

A Global Environmental Justice?

The challenge of transferring a US movement
to countries outside the US

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Series of Papers: Environmental Justice and Sustainable Development

No 4

2014

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Publication Info:

Working Paper

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Abstract

With the help of authors such as Wolfgang Sachs (1999 and 2002), this paper examines the possibility of expanding the US concept of environmental justice to a global scale. Through the body of literature reviewed, the paper concludes that the US environmental justice concept can be applied outside its borders. However, the concept will need to be molded into new forms that are tailored to the countries in which it is applied. The elements, which promote a critical, community-concentrated and bottom-up approach are those which will be most useful when expanding environmental justice beyond the US borders. In addition, as referred to in Wolfgang Sachs' 2002 article, a focus on "lowering the top" to bring resource-usage to more sustainable levels is something which will only benefit environmental justice and its success in the future.

1. Introduction

This paper evaluates the obstacles faced in expanding the environmental justice (EJ) concept, as we know it, from the US to a worldwide scale. This is an important topic to consider as we live in a time when old ways of understanding how policy should be implemented both on a national and global level need to be revised. It is important to consider this topic as local issues are being neglected in attempts to compete on mainstream global levels in an increasingly interdependent world. EJ is a concept and set of approaches that can serve to ease the transition to a global world and to better regulate the goals of economic growth and responsible resource usage. This paper will, through the authors presented, both determine what obstacles exist, and examine how we can best move forward with using EJ on a local and global scale. This work presents a review of a selected body of literature, and in turn seeks to serve as a solid base for future and more in depth analysis of environmental justice and its relevance outside the US borders. The authors selected, such as Enzensberger (1974) and Sachs (1999 and 2002), provide both sides of the picture, the positives and negatives of applying a US specific concept in a worldwide situation as well as what implications it has for policy. This policy level is especially brought forth through the works of Dryzek (2009) and Meyer et al. (1997) who show both the obstacles faced by EJ on the policy level and the work it can do to affect change on that policy level. The paper relies heavily on one author, Wolfgang Sachs, as both his 1999 and 2002 papers present the obstacles faced by EJ and solutions for how to take the concept and mold it into a globally applicable tool to improve and regulate resource usage. The

paper will begin with a definition of the U.S. version of EJ and then move to see how it can be situated in a global world. It will then examine the obstacles EJ faces, such as Wolfgang Sachs' *dimensions of space and time*, in being applied on a global level and the way forward in placing and applying EJ on a global level.

2. Environmental Justice (EJ)

The *Environmental Justice* journal web page (2008 cited Pellow 2009, p. 3) provides a definition of EJ to be analyzed:

“Environmental justice is an effort to analyze and overcome the power structures that have traditionally thwarted environmental reforms and is defined as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, mentation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.”

While this is the definition Pellow's article presents, the author also adds to it by saying that there is an inherent social problem, not just ecological. The author also stresses the importance that the movement evaluate the existing societal structures.

Only since the 1970s has EJ, as we know it from the United States, began to have a serious effect on discussion both in the activist and academic world. According to the authors Gosine/Teelucksingh (2008, p. 1), the concepts behind EJ originate not just in the US rather the current understanding as we know it comes from the South Eastern US. This can be traced back to incidents such as the 1982 dumping of toxic waste in minority neighborhoods in Warren County in Afton, North Carolina. Such incidents tied the African American population and thereby black and white relations to the environmental justice movement. This of course spread further to other minority groups who then realized that action could be taken to defend their mistreatment and unequal access to resources as well as their unwarranted burden of carrying the waste problems of the majority white population in the US. Since that time the US version has been broadened and includes discussion of the poor, discrimination and environmentalism. The discussion has branched out further to include substantive and procedural rights, meaning that a legal focus has been added to better analyze where injustice is present in a particular group and how best to address the problem (ibid, p. 7). There is a strong need, at least according to Gosine/Teelucksingh, to combine race with justice when addressing EJ issues (ibid, p. 8). Still, as we will see later, the ability to separate environmental racism and its narrow focus from EJ is important.

