

## Toward a ‘just’ sustainability?

Julian Agyeman\*

Tufts University, Medford, USA

### Introduction

Why should race and class, justice and equity play a role in sustainability? Has the current environmentally focused sustainability movement not done a good job? Irrespective of whether we take a global, national or more local focus, a moral or practical approach, inequity and injustice resulting from, among other things, racism and classism are bad for the environment and bad for a broadly conceived notion of sustainability. What is more, as most of the environmental justice literature (see, for instance, Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003) and Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004) have shown in the United States, the environmental sustainability movement does not have an analysis or theory of change with strategies for dealing with these issues. Indeed, Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004, 12) in *The Death of Environmentalism*, their stinging indictment of the US environmental movement, ask:

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?

And many don’t see inequity and injustice, racism and classism as their responsibility. While researching a film in the early 1990s on the (lack of) inclusivity of the environmental movement in the United Kingdom, I asked a Greenpeace staffer if she felt that her organization’s employees reflected multicultural Britain. She replied calmly, ‘No, but it’s not an issue for us. We’re here to save the world.’ There is a common belief among those in the environmental sustainability movement that as they are ‘saving the world’, they are saving it for everyone *equally*, which somehow absolves them from wider discussions of equity and justice. As I have argued elsewhere:

sustainability ... cannot be simply a ‘green’, or ‘environmental’ concern, important though ‘environmental’ aspects of sustainability are. A truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally related to environmental limits imposed by supporting ecosystems. (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2002, 78)

In this short discussion, based very loosely on my December 2007 keynote at the ‘Sustaining Culture’ conference at UniSA, Adelaide, I want to outline:

- the inseparability of environmental quality and human equality;
- ideas about a *just*, as opposed to a purely *environmental*, sustainability.

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\*Email: julian.agyeman@tufts.edu

### **The inseparability of environmental quality and human equality**

In recent years it has become increasingly apparent that the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked to that of human equality. Wherever 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.

It has been shown by Torras and Boyce (1998) that, globally, countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland with a more equal income distribution, greater civil liberties and political rights and higher literacy levels, tend to have higher environmental quality (measured in lower concentrations of air and water pollutants, access to clean water and sanitation) than those with less equal income distributions, fewer rights and civil liberties and lower levels of literacy. Similarly, in a survey of the 50 US states, Boyce et al. (1999) found that states (predominantly southern) with greater inequalities in power distribution (measured by voter participation, tax fairness, Medicaid access and educational attainment levels) had less stringent environmental policies, greater levels of environmental stress and higher rates of infant mortality and premature deaths. At an even more local level, a study by Morello-Frosch (1997) of counties in California showed that highly segregated counties in terms of income, class and race had higher levels of hazardous air pollutants. The message? From global to local, human inequality is bad for environmental quality.

If sustainability is to become a process with the power to *transform*, as opposed to its current *environmental, stewardship or reform* focus, justice and equity issues need to be incorporated in its very core. Our present 'green' or 'environmental' orientation of sustainability is basically about tweaking our existing policies. Transformative sustainability or *just* sustainability implies a paradigm shift that in turn requires that sustainability takes on a redistributive function. To do this, justice and equity must move centre stage in sustainability discourses, if we are to have any chance of a more sustainable future.

### **Ideas about a *just*, as opposed to a purely *environmental*, sustainability**

At present, much theorizing and activity on sustainability and sustainable development is based on environmental sustainability or environmental stewardship. Based on the New Environmental Paradigm of Catton and Dunlap (1978), environmental sustainability is very good on '*inter*-generational equity' – equity to as yet unborn generations – but has little to say about '*intra*-generational equity' – equity or social justice *now*. I call this the 'equity deficit' of environmental sustainability.

This dominant, 'equity-deficit environmentalism' is precisely why the environmental justice project, paradigm and movement grew, first in the United States, but now in other countries. Environmental justice organizations emerged from grassroots activism in the Civil Rights Movement. Unlike environmental sustainability, environmental justice is, according to Taylor (2000), a framework for integrating class, race, gender, environment and social justice concerns. It can be understood as a local, grassroots or 'bottom-up' community reaction to external threats to the health of the community that have been shown to disproportionately affect people of colour and low-income neighbourhoods (Bullard 1990, 1993). The environmental justice project has redefined the term 'environment' so that the dominant wilderness, greening and natural resource focus now includes urban disinvestment, racism, homes, jobs, neighbourhoods and communities. The 'environment' became discursively different; it became 'where we live, where we work and where we play' (Alston 1991).

