



"People-of-Color Environmentalism"

from *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990)

Robert Bullard

Editors' Introduction



Sustainability goals are often presented in terms of the "three Es" – environment, economy, and equity – which in a sustainable society would all be enhanced rather than undermined over the long term. Of these, equity has been by far the least represented within public policy debates. There are relatively few well-organized groups advocating on behalf of low-income or otherwise disadvantaged communities. Even the environmental movement, with its relatively progressive middle-class constituency, developed with little consideration of the equity implications of its issues.

The link between social justice and environmental issues in the USA was developed beginning in the 1980s in large part by working-class communities fighting against the location of garbage incinerators, land fills, and toxic chemical hazards near their neighborhoods. African-American and Latino activists also criticized mainstream environmental groups for their lack of diversity, and demanded changes in federal regulation to produce more equitable public participation within environmental decision-making. At the same time, Third World activists were calling attention to the inequitable impacts of development policies internationally – a separate but parallel set of equity debates. The environmental injustices suffered by disenfranchised communities in North America, in other words, came to be seen by many activists as similar to the condition of less well-off groups worldwide.

Atlanta sociology professor Robert D. Bullard has been at the forefront of chronicling and defining the environmental justice movement in the USA. Here he discusses the roots of the movement, links with gender issues, and prospects for future organizing. Other leading writings on the subject of environmental justice include *Sprawl City: Race, Politics, and Planning in Atlanta*, edited by Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000), *Environmental Injustices, Political Struggles: Race, Class, and the Environment*, edited by David E. Camacho (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), and *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*, edited by Julian Agyeman, Robert D. Bullard, and Bob Evans (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).



It is time for people to stop asking the question "Do minorities care about the environment?" The evidence is clear and irrefutable that white middleclass communities do not have a monopoly on environ-

mental concern, nor are they the only groups moved to action when confronted with the threat of pollution. Although a "concern-and-action gap" may still exist between people of color and whites,

communities of color are no longer being bullied into submission by industrial polluters and government regulators.¹

Clearly, a "new" form of environmentalism has taken root in America and in communities of color. Since the late 1970s, a new grassroots social movement has emerged around the toxics threat. Citizens mobilized around the anti-waste theme. These social activists acquired new skills in areas where they had little or no prior experience. They soon became resident "experts" on toxics issues. . . . However, they did not limit their attacks to well-publicized toxic-contamination issues but sought remedial actions on problems like housing, transportation, air quality, and even economic development — issues the traditional environmental agenda had largely ignored.

Environmental justice embraces the principle that all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental, health, employment, housing, transportation, and civil rights laws. Activists even convinced the EPA to develop a definition of environmental justice. The EPA defines environmental justice as:

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socio-economic group should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies.²

A major paradigm shift occurred in the 1990s. This shift created a new framework and a new leadership. Women led much of this grassroots leadership. The impetus behind this change included grassroots activism, redefinition of environmentalism as a "right," research documenting disparities, national conferences and symposia, emphasis on pollution and disease prevention, government initiatives, interpretation of existing laws and mandates, and grassroots alliances and coalitions.

Environmentalism has been too narrowly defined. Concern has been incorrectly equated with check

writing, dues paying, and membership in environmental organizations. These biases have no doubt contributed to the misunderstanding of the grassroots environmental justice movement in people-of-color communities. People-of-color activists in this new movement focused their attention on the notion of deprivation. For example, when people of color compare their environmental quality with that of the larger society, a sense of deprivation and unequal treatment, unequal protection, and unequal enforcement emerges. Once again, institutional racism and discriminatory land-use policies and practices of government — at all levels — influence the creation and perpetuation of racially separate and unequal residential areas for people of color and whites. Too often the disparities result in groups fighting another form of institutional discrimination.³

All communities are not created equal. Institutional barriers have locked millions of people of color in polluted neighborhoods and hazardous, low-paying jobs, making it difficult for them to "vote with their feet" and escape these health-threatening environments. Whether in the ghetto or barrio, on the reservation, or in rural "poverty pockets," environmental injustice is making some people sick. Government has been slow to take these concerns as legitimate environmental and health problems. Mainstream environmentalists have also been slow in recognizing these grassroots activists as "real" environmentalists.⁴

The environmental justice movement is an extension of the social justice movement. Environmental justice advocates should not have to apologize for this historical fact. Environmentalists may be concerned about clean air but may have opposing views on public transportation, highway construction, industrial-facility siting, or the construction of low-income housing in white, middle-class suburban neighborhoods. On the other hand, environmental justice advocates also want clean air. People of color have come to understand that environmentalists are no more enlightened than nonenvironmentalists when it comes to issues of justice and social equity. But then, why should they be more enlightened? After all, we are all products of socialization and reflect the various biases and prejudices of this process. It is not surprising that mainstream environmental organizations have not been active on issues that disproportionately

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impact people of color, as in the case of toxics, workplace hazards, rural and urban housing needs, and the myriad of problems resulting from discriminatory zoning and strains in the urban, industrial complex. Yet people of color are the ones accused of being ill-informed, unconcerned, and inactive on environmental issues.

