

# STORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

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## *Are Justice and Sustainability Compatible Objectives?*

Treading the ground between anti- poverty and environmental movements, environmental justice can be seen as: “a social conflict which exposes negative externalities at the heart of economic development” (Scandrett 2007). Faber & McCarthy (2003) note the capacity of the environmental justice movement to challenge the “‘single- issue focus’ of the traditional environmental movement, which often constrains its capacity to affect change. Referencing the work of Paolo Eisenberg they discuss the tendency of non- profit organizations to operate in a manner that “fails to recognize the complexity and connectedness of our interrelated socio-economic, ecological and political problems” (2003 p.42).

One of the key strengths of the concept of environmental justice is that the breadth of its scope allows it to address ‘root causes’ of the ecological crises. Middleton and O’Keefe argue that examining social inequity should be a key tenet of the sustainability movement as: “Unless analyses of development begin with not the symptoms, environmental or economic instability, but with the cause, social injustice, then no development can truly be sustainable” (2001, p. 16).

An emergent strain of discourse, especially in the non- profit sector, concerns whether or not environmental sustainability and international development are truly compatible agendas. In a paper declaring a ‘reluctant’ conclusion that social justice and environmental sustainability are “not always compatible objectives,” (2003 p. 83) Andrew Dobson notes that a tension will

always exist because 'reds' (advocates of social justice) and 'greens' (environmentalists) have inherently different motives.

For example, addressing the tendency for poverty alleviation measures to exacerbate climate change, Terrence Dawson and Simon Allen (2007) note the propensity of international development organizations to advocate for the removal of trade barriers and promote international tourism in order to bolster economic growth in the global South. Increased global trade and tourism comes at the cost of an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, thus acting in direct opposition to climate change mitigation efforts. They assert: "Climate change therefore seems to demand that the international community should find new ways of transferring wealth from rich to poor countries, instead of relying on ever increasing volumes of trade and tourism with their associated greenhouse gas emissions" (2007 p. 372).

As an inherently localized movement, environmental justice groups often eschew anti-poverty solutions involving such economic growth. In tackling localized injustice, groups confront global and international powers that whilst addressing environmental injustices on a local scale. For example, the people of Bhopal, India- as a localized community- seek justice and retribution for the 1984 chemical disaster from global multinational corporations Union Carbide and now Dow Chemicals.

Attempts to link ecological crises with issues of global poverty has spawned such concepts such as 'ecological debt' and 'climate justice'. Ecological debt is the notion that the existing Western consumer culture has been built on resources exceeding the local carrying capacity and thus the West is ecologically 'indebted' to other nations (Simms 2005). Climate justice addresses the injustice present in the reality that adverse effects of climate change are, and will continue to be, largely endured by the global South, whilst been caused by the hyper-consumptive culture of the North (Hill 2008). Both concepts thereby press for a justice-based redistribution of wealth amongst and within nations, eschewing anti-poverty solutions reliant on environmentally destructive economic growth.

Asserting that "the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked to that of human equality," Agyeman *et al.* stress the need for the "discourse of environmental justice to be firmly placed within the framework of sustainability"

(2003, p. 13). The core tenet of the sustainability ethos is living within the earth's carrying capacity such that the global ecosystem may maintain its biodiversity and resilience for future generations. The implementation and enforcement of the sustainability-based values on a policy level is referred to as sustainable development.

Perhaps the most widely acknowledged definition of sustainable development is from the oft quoted 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development Report (WCED), (commonly referred to as the Brundtland Report) which identifies sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Baker 2006). Sustainable development theory largely challenges core tenets of the dominant development paradigm, perhaps most notably in challenging the limits to economic growth. As an early precursor to the conception of sustainable development, two seminal papers by Herman E. Daly and Kenneth E. Boulding rattled the field of economics by challenging fundamental assumptions about the nature of our planet. Boulding's *The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth* (1966) and Daly's *The Economic Growth Debate: What Some Economists Have Learned But Many Have Not* (1987) sparked the recognition that the dominant 'growth' paradigm of our economy is, at best, incompatible with the exhaustible nature of the earth's resources (Edwards-Jones, Davies & Hussain 2000). Written with a strong sense of urgency, both papers tackle the question of how the global economy must adapt to a planet dipping into its final reservoirs and reaching its limits. Daly's *The Economic Growth Debate: What Some Economists Have Learned but Many Have Not* takes a strong stance against the 'growth' of the economy, defined as the "a quantitative increase in the scale of the physical dimensions", as opposed to the "qualitative improvement" inherent in the economy's 'development' (1987: p. 323). His stance is triggered by his recognition that we are nearing the biophysical and ethicosocial limits of our planet (Daly 1987). Sustainable development theory fundamentally questions the dominant notion of 'progress', specifically where it applies to progress being associated with an increased domination over nature (Baker 2006). An example of this is the use of integrative 'Quality of Life' indicators to measure sustainable development, as opposed to traditional

development indicators which measure development in terms of GDP and human consumption of resources. ). A combination of 'top- down'<sup>1</sup> (e.g. economic reforms such as emissions 'cap- and- trade' programs limit the amount of pollutants that industry may emit) and 'bottom up'<sup>2</sup> (e.g. community campaigning against injustice in land use issues) approaches combine in a wide spectrum of individual movements to drive structural change.

*To read the full research paper, including the bibliography, visit:*

*<http://environmental-justice.com/wp-content/uploads/EJR.pdf>*

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November 2010

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<sup>1</sup> wherein 'expert' opinion is negotiated by a select few and then integrated into a tactic

<sup>2</sup> wherein 'expert' opinion is generated and executed at a grassroots level, (e.g. community campaigning against injustice in land use issues)