Lessons Learned: Gaining New Ground

“The steps we take now make new earth grow beneath our feet.
The steps we take now decide what kind of earth that will be.”


Voice Matters

On the cover of our Six Big Wins for Social Equity brochure (an achievement of coalition development in itself), there is a photograph of our coalition in action at the Metro Center. Please enter into this photo through the eyes of a coalition member. The man at the podium—tall, original, distinguished in suit and tie, and dreads—steps up with calm and grace. We hold our breath. The man at the podium providing testimony is Azibuike Akaba, the Six Wins’ climate scientist. His lifetime career is dedicated to environmental justice and he has applied his scientific knowledge on behalf of vulnerable communities in countless heartbreaking situations where poison meets poverty and race. Voice matters. And Azi proves that civic engagement is much more than signing a blue card as you enter the room at the Joint Policy Commission. Finding one’s voice after being officially registered is yet another challenge.

Azi’s voice matters in our community. He has just followed Devilla Ervin and several of the youth of color from New Voices are Rising, who have unearthed their power, crafted their messages in spokesperson training, and have been learning to conduct door-to-door community-based outreach and education in their neighborhoods from West Oakland to Fruitvale to the Iron Triangle. For them there is a challenging journey to finding their voice—crossing territories of shame, the historic silencing across boundaries of class, sometimes coming from immigrant families for whom English is a new lan-
guage, then climbing the hurdle of yet another foreign language—urban planning and policy jargon—SB 375, SCS, RTP, MTC. These youth of color of various ethnic backgrounds have traversed perilous obstacles with aplomb and have become a force—a consistent, evocative, and persuasive presence in the SB 375/SCS process. Many elected officials remarked that it was the voice of the youth that caused them to shift their positions on social equity. Today, Azibuke rises to speak about the new face of the climate crisis—not polar bears on an iceberg, but children with asthma in communities of concern. He knows the territory, and the scientific authority of his testimony following the firsthand experience of the youth is powerful and effective.

On this occasion, when Azi brings his voice to the podium, he is holding additional coalition authority. He speaks today from the successful resolution of a conflict between two Win networks. The Six Big Wins steering committee had reached an impasse between public health advocates and affordable housing advocates on the issue of placement of infill housing near transit centers, which may contribute to asthma rates.

In other regions this divisive issue created fractures in the community and split coalitions. Azi is the leader of the Health and Safety Win network and took a bold step to propose a joint conference with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD) and the Regional Asthma Management Project (RAMP). Further, Azi, through RAMP, sponsored a series of workshops where advocates from both issue areas put the spotlight on their conflict and entered a safe place for in-depth community exploration of their impasse. At the culmination of the second daylong, he facilitated a participatory process that resulted in a bottom-up community-led innovation. Community members invented new policy recommendations for a win-win-win that was subsequently adopted by BAAQMD and the SB 375 planning process for implementation: Reduce the concentration of low income housing density in existing corridors and create more housing in locations of opportunity, offer better site design and require mitigations to reduce the impact on the air quality of those living there. Historically white architects had invented “walkable neighborhoods” with new housing around public transit, a generally agreed principle. However, EJ folks had evidence that the concentration near inner city neighborhoods increased asthma and hospitalization as a result of that—they needed their voices to be heard.

Therefore, when Azi stands at the podium on this day, he is much more than a three minute spot in the MTC lineup. He has helped us hear one another across sectors, through disputes and fights across our issues, he has held a larger container. Rather than closing off and retreating—he invented a larger civic space for exploring and reaching a new horizon with one another.

We are rooting for him, we are grateful for his diplomacy, his scientific knowledge, and his dedication to social justice as a leading value in this process and in the community over time. We are holding our signs up in solidarity with him—Azibuike Akaba is a Climate Justice Superhero.
The Power of Story

In the foreground of this photo, the first person that we see, the most prominent and most visible in the front row is Alia Phelps. She is a member of a frontline community, and in our highest intention she and her community are setting the priorities of our work. She is also a story weaver, and an embodiment of the power of story—the next lesson learned in the SB 375 Sustainable Communities Strategy process.

