

# STORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

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## ***What is Environmental Justice?***

Environmental Justice is a concept and social movement that seeks to address the reality that environmental burdens (eg. intrusive mining and extraction, dumping of toxic & contaminated materials, high-polluting industry *etc.*) are inequitably distributed and often concentrated in areas of socio-economically marginalized people (Agyeman *et al.* 2003). The basic premise of environmental justice is the notion that all people have an equal right to live in a healthy environment and, correspondingly, that environmental harms should be equitably distributed amongst all social groups (McLaren 2003).

The concept of environmental justice was borne out of the movement against environmental racism in America in the 1980s and 1990s. The notion of 'environmental racism' emerged from the American Civil Rights movement and attempted to address the injustice of toxic industry being predominantly concentrated in areas of African- American, indigenous and Hispanic residents (Agyeman *et al.* 2003). The term environmental justice gained momentum, broadening the scope of the movement to include marginalized residents of all races who face inequitable distribution of environmental damage (Sze & London 2001).

The tendency for hazardous industry to be concentrated in low-income areas is often based on a 'path- of- least resistance' for industries and corporations. An example of this is a 1984 Report by Cerrell Associates for the California Waste Management Board, "openly recommending that polluting industries and the state locate hazardous

waste facilities in 'lower socio- economic neighbourhoods' because those communities had a much lower likelihood of offering political opposition" (Faber & McCarthy 2003 p.45).

What is referred to as the Environmental Justice movement in North America, Europe and South Africa is also known as the 'Environmentalism of the Poor' in many parts of the world. Scholar Joan Martinez Allier describes the Environmentalism of the Poor as the occurrence of "unequal incidence of environmental harm [giving] birth to environmental movements of the poor" (2002). Proponents of these movements are local landowners in the Global South whose livelihoods are threatened by environmental damage. Examples of the 'environmentalism of the poor' movements include Chipko tree- hugging women in India and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya founded in 1977 by Nobel Peace prize winner Wangari Maathai. Furthermore, the discourses of 'popular environmentalism', 'liberation ecology and 'livelihood ecology' are largely based on similar sets of ideas.

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November 2010