

Environmental Democracy? Does Anyone Really Care?

Written by Akash Goreeba

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AKASH GOREEBA, OCT 26 2012

Issues of the environment have taken centre stage within recent years. With issues such as climate change, global warming, environmental degradation, pollution, highly publicised documentaries such as Al Gore's the inconvenient truth, and even Hollywood movies such as Avatar, it is hardly surprising. Major companies are showcasing their environmental policies, brands such as Cadbury, Staples and Costa Coffee are showing off their Rainforest Alliance credentials and many major supermarkets are ditching the age old plastic bag. All in the name of the environment, arguably. With issues of the environment of such importance it was inevitable that issues of environmental democracy and justice would also come under scrutiny. Both environmental Democracy and justice will be discussed in this paper. We will start by looking at and defining democracy briefly, before identifying how individuals and communities can benefit, or access the democratic playing field. We will then look at some of the issues concerned with environmental democracy illustrated with some examples.

Later in the paper we will look at environmental justice in a similar fashion to environmental democracy. We will highlight some of the issues with examples and look at whether issues of Environmental democracy and justice are easier to deal with a localised level. We will conclude by arguing that both justice and democracy are essential when the environment is concerned. This is not to say that they are not problematic. However in a time where we are all witnessing environmental degradation and problems globally, both justice and democracy are a necessity.

A token yet generally received definition of democracy comes from Dahl 1991, that is democracy as "a political system in which opportunity to participate in decisions is widely shared among all adult citizens" (Dahl 1991, p.6). Mason is correct when he states in relation to these opportunities that "the more significant and comprehensive these opportunities are, the greater the level of democracy attached to a political system" (Mason 1991, p.22). It is fair to say we are in the era of liberal democracy. One which defends the rights and liberties of the individual, albeit in the majority of the world via representation. Whilst it is fair to say that this has been accepted over the ancient Athenian model of direct democracy, it is not to say that some, namely radical greens have not called for a return to a small scale version of the Athenian model.

Mason correctly argues that "the distinction between representative democracy and direct democracy highlights a central dilemma of modern governance: the functional need for effective political decision making – achieved in increasingly complex societies through representative, often remote structures – threatens to undermine the accepted conditions for democratic justification: that affected interests have had a fair opportunity to influence the relevant decisions giving them good reason to support democratic norms" (Mason 1991, p.22). Dunn expresses this frankly "we have all become democrats in theory at just the stage in history at which it has become impossible for us in practice to organise our social life in a democratic fashion any longer" (Dunn 1993, p.29)

Whether this is the case or not it is clear that issues of the environment involve individuals, communities, schools, workers, and governments alike. As will become clear further in this paper, democracy is essential in safeguarding the rights and liberties of all individuals not only at the local level but globally. "Although scientific consensus has not been reached, there is ample evidence to suggest that race and class are importance determinants of the location of environmental pollution, degradation, and associated health risks" (Jones and Rainey 2006, p.473) (see also Bullard, 1990; Cable, Hastings, & Mix 2002; Foster, 1993; Goldman, 1994: Jones, 1998 as discussed in Jones and Rainey 2006). Hence why it is essential that all voices are heard even if this is via representation. As noted above,

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issues of environmental democracy concern all, Susan Hazen of the UNEP agrees *the* "new term 'environmental democracy', now taking hold, reflects increasing recognition that environmental issues must be addressed by all those affected by their outcome, not just by governments and industrial sectors. It captures the principle of equal rights for all those in the environment debate – including the public, community groups, advocates, industrial leaders, workers, governments, academics and health care professionals. For those whose daily lives reflect the quality of their environment, participation in environmental decision-making is as important as in education, health care, finance and government" (Hazen, UNEP p.1).

Thankfully we are in an era where we all have the 'the right to know' or freedom of information (although not surprisingly this is sometimes limited). This allows us to at least attempt to make informed decisions concerning the environment. " Access to environmental information for all who choose to participate in such decision-making is integral to the concept of environmental democracy" (Ibid). More recently questions of how to allow individuals and communities access to environmental decision making has taken centre stage. With initiatives such as the TAI (The Access Initiative) governments are arguably aiming to provide a more accountable, transparent and democratic government where the environment is concerned.

"Environmental democracy is about government being transparent, accountable, and involving people in decisions that affect their environment. The Access Initiative (TAI) network are expanding their work to promote environmental democracy. Here is a summary of what's ahead in 2008 and beyond. Local TAI partners work with their governments to reform transparency laws and train government officers to involve people in development planning. They also build the awareness among judges and in the media about the public's ability to influence decisions that affect the environment" (Kerdeman 2008, p.1). (See fig .1 for a list of countries in the TAI and examples of some successes)

Today environmental democracy is taking centre stage. Whether this is from the abundance of websites championing equal rights to the risks and benefits associated with the environment, movies such as the recent Avatar being championed for its environmental message (whether intentional or not) or the highly publicized case of Robert Lovelace in 2008 who was jailed following his campaign against a uranium mining company in Ontario. Another more recent development in the media linked to the 'right to know' or freedom of information we discussed above which highlights the availability of access to environmental democracy, as well as the ease of access to information via the internet is that, "European citizens will soon be able to find out about pollution in their local areas at the click of a mouse and lodge complaints under a new international agreement, the UN said. Dubbed a tool for "environmental democracy" by its supporters, the Kiev Protocol obliges authorities to keep a public register of pollution incidents or emissions from sources such as chemical plants, power stations, oil and gas refineries, mines and waste dumps" (AFP 04/2010, p.1) Jan Kubis, executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe argued that "It will enable ordinary citizens, simply using the Internet, to find out about the major sources of polluting emissions in their immediate neighbourhoods" (Ibid).

