

COLLOQUIUM:

COMMUNITY-BASED EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

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The 1995 Colloquium of the *New York University Review of Law and Social Change* was motivated by the belief that community-based development efforts are a means of providing low-income residents of disinvested communities with a greater degree of social and economic control over their own lives. The students planning the Colloquium sought to create a forum in which participants could learn from academics and practitioners about the goals of community-based economic development and the possible methods of financing such projects. The members of *Social Change* hoped to facilitate a critical examination of the potential of community-based development and to consider possible roles to be played by lawyers interested in working in partnership with grassroots organizations.

As law students, our "public interest education" consisted primarily of classroom discussions and legal clinics focusing on litigation efforts to protect and enforce civil rights and civil liberties. Litigation alone, however, has not proven to be effective in addressing the economic issues facing disadvantaged communities in New York City and other urban areas. While there is no question that continued public interest litigation is a vital part of fighting discrimination and ongoing oppression, issues such as limited access to capital and credit, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, unavailability of quality goods and services, and substandard job training opportunities are not problems to be solved in a courtroom. Confronting these economic issues requires creative and strategic thinking by lawyers who understand corporate, tax, and real estate law—fields too rarely included in a traditional curriculum for public interest lawyers.

The two-day Colloquium was held in the wake of the 1994 elections. Federal and State programs targeted to assist inner city communities and their residents, especially those of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), had been dramatically cut or were at imminent risk.

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In the time since the Colloquium, we have been witnessed a further unraveling of our nation's safety net. Although the problems facing disadvantaged communities continue to increase, the public discourse about issues facing low-income persons remains mired in a rhetoric of individual responsibility and the presumed inability of government to provide effective solutions. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the welfare reform bill signed by President Clinton, is premised on the politically popular notion of moving recipients of welfare to work, but overlooks the realities that such jobs do not exist and that current job training programs are totally inadequate. This politically expedient "reform" does nothing to confront the root causes of poverty.

When the effects of mandatory time limits are examined in light of the drastic cuts to HUD's budget, efforts to privatize public housing, and the elimination of any new Section 8 vouchers which enable low-income residents to cover housing costs, the situation appears all the more bleak. The elimination of any new Section 8 vouchers, along with the de-funding of HUD's "Moving to Opportunity" program, suggests that deconcentration and mobility strategies advocated by Michael Schill in this issue may be no more politically viable than other community development efforts.

In the context of shrinking public support, job opportunities for people who are now receiving public assistance become even more crucial. It is critical to develop strategies which utilize public and private capital to support community ventures and to create viable business, employment, and training opportunities. Such strategies include community development credit unions, community development loan funds, community development venture capital funds, franchise development programs, and community training businesses. These undertakings seek to combine solid financial returns with a concept of social return, thus building the social goals of employment and empowerment into business operations. These ventures are premised on the notion that we must think differently about what community-based organizations can contribute to and demand from the private sector. Public interest lawyers have important roles to play in this work.

The articles contained in this issue—some of which began as presentations at our colloquium and some of which were solicited after the colloquium—explore some of the strategies available to community development and economic justice activists. The first piece, Henry Cisneros's Keynote Address, outlines a strategy for greater cooperation between federal, state, and local organizations. Cisneros's speech is followed by an article by NYU Law Professor Michael Schill. Schill's article critically assesses the capacity of community development organizations to contribute to job creation and the delivery of commercial services. This piece is followed by David Reiss's article on New York City's programs for renovating abandoned housing and by David Ehrenfest Steinglass's review of

Robert Halpern's recent book on the history of neighborhood-based efforts to address urban poverty. This issue of *Social Change* closes with a series of annotations describing three other recent books on economic justice and community economic development.

Despite the wide variety of tools and strategies available to community-based activists, none of these strategies will be possible on any large scale without renewed and forceful advocacy and organizing. The problems facing disinvested communities are enormous, and real solutions will not be possible without a significant redistribution of wealth and progressive taxation. We need creative strategies, and we need dedicated public interest lawyers working to make them possible. But it will be our ability to build the political will necessary to support this work which will determine the possibility for success of community-based efforts to achieve economic justice.