Environmental decision-making operates at the juncture of science, economics, politics, and ethics. It has been an uphill battle to try to convince some government and industry officials and some environmentalists that unequal protection, disparate impact, and environmental racism exist. Nevertheless, grassroots activists have continued to argue and in many instances have won their case. Working together, community stakeholders can assist government decision-makers in identifying "at-risk" populations, toxic "hot spots," research gaps, and action plans to correct existing imbalances and prevent future threats.⁵ In order to accomplish their mission in an era of dwindling resources, environmental policymakers are increasingly turning to strategies that incorporate a *community-empowerment* approach. For example, community environmental protection (CEP) is being touted by the EPA as a "new" way of doing business.

Strengthening grassroots community groups can build a supportive social environment for decision-making. Residents and government authorities (local, state, and federal), often working together through creative partnerships with grassroots community groups, universities, nonprofit agencies, and other institutions, can begin solving environmental and health problems and design strategies to prevent future problems in low-income areas and communities of color. But the US Environmental Protection Agency and other governmental agencies cannot resolve all environmental problems alone. Communities also need to be in the position to assist in their own struggle for clean, safe, healthy, livable, and sustainable communities.

THE RIGHT TO BREATHE CLEAN AIR

Before the federal government stepped in, issues related to air pollution were handled primarily by states and local governments. Because states and local governments did such a poor job, the federal government established national clean-air standards.

Congress enacted the Clean Air Act (CAA) in 1970 and mandated the EPA to carry out this law. Subsequent amendments (1977 and 1990) were made to the CAA that form the current federal program. The CAA was a response to states' unwillingness to protect air quality. Many states used their lax enforcement of environmental laws as lures for business and economic development.⁶

Transportation policies are also implicated in urban air-pollution problems. Automobile-choked highways create health-threatening air pollution.⁷ Freeways are the lifeline for suburban commuters, and millions of central-city residents are dependent on public transportation as their primary mode of travel.⁸ Are people of color concerned about air quality and transportation? The answer is yes. The air-quality impacts of transportation are especially significant to people of color, who are more likely than whites to live in urban areas with reduced air quality. . . .

Asthma is an emerging epidemic in the United States. The annual age-adjusted death rate from asthma increased by 40 per cent between 1982 and 1991, from 1.34 to 1.88 per 100,000 population,⁹ with the highest rates being consistently reported among blacks between the ages of 15 and 24 years during the period 1980-1993.¹⁰ Poverty and minority status are important risk factors for asthma mortality. Children are at special risk from ozone.¹¹ Children also represent a considerable share of the asthma burden, that affliction being the most common chronic disease of childhood. Asthma affects almost 5 million children under 18 years of age. . . .

The public health community has insufficient information to explain the magnitude of some of the air pollution-related health problems. However, they do know that people suffering from asthma are particularly sensitive to the effects of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxides, particulate matter, ozone, and nitrogen oxides.¹² Ground-level ozone may exacerbate health problems such as asthma, nasal congestion, throat irritation, respiratory-tract inflammation, reduced resistance to infection, changes in cell function, loss of lung elasticity, chest pains, lung scarring, formation of lesions within the lungs, and premature aging of lung tissues.¹³

African Americans, for example, have significantly higher prevalence of asthma than the general population.¹⁴ A 1996 report from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows

hospitalization and death rates from asthma increasing for individuals 25 years old or younger.¹⁵ The greatest increases occurred among African Americans. African Americans are two to six times more likely than whites to die from asthma.¹⁶ Similarly, the hospitalization rate for African Americans is 3.4 times the rate for whites. . . . Air pollution, for many environmental justice advocates, translates into poor health, loss of wages, and diminished quality of life.

THE THREAT OF ECONOMIC EXTORTION

Why were people-of-color organizations late in challenging the environmental imbalance that exists in the United States? People-of-color organizations and their leaders have not been as sensitive to the environmental threats as they have been to problems in education, housing, jobs, drugs, and, more recently, the AIDS epidemic. In some cases, they have operated out of misguided fear and speculation that environmental justice will erode hard-fought civil rights gains or thwart economic development in urban core neighborhoods. There is no evidence that environmental justice or the application of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has hurt business or "brownfields" (abandoned properties that may or may not be contaminated) redevelopment opportunities in communities of color.¹⁷ On the other hand, we do not have to speculate about the harm inflicted on the residents from racial red-lining by banks and insurance companies and the targeting of communities of color for polluting industries and locally unwanted land uses, or LULUS. The harm is real and measurable.