The 'patriotic celebration of American wilderness' (Guha cited Turner 2012, p. 326) is also

what could hold EJ from having a global usefulness. This US American over-focus on the wilderness led people in the US to “often put a concern for wild nature before the interests of rural communities, and limited the ways Americans often thought about the relationship between society and nature” (Turner 2012, p. 327). Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1974, p. 15) corroborates this sentiment by saying that

“the ecological movement in the United States, with its tendency to flee from the towns and industry, is an indication of what will come, as are the citizen’s campaigns which are spreading apace.”

Such shifting of the problem to different locations within the US leads to environmentally and socially harmful projects being relocated to other areas where the controversy is less palpable (Enzensberger 1974, p. 15). If other countries follow the concept of shifting blame and relocating, but not addressing the problem, the locals in these countries will not benefit. This is an element of the US American version of EJ, which could be transformed and improved within other contexts abroad.

Enzensberger also highlights the problem of *social want* as an element of society which when related to his argumentation can be seen as a complication for EJ. He states that there is a direct correlation between the increase in *social want* and the increase in social wealth. This ‘want’ tends to further the consequences of the environmental crisis including a

“lowered expectation of life, [which means] the direct threat from local catastrophes can lead to a situation where class can determine the life or death of an individual by deciding such factors as the availability of means of escape, second houses, or advanced medical treatment” (Enzensberger 1974, p. 14).

Here we see as Sachs (1999, p. 16) has also pointed out, a focus on the global as opposed to the local and the consequences this focus has on the success of the environmental justice movement outside of the US. Enzensberger deepens his discussion of social ‘want’ by saying that the “hunger for commodities, in all its blindness, is a product of the production of commodities, which could only be suppressed by force” (1974, p.15). The author seems to be creating a destructive beast out of ‘want’ and telling us that the only way to control it is by force. If we think we can control capitalism and its exploitation of resources and people, Enzensberger says think again:

“In reality, capitalism’s policy on the environment, raw materials, energy, and population, will put an end to the last liberal illusions. That policy cannot even be conceived without increasing repression and regimentation”(1974, p. 15).

So in essence, Enzensberger's solution to the increased and destructive 'want' can only be stopped if the political and organizational climate is right. He does not have much faith in the ability of the public to see the consequences of their 'want' for more production and resources and the environmental crisis they create through pursuing the fulfillment of those needs. He tells us that the possibility of 'internal imperialism' is then ever more present in situations where the public does not or cannot see the consequences of this social 'want' (1974, p. 15).

This imperialism whether internal or external

“will do everything to incite the population of the industrialized countries against such apparent external enemies whose policy will be presented as a direct threat to their standard of living, and to their very survival, in order to win their assent to military operations” (Enzensberger, 1974, p. 15).

It seems we have a very hostile environment for movements such as environmental justice to exist in.

3. A Global World?

In order to better analyze the obstacles faced by expanding EJ outside the US borders, it is important to first understand the global context in which EJ finds itself. Wolfgang Sachs' 1999 paper, *Globalization and Sustainability* serves this aim well. One of Sachs' main focal points is that of the image of the globe as an “all-weather icon” changing over time and being used for all kinds of environmental propaganda, mostly starting in the 60's. He explains that in the 1980s the image of the world changed to that of an “emblem of transnational business” (Sachs 1999, p.2) creating for some an image of an “open, continuous and controllable” earth, which could be termed “imperial” (Sachs 1999, p. 3). In order to better illustrate how this change has happened, Sachs highlights a few examples. He speaks about the removal of “controls on [the] movement of capital” (Sachs 1999, p. 4.). This removal meant it had become easier to disregard the environmental impact of decisions made for economic gain. It also leads to a “utopian model of economic globalization” which has no boundaries and ignores the “diversity of the world's social and legal orders” (Sachs 1999, p. 5). A simplification of reality occurs, which is for Sachs a point of concern especially when viewing the world as a global entity. Essentially the supporters of economic globalization “seek to undermine, and gradually to break up altogether, the state-defined ‘containers’ of national markets” (Sachs 1999, p. 8). This frees the actors up from having to worry about cultural differences or national interest diversity. This is something that proves to be a stumbling block for our later discussion of EJ and its global application.