Another recent and worrying example is the oil spill threatening to cause an environmental catastrophe. Questions of who should be held accountable were inevitable, and with speculation that President Obama is under pressure to act quickly following calls for answers by local communities, it would hardly be surprising if BP (already having claimed responsibility for the spill) would have to pay for the cleanup.

We have looked at environmental democracy and its significance and importance. With some examples which highlight the necessity of democracy where environmental issues are concerned. We will now look at environmental justice and injustice, which often goes hand in hand with environmental democracy. Many of the examples above can be described as either an environmental justice or injustice. In a similar discussion of environmental democracy above, we will now look at environmental justice highlighting its importance and some of the problems with it.

Let us firstly look at a briefing produced by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) entitled 'Environmental Justice, rights and means to a healthy environment for all' 2001. The paper was developed following a seminar including the likes of Friends of The Earth, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on Environmental Justice.

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The paper does well to illustrate the links between social injustice and environmental problems, it works on the two basic premises of environmental justice that is, "that everyone should have the right and be able to live in a healthy environment, with access to enough environmental resources for a healthy life, and second, that it is predominantly the poorest and least powerful people who are missing these conditions" (ESRC 2001, P.3). Its main aim is to "research the extent of linkages between environmental and social injustice, and ask whether it is possible to tackle both social exclusion and environmental problems through integrated policies and developments" (ESRC 2001, P.3). As noted, whilst the ESRC recognizes the links between social injustice and environmental problems, they also recognize that although recently, the government as well as individuals and communities, particularly as a result of the efforts of researchers in the United States have been able to benefit from a new set of tools better allowing them to produce effective policies in accordance with environmental justice. In the ESRC's words, "there is an emerging toolkit for governments, individuals and communities to use to implement environmental justice. New assessment techniques, policies, and laws now allow the more transparent establishment of rights and responsibilities, and this in turn brings new legal, reputational and financial risks for those acting in an irresponsible way" (ESRC 2001, P.3).

What is useful for us when looking at the report here is the problems which arise when seeking to administer environmental justice, these can be seen throughout the 28 page document. Some of the more noticeable examples are, firstly the question of how to define a victim or victims of environmental injustice. For example should we or should we not consider the unborn when considering victims of environmental injustice, and what if the victim cannot express themselves "it remains unclear how to accord victim status in law when, for example, the victim cannot speak for themselves, such as an unborn child or a person whose intellectual abilities have been severely damaged by the harm they have suffered, such as radiation" (ESRC 2001, P.6).

Secondly, though there is now a great quantity of literature discussing the effects of environmental justice and injustice it is fair to say that most of these place more importance on localised areas. Arguably we should better consider injustices of large scale geographic areas, take the Chernobyl crisis as prime example. Another notable example provided by Sandeu 2000 is the case of the Inuit people "the Inuit people's staple diet of fish contains high levels of polychlorinated biphenyl, by-products of industrial processes far from their country, concentrated gradually through the food chain" (Sandeu 2000 in EDT ESRC 2001, p.6). There are many other examples of cases where the few have benefited from economic benefits whilst the large have suffered grave economic as well as social disbenefits.

Another particularly difficult example is time and space. That is as we can clearly argue, environmental justice is not only a national issue but a global one. The effects of climate change perhaps being the most obvious example. "For example, people in African countries and future generations are likely to be badly affected by climatic changes caused by fossil fuel burning, which has been caused predominantly by people in non-African countries, in this and previous generations" (Boyle and Anderson 1996 in EDT ESRC 2001 P.6). Another prime example is the responsibility of us all. That is simply, human race and our responsibility to maintain the earth's existing bio diversity. Dobson makes note of this point well "no theory of justice can henceforth be regarded as complete if it does not take into account the possibility of extending the community of justice beyond the realm of present generation human beings" (Dobson 1998, p.244-245).

From the above it is clear that environmental justice is not just a local issue but a global one, an inter-generational one, and undoubtedly a problematic one. This should be a concern of not only the few, but all countries. It is also clear from the above that identifying environmental injustices is often a difficult task. As Frosch and others have noted, "environmental justice offers researchers new insights into the juncture of social inequality and public health and provides a framework for policy discussions on the impact of discrimination on the environmental health of diverse communities... Yet, causally linking the presence of potentially hazardous facilities or environmental pollution with adverse health effects is difficult, particularly in situations in which diverse populations are exposed to complex chemical mixtures" (Frosch et Al 2002, P. 149).

