

# IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THE MAIN FORCE FOR LOCAL SUSTAINABILITY?

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## Abstract

One of the tragedies of recent times is the uneven burden of negative environmental impacts endured by the less advantaged communities in our society. Some authors argue that “[W]herever in the world environmental despoliation and degradation is happening, it is almost always linked to questions of social justice, equity, rights and people’s quality of life in its widest sense” (Agyeman *et al*, 2003: 1). These authors also suggest that the concept of environmental justice should become an integral feature of sustainability. At the same time, urban areas have long been recognized as essential for achieving sustainability. Cities represent a vital proving ground for both environmental justice and sustainability since a large percentage of the world’s population live in urban areas and cities devour great quantities of resources. However, most existing programs for achieving urban sustainability, although they are well-intentioned, fail to address social justice and equity concerns.

*Keywords: Sustainability, Environmental Justice, Urban Sustainability.*

## Introduction

This paper is the result of an ongoing Ph.D. research about the links of environmental justice and sustainability – the ‘Just Sustainability’ paradigm – within the Spanish urban context. It will firstly outline both the origins and the theoretical and conceptual backgrounds of the terms sustainable development and environmental justice. Secondly, it will briefly discuss the growing paradigm of ‘just sustainability’ originated by Agyeman, Evans and Bullard (2002). Finally, the paper will analyze issues of social justice and equity within the context of urban sustainability. The aim of this paper is to provide a broad notion of the emergent paradigm of ‘Just Sustainability’ which is the focus of the author’s Ph.D. investigation.

## **The Ambiguity of the Sustainable Development Concept**

The concept of sustainable development was founded with the aim of incorporating environmental concerns into the central policy arena, as a result of the idea pertaining to the negative effects of human activities on the environment. Intentionally, this concept was visualized as a more pleasant notion than the rigid environmentalist conceptions; and therefore, it sought to transform the development strategies that were pursued more willingly than directly challenging the scheme of growth (Dresner, 2002). Or else, as Desai (quoted in Dresner, 2002: 65) pointed out: “[...] *redirecting growth* [...] rather than stopping it”. However, concerns about sustainability have not been translated into an operative transformation of the economic model and towards the sustainable development rationale.

There is consensus about the fact that most of the success of the sustainable development terminology is a consequence of the rather vague definition of the concept (Dresner, 2002) and its ambiguity (Naredo, 1996): It is a very general term where both its content and the way to take it into practice are not quite accurate (Naredo, 1996). O’Riordan (1988) also argues that another reason for the attractiveness of the term sustainable development rests in the way it could be used both by environmentalists – underlying the sustainable element, and by developers – underlying the development element. This assumed inaccuracy of the concept also suggests a lack of hegemony among the different discourses. Furthermore, according to Dresner (2002) some have perceived this imprecision as meaningless; and therefore, declare anything as part of sustainable development (O’Riordan, 1988).

Consequently, is the concept of sustainability a practical one? According to Campbell (1996) the answer to that question is diverse for two central reasons. Firstly, Campbell (1996) points out how the goal of sustainability may be unable to be translated into real and immediate steps, since it may be too distant and integral to be operational. Secondly, the author states that even in the case that we would be able to define the concept of sustainability; we may not be capable to truly measure it. Nonetheless, Campbell (1996: 301) subscribes to the success of the term sustainability by claiming that: “in the battle of big public ideas, sustainability has won: the task of the coming years is simply to work out the details and to narrow the gap between its theory and practice”. Although criticism about the vagueness of the term sustainable development is accepted, Dresner (2002: 64) points out after an interview with Nitin Desai that “the problem in agreeing on the meaning of sustainable development is not fundamentally about agreeing upon a precise definition, but agreeing upon the values that would underlie any such definition”.

## **Defining Sustainable Development**

There are numerous definitions of the term sustainable development. On the one hand, the Cambridge English Dictionary (2008), defines the term ‘sustainability’ as from the verb ‘sustain’, meaning: “to cause or allow something to continue for a period of time” and on the other hand, defines the term ‘development’ as “to (cause something to) grow or change into a more advanced, larger or stronger form”.