Yet another example of the muddling of the global world image occurs for Sachs in the electronic age. In reference to the over-used image of the Earth from outer space he states

“whereas the picture of the globe conveyed the absence of boundaries as a visual experience, electronic networking converts it into a communications (and air transport into a travel) experience” (Sachs 1999, p. 6).

This creates a “hierarchy of space” (Sachs 1999, p. 7) where the ‘global cities’ are interlinked by technology but regions such as Africa or Central Asia are not included in this information network. This has led to a transnational world amongst the richer countries but certainly not a global one, or as Sachs puts it, “deterritorialized rather than globalized” (Sachs 1999, p. 7). This plays well into the *space and time dimensions* that Sachs addresses in a 2002 article. Sachs’ text speaks to the *dimension of time* and *space* as well as *social class* as areas where issues of justice play out. He explains this *dimension of time* as the past practice of imposing a forced inheritance of the consequences of economic progress. His *dimension of space* is defined as the practice, at least from Western nations, of pushing waste to the outlying areas or countries where there is less chance of backlash from the citizens. *Distance* in this sense leaves the people living in the developed and central areas as not being affected by the consequences of over-use of resources such as deforestation as in less industrialized countries. Sachs’ third arena for justice is *social class*. Similar to the space dimension he describes the ‘consumer class’ burdening the ‘less advantaged groups’ with their waste and industry. The problem of distancing groups from their own waste has a direct relation to which class each group belongs (Gadgil and Guha 1995 cited Sachs 2002, p. 29). Sachs points out though that this practice of shifting the consequences of the pursuit for economic growth across the *dimension of space* is no longer realistically possible. He states that the “costs shifted to the future spill already into the present” (Sachs 2002, p. 29).

Another example of Sachs’ is that of currency. In 1971 the Bretton Woods system turned currency into a commodity. This made countries more vulnerable, dependent on the global market, and less competitive on the international market if their currency was not of high value. “One might even, as Menotti acerbically suggests, speak of a causal link between falling currencies and falling trees” (Menotti cited Sachs 1999, p. 22). This focus on the value of currency and competitiveness has a direct causal relationship with environmental resource usage.

As concern for competitiveness on the global scale increases, the concern for local issues and welfare decreases. Corporations gain more control and influence especially in the example of patents. These patents that are obtained by corporations mean “activities such as planting, animal-

raising or curative treatment, which used to be part of the public domain, thus come increasingly under the control of corporations” (Sachs 1999, p. 29). Similarly, the import of foreign and mass-produced food is another situation where especially the poorer local community or entire host country has a reduced level of food security. The power elite present in these corporations and high-powered government seats have gained too much control. A blind eye has been turned to the reality of human interdependence. In fact Sachs states “the old law that the market puts purchasing power before human need asserts itself still more powerfully in a world economy beyond frontiers” (Sachs 1999, p. 33). The investing companies have then created a conflict of interest as they want to control “extraction of natural resources” and the host state that wants to “draw in investment capital and know-how” so they can “catch up with the rich countries” (Sachs 1999, p. 13). The constant removal of barriers to transnational companies (TNCs) and the economic interest of these TNCs leads to a dangerous level of deregulation, which becomes “a catch-all term for attempts to further global competition by dissolving the links between economic actors and a particular place or particular community” (Sachs 1999, p. 16). This leads governments to also value the ability to compete over any concern for the environment or the over-use of natural resources (Ibid, p. 16). Here one sees yet another concrete example of Sachs’ *dimension of space* as competition furthers the distance between government and irresponsible resource usage. This can be coupled with the falling prices that result from price wars. The price of a resource may be reduced but the costs on the environment and host country do exactly the opposite, they increase. A drop in freight costs is an example of drop in prices that has led to irresponsible expansion in the global markets. These freight costs in addition to other facility costs lead to more land and resource use that are often carried by the host state. Consequently the private companies are left with little responsibility for the detrimental results that have been created merely for their economic gain (Ibid, p. 26-27). According to Sachs’ 2002 argumentation this is directly tied to the companies and their *social class* and a shifting of the problem in the *dimension of space*.

