

Environmental Justice: A Primer

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Abstract: Environmental justice is the fair treatment and inclusive participation of all people in environmental decision-making regardless of race, color, or socioeconomic status. It mainly addresses the issue of environmental discrimination or racism. Scholars and activists for environmental justice argue that all people deserve to live in a clean and safe environment. Governments or civil society leaders should provide leadership to champion environmental justice by addressing grassroots concerns on environmental inequalities. This paper provides a primer on environmental justice.

Keywords: *Environmental Justice, Environmental Racism, Environmental Equity, Climate Justice*

I. INTRODUCTION

Trees cool and clean the air in cities and provide neighbors with a healthier environment. We all have a stake in our environment. We must ensure that our air is cleaner, our water is purer, and our land is protected. Environmental discrimination has historically been evident in the process of selecting where to dump waste and hazardous materials. It is well believed that environmental injustice is the outcome of an institutional oppression and isolation. Such environmental injustice has implications for human health and wellbeing, affecting the ability of present and future generations to be productive.

The exact meaning of “justice” in “environmental justice” has remained contested because justice is a familiar but complex concept. There are apparent clashes between resource utilization, transport, and waste disposal. Increasing evidence shows that minority-based environmental injustice exists. For example, economically disadvantaged kids live in crowded homes and are exposed to environmental toxins.

II. CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice (EJ) or rather injustice is a concept that emerged in the United States in the early 1980s, in the context of the struggle for racial equality. It encompasses the distribution of environmental goods and harms. It may also be regarded as a principle of American democracy that combines civil rights with environmental protection. Evidence indicates certain racial and ethnic groups bear a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards. EJ that must be considered in relation to the social, economic, and political factors that influence the experiences of affected communities. EJ tries to shed environmental racism. Several environmental justice issues revolve around issues of environmental risk. Environmental justice is an integral part of social justice.

Environmental justice is a multifaceted concept. It is also a “contested” concept which is susceptible to multiple interpretations. It is both a distributive and participative idea. Distributive environmental justice involves fair allocation of environmental risks and resources regardless of race or income. Participative justice involves the political participation of all stakeholders in the environmental decision making process regardless of race or income [1].

EJ is the principle that environmental costs and amenities ought to be equitably distributed within society regardless of race, color, or income. It is a concept whereby individuals, environment, and health are integrated to advance social policy and improve health for vulnerable populations. The rise of green movement in the 1960s helped to develop environmental consciousness and elevated the scholarly debate about environmental justice.

Typical practices of environmental injustice are [2]:

- The placing of hazardous and other noxious facilities
- Lead poisoning among children
- Asthma and other respiratory illnesses
- Unsafe, indecent, and exploitative workplace conditions
- Cancer, birth defects, and developmental illnesses
- Pesticide poisoning of farm workers
- Contaminated sites and properties
- Transportation thoroughfares
- Congested and decaying housing conditions
- Lack of protection of spiritual grounds and indigenous habitats
- Pollution and lack of sound economic development
- Lack of access to quality health care
- Unequal enforcement of environmental laws
- Lack of people of color in the environmental professions
- Inadequate community participation in the decision-making process

III. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Environmental justice advocates keenly contend that there is a relationship between the trilogy of environmental racism, environmental discrimination, and environmental policymaking. The social values of several local environmental justice activists have translated to the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM). The EJ movement grew in US in 1970s as a grassroots movement from concerns that hazards, such as toxic waste disposal facilities, were predominantly located in low income and non-white communities. The resultant impacts of pollution on human health and well-being are generally spread nonuniformly among the populace. Robert Bullard, African-American sociologist, is widely regarded the “father of the environmental justice movement.” Environmental Justice movement began in the United States and spread to other countries and became a global movement known as Transnational Networks for Environmental Justice [3].

The movement aims at building a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities. The goals of the movements include: ending institutional discrimination, eliminating environmental inequality, and pursuing social justice. Other issues tackled by EJ in the United States include

race, racial justice, inequality, environmental degradation, and social liberation.

The movement has achieved a measure of success, particularly in getting government to respond to their concerns and ensuring federal intervention. A key determinant of success is the ability of the movement to continuously push for environmental laws and policies that benefit their community [4]. A group of EJ activists is shown in Figure 1 [5].



Figure 1: A group of EJ activists [5]

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE PRINCIPLES

Environmental justice embraces the major principle that all people are entitled to equal protection of our environmental laws. The following seventeen principles have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice [6,7].

1. Environmental justice affirms the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, and the right to be free from ecological destruction.
2. Environmental justice demands that public policy be based on mutual respect and justice for all peoples, free from any form of discrimination or bias.
3. Environmental justice mandates the right to ethical, balanced, and responsible uses of land and renewable resources in the interest of a sustainable planet for humans and other living things.
4. Environmental justice calls for universal protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes and poisons and nuclear testing that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water, and food.
5. Environmental justice affirms the fundamental right to political, economic, cultural, and environmental self-determination of all peoples.
6. Environmental justice demands the cessation of the production of all toxins, hazardous wastes, and radioactive materials, and that all past and current producers be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production.
7. Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation.
8. Environmental justice affirms the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment, without

being forced to choose between an unsafe livelihood and unemployment. It also affirms the right of those who work at home to be free from environmental hazards.