Sustainable development is most commonly defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” given by the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987: 8). Therefore, this definition includes within it two key concepts: Firstly, “the concept of ‘needs’, in particular the essential needs of the world’s poor, to which overriding priority should be given”; and secondly, “the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” (WCED, 1987: 8).

This well-known definition is based, principally, on the concept of fairness between and within generations. Sustainable development is thus principally an equity, rather than an efficiency issue (Hanley *et al*, 2001). Nevertheless, this definition is often criticized as elusive and “non-operationalizable” (Dresner, 2002: 64). As Pearce *et al* (1989) indicate, the apparent impossibility of determining what exactly are needs is the main obstacle towards the way to put into practice Brundtland Report’s definition of sustainable development. At the same time, “at a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth: the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings” (WCED, 1987: 45). Hence, sustainable development not only should meet the basic needs of all humankind and lead to satisfy their aspirations for a better life but also maintain the natural life-support systems on Earth. Consequently, it seems that the Brundtland Report identifies that the challenge that sustainable development has to cope with is to integrate economic, ecological, social and ethical aspects into a consistent view of the world in which both present and future generations, as well as other existing organisms, can maintain indefinitely (Moffatt *et al*, 2001).

## **The Origins of the Environmental Justice Discourse**

The alliance of environmentalism and the principle of justice is quite a recent phenomenon. The fundamental argument of environmental justice is that communities with high concentrations of racial or ethnic minorities or low-

income families are excessively exposed to an array of environmental stresses and risks than others do. During the past three decades, the environmental justice notion has increasingly appeared as a major element of the environmental discourse. Environmental justice as a movement has mainly been a U.S. based phenomenon which emerged through humble grassroots social movement in the early 1980s. The majority of proponents of environmental justice, approach the broad environmental justice movement using dual origins – antitoxic in working-class communities and the people of color environmental justice movement. Environmental justice organizations have attempted since then to extend the prevailing conventional environmental discourse based around environmental organization to incorporate social justice and equity considerations (Agyeman, 2007: 172).

Nevertheless, it is a very difficult, if not an impossible task, to place a date or an episode that ignited the environmental justice movement. Despite the fact that there were certain events which roused the movement, it purely grew as result of hundreds of local efforts and incidents, as well as out of a range of other social movements<sup>1</sup> (Cole and Foster, 2001). Beginning in the early 1970s, an extensive literature that provided evidence about the existence of environmental inequalities in the U.S. was developed. These early struggles were later extended and complemented by three landmark studies which broadened the understanding of what environmental justice represents; as well as provided empirical support for environmental justice claims. Consequently, their influence on policy decision-making was developed and the environmental justice movement achieved national interest.

The first study focused on the location of hazardous waste sites was that conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office in 1983. This study reported that 75 per cent of landfills in the U.S. were located near primarily African-American communities. This research was followed by The United Church of Christ crucial study titled *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (1987) which found that the most significant reason for the location of these waste sites was race, being almost 40 per cent of the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Bullard (2005), the case of Warren County, North Carolina and the protests undertaken by African Americans against a toxic dump in 1982, can be considered the case which ignited the foundation of the environmental justice movement. However, Commoner (1987) affirmed that concerns about the negative environmental impacts and environmental protection and social justice were already recognized by people of color in the United States even before the 1970s. For instance, Bullard (2005) claims that Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. noted the connection and argues that he was traveling to Memphis to support a strike – which demanded equal pay and better working conditions - carried out by garbage workers when he was assassinated in 1968. In addition, Robert Bullard also points out as early as in 1967, how students began a protest in order to show disapproval about the drowning of an eight-year old girl in a garbage dump in a residential area of Houston (Cole and Foster, 2001).