All of these examples point to the problem of “limitation in the physical sense and expansion in the political sense” (Sachs, 1999, p. 3). Which in turn means the global world image and mentality can be used by environmental groups and transnational corporations but in the end creates confusion and lack of collective effort to better the use of resources. Herein lies the paradox that exists between expansion and a focus on efficiency and depletion of resources. We as humans cannot stop the over-use of resources that comes with expansion of economic activity. It is a conundrum between the physical limits of the earth and the want for economic global expansion. Sachs criticizes this global world further by speaking of the problems that exist when we think of

the earth as a “closed system” (1999, p. 2). The closed system leads to the exclusion of the reality of nations and cultures and states, or as Sachs terms it, a “dissipated social reality” (1999, p. 3). The image of a single earth simplified our vision of the biosphere and through globalizing our perception of reality we lose the reality of the interconnectedness of the human story.

However simplified the image of the world has become through technology, governmental policy, and trade policy the image or symbol itself has been able to take on many forms; and on a global level it is important, as Sachs states, to remember that “symbols are the more powerful the more meanings they are able to admit” (1999, p. 1). One can then draw the conclusion that just as the image of the globe expressed versatility on the global level, EJ also, if it is able to ‘admit more meanings,’ could become globally useful.

4. Obstacles

But where are the definite stumbling blocks, according to the authors reviewed in this paper, which hinder the success of environmental justice acting on a global scale? As has been mentioned above, the conflicting interests in different countries and their competitiveness which seeks to reach stability on a global level seems to be a major point of trouble for environmental justice. In globalizing the US American version of EJ the local interests could be pushed further into the background. In addition, in an attempt to act on a global competitive level, companies and governments, as we saw from Sachs’ (1999) paper, could use the concepts propelled by EJ to serve their own needs, thereby creating a problem of over-identification and misuse of the concepts. Can EJ as Gottlieb (2008, p.7) says, be both universal and applicable to people’s daily lives?

Hamlin (2008, p. 145) poses a problem for the global applicability of EJ by suggesting that it has changed in scope and meaning. The author asks the question of whether it is “insufficiently mainstream.” The critical EJ movements however run exactly contrary to this mainstream critique. These movements seek to function on a critical level which works from the community level upwards. Therefore this obstacle does not seem to hold much weight. The author also touches on the false separation of justice from the biological embodiment (Hamlin 2008, p. 146). This separation causes the individual to be lost in the discussion of community or globalization. The human element, and its connection to nature and survival, loses its influence when only justice becomes the main focus. The application of EJ abroad is removed too far from its original intention to incorporate both the substantive and procedural into the EJ realm.

Another issue for the success of the community-level approach of EJ is capitalism understood as a main roadblock to a more open social structure that benefits the more and not the

few (Pellow 2009, p. 6). The author goes on to say that without putting the brakes on capitalism's rampage the treatment of crisis can lead to misuse e.g. in the case of the Hurricane Katrina disaster (ibid, p. 4).

The EJ movement can take on such obstacles by making sure people realize that "environmental concerns are not like racism or sexism which may affect a particular group of people, environmental concerns impact on us all and thus should be the concern of us all" (Lawson 2008, p. 156). However, we must still realize that the problem with the above is

"the bringing together of diverse environmental stakeholders to resolve issues regarding the environment. This is particularly difficult when environmental policies appear to be rooted in class or race divisions" (Lawson, 2008, p. 156).

This leads us to question whether the US movement is just a reaction to environmental racism in the US. Author Joan Martinez-Alier (2002) questions this and goes on to analyze whether, on an international level, EJ is more relevant and applicable when trying to solve problems of human and civil rights and environmental degradation. The author agrees, "the 'minority' focus detracts from [EJ's] usefulness worldwide" (Martinez-Alier 2002, p. 176). Therefore, the focus on environmental racism and minority exclusion cannot become the staple of EJ if it is to be applied abroad. Martinez-Alier shows the reader that a single US worldwide model of EJ is not likely to be a successful solution to addressing crisis and inequality in other areas of the world.