There are three Alia’s in this picture. The first Alia is an individual, the young African American woman who set out to visit her father on Father’s Day with her siblings and infant son on the bus. AC Transit had cut Sunday service without notice from Oakland to Antioch, where her father had recently moved. Alia’s father is one of 300,000 other African Americans who have left the inner city for the suburbs—displaced from West Oakland due to rising real estate prices—but also a man following the promise of the American dream: a better life in the suburbs, less stress than the city. Alia’s father moved to Antioch, a car-commute away from anywhere. There he found himself caught in the latest machine of disinvestment: isolation and lack of infrastructure, and the growing “Suburbanization of poverty.” $400K homes are now underwater with $100K appraisals. Alia stands at the bus stop and waits 2 hours for the infrequent bus which never comes. With infant son in arms and siblings set on celebration with dad, and no fare for cab, they resourcefully decided to walk. It takes them four hours in the heat. They attempt to secure water enroute, but are turned down along the way. They arrive in time for dinner with dad.

The second Alia in this picture is wearing a yellow T-shirt which signifies that she is a member of the organization ACCE-- the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (formerly ACORN). Many would feel victimized and discouraged by the daily kinds of incidents that Alia experienced waiting for the bus on Father’s Day. Alia turned this challenge into power. As a lead organizer for ACCE, she works to raise up the voices of low income, immigrant and working families across California. Alia is a leading the way on Transit Justice organizing in the East Bay. Her current passion and ACCE campaign is that of forming a Bus Riders Union, inspired by the successful frontline work of Eric Mann in Los Angeles. The personal Alia knows the pain of transit injustice and is working with the professional Alia to help other people who are living in places that do not have service, to mobilize their personal and community knowledge to effect policy change. She is principled, head-strong, and clear in her intent.

The third Alia is a member of a regional coalition. In this photo, we know this because she is holding an orange sign with black letters—I support the Equity Scenario. She works with other base-building groups to lead the Community Power Win network. She is a team player and played a major role in the education and advocacy days for the Six Big Wins. Alia is also a dedicated mother, and approaches her organizing work with the same fierce care. Alia is uncompromising about being at service to low income communities and communities of color, and is willing to reach for new horizons to achieve a goal. She is committed to finding public transit infrastructure dollars that benefit a robust transportation plan for the Bay Area’s most vulnerable communities. And she has been sharp about translating the needs of her community into the technical requirements of creating the Equity, Environment and Jobs scenario. Alia is a Climate Justice Superhero.

University / Community Networks At Work

Lets look more closely at Alia’s orange sign. There are many in this room holding orange signs—inexpensive as an organizing tool to produce—three cents at Krishna Copy, but they represent a significant financial investment of time, energy and dollars by the coalition and the larger communities they represent.

Embedded in this visible orange sign is an invisible process. A modest investment by private foundations to provide technical assistance is leveraged by extraordinary matching investment from the community undertaking education, tapping the community-based knowledge of issues, identifying self-interest, translating the issues and demands, creating a frame and strategy, and performing the transportation modeling needed to be authentic to the
community needs, and effective in the process of delivering a professionally credible scenario.

Embedded in this neon orange sign, there is an invisible presence, a strategic partner, who is also a part of this picture. This invisible other is an ally of Alia’s and ACCE and the Six Big Wins coalition, and his name is Alex. Alex Karner is a post-doc researcher at UC Davis who came forward when asked to assist with community requests to gain credibility in the SCS process. He provided technical assistance in developing a community-based scenario which included the indicators and requirements of vulnerable communities. This came to be known as the Equity, Environment and Jobs Scenario (EEJ).

Alex Karner is the young buoyant genius who assisted the community on the technical side to translate their concerns, issues and demands in the SCS process. He jumped through many hoops with us, both technical and political, to pass muster and co-create a world class transportation modeling proposal—the Equity Environmental and Jobs Scenario (EEJ Scenario). At the time, he was a post-doctoral researcher at the University of California at Davis Center for Regional Change. However, in the spirit of emerging Community/University networks, the university translated community needs into power at the decision-making table. He is modeling a new kind of role for the University. This was not an ivory tower University faculty-driven research project using community in a parasitic relationship of knowledge-mining and extraction for their own ends. This is a new model.