landfills also situated near African-American neighborhoods. Moreover, this study argued that African-Americans were two to three times more likely to live near a hazardous location. The third landmark study about the interrelation between the location of environmental hazardous sites and social inequality in the U.S. was that of Bullard (1983) who documented that 21 out of 25 of Houston's waste facilities were placed in African-American neighborhoods. Successive studies showed similar arguments about the fact that Native Americans and Latin Americans have to confront unequal impacts from environmental vulnerabilities (Damayanti and Bell, 2008). All of this evidence focused on the question of race and ethnicity principally brought about the foundations for the term 'environmental racism'<sup>2</sup> coined by Benjamin Chavis (Bryant, 1995). Nonetheless, the expression 'environmental justice' was not operational until the mid-1990s (Damayanti and Bell, 2008). In a more actual period of time, it is worth to highlight the instance of Hurricane Katrina which hit New Orleans' shore on August 2005 and whether class and race were important factors in the level and speed of response by U.S. government (Agyeman, 2007).

### **Framing the Environmental Justice Discourse**

Environmental justice, like sustainable development, is a challenged and problematic concept and hence, defining it is not an easy task since there are many possible definitions (Agyeman and Evans, 2004). As defined by Bryant (1995: 6) environmental justice "refers to those cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities, where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing and protective". Moreover, Bullard defines environmental justice as the principle that "all people and communities are entitled to equal protection of environmental and public health laws and regulations" (Bullard, 1999; quoted in Brulle and Pellow, 2006).

These definitions show that the term environmental justice is not only reactive to environmental 'negatives' but more importantly, it is also proactive to the distribution and achievement of environmental 'benefits' (Agyeman *et al*, 2002: 84; Agyeman and Evans, 2004: 156; Agyeman, 2007: 175). The concept of environmental justice has also been used to manage issues of both distributive

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<sup>2</sup> Environmental racism is defined by Bryant (1995: 5) as the term that "[...] refers to those institutional rules, regulations, and policies or government or corporate decisions that deliberately target certain communities for least desirable land uses, resulting in the disproportionate exposure of toxic and hazardous waste on communities based upon certain prescribed biological characteristics. Environmental racism is the unequal protection against toxic and hazardous waste exposure and the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities".

and procedural nature (Ikeme, 2003; Agyeman and Evans, 2004; Agyeman, 2007). It is also obvious that an explanation of the environmental justice concept can be founded on both deontological and consequentialist reasoning (Ikeme, 2003). In order to do so, and according to Baden and Coursey (2002) a definition of environmental justice must recognize the distinction between injustice in outcome (ex post) and injustice in intent (ex ante). Ikeme goes further and argues that injustice in outcome (ex post) has a consequentialist basis since it focuses on the consequences of action; on the contrary, injustice in intent (ex ante) shows a focus on the ethics of the action rather than on the consequences and therefore, it is based on deontological analysis. Moreover, the concept of environmental justice is also anthropocentric in its orientation since it sets people at the heart of the interrelationships between the social, economic, political and ecological dimensions, rather than the biophysical environment (McDonald, 2002; quoted in Patel, 2006).

The environmental justice framework expanded from the traditional environmental discourse based on stewardship to include social justice and equity concerns. According to Bullard (2005: 25) the environmental justice framework also includes “the aims of other social movements that seek to eliminate harmful practices in housing, land use, industrial planning, health care, and sanitation movements”. There was a sense that the environmentalist movement was ‘lost in the woods’ and activists of the environmental justice movement claimed that “if the environment is everywhere, anthropocentric concerns for conditions in and near where most humans live should be at least equally salient” (Damayanti and Bell, 2008: 3).

More and more in recent years, the issue of environmental quality has seemingly become unable to be separated to that of human equality (Agyeman *et al*, 2002; Agyeman and Evans, 2004; Agyeman, 2007). Moreover, according to Vicki Been (1993: 1006) “calls for environmental justice are essentially calls for equality”. Agyeman *et al* (2002) argue that almost in all cases where environmental deprivation and destruction are taking place, these are associated to issues of social justice and equity, rights, and people’s quality of life. Pellow (2009) also claims that the most important generator of our ecological crises is social inequality by several categories of difference, such as race, class and gender, among others. Therefore, “if we approach environmental inequalities through a purely ecological lens, not only do we ignore the social basis of these problems, we implicitly accept the ‘techno-fix’ orientation that much of the mainstream environmental movement has embraced for the past four decades” (Pellow, 2009: 4).