John W. Meyer et al. (1997) explain the power and reality of worldwide models, which do not provide as much of a critical view as EJ does, and remind us that these structures are strongly cemented in place. Meyer et al. also state that

"worldwide models define and legitimate agendas for local action, shaping the structures and policies of nation-states and other national and local actors in virtually all of the domains of rationalized social life - business, politics, education, medicine, science, even the family and religion" (1997, p. 145).

The result, "is nation-states that are more isomorphic than most theories would predict and change more uniformly than is commonly recognized" (Meyer et al, 1997, p. 173). Here 'isomorphic' means that despite the nations' varying structures and policies they are able to be compared on a global level and change in relationship to one another instead of completely independent of one another. While the structures are hard in place they apparently offer the chance for local change to happen.

Meyer et al.'s claims paint the picture that "global models of nationally organized progress

and justice” have created “rationalized definitions of progress and justice” which are “rooted in universalistic scientific and professional definitions that have reached a level of deep global institutionalization” (Meyer et al. 1997, p. 174). The authors stress that the “universalistic scientific and professional definitions” are, regardless of the problems and conflict they create, “likely to prove quite durable” (ibid, p. 174). This leads to the conclusion that EJ is up against a well-established system that it will have to fit into rather than transform.

5. How to apply EJ’s attributes worldwide and where to go next

So what does EJ have to offer and how can we fit it into a global context? Kameri-Mbote and Cullet say, “the knot of the ecological crisis cannot be cut with a paper knife” (1996, p. 15). Here is an option for the EJ movement to take hold and cause change. If the real change cannot be sparked by administrative or governmental paperwork, then the real solution lies in working at a community level with palpable change. EJ as Kameri-Mbote and Cullet state, draws the “link between conservation and economically disadvantaged communities” (ibid, p. 3). In addition, as Wolfgang Sachs in his 2002 paper states, “Governments...are backing out from the development consensus; they increasingly consider the quest for justice outside their competence” (p. 23). Perhaps this means that EJ then has a place in the world especially outside US borders. Where governments are unwilling or cannot make a change, EJ can.

If this is the case, what can EJ do now to have success worldwide and how should it look like in the future? Joan Martinez-Alier (2002, p. 176) believes that EJ has to broaden its scope and realize its international connections to human rights: social justice for poor people regardless of race. We have to focus instead on “three goals of ‘diversity’ ‘sustainability’, ‘equity’ [that would] provide a basis for a more coherent and unified ecology movement” (Guha cited Myers 2005, p. 17). But one must be careful with the above quote. It does indeed combat a hegemonic, white-patriarchal focus but also can generalize too much. In order to combat such generalizations, Pellow (2009, p. 4) stresses the value of focusing on crises and how they spark movement and change in policy. Here is a prime example of where EJ can be applied successfully as it has directly to do with community engagement and local issues. Pellow goes on to suggest that the focus must be on the social roots of the problem. The author sees this as the key to internationalizing EJ (Pellow 2009, p. 3).

Policy analysis, just as crises, is also an area from which EJ can learn. For example, Dryzek (2009, p. 191) compares *Accommodative* policy analysis (top down, making people in power more enlightened) versus *Critical* policy analysis (bottom-up, with the goal to enlighten disadvantaged

groups) approaches. This relates to the concept of an analytical and critical EJ, which was developed by Gosine/Teelucksingh (2008, p. 21). A more critical and analytical EJ can learn from the *Critical* policy analysis approach as proposed by Dryzek. For, as stated earlier in the paper, a bottom-up approach can get to the social root of the problem as opposed to a superficial system-level solution that will most likely not affect real change. Dryzek further suggests the process of “decentralized problem solving” mostly through networks (2009, p. 201). This is again a community-based, bottom-up approach that matches directly with EJ and how it can be improved and applied on a global level.