Grassroots groups in communities of color are beginning to take a stand against threatened plant closure and job loss as a trade-off for environmental risks. These threats are tantamount to economic extortion. This extortion has lost some of its appeal, especially in those areas where the economic incentives (jobs, taxes, monetary contributions, etc.) flow outside of the host community. People can hardly be extorted over economic benefits they never receive from the local polluting industry. There is a huge difference between the promise of a job and a real job. People will tell you, "You can't eat promises." Because of the potential

to exacerbate existing environmental inequities, community leaders are now questioning the underlying assumptions behind so-called trade-offs as applied in poor areas.

In their push to become acceptable and credible, many mainstream environmental organizations adopted a corporate model in their structure, demeanor, and outlook. This metamorphosis has had a down side. These corporate-like environmental organizations have alienated many grassroots leaders and community organizers from the larger movements. The environmental justice movement – with its egalitarian worldview and social justice agenda – offers an alternative to the more staid traditional environmental groups.

Local community groups may be turned off by the idea of sitting around a table with a waste-disposal giant, a government regulator, and an environmentalist to negotiate the siting of a toxic-waste incinerator in their community. The lines become blurred in terms of the parties representing the interests of the community and those of business. Negotiations of this type fuel residents' perception of an "unholy trinity," where the battle lines are drawn along an "us-versus-them" power arrangement. Moreover, overdependence on and blind acceptance of risk-assessment analysis and "the best available technology" for policy setting serves to intimidate, confuse, and overwhelm individuals at the grassroots level.

Talk of risk compensation for a host community raises a series of moral dilemmas, especially where environmental imbalances already exist. Should risks be borne by a smaller group to spare the larger groups? Past discriminatory facility-siting practices should not guide future policy decisions. Having one polluting facility makes it easier to site another in the same general area. The "one more won't make a difference" logic often becomes the dominant framework for decision-making. Any saturation policy derived from past siting practices perpetuates equity impacts and environmental injustice. Facility siting becomes a ritual for selecting "victims for sacrifice."

MOBILIZING THE GRASS ROOTS

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communities of color. Few social movements can count on total support and involvement of their constituent groups. All social movements have "free riders," individuals who benefit from the efforts of a few. Some people shake the trees, while others pick up the apples. People-of-color environmentalism has been and will probably remain wedded to a social-action and social-justice framework. The issues raised by environmental justice advocates challenge the very core of privilege in our society. Some people make money and profit off the misery of poisoning others. Some communities are spared environmental assaults because of industrial-siting practices of concentrating locally unwanted land uses in communities with little or no political power and limited resources. After all, American society has yet to achieve a race-neutral state where race- and ethnic-based organizations are no longer needed.

Although the color barrier has been breached in most professional groups around the country, blacks still find it useful to have their own organizations. The predominately black National Bar Association (NBA), National Medical Association (NMA), National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), Association of Black Psychologists (ABP), and Association of Black Sociologists (ABS) are examples of race-based professional organizations that will probably be around for some time in the new millennium.

Grassroots environmental organizations have the advantage of being closer to the people they serve and the problems they address. Future growth in the environmental movement is likely to come from the bottom up, with grassroots environmental groups linking up with social-justice groups for expanded spheres of influence and focus.

Communities of color do not have a long track record in challenging government decisions and private industries that threaten the environment and health of their residents. Many of the organizations and institutions were formed as a reaction to racism and dealt primarily with social-justice issues. Groups such as the NAACP, Urban League, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Commission for Racial Justice operate at the multi-state level and have affiliates in cities across the nation. With the exception of Reverend Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference, Benjamin R. Chavis Jr. of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, and Reverend Jessie Jackson of the National Rainbow Coalition, few national black civil rights leaders and organizations embraced an ideology that linked environmental disparities with racism.¹⁸ It was not until the 1980s that national civil rights organizations began to make such links. This linking of institutional racism with the structure of resource allocation (clean environments) has led people-of-color social-action groups to adopt environmental justice as a civil rights issue, an issue well worth "taking to the street."

NIMBYism [not-in-my-backyard politics] has operated to insulate many white communities from the localized environmental impacts of waste facilities while providing them the benefits of waste disposal. NIMBYism, like white racism, creates and perpetuates privileges for whites at the expense of people of color. Citizens see the siting and unequal protection question as an all-out war. Those communities that can mobilize political influence improve their chance of "winning" this war. Because people of color remain underrepresented in elected and appointed offices, they must, most often, rely on indirect representation, usually through white officials who may or may not understand the nature and severity of the community problem. Citizen redress often becomes a political issue. Often the only science involved in the government response and decision-making is political science.

