community, by realising the strategies for making policy change, and by moving forward from that.

Let me tell you another story – the story of Market Creek Plaza in San Diego, where a family foundation called the Jacobs Family Foundation, which had been doing micro-enterprise all across the world, decided that it wanted to make a difference in its home town. And so the Jacobs Family Foundation came back to San Diego and they did it right – they hired community residents to go out and have conversations with all of their neighbours, to say, “What would you want to see to improve life in this very low-income community?”

I don't know if this is true here, but in the United States you often know that you're in a low-income, disrespected community because there's no grocery store. The grocery stores have moved out of the poorer communities and they're not serving them any more. The people in this poor San Diego community, which included people who were black and Latino and from several different Asian groups, said what they wanted was a grocery store. But not only did they want a grocery store, they wanted to have jobs in the grocery store and they wanted to be part of a whole shopping area. They wanted to begin to develop their own entrepreneurial activities.

This is a long and interesting story, but I'm going to make it short for you. After about 18 months, they were able to open a grocery store where 91% of the employees live in the community. In building the economic development area – a whole plaza – 60% of the contractors were women and minority contractors, in a city where for the most part you only find about 2% women and minority contractors on any given job.

And here's the most exciting part of all. The people in the community said, "Not only do we want to build this place where there will be economic activity in an undeserved community, but we would like to be the owners. If our money is going to create wealth, we would like to be able to create wealth for ourselves at the same time."

And so working with the Jacobs Family Foundation, they were finally able to get permission from the California Department of Corporations to sell shares in the plaza to the people who lived in the community. It took a long time because these were low-income people, and to figure out a way to sell shares to low-income people is a difficult thing. But here's the exciting end of the story: They were able to sell $500,000 worth of shares to over 600 individuals in the community, because some of them joined together to buy those shares. The average purchaser was a black woman making less than $30,000 with two children.

And so not only did the community get a grocery store, jobs, and entrepreneurial opportunities, but they're actually building their wealth as well.

Now why is PolicyLink working with them? What we're trying to do is to help them tease out the implications for policy change so that this extraordinary example does not become just an island of excellence.

This is something we see every place we go – people come together, they work hard, they do innovative, they make change, but it becomes an island of excellence, never to be repeated again.

At PolicyLink we're working with them to figure out how to tease out the policy implications of this project so that we can have new grocery stores in other undeserved communities, so we can have more job opportunities for people, so we can have more opportunities for small businesses to be able to really get into something that's going to make money for them. We are figuring out ways for everybody to participate and everybody to prosper.

One of the things that's happened as a result of that project, as well as other stories about grocery stores, is there is now a piece of legislation that's passed in one of our states, Pennsylvania, that actually set up a $60 million fund to be able to help communities that were undeserved by grocery stores to be able to get some. This fund has only been in place for about a year and already in Pennsylvania seven new grocery stores have been put in place.

Copying what they'd done in Pennsylvania, we've introduced in California legislation, SB107, that will create the same kind of pool of money to be able to get more grocery stores in California.

So here is an example of being able to look at the good work that we're doing and figure out how we create a policy platform so that this is not an isolated incident. Instead, it becomes something that we're doing all over the nation.

Let me talk to you a minute about Louisiana and the Gulf region after Hurricane Katrina. I'm sure you, like everybody else all over the world, saw the horror of what happened when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana and other places around the Gulf.

The American people were ashamed when it happened because they had been hiding from their own poverty. They had been able to have it isolated in an inner-city community or in a small rural community, and too many American people were able to move around through their daily lives and not have to come in contact with poverty at all.

When Hurricane Katrina hit, it pulled the blanket off poverty in America. People had to see it. They saw how many people were still poor, who had been forgotten. Even though the legal barriers to participation by people who were black had been broken down, even though there were many examples of people who were black in high positions of political office, academia, the media, sports, still hundreds of thousands, in fact millions of people were being left behind.

America was ashamed of its poverty. And they hoped that the Federal Government would do something to fix it. That has not been the case, but it's not over either, because there have been continuous demands on the Federal Government, not just to do something about the poverty in New Orleans and Louisiana, but to do something about poverty all across the nation.