Let us look now at the problems of environmental justice. In relation to the UK, Ageyman believes that "to many people in the UK, environmental justice is quite simply someone else's problem. To them, the words 'environmental' and 'justice' do not sit easily together. At best, their combination evokes a memory of some distant news report or

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documentary of how communities of colour and poor communities in the US face a disproportionate toxic risk when compared with white middle class communities, and at worst the combination fails to register a signal” (Agyeman & Evans 2004, p.157).

However it is clear that within the last 20 years at least, the effects of environmental injustices have become of increasing importance. Whether this is due to climate change, global warming, or disproportionate pollution, we have seen an increase in NGO’s and in some cases MP’s who are addressing environmental injustices and pushing the issues off of the sidelines and into the mainstream in Britain and indeed British government. As predicted by Cutter the issue of environmental justice in “other regions will intensify in the years to come as nations implement international accords for sustainable development” (Cutter 1995, 111).

Not just within the UK but within Europe we have seen the EU adopt a set of initiatives aimed towards environmental justice through ‘Just Sustainability’. Just sustainability as defined by Jacobs is understood as “the egalitarian conception of sustainable development”(Jacobs 1999, p.32). To further this it is, “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems” (Agyeman, et al., 2003, p.5). Guidelines for EU policy implementation sets out that “all policies must have sustainable development as their core concern. In particular, forthcoming reviews of Common Policies must look at how they can contribute more positively to sustainable development” (Commission of the European Commission 2002, p.12).

It is not surprising that EU policy has placed emphasis on just sustainability a year after and EU governance white paper was produced (2001). In this White Paper, “the modernization of European governance is seen as a necessary precondition for European integration through a process of decentralization, combating the impact of globalization, and a restoration of faith in democracy through wider involvement in decision making” (Agyeman & Evans 2004, p.162).

We have seen from the above the problematic of environmental justice. It is arguably particularly difficult when considered in the global context. It is not surprising that attempts to safeguard and provide environmental justice have now taken a small scale dimension. An example of a more small scale attempt at addressing the effects on environmental justice/injustice is the Environmental Justice Showcase Community by the EPA (environmental protection agency). Recently it was announced that the State of Jacksonville USA had been selected for the pilot scheme which would see a cash injection of over \$100,000 by the EPA which would go towards addressing the environmental issues suffered by low income and minority communities.

“EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson announced that, under the initiative, Jacksonville will be one of the national models for EPA’s commitment to EJ efforts. EJ refers to the disproportionate environmental burdens placed on low-income and minority communities” (EPA News Release, 04/2010). The project aims at working with the likes of schools, community organisations, local residents, as well as federal agencies. Greg Strong, Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s Northeast District Director stated that “we can achieve much more collectively, when we combine and leverage our resources, than as stand-alone organizations working independently... This kick-off event is an excellent way for us to find new opportunities to work collaboratively with our partners in order to benefit the local community and further improve human health and the environment”(EPA News Release, 04/2010).

Those such as the EJF (Environmental Justice Foundation) have already done well to illustrate the usefulness of small scale local and community projects aimed at addressing environmental injustices, the EJF essentially operates via providing film and advocacy training and empowering “local” communities. Some notable examples where this has been successful include the Cambodian Fisheries Action Coalition Team, or (FACT). The Team aimed to resolve conflicts over freshwater fisheries, in short the EJC “ trained and equipped FACT with essential cameras, computer equipment, internet access and GPS systems. And thereby helped FACT gather essential information and testimonies and co-produced ‘Feast or Famine’, which was launched at a meeting hosted by the UK Ambassador to Cambodia and attended by World Bank, IMF and other representatives of the donor community, helping to put the issues firmly on the political agenda” (EJF 2010).

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Other examples include the EJF's "educating on nature in Vietnam", "CEDAC" aimed at reducing the use of deadly pesticides in Cambodia, and "JALA" aimed at combating illegal fishing and helping poor fisherman in Sumatra. All the examples above have in common that they operated in the "local" communities. Perhaps it is the case that both democracy and justice are best implemented at a local level.

We have looked at the importance as well as the problematic nature of environmental democracy and justice. As problematic as the two are, their importance are undeniable. There are numerous organisations and NGO's that are dedicated to ensuring environmental democracy and justice, some of which have been discussed above. In a world where we are witnessing environmental degradation and problems globally, effective democracy and justice is a necessity.

Good environmental governance equates to good environmental democracy/justice. We have seen how minorities have suffered disproportionate environmental dis-benefits. In a supposed free world it is only fair that everyone should be allowed to experience both the risks and benefits associated with the environment, as well as future generations to come. And whilst from the above it is clear that environmental democracy/justice has a long way to go, it has done well so far to deal with many environmental issues globally, usually small scale and local. But it is undoubtedly the case that small scale localised efforts are most effective. It remains to be seen whether implementation of small scale localised agendas "globally" will prove fruitful. And whilst the likes of Agyeman above, have argued that the majority of environmental issues "fail to register a signal", this is undeniably changing. Thanks to the efforts of the many who go out of their way to make consideration for the environment a key part of modern life.

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