## **The Relationship between Sustainability and Environmental Justice – ‘Just Sustainability’ Paradigm**

The concept of sustainable development emerged after the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987 and, more significantly, after the Earth Summit held at Rio in 1992 where it was placed more emphasis in the importance of social equity concerns within the sustainable development definitions. Agyeman and Evans (2004) highlight the fact that the environmental justice discourse outside the U.S. have recently started to advance in the direction of sustainability. At the same time, the sustainability discourse is progressively deviating from its previous ‘environmental sustainability’ origins towards what the authors called ‘just sustainability’ – a discourse based around the linked notions of environmental justice and sustainability (Agyeman and Evans, 2004; 155). However, although both concepts are greatly challenged, they have a great potential to effect enduring change on a range of levels, from local to global (Agyeman, 2005).

According to Agyeman, Evans and Bullard (2002), more and more, it can be found a myriad of authors who endorse this shift from environmental sustainability to ‘just sustainability’. Agyeman *et al* (2002: 157) support some of their fundamental arguments by noting that “a truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally connected to environmental concerns”. Walker and Bulkeley (2006: 657) also states that “[...] pursuing environmental justice is manifestly encompassed within, if not central to, the broader framing of sustainable development”. Elkin *et al* (1991: 203) claims the importance of social justice and equity within sustainability by stating that “sustainable development involves more than environmental conservation; it embraces the need for equity. Both intra-generational equity providing for the needs of the least advantaged in society, and inter-generational equity, ensuring a fair treatment of future generations, need to be considered”. Warner (2002: 36) remarks that “just as social dimension have broadened the scope of environmentalism, environmental justice should become an integral feature of sustainability efforts”; Martinez-Alier (2000) argues that “the environmentalism of the poor and environmental justice (local and global) are the main forces for sustainability”. Finally, Shellenberger and Nordhaus declare that the environmental sustainability movement has failed by concluding in *The Death of Environmentalism*:

*Why, for instance, is a human-made phenomenon like global warming – which may kill hundreds of millions of human beings over the next century – considered ‘environmental’? Why are poverty and war not*

*considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications of framing global warming as an environmental problem – and handling off the responsibility for dealing with it to ‘environmentalists’? Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004: 12).*

On the other hand, there are some authors who are not in favor of this shift in the sustainability discourse. Andrew Dobson is probably its leading voice in the academic realm. Dobson (2003: 83) concludes that “social justice and environmental sustainability are not always compatible objectives”, although this conclusion is unwilling, he says, “because from a political point of view I can see tremendous benefits in marrying environmental sustainability and social justice”. Dobson (2003) believes that an association between social justice and environmental sustainability is idealistic since they differ in their basic objectives. Nonetheless, Dobson (1999: 5) highlights the relationship between sustainability and justice by asserting that “sustainability obliges us to think about sustaining something into the future, and justice makes us think about distributing something across present and future”. In environmental justice discourse, that ‘something’ represents environmental resources which can be considered as environmental ‘benefits’ or environmental ‘negatives’ (Patel, 2006).

If our current environmental sustainability paradigm is just about amending existing policies, it is necessary a *re-think* (Jiménez Beltrán, 2008), a shift towards a new paradigm in which society and social values come before economics and far away from the current development models based on markets and resource efficiency (Agyeman and Evans, 2003). Consequently, as long as equity and justice are not moved to the center stage in sustainability discourses, there is not an actual chance of a more sustainable future (Agyeman, 2005). As an instance, Einstein very appropriately pointed out that “we cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”.

