

Environmental Justice Symposium - World Café (27 July 2012)

Topic 1: Are there repercussions of broadening environmentalism to include “justice”?

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Discussion points

The starting point for this discussion was that the repercussions of broadening environmentalism to include ‘justice’ would be positive. Certainly, in the human rights context, a clean and healthy environment can be seen to be a prerequisite to basic rights. EJ is a good tool for recognising this link.

Defining Justice

1. This was a point of interest and concern in all groups. Some felt that a definitive definition was important; others suggested that an overly prescriptive definition would be counter-productive. Some of the ideas and questions which were raised included:
 - a. It is core to the EJ movement that ‘justice’ be defined.
 - b. On the other hand, institutionalising the terminology can leave it meaningless
 - c. Historical examples of this include ‘sustainability’ - for, say DSE - and ‘ESD’. For this reason it may be best to keep the term amorphous.
 - d. By extension, ‘justice’ is an evocative idea (ie ‘we had justice in court today’). As is ‘injustice’. It speaks to moral ‘rightness’, a gut instinct, and by making it legalistic you may lose this impact.
 - e. By linking justice to law, does this buy into a dominant power structure that we are trying to work outside of?
 - f. Justice for whom, and what? Is justice a purely human concept, or does it extend to animals and the environment more broadly?
 - g. What type of justice? Court-based approach?
 - h. Restorative justice? This is what EPA are interested in. This links to the above idea that justice in the EJ context is less about proving an illegal act as it is about getting perpetrator to recognise a (moral) wrongdoing.
 - i. Do we need the term EJ at all? Or is it enough just to achieve a tacit understanding in the environment movement that environmental problems impact on humans?

Positive repercussions of broadening environmentalism to include ‘justice’

2. The prevailing attitude was that bringing a social justice dimension to the environmental movement would be positive, because it would give it a new ‘language’ and may lead to more fundamental paradigm shifts. For example:
 - a. EJ would give us a new framework in which to address environmental problems.
 - b. Social justice ‘speaks’ to more people and can be applied broadly (eg connecting health and the environment often brings children and families to the fore. This local domain is visible and raises ‘solveable’ issues (unlike, say, climate change, which can feel unsurmountable).
 - c. David Schlosberg used the story of buses in NYC by way of illustration – even though the buses caused pollution, what really gave the campaign traction was to expose the high rates of asthma

among children affected by emissions from those buses. In other words, seizing on the idea of communities at risk achieves better outcomes.

- d. EJ allows greater flexibility in approach. Again, David's example of lead poisoning from decrepit buildings in a community is helpful – it was only when the campaign took the more creative/expansive approach of sustainable building and green jobs creation that the government responded with funding to address the problem.
- e. As part of this flexible approach, EJ may not only redistribute risk better, but also get rid of the risk altogether.
- f. EJ does something which mainstream politics is not yet doing: marries the interconnected ideas of the economy, the community and the environment. It is not an 'either or' situation and it is time we stopped treating it as such.
- g. Ultimately, what EJ may do best of all for the environmental movement is to give the government something to hang its hat on.
- h. Finally, EJ may lead to a paradigm shift - a shift to collective rather than individual rights. The current legal framework (particularly property rights) is very individualistic. Arguably there is inefficiency in developing environmental standards in response to environmental complaints and this might be addressed through EJ, which could have a role in pushing the boundaries of the existing legal framework.

Negative repercussions of broadening environmentalism to include 'justice'

3. What is not necessarily apparent to those exploring the repercussions of dealing with environmental issues through a social justice lens is that this approach may not always benefit the environment. In fact, it could lead to damaging outcomes. Some questions that arose in this context included:
 - a. What happens when environmental rights and human rights diverge?
 - b. For example, the provision of an air conditioning unit to an elderly person in response to increases in heat waves recognises that person's right to life; but contributes to climate change. Some suggested that this might be a question of how the issue is framed: in this case, the use of renewable energy to power the air conditioner would resolve this tension.
 - c. The right to (economic) development is a good example of where HRs and enviro rights come into conflict. Eg In Australian context, does the control of resource extraction hamper the right to economic development?
 - d. Quite a few emphasised the need for social justice as a precursor to dealing with environmental issues – ie, people can't look after the environment if they are hungry. This may be why it is usually the privileged who take on environmental battles. Does EJ threaten the enviro movement because it needs to expend its energy addressing social injustice before it can address the environmental harm?
 - e. Will there be resistance from the environment movement? If so, what form might this take and how can this be resolved?
 - f. Interestingly, people had difficulty in recognising this possibility and the discussion wasn't taken very far.
 - g. EJ by its nature requires an anthropocentric approach to dealing with environmental issues.
 - h. For example, a forest may be protected because it is visible and has some utility to humans. Grasslands have been historically neglected because they are/do not.
 - i. Does this lead to 'species chauvinism'?
 - j. What about addressing environmental harms in their own right, rather than through the prism of a human/social harm?