PolicyLink has been working with many community organisations and elected officials in Louisiana. Earlier I talked to you about equitable development – about developing ways to focus on the people and the place at the same time. If ever there was a need for equitable development, it's in the rebuilding in the Gulf Coast in Louisiana, so we have been very involved there.

Firstly, we put out 10 points to guide rebuilding in the Gulf that focused on fairness and participation. Then we began to do what has become the signature of the way PolicyLink works – building the voice of community-based organisations to be effective advocates to those who have been left behind; building the capacity of elected officials to

be able to do the things that we know make a difference; and building the power of the government agencies to be able to put in place policies and to make sure that implementation is consistent with the vision and the values of those policies.

In the rebuilding of Louisiana our main work is to focus on affordable housing – affordable housing to buy, and affordable housing to rent. The hard part is that in Louisiana there has not historically been a focus on housing; it's not an area where there's been a lot of advocacy. And while the story in Louisiana has a long way to go before it is finished, I will tell you that there are probably 100 new community-based organisations that are focusing on housing that had no ability to do that in the past. They're meeting together, they're planning together, they're consciously building their advocacy capacity and they are getting attention.

There are elected officials now who understand what to do in the housing arena who never understood it before.

And there are government agencies that are thinking hard about how to learn from what's happened in other places, to be able to do a better job.

It is this kind of working together that actually allows for the policy platform to be built. And I think that community organisations like all of you, doing community development work and service work, really have to be at the vanguard of advocacy and policy if we're going to build a society in which everybody can participate and everybody can prosper – because it's your knowledge that will be needed to go forward.

Community organisations come with knowledge about what is good about the practice so far. Because you're often so involved in delivering services or analysing where services have not been effective, your knowledge becomes the foundation for building a policy platform.

The other thing that you have is access to people, people who have personal stories that can dramatise what it is we need to make a

difference. Good policy usually happens because of a strong anecdote. There is of course a great need for really good research and solid documentation – you often find that being able to pull out the right statistic at the right time makes all the difference – but the truth of the matter is, when we really see a policy change it is because somebody told a good story, and you could put a face on it. It's that face that you remember, and it's that face that actually becomes the face of the policy initiative.

As service providers and community-based organisations, you know the faces, you know the good stories, and you are able to bring that forward.

You also have access to what it will take to actually be at the policy table, and that's where PolicyLink does a lot of its training. We call it the Triple Focus. To be at the policy table and to be effective you have to have the personal skills to be in that arena; you have to be able to articulate your arguments; you have to be able to utilise data to support your arguments; you have to be able to tie together that really good story with all the elements that are going to make for really good policy; and you have to able to be a personal advocate.

But it also takes a good organisation behind you, because what you need is to be able to turn out that paper at the right time; to be able to put together the right press release; to be able to bring in others and build that strong coalition. That takes a good organisation.

The other thing that it takes is a strong constituency, because very often around the toughest issues, if there's not a constituency, the best argument and the best data and even the right story won't make the difference. You probably have all heard the story about Mothers Against Drunk Driving in the United States. They were able to get laws in place about driving while intoxicated because they were able to mobilise thousands and thousands of people. That ability to pull together constituency is often so important.

And so that triple focus of having the individual skills, having the organisational capacity and having the committed constituency is what

it takes to be able to move forward. As community-based organisations you are often in the best position to be able to do that.

If I think about all that I've heard and seen since I've been here in Australia, I'm absolutely convinced that we share so much, even though our geographies are different, our demographics are different, and our politics are different. When it comes right down to it, we all want to build a society in which everybody can participate and everybody can prosper.

In order to do that, you have to be able to continue working every day on the problem. What is it that we need to put in place as a policy platform so that our work starts spiralling upward, rather than being a constant repetition of what we did yesterday? How we can make our voices heard in the policy arena as advocates, even when there's no support?

We have been lucky at PolicyLink because we have lots of foundations that give us money to do work that is not service provision, that is not the building of houses. It is the gathering of data, it is the framing of the question, it is the building of skills, it is the policy advocacy.

But if we didn't have the money to be able to do it, we would find a way to do it anyway because we must. We would have to take a little bit of the resources that we have for services and put them into advocacy. We would have to find people who have the passion, and help their voices build to the level of demand for the kind of change we need.

Because in the end, if we're not the ones to do it, who will do it? Who knows more? Who has more passion?

Thank you very much.

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