9. Environmental justice protects the right of victims of environmental injustice to receive full compensation and reparations for damages as well as quality health care.
10. Environmental justice considers governmental acts of environmental injustice a violation of international law, the Universal Declaration On Human Rights, and the United Nations Convention on Genocide.
11. Environmental justice must recognize a special legal and natural relationship of Native Peoples to the US government through treaties, agreements, compacts, and covenants affirming sovereignty and self-determination.
12. Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honoring the cultural integrity of all our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources.
13. Environmental justice calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and a halt to the testing of experimental reproductive and medical procedures and vaccinations on people of color.
14. Environmental justice opposes the destructive operations of multi-national corporations.
15. Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression, and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms.
16. Environmental justice calls for the education of present and future generations which emphasizes social and environmental issues, based on our experience and an appreciation of our diverse cultural perspectives.
17. Environmental justice requires that we, as individuals, make personal and consumer choices to consume as little of Mother Earth's resources and to produce as little waste as possible; and make the conscious decision to challenge and reprioritize our lifestyles to insure the health of the natural world for present and future generations.

V. APPLICATIONS

Practicing environmental justice entails ensuring that all citizens receive from the government the same degree of protection from environmental hazards. The practice of EJ will be illustrated by the US government and the US Department of Transportation,



Figure 2 President Clinton signing the EJ executive order in 1994 [8].

A. Government

Environmental justice is regarded as a policy principle formulated by the government at local, state or federal level. The responsibility for drawing up these policies lies with the federal states, which can transfer responsibility to local agencies. Environmental justice initiatives now operate across multiple programs within the states in the US and the rest of the world. Achieving climate goals in the US disproportionately affects members of the population who are the poorest, most marginalized, and non-white. Fairness, justice, and equity must be the main aspects of our climate agenda. There is a relationship between the US prison system and environmental justice concerns. The government at all levels should have an inclusive agenda in ensuring social and environmental justice. As shown in Figure 2, the US President Clinton signed the executive order on EJ in 1994 [8]. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2009 initiated activities to ensure the assessment and consideration of environmental justice issues in its regulatory decisions. Regulatory interventions by EPA was to fulfill its mission to protect the environment and health. Municipal government should incorporate advocacy planning at the neighborhood level into the planning process. It can address environmental justice by including justice values in planning education.

B. Transportation

Transportation is the largest source of pollution. The Department of Transportation (DOT) issued regulatory guidelines to address environmental justice in transportation in 1997. There appears to be discrimination in provision of transportation services in the eyes of advocacy group members. Hence, environmental justice is necessary in transportation planning and policy. The Department of Transportation ensures ES non-discrimination and of considers adverse economic, social, and environmental effects of transportation. To be specific, DOT is committed to three basic principles of EJ: (1). Ensure full participation of low-income and minority groups and communities potentially affected by the transportation decision-making process; (2) Avoid, minimize, or mitigate disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects on minority populations and low-income populations; and (3) Prevent the denial of, reduction in, or significant delay in the receipt of benefits by minority and low-income populations [9]. DOT should endeavor to reduce transport pollution.

Other areas of application of EJ include energy use, tourism, and warehousing location.

VI. BENEFIT AND CHALLENGES

Environmental justice/injustice is a call to equity in view of the disparities among people in costs and benefits distribution. It is an important issue affecting health disparities among citizens. It can contribute to fighting environmental racism, eliminating poverty, and reducing inequality. Environmental justice activists link the unequal distribution of resources with environmental racism. Economic equity is ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefits and costs among stakeholders, including residents [10]. Those experiencing the most harmful effects of a changing climate are typically those who have contributed the least emissions. For this reason, native Americans and other minority groups seek EJ restitution [11].

Environmental justice movement has not escaped criticism. There are challenges to collaboration between environmental justice advocates and the environmentalists who lead the climate change movement. Recognizing the plurality of the principles of environmental justice poses a challenge to those who seek to identify a set of universal principles of justice and sustainability. There is lack of standards and regulatory guidance in implementing environmental justice principles. Standardized measures are needed to inform public dialogue and policy [12]. There is also lack of environmental justice ethics in many nations. These challenges can also produce new injustices or perpetuate existing ones.

CONCLUSION

The concept of environmental justice originated from the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s and the more recent Environmental Justice Movement. It started with the desire to prevent environmental injustices and to ensure a healthy environment for everyone regardless of race and socioeconomic status. Environmental injustice is still prevalent in the US and worldwide. The fair treatment of all people is essential in creating a healthy world where children can grow to their full potential.

Environmental justice is a phenomenon that is causing revolution in the United States and abroad. It is based on the principle that all people have a right to be protected from environmental pollution. EJ scholarship has been expanding. Researchers have identified three explanations as the causes of environmental injustice: economic, sociopolitical, and racial [13]. Citizens must be educated in organizing, mobilizing, and empowering themselves to take charge of their lives, their communities, and their environments. More information on environmental justice can be found in books in [7, 14-23] and several other books available on Amazon.com.

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