Who are the frontline leaders in this quest for environmental justice? The war against environmental racism and environmental injustice has been waged largely by people of color who are indigenous to the communities. People-of-color grassroots community groups receive some moral support from outside groups, but few experts are down in the trenches fighting alongside the warriors. On the other hand, it was the mothers and grandmothers, ministers from the churches, and the activist leaders from community-based organizations, civic clubs, neighborhood associations, and parents' groups who mobilized against the toxics threat. Few of these leaders may identify themselves as environmentalists or see their struggle solely as an environmental problem. Their struggles embrace larger issues of equity, social justice, and resource distribution. Environmental justice activists question

the fairness of the decision-making process and the outcome.

Many environmental justice disputes revolve around siting issues, involving government or private industry. Proposals for future sites are more likely to attract environmentalists' support than are existing sites. It is much easier to get outside assistance in fighting a noxious facility that is on paper than one that is in operation. Again, plant closure means economic dislocation. Because communities of color are burdened with a greater share of existing facilities – many of which have been in operation for decades – it is an uphill battle of convincing outside environmental groups to support efforts to close such facilities.

It makes a lot of sense for the organized environmental movement in the United States to broaden its base to include people-of-color, low-income, and working-class individuals and issues. Why diversify? People of color now form a potent voting bloc. Diversification makes good economic and political sense for the long-range survival of the environmental movement. However, it is not about selfishness or "quota filling." Diversification can go a long way in enhancing the national environmental movement's worldwide credibility and legitimacy in dealing with global environmental and development issues, especially in Third World nations.¹⁹

NOTES

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- 2 US Environmental Protection Agency. 1998. *Guidance for Incorporating Environmental Justice Concerns in EPA's NEPA Compliance Analysis*. Washington, DC: EPA.
- 3 Bullard, R.D. 1999. Dismantling Environmental Racism in the USA. *Local Environment*, 4, pp. 5–19.
- 4 Westra, Laura and Wenz, Peter S. 1995. *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- 5 Bullard, R.D. 1999. Leveling the Playing Field Through Environmental Justice. *Vermont Law Review*, 23, pp. 453–478; Collin, Robert W. and Robin M. 1998. The Role of Communities in Environmental Decisions: Communities Speaking for Themselves. *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation*, 13, pp. 37–89.
- 6 Reitze, Arnold W. Jr. 1991. A Century of Air Pollution Control Law: What Worked; What Failed; What Might Work. *Environmental Law*, 21, pp. 15–49.
- 7 Davis, Sid. 1997. Race and the Politics of Transportation in Atlanta. In R.D. Bullard and G.S. Johnson (eds). *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility*. Gabriola Island, DC: New Society Publishers, pp. 84–96; Environmental Justice Resource Center. 1999. *Sprawl Atlanta: Social Equity Dimensions of Uneven Growth and Development*. Atlanta, GA: Report prepared for the Turner Foundation, Clark Atlanta University.
- 8 For an in-depth discussion of transportation investments and social equity issues, see Bullard and Johnson (eds). *Just Transportation*.
- 9 Centers for Disease Control. 1995. Asthma – United States, 1982–1992. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 43, pp. 952–955.
- 10 Centers for Disease Control. 1996. Asthma Mortality and Hospitalization Among Children and Young Adults – United States, 1980–1993. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 45, pp. 350–353.
- 11 Pribitkin, Anna E. 1994. The Need for Revision of Ozone Standards: Why Has the EPA Failed to Respond? *Temple Environmental Law & Technology Journal*, 13, p. 104.
- 12 See Mann, Eric. 1991. *L.A.'s Lethal Air: New Strategies for Policy, Organizing, and Action*. Los Angeles: Labor/Community Strategy Center.
- 13 US Environmental Protection Agency. 1996. *Review of National Ambient Air Quality Standards for Ozone, Assessment of Scientific and Technical Information*. Research Triangle Park, NC: OAQPS staff paper, EPA; American Lung Association. 1995. *Out of Breath: Populations-at-Risk to Alternative Ozone Levels*. Washington, DC: American Lung Association.
- 14 See Mak, H.P., Abbey, H., and Talamo, R.C. 1983. Prevalence of Asthma and Health Service Utilization of Asthmatic Children in an

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17 US Environmental Protection Agency. 1999. *Brownfields Title VI Case Studies: Summary Report*. Washington, DC: Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

18 United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. 1998. *From Plantation to Plant: Report of the Emergency National Commission on Environmental Justice in St. James Parish, Louisiana*. Cleveland: United Church of Christ.

19 See Bullard, R.D. 1993. *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*. Boston: South End Press, ch. 1.