

Social Equity in Planning

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Planners are called upon to promote equity in their work, to assure fairness in their procedures and secure justice through their plans and programs. Equity, fairness, justice - what exactly do these terms mean in planning? In this essay I shall use them essentially as synonyms, although there are nuances.

Like many of our most important words, justice has many meanings. One definition of justice is to have a basis in fact and follow established rules and procedures to produce an impartial result. Impartiality, or the absence of prejudice or favoritism, was Cardozo's definition of fairness and justice under the law.

Yet long tradition supports the idea that justice does not always mean treating everyone the same. For example, the law considers context, evaluating the circumstances in interpreting the facts. In addition, in Anglo-American jurisprudence equity developed as a formal body of doctrines and rules of procedure designed to supplement, and if necessary override, common law and statutes, in order to protect substantive, fundamental rights of individuals. The law of equity addresses those circumstances where the "ordinary" rules, applied in a blind or narrowly rigid fashion, would produce a result that violates our sense of justice in another of its meanings — that a just result is a good one. Today both the law of equity and the rules of administrative procedure, directing how government should operate, recognize that due process may require the varying of rules and procedures to reflect acknowledged differences. Justice requires attention to both process and outcome.

Rawlsian conceptions of justice offer a still broader conception of equity. Rawls based his theory of justice as fairness on two principles. Rawls' first principle is equality in the assignment of rights and duties. His second principle holds that social and economic inequalities are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1971).

The idea that justice necessitates an examination of the distribution of gains and losses, and sometimes requires compensatory action, has been a powerful one for planners. Paul Davidoff, who is honored by planners for his devotion to equity in planning, viewed the profession as a means of addressing a wide

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range of societal problems. He saw planning as a way to improve physical and economic conditions for all people, including those with the fewest resources at their command. The challenge for planning professionals, following this line of thinking, is to find ways to promote participatory democracy and positive social change.

Some of our best-respected planning practitioners have taken up this challenge and devoted much of their professional lives to improving equity. A well-known example was the Cleveland planning department under the leadership of Norm Krumholtz. The planning department directed its resources to reduce the disparities between rich and poor; planning was used as a tool to improve the circumstances of people suffering from poverty and racism.

Planning research on social equity has provided an important factual basis for reform efforts. Researchers have exposed discrimination in the provision of public services, from the paving of streets and installation of sewers to the delivery of quality education (see, e.g., Ratner, 1968; Inman and Rubinfeld, 1979; Haar and Fessler, 1986; Gillette, 1987; Hanushek, 1991). Researchers have also sought to address unfairness in the allocation of public burdens, from the routing of highways through inner city neighborhoods to the siting of landfills, incinerators, and hazardous waste disposal sites (Lazarus, 1993, Been, 1993.)

Research on environmental justice in facilities siting offers a good example of the work to be done. The environmental justice movement was thrust into the public eye with the Love Canal crisis, where housing had been built atop a chemical disposal site that began to leak. The ensuing debate over exposure to environmental hazards and risks versus cleanup costs was spurred on by church-sponsored studies of the siting of hazardous waste dumps. Those studies found such facilities preponderantly located in low income and minority communities. Since then evidence has mounted from studies of incinerators, landfills, waste sites, high-pollution industries, and large scale transportation facilities, almost all showing that neighborhoods having these locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) tend to be poorer and to house a higher percentage of minorities than other neighborhoods. It is less clear, however, whether this result is due to discriminatory siting practices or other forces that lead minorities and the poor to settle in impacted areas — racial and ethnic discrimination, a shortage of affordable housing, constraints on the availability of jobs, transportation, and services (Been, 1993). Regardless of the causality, the result is the same: a disproportionate burden on people of color and the poor.

But because the appropriate remedy depends on the causes, there is much work for planners to do in investigating and where necessary reforming both siting procedures and the larger urban development processes that produce the LULUs in the first place.

Advocates for the poor and minority communities are increasingly using civil rights laws and environmental justice directives together with planning research to insist that inner city residents be heard and to force government agencies to deal with them fairly. Transportation, brownfields, and housing are three targets of action. In Los Angeles, for example, advocates for bus riders — largely minorities — successfully challenged the transit authority's decisions to spend massive sums on a suburban-oriented light rail system while at the same time cutting bus services in the central city. Planning data and analyses on the distribution of revenues versus ridership were enlisted to support this challenge. In Chicago, planning advocacy has focused on securing new housing and improving services in inner city areas, especially around transit stations. In the San Francisco Bay Area, efforts have been directed toward sustainable regional development and the promotion of tax sharing policies.

Planning practice today offers a wealth of opportunities for taking up the challenge of social equity. For community development planners working in inner cities and older suburbs, preservation, renovation, redevelopment, and infill are being used together with community-based social and economic programs to foster neighborhood and business district revitalization. Brownfields cleanup and redevelopment programs are being coordinated with job strategies and transportation investments. Increasingly these efforts are also being coordinated with programs to improve schools, reduce crime, beautify neighborhoods, and provide a mix of housing types at a range of prices. Experimental programs such as the location efficient mortgage being tested by Fannie Mae are being combined with transportation innovations such as car sharing to offer significant new choices for inner city dwellers.

Suburban planners are increasingly raising social equity issues as well. A new round of initiatives to open up housing markets to allow greater opportunity and choice is being carried to the suburbs in several states, challenging trends toward the inward focus and homogeneity of privatized and gated communities. Sustainable development advocates are drawing the connections between the continued suburbanization of jobs and housing, the plight of the inner cities, and the loss of valued habitat and open space.

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Infrastructure planners are looking not only at the specific impacts of particular projects, but at the choice of instruments for finance in evaluating equity. Increasingly, infrastructure planners are also stepping back from the specifics of projects to examine whether different alternatives — recycling a larger portion of the waste stream, for example — might produce more balanced, and fairer, results.

In addition, there has been growing recognition that social justice in planning requires a democratization of the planning and decision processes, and that this can often be attained through cooperative approaches (Ostrom, 1990). The success of such an approach depends, however, on building a capacity to participate, to identify and communicate one's own interests, and on developing sufficient mutual trust and other forms of social capital (including leadership) to keep the process going. The increased use of capacity building and consensus processes in a variety of planning applications (Innes, 1992, 1998) is an important start toward broader participation and democracy, and hence greater social equity, in planning.

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