GUEST ESSAY

Environmental Justice for All

Robert D. Bullard

Robert D. Bullard is professor of sociology and director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. For more than a decade, he has conducted research in the areas of urban land use, housing, community development, the location of industrial facilities, and environmental justice. He is the author of seven books and a number of articles, monographs, and scholarly papers that address concerns about environmental justice. His book Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality, 3rd ed. (2000) has become a standard text in the field. Other books are Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots (1993), Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color (1994), Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World (2003 with Julian Agyeman and Bob Evans), and A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana’s Chemical Corridor (2004, with Steve Lerner)

Despite widespread media coverage and volumes written on the U.S. environmental movement, environmentalism and social justice have seldom been linked. Nevertheless, an environmental revolution has been taking shape in the United States that combines the environmental and social justice movements into one framework.

People of color (African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans), working-class people, and poor people in the United States suffer disproportionately from industrial toxins, dirty air and drinking water, unsafe work conditions, and the location of noxious facilities such as municipal landfills, incinerators, and toxic-waste dumps.

The environmental justice movement attempts to dismantle exclusionary zoning ordinances, discriminatory land-use practices, differential enforcement of environmental regulations, unfair location of harmful industrial plants and other

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facilities, and the dumping of toxic waste on the poor and people of color in the United States and in developing countries.

Despite the government’s attempts to level the playing field, all communities are not created equal when it comes to resolving environmental and public health concerns. Each year pesticides sprayed on crops in the United States poison more than 300,000 farm workers (more than 90% of whom are people of color) and their children. Some 3–4 million children (many of them African-Americans or Latinos living in the inner city) are poisoned by lead-based paint in old buildings, lead-soldered pipes and water mains, lead-tainted soil contaminated by industry, and air pollutants from smelters.

All communities do not bear the same burden or reap the same benefits from industrial expansion. Nationally, 60% of African-Americans and 50% of Latinos live in communities with at least one uncontrolled toxic-waste site. Three of the five largest hazardous-waste landfills are located in communities that are predominantly African-American or Latino.

Environmental justice does not stop at the U.S. border. Environmental injustices exist from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to the shantytowns of Johannesburg, South Africa. Members of the environmental justice movement are also questioning the wasteful and unsustainable development models being exported to the developing world.

Grassroots leaders are demanding justice. Residents of communities such as West Dallas and Texarkana (Texas), West Harlem (New York), Rosebud (South Dakota), Kettleman City (California), and Sunrise, Lions, and Wallace (Louisiana) see their struggle for environmental justice as a life-and-death matter. Unfortunately, their stories of environmental injustice are not broadcast into the nation’s living rooms during the nightly news, nor are they splashed across the front pages of national newspapers and magazines. To a large extent, the communities that are the victims of environmental injustice remain invisible to the larger society.

The environmental justice movement is led, planned, and to a large extent funded by people who are not part of the established environmental community or the “Big 10” environmental organizations. Most environmental justice groups are small and operate with resources generated from the local community.

For too long these groups and their leaders have been invisible and their stories muted. This is changing as these grassroots groups are forcing their issues onto the nation’s environmental agenda.
The United States has a long way to go in achieving environmental justice for all its citizens. The membership of decision-making boards and commissions still does not reflect the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the country. And token inclusion of people of color on boards and commissions does not necessarily mean that their voices will be heard or their cultures respected. The ultimate goal of any inclusion strategy should be to democratize the decision-making process and empower disenfranchised people to speak and do for themselves.