INSPIRING TOXIC FACILITY RESISTANCE
IN LOW INCOME AND MINORITY POPULATIONS

In the United States, environmental policymakers and land use planners strive to maintain a balance between humans and the land they live on in order to create a better world for all citizens. However, the laws do not protect all members of the society, creating inequity in who is subject to environmental hazards and who is not. Overwhelmingly it is low income and minority populations that are subjected to hazards such as toxic waste sites, “dirty” industries (Domhoff 1986: 61), and other “locally unwanted land uses (LULUs)” (Bullard 1990: 4). The inequity is present because although policy and laws are designed to protect all, these marginalized groups have not had their best interests addressed within the policies. As a result, with all the protective policy congress has created, these marginalized populations are still not getting the protection they deserve. Efforts must be redirected in many areas of environmental (and human)protection to represent low income and minority populations within the law, and to encourage more active participation within those groups in protecting their local environment.

The issue of inequity has sparked many researchers to publish work looking into the causes of the inequity. Some, like Robert Bullard, have found that race plays a large part in the inequity. Bullard published Dumping in Dixie in 1990, in which he noticed inequity in both race, and class. Bullard, however, maintains that race plays a
A stronger role in the presence of environmental hazard. On the other hand, researchers like Warren Kriesel, Terence Centner, and Andrew Keeler found in their study in 1996 that the inequity is based on class struggle. Still other researchers believe that it is a combination of these two factors that make up the inequality found in environmental hazards. Bullard, along with Keeler, Kriesel, and Centner recognize that both race and class effect environmental inequity.

Many African American scholars believe that “environmental racism” is to blame for the inequity in minority neighborhoods in the United States. That is, they believe racism in environmental policy making creates the disproportionate number of environmental hazards in minority neighborhoods. Rev. Benjamin Chavis coined the phrase and defines environmental racism as, “racial discrimination in environmental policy making creates the disproportionate number of environmental hazards in minority neighborhoods” (Chavis 1993: 3). Timothy Maher has also seen that although toxic waste sites are more prevalent in low income and blue collar neighborhoods, toxic waste sites also “appear to be disproportionately located in predominantly African American communities” (Maher 1998: 363). On the other hand, Warren Kriesel has found that in looking at specific levels of exposure, areas of severe poverty tended to have the highest amounts of toxic exposure, rather than minority neighborhoods (Kriesel, Centner, Keeler 1996: 480). This correlation lies in the fact that many minority neighborhoods are also low income (defined as total annual household income of less than $15,000) resulting in a lack of political and economic power for resisting LULUs (Bullard 1990: 81). Environmental inequity is a dual edged sword: marginalized populations often need the income of industry in their neighborhoods, but do not have the power to demand environmentally safe facilities (Ibid.: 26).
Minority and low income neighborhoods often are targeted for sites of LULUs because they are considered weak communities, with little ability to prevent the erection of such facilities. (Kriesel, Centner and Keeler 1996: 490). They are targeted as a result of the fact that they have had a tradition of non-resistance and lack of strength which corporations recognize and take advantage of. Research has shown that landfills, specifically, have been placed in areas of “least resistance” (Collin, Beatley and Harris 1995: 368). When populations do not initially resist incoming forces, the forces assume that they will not receive trouble later and continue to plan unwanted facilities and waste disposal sights. According to Kriesel et al. this pattern is turned into a cycle because often, when unwanted facilities are built, higher income and better educated families can afford to move away from those facilities (Kriesel, Centner, and Keeler 1996: 480). Barbara Epstein has seen in her research the same cycle, and she has found that these middle income and college-educated families have historically led the environmental movement in resisting (Epstein 1995: 3). Epstein’s research has tracked the history of the environmental movement. She has found that when middle income move away, they take their efforts with them, and minority and low income groups have had to pick up where middle income populations left off. Because they have not immediately moved to resist, corporations have jumped at the opportunity and lack of resistance and built hazardous facilities. There is a gap that is left to be filled by minority and low income populations within both their neighborhood movement and in the wider global environmental movement. And although resistance has been slow to grow and is not wide-spread, African Americans have increasingly become stronger resisters of environmental hazards within their neighborhoods.
There is much evidence to show that marginalized populations have higher levels of toxic waste, air pollution, and high industrial areas in their neighborhoods. One study highlighted Emelle, Alabama, which is approximately 79% Black. Emelle is home to the Chemical Waste Management Corporation, and has its landfill in the town. Of the 523 residents who discussed their neighborhood’s living conditions with Bullard, 86% reported having only a highschool or lower education and 83.2% reported an annual household income of under $15,000 (Bullard 1990: 81). The majority of the population of Emelle is low income, Black and had a low level of education, and is being exposed to a toxic landfill. The residents felt that hazardous waste and toxic chemical leaks were severe problems in their neighborhoods (Ibid.: 83). However, most also felt that they would be unlikely to try to close the landfill, with 61.6% feeling that the facility actually generated much needed tax benefits for the area (Ibid.: 92). The population was concerned for their health, but was not willing to give up the benefits of added income in their community.