Just as with Martinez-Alier (2002), the broadening of the scope of EJ to a global level is also supported by Kameri-Mbote and Cullet (1996). For example, Kameri-Mbote and Cullet (1996) focus on the “centrality of human beings in the development process” which is also stressed in “international sustainable development” (p. 3). These authors illustrate the fact that mainstream failures are a chance for EJ to make real change at the local level. The incorporation of the community/human dimension is vital to the success of EJ. The community/human dimension of which Kameri-Mbote and Cullet (1996) speak can come through and have influence in a situation where there exists a sort of base-plan for EJ where each local entity also has the freedom to change it (Walker 2009, p. 355). The local reinterpretation, while also running the danger of over-identification can help to bring EJ to a global level that allows it to be of use beyond the borders of the US. Walker speaks of two ways in which this can happen. One is through *horizontal diffusion* where EJ language and rhetoric from the US travels to other countries and functions within political and institutional cultures. The second is *vertical extension*, which involves an enlargement of the scope of EJ concerns to encompass inter-national and global issues. This does not end at national borders but involves relations between countries and global scale issues (ibid, p. 355).

The examination of relations between countries and a focus on readjusting the global scale are also brought forth in Wolfgang Sachs’ 2002 paper where he states that “justice at the beginning of the 21st century, will be more concerned with the reduction of risks than with the redistribution of riches” (p. 30). A focus on spreading the economic wealth from richer countries to the less rich countries seems, according to Sachs, to be the wrong path to take. Instead, he tells the reader to think about pulling justice away from the ideals of development. Justice, for Sachs, relates more to lowering the risks created from out-of-control resource usage. Especially in terms of future equity between countries in the world, Sachs calls the proponents of justice to focus more on bringing the level of resource usage of the rich countries to a more reasonable level. This is to be done instead of attempting to raise the poorer countries to a level of resource use that is not sustainable, in other

words “lowering the top” (Haavelmo-Hansen 1991; Goodland and Daly 1993 cited Sachs 2002, p. 33). Sachs relates this focus on “lowering the top” directly to the use of EJ outside the US. Sachs’ 2002 article calls for the global application of the US model of EJ with a focus more on crisis that involves “excessive resource use” as opposed to exclusively tying it to race as it was before (p. 31). This approach, Sachs claims, will give EJ a more “fundamental relevance” (2002, p. 31). The “industrialized countries and classes”(Sachs 2002, p. 34) will in the coming years have to make justice “more about learning how to take less rather than how to give more” (ibid).

6. Conclusion

This paper through the form of a selected literature review has evaluated the obstacles faced in expanding the environmental justice concept as we know it from the US to a worldwide scale. This is an important topic to consider as we live in a time when old ways of understanding how policy should be implemented both on a national and global level need to be revised. The paper has, through the authors presented, determined what obstacles exist and how we can best move forward with using EJ on a local and global scale. The majority of the paper points to a strong possibility of EJ being used in other countries. The form, as it is known from the United States may function within the US itself but once it leaves the borders it must be able to mold with other nation-states and their own history, culture and needs. This is what authors such as Kameri-Mbote and Cullet (1996) and Martinez-Alier (2002), point to as a need for the broadening of EJ to be able to function in various countries in a bottom-up fashion. Wolfgang Sachs (1999) challenges the idea of globalization and its tendency to only function transnationally and not globally. Perhaps this is then the conundrum that EJ faces. If the movement and its proponents wish for it to become a policy which is used worldwide, it must be flexible enough to be used according to different histories and cultures, not just the US-model. The solution must be then to suggest the use of EJ but realize that how it began in the US is not what it will look like in other countries. The critical, community concentrated, bottom-up elements are indeed universally applicable, but EJ will be used and interpreted differently depending in which country it is used. Elements of EJ, such as Sachs’ suggestion for a resource-usage focus, can be taken abroad and used but must then be thought of as something separate than that of the EJ that began in the 1970s United States. More research must be performed in determining how to solve the problem of using principles of EJ in other countries while also incorporating the actual needs of the locals. The EJ movement and research must resist the “...tendency to hasty global projection” as it only provides an “escape into global projection” which is merely “then the simplest way out” (Enzensberger 1974, p. 8).

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Abbreviations

EJ - environmental justice

TNCs – transnational companies

US – United States of America