## **Social Justice and Urban Sustainability**

Urban areas are an oxymoron of advantages and disadvantages towards the achievement of sustainable development. On the one hand, the great majority of the environmental problems that are affecting the world nowadays have their origin in cities and in their industrial surroundings as they demand large amounts of resources and energy. Cities are abundant originators of waste and consumers of natural resources; they also generate the majority of the

greenhouse gases that are triggering global climate change<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the greater part of the world's population live in urban areas. Cities are also the central node of the main production, distribution and consumption networks of humankind (Prats, 2008). On the other hand, urban areas and their citizens constitute the central point of information, innovation, coexistence as well as the diffusion of social values (Prats, 2008); at the same time, cities count with the managerial resources and the social proximity, in addition to the capabilities to transform the reality of our society; and therefore, cities must put these capabilities to serve sustainability and set the bases for the changes that the new challenges demand (Prats, 2008).

A growing number of cities worldwide are addressing the future of urban areas in terms of the concept of sustainable development by adopting Local Agenda 21 principles laid out at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro as the principal means of implementing programs of sustainable development at the local level. Some of the leading thinkers claim that local efforts are crucial to sustainability (Warner, 2002). Prugh *et al* argue that:

*[D]espite appearances, [sustainability] is not primarily global. To be sure, the world's the stage; a sustainable community or nation surrounded by unsustainable neighbors is a brave failure ... but we believe communities are the primary locus of responsibility for creating a sustainable world. The admonition to 'think globally, act locally' retains its wisdom despite years of bumper-sticker over-exposure. Prugh et al (2000; quoted in Warner, 2002)*

Certainly, it appears that the achievement of a more sustainable future for our planet is hold in the cities: in order to confront the numerous environmental challenges the planet is facing today, it is required an operational agenda where cities are the vital element. However, most existing programs for achieving urban sustainability, although they are well-intentioned, fall short of addressing social justice and equity concerns as essential within these programs (Yanarella, 1999).

As noted above, for many advocates of sustainability, social justice and equity should become an integral part of the efforts for achieving sustainable development. Obviously, the centrality of social justice and equity has also been acknowledged and highlighted along the potential for the sustainable city. This view has been reflected in several European policy documents such as the

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<sup>3</sup> It should not be forgotten that environmental damage is also a function of rural and extractive industries and of agriculture (OECD, 1994).

*European Commission's First Report on Sustainable Cities* (Union Expert Group on the Urban Environment, 1994) where it was stated that social equity [and economic sustainability] are a condition for environmental sustainability. Likewise, the *Conference on European Sustainable Cities and Towns* held in Aalborg in May 1994 recognized that urban sustainability can only be reached through social justice, sustainable economies and environmental sustainability which shows that “[S]ocial equity is finally agreed upon as being a pre-condition for achieving sustainability” (Mega, 1996: 139). Also, Mega (1996: 137) elaborates further by stating that “[S]ocial justice becomes of major importance for cities willing to preserve their integrity, to absorb social shock waves and to assure their future attraction for people and capital”.

Nonetheless, in a study carried out by Portney (2000) about why some cities take sustainability seriously and other do not, the author states that equity considerations are not generally addressed in many cities which claim to be pursuing the achievement of a more sustainable future. Likewise, in cities where issues of equity are incorporated into their sustainability initiatives, “it is not altogether clear why equity and sustainability are sometimes linked” (Portney, 2000: 159) or “have done so in only a superficial way” (Portney, 2000: 175). Portney (2000) also argues that the equity indicators utilized by these cities are simple and incomplete measures (income inequality, differential health of at risk populations) since they do not describe the fundamental nature of environmental and social justice: that is, indicators which measure differential exposures to environmental contamination.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen in this paper, the alliance between the environment and the principle of justice is a recent phenomenon. More original is the purpose of cooperation between the concepts of environmental justice and sustainable development. At the same time, locally, a growing number of cities around the world are addressing the future of urban areas in terms of sustainable development. Some of the main authors contend that efforts at local level are crucial for achieving sustainability. However, more sustainable societies will only emerge if those cities begin to show greater levels of social justice and equity.

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