The community was at a crisis point—if we did not want to end up on the menu, we needed to be at the table. In order to have power, standing, credibility in this SCS process, we would have to convert our demands into the language of modeling, the coin of the realm. Alex became our alchemist. As a graduate student at U. C. Davis he was all about being the supertech genius—in love with technology, data and statistics. In the process of his graduate study in the innovative and progressive Center for Regional Change, working in a new field-based model of community development, he himself has been transformed. As he reports in his interview, he has become a scholar/activist, an equity advocate, with an expanded sense of mission to communities in the US and throughout the globe. Dr. Karner now “has the tools to dismantle the master’s house” (Audre Lorde). He goes another step—he is also critiquing the tools. He sees that they can be used and misused in these professional and policy processes. To paraphrase, people know what needs to be done in order to create a more just and sustainable world, but they avoid taking the clear actions needed due to a misuse of technology and statistics. True knowledge is power.

As a movement we have great respect for real data that can provide a wider lens on an issue, and help mobilize the scale of action needed into clear focus. Yet we also recognize that these knowledge systems can easily be used to justify and reproduce the status quo. Alex Karner is challenging the game on statistics. See Dr. Karner’s article in Resources that was inspired by new discoveries he made in the SB 375 and SCS process. We are deeply grateful for this new evolution of Community-University partnership, and for the many colleagues and new centers he represents. Alex Karner is a Climate Justice Superhero.

The Power of Framing: Linking Opportunity to Communities

We would like to direct your attention to another figure that is partially visible in our photo. Standing in the center background of the image, standing against the wall, slightly obstructed, is Carl Anthony. Doubtless he is supporting us all, yet again, like a steel I-beam or granite bedrock. He wears a tan suit today, tie and the ubiquitous brief case. At 75, he has a recent vision impairment, but he remains a visionary leader who brings history and perspective, battle scars and wisdom, illumination and wit to the daily grind of our SB 375 movement building. But he is also a tireless force of nature, a mountain of strength and intelligence—panoramic in his scholarship and strategic intelligence. We grow new legs for the possibility of following in his footsteps. FBI-style wing-tips, but retro cool, Carl is a secret weapon in any tough negotiation. He reliably creates a bigger pie where all can win, with deft political acumen. And today our senior statesman is “in the house”. His presence demands accountability—they can’t pull
any B.S. on his watch. When he enters the room, there is an air of gravitas—something serious must be underway. Today, there are heads nodding from both sides of the room when he takes the stand, evidencing the respect he has earned from decades of relationship with both community groups and mayors, county supervisors, and agency heads. The waves part as he walks through today’s crowd to the public podium and we all breathe deeper, more confidently, when he takes the stand with that resonant, velvet baritone voice, a worthy opponent for some, a living legend for others. “Good morning, my name is Carl Anthony, Co-founder of Breakthrough Communities and our mission is building multi-racial and multi-class leadership for sustainability and justice in our metropolitan regions. Today I invite us to wake up to the opportunity that is before us....”

Carl Anthony has an amazing talent for framing the issues. In 2007 on returning from the Ford Foundation, he began researching and scouting the opportunities that currently exist in this moment in history and in the policy climate of California for vulnerable communities. As an architect and urban planner, he is partial to land use and transportation. He was one of the first to unearth and excavate the policy opportunity of SB 375 and climate change as a means for activating a new round of social justice and civil rights mobilization. In the beginning, he would say “The bad news is, no one knows what a Sustainable Communities Strategy is. The good news is, no one knows what a Sustainable Communities Strategy is.” We can lower greenhouse gas emissions, reduce racial injustice, and create economic opportunity at the same time. Indeed, unless we see the interdependence of these forces, we will not get it right. With the threat of increased extinction of species and the loss of biological conditions which support complex life on earth, this is an important moment in planetary history. And the heat really is on for us to get it right. Carl Anthony has not only given us a fish, he has taught us to fish.

I feel personal pride and gratitude for the opportunity to work with this superstar for nearly 15 years. With a sparkle in his eye, he reminds us all to grow up and act our age—13.7 billion years. It has been a long journey from the supernova and the birthplace of humankind in Africa. We are stronger for his guidance and voice in the wilderness. Carl is now working on a new climate justice story of the Universe. With decades of achievement and service, Carl Anthony is our Climate Justice Superhero.

