Economic Inclusion Is Not Charity—It Is a Competitive Imperative for America

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I want to begin by thanking Reverend Dr. Al Sharpton, president of the National Action Network, for his vision, perseverance and courage in once again convening the March on Washington. The 2026 march's focus on voting rights, healthcare and diversity, equity and inclusion remind us that America's promise of opportunity remains unfinished.

For business and political leaders, however, there is an important question we must ask: **What does economic inclusion mean in practical terms, and what will it take to make it measurable?**

On August 28, 1963, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before more than 250,000 Americans in Washington, D.C. and spoke to a nation struggling with the contradiction between its democratic ideals and the lived reality of Black Americans. His vision was not limited to civil rights in the narrowest sense. It included employment, housing, education, voting rights and meaningful participation in the American economy.

More than 60 years later, the economic dimension of that unfinished work deserves renewed attention.

America became the world's leading economy through the contributions of generations of people whose labor, innovation and entrepreneurship helped build its institutions and industries. Yet Black Americans have historically faced barriers to capital, education, property ownership, government contracting, corporate procurement and other pathways to wealth creation.

This history is important—but history alone cannot be our economic strategy for the future.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson understood the transformative power of knowledge when he established Negro History Week in 1926. Dr. King understood the transformative power of collective action. Today, leaders across government and business must understand the transformative power of **economic access**.

Access to opportunity is ultimately an issue of competitiveness.

Consider New Jersey. The state's 2024 Disparity Study presents a sobering picture of participation in public contracting. According to the study, Black-owned businesses received just 13 state-funded contracts totaling approximately $3.3 million out of roughly $11 billion in state contracting expenditures over a five-year period. The study also reported that approximately 30 percent of state-funded contracts went to firms domiciled outside New Jersey.

Those figures should concern every policymaker, corporate executive and taxpayer in the state—not because Black businesses should receive contracts simply because they are Black-owned, but because **qualified New Jersey businesses should have a fair opportunity to compete for New Jersey's economic activity.**

That distinction is fundamental.

Economic inclusion is not about lowering standards. It is about removing artificial barriers that prevent qualified companies from reaching the starting line.

A competitive economy requires access to capital, procurement opportunities, technical assistance, networks, information and markets. If a capable business is unaware of an opportunity, cannot access the capital necessary to perform, lacks the relationships required to enter a supply chain, or is systematically excluded from consideration, the marketplace is not operating at its full potential.

The consequences extend far beyond the individual entrepreneur.

A business that wins a contract can hire employees. Employees spend money in local communities. Growing companies purchase equipment and professional services. Successful entrepreneurs create taxable wealth and become investors, mentors and employers for the next generation.

In other words, **business inclusion creates economic multiplication.**

This is why the disparity in wealth between Black and White households must also be understood as an economic issue rather than simply a social issue. When communities possess dramatically different levels of accumulated wealth, they begin from dramatically different positions when seeking to purchase homes, capitalize businesses, finance education or transfer assets to future generations.

New Jersey and America cannot afford to leave productive economic capacity on the sidelines.

The solution does not require government or corporations to guarantee outcomes. It requires leaders to guarantee **access to a fair competitive process** and then measure whether that process is producing meaningful participation.

That means establishing clear procurement goals, expanding supplier diversity, improving access to capital, publishing transparent contracting data, connecting small businesses with corporate supply chains, and holding institutions accountable for measurable results.

Corporate America has an equally important role.

Every major corporation should ask itself a simple question: **How many qualified businesses are missing from our supply chain because we have not created a pathway for them to compete?**

The answer may reveal opportunities that conventional economic-development strategies overlook.

The African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey believes that Black businesses are not asking for a handout. We are asking for a marketplace in which capability, innovation, performance and entrepreneurship can determine success—not barriers unrelated to a company's ability to compete.

The March on Washington reminds us that the struggle for full participation has never been solely about protest. It has always been about possibility.

Dr. Woodson taught us the power of knowledge. Dr. King demonstrated the power of moral leadership. Reverend Dr. Sharpton continues to demonstrate the power of perseverance.

Now, political and corporate leaders must demonstrate the power of **economic action**.

New Jersey has an opportunity to become a national model for inclusive economic growth. America has an opportunity to turn decades of conversation about equity into measurable expansion of entrepreneurship, ownership, employment and wealth creation.

The choice before us is straightforward.

We can continue to discuss disparities as a social problem—or we can recognize them as an **economic opportunity**.

When qualified businesses have greater access to resources, contracts, capital, information and markets, competition becomes stronger, innovation increases and communities prosper.

Economic inclusion is not charity. It is not a concession. It is not a zero-sum proposition.

It is a strategy for building a more competitive New Jersey and a stronger America.

And the time to act is now.

I also extend my sincere appreciation to Reverend Steffie Bartley, president of the New Jersey Chapter of the National Action Network, for including the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, Inc. in this year's March on Washington.

We stand ready to work with government, business and community leaders to turn the promise of economic inclusion into measurable economic opportunity—for New Jersey and for America.