In West Dallas, Texas, (7.3% Black, close to 90% low income) home of the RSR Corporation which smelts lead, 87.5% of the population reported household income of under $15,000 and 92.3% reported education of highschool or less (Ibid.: 81). These residents reported solid waste along with hazardous waste, air pollution and pollution of lakes and streams as severe problems (Ibid. 83). But like Emelle, the majority of residents feel that the economic benefit of having such a facility is good (Ibid. 92). Although it is trade off, having income coming into the community is more important than protecting the environmental health of the community. These residents must be made to feel that it is possible to have both industry and safe living space within their
community, and doing that means increasing resistance to hazardous facilities while encouraging more environmentally friendly industries to locate in such communities.

The low income and minority residents in both Emelle and West Dallas felt that it was unfair to locate the facility in their community. However both communities “have come to accept the idea that the facility will likely be in the community for some time” (Ibid.: 87). Clearly residents feel helpless to the facility within their neighborhoods, yet at the same time worry about their exposure to toxic materials. They have little access to information regarding the long term risks and have little insurance for future medical problems that may result from exposure. They are unprepared for the risks that these facilities pose (Laituri and Kirby 1994: 123). On the other hand, the same facilities that put these populations at risk, also bring jobs into the community, and their presence gives tax breaks to the residents. The lack of education in low income and minority populations makes it difficult for “clean” (Dumhoff 1986: 61) industries that require skilled workers to move into such neighborhoods. What seems necessary in order for change to come about is for the environmental movement to move to greater incorporate marginalized populations, and for low income and minorities neighborhoods to strive to better educate themselves on the dangers in order to effectively resist them.

The change that must take place is two fold. First, minority and low income populations need to be educated about the dangers. Second, these populations must decide among themselves take action in protecting themselves. This second part must come about after the first- only after minority and low income populations have realized the potential harm will they see the environmental benefit rather than the potential
economic loss from driving waste treatment facilities, landfills and other hazards out of their neighborhoods. By expanding the environmental movement to include minority and low income peoples, change will begin to more effectively take place within the communities. And this change is, in fact, starting to happen. Attitudes in these communities are shifting from acceptance of the facility as a necessary part of the economy of the neighborhood to open rejection of the facility on the grounds that it is harmful and actually unnecessary. The environmental movement has played a key role in shifting attitudes, however there is still much work to be done in order to more fully protect these marginalized populations.

The environmental movement has been growing steadily since the early seventies, and the fastest growing group within the movement are the Black and low income populations (Epstein 1994: 4). The reason for this surge in participation is that Black community members are seeing the need to step up and defend their neighborhoods against hazardous facilities. Black leaders have long noticed the unfairness of where facilities are located, but with the civil rights movement, came a greater sense of power for changing social inequities. Within these populations, a desire to change living conditions was realized. And leaders within low income and minority communities began (and continue to) draw more members of their communities into the environmental movement. They have succeeded convincing other residents that environmental hazards have serious long term health effects and lead to long-term loss in property value. Both the medical and economic risks has inspired traditionally marginalized groups to become more involved in the established movement and to form their own grassroots movements within their smaller communities and neighborhoods.
The strength and effectiveness of earlier movements has sparked further growth. These newer grassroots movements have had success in both keeping facilities out of their neighborhoods and gaining reparations for damage already done by facilities. And, as Robert Bullard correctly hypothesized, the most successful movements have been led by members of the community, rather than outside individuals (Bullard 1993: 38). The movement has been most successful when inspired and led from the inside, the difficulty is in getting people to lead their community in resisting. In order for these populations to become involved in resisting further education is needed to inspire new leaders and new environmentalists, who care about the environmental and human life in their neighborhoods.

Education must be used as a tool to inspire marginalized populations to take the lead in their communities and resist hazardous facilities. They must organize against industries that they do not want in their neighborhoods and attempt to attract new industries that will both provide jobs for the neighborhood and be safe for their living environment. This task is not an easy one. It is important for more affluent members of communities and for higher educated individuals to remain connected to marginalized populations and to inspire others to join and lead in fighting industry. Environmental education at the most basic level is necessary, and should be started as early as elementary school to promote further leadership within the community. Leaders must organize further educational events that will get the whole community involved, because of the power of large groups in making change.

Local change through education is not the only way that marginalized populations should gain power; laws at the state and federal level must be changed to
better represent more of previously neglected populations. These laws should protect those who already live at risk of some environmental hazard from further exposure to toxins. This would lead to a halting of new hazards entering communities, leaving time to fight and push out existing ones. Furthermore, the federal government should undertake greater testing of suspected areas of high contamination and urban/industrialized areas to determine if the government should step in and aid residents in protecting their neighborhoods from existing toxic facilities.

Policymakers must look out for the interests of low income and minority populations when making laws protecting the environment and people. Planners must take into account that all populations should be given equal thought in what planners place in neighborhoods. Through careful consideration of all populations and grassroots movements within marginalized populations, environmental equity will a reality.

There is no question that inequity exists, numerous studies (such as Bullard’s) have more than proven that environmental racism and classism is, in fact, real and a problem. Low income and minority populations have consistently gotten poor representation within laws regarding the environment and human living space. The environmental movement has expanded over the past two decades to greater encompass these marginalized population, but further efforts must be made in order to reach social justice within the issue of equity in locating toxic facilities and landfills. Education and personal strength are the strongest tools that society has to fight inequity and these must be fully utilized. Leaders must rise up from within these
populations and take back power from big industries and the policymakers. And it is the people who are affected who must lead.
Bibliography