**Be The Media: The Power of Telling Our Story**

“My arms grow longer or shorter by your looking or not looking” (Rosa Lane, poet Roots and Reckonings)
Back to our photo. Who else is in the picture? Each one of our coalition members that you see standing or sitting in this room I would propose is one of our Climate Justice Superheroes. Each has a voice, has a story, and has a frame of meaning for their own mobilization in the SB 375 SCS process. Learning to work together as a coalition and see one another deeply, we have created the conditions for each of our voices and visibility to be amplified in this process. We are literally witnessing one another into being. The New Voices Are Rising Youth are a dramatic demonstration of this.

Who is not in the picture? The many in our own communities who wanted to be in this room but could not get off work to be here in person, or who cannot squeeze another hour from the press of survival to be here in person. We who occupy this room feel you and seek to speak on your behalf.

Who else is not in this photo? The Tea Party members. We heard a lot of noise and saw a lot from them, throughout this process. They were a curve ball. It took great discipline and focus, not to engage with their negative and distracting energy and to stay in alignment with our deepest vision and values and sustain our respectful and collaborative leadership working for collective impact. Beyond “saying no” to the Tea Party framework, we stayed on our own message to “say yes” to solutions that would move us closer to sustainability and closer to reconciliation of protecting what is vital about urban culture and bring it into alignment with the life support system of the planet.

Who is not in the picture? The more than human world, the larger living system of our planet. When we stand up to give testimony at the Metro center, we are part of the feedback loop in the living body of the earth, we speak not only for vulnerable communities, but also for the trees.

Who else is not in this photo? Coalitions in other regions. Those in each of the five target regions who have been the writers and contributors to this California Climate Justice story are not in the photo, but they are present to us as we look at this photograph. We are also aware of those who have been participating in similar processes in each of the 18 regions of California. And we are aware of those whose eyes throughout the nation and the world are on California and this historically significant process.

We acknowledge the need for a second stage of the Climate Justice project—to gather the knowledge that so many have gathered and generated here and share that knowledge more widely. There are many places ripe to share learning, strategy. Starting with ourselves. We say this even as SB 535 and Cap and Trade are already looming. We feel the heat and need to prepare together for greater collective impact. Up our game. Fast. We have learned much in this process. The power of we, and the tools and the capacity to create an even larger we.

Who else is missing from this photo? On the other side of the room, the target for our community remarks in this civic engagement process are the decision makers. On the right hand border of the photo, we see the consternation of the gentleman holding his head sitting at the boundary of the two sides of the room. He is a symbol of the struggle at
the boundary to reach through these complex processes and hear one another in fresh and powerful ways that forge a future we can live for (to paraphrase Nelson Mandela). To his right just outside of our frame is a large U-shape structure of tables with individual microphones—the Board of the Metropolitan Policy Organization (MPO) formally in session. These decision makers are becoming more visible to us.

We are learning to go outside the frame of this designated photo, to cross this line with increasing aplomb. And we are becoming visible to them. The voice of Contra Costa County District One Supervisor John Gioia in this Climate Justice volume is a powerful demonstration of this dynamic. And he represents other electeds who also seek to cross the line, listen deeply and respond to their most vulnerable constituents, walking the walk of democracy.

And finally, who else is missing from this photo?

The person who took it. Yet, the photo exists. We are able to have this shared perspective because we are both looking at this photo together. We are bound in a horizon of new possibility, by the documentation of the work of our coalitions. Why does this matter? As the photographer, I took this picture because I wanted to capture our coalition’s story. I am speaking now of this individual photo before us, however it reflects the larger project of documenting and recording our work, telling our story as a practice and as a necessity of our social justice movements. We ask you to join with us in strengthening the Climate Justice project which is before you now (the interviews, the videos, the articles, the analyses, the lessons learned, the recommendations).

In order to place ourselves in the center of the frame, we must be the media. We must document, hear and see ourselves in action. And we must share this message. Who are our primary audiences?

First we must share this story with ourselves. We need to see ourselves reflected back, and in effective action. Second we need to share our story with vulnerable communities, for education and mobilization. Third, as the crisis deepens, we must share our story with other allied communities including the middle class in the United States who stand to benefit from healthy public transit investment. Fourth, we must share our story with a larger national audience and in solidarity with those in the developing world, sending a grounded demonstration that social justice is compatible with reducing greenhouse gas emissions and increasing solutions to climate change. We must get the word out: Another world is possible beyond rampant consumption and waste. (Paloma Pavel, Ph.D., Editor)