It will come as no surprise that these two paradigms, the New Environmental Paradigm and the Environmental Justice Paradigm, drive two movements that look very different. Without wishing to essentialize, there is abundant research that characterizes the environmental

sustainability movement as largely white, educated and middle class while the environmental justice movement is largely low-income, people of colour driven. At a more global level, this difference is amplified and played out at conferences between the richer countries and the not-for-profits of the global North that want to discuss a 'green' agenda of environmental protection, biodiversity, and the protection of the ozone layer, versus those poorer ones in the South that are proponents of a 'brown' agenda of poverty alleviation, infrastructural development, health and education. McGranahan and Satterthwaite (2000) call these agendas the 'ecological sustainability' and 'environmental health' agendas, respectively. Notwithstanding the historical mistrust between these two largely separate movements and agendas, the differences between them are based primarily on the issues of race and class, justice and equity and how these play out in terms of services, *not* about the need for greater environmental protection. There is, however, I believe, an emergent middle way between the green/New Environmental Paradigm and the brown/Environmental Justice Paradigm that I call the *Just Sustainability Paradigm*.

The '*Just Sustainability Paradigm*' is an emerging discursive frame and paradigm. It is not, however, rigid, single and universal, thereby avoiding the charge of essentialism. It links to both the green/New Environmental Paradigm and the brown/Environmental Justice Paradigm. In this sense, it can be seen as being both flexible and contingent, composed of overlapping discourses that come from recognition of the validity of a variety of issues, problems and framings. It arises from the definition of sustainability of Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans (2003, 5) – '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' – which prioritizes justice and equity, but does *not* downplay the environment, our life-support system. In essence, it is malleable, acting as a 'bridge' spanning the continuum between the green/New Environmental Paradigm and the brown/Environmental Justice Paradigm.

An example of a not-for-profit organization in the United States that is operating firmly within the *Just Sustainability Paradigm* is Urban Ecology, based in Oakland, California. Founded in 1975, its website says:

*Urban Ecology has not focused on the traditional environmental priorities of preserving land, air and water. Neither have we had a traditional community development focus aimed at, for example, generating affordable housing. Rather, our work has integrated elements of these disciplines and others, with healthy 'human habitats' as the common denominator. We have sought to advance sustainability in the Bay Area using three main strategies – alternative visioning, education and policy advocacy, with all of our work grounded in the three E's of environment, economy and social equity. (<http://www.urbanecology.org>)*

Note that Urban Ecology eschews both, on the one hand, a '*traditional environmental*' and on the other a '*traditional community development/environmental justice*' focus in favour of just sustainability or what they call '*healthy human habitats*'. Urban Ecology is engaged in two primary avenues towards promoting just sustainability principles in land-use planning within the San Francisco Bay Area. Firstly, its '*Community Design Program*' provides planning and design services to low-income urban neighbourhoods, such as the Weeks Neighborhood in East Palo Alto, to assist them with community development. They have developed a process to bring the services of city planners into communities to engage in local needs assessments and community visioning. Urban Ecology helps organizations to facilitate the drafting of a community plan that addresses the immediate and long-term needs of the area, and assists the local community organizations with implementation strategies. Although the needs of the community are given first priority, Urban Ecology staff promote ideas such as transit access, pedestrian-friendly streetscapes and affordable infill housing to help revitalize neighbourhoods with sustainability principles in mind.

Secondly, Urban Ecology's '*Sustainable Cities Program*' approaches municipal governments such as Berkeley, Fremont, Oakland and San Francisco and works with community groups such as San Jose's Tamien Neighborhood Association to promote more sustainable development patterns. The suburbs at the frontiers of urban sprawl are encouraged to adopt Smart Growth principles that allow for diverse housing options and alternative transportation infrastructure. Urban Ecology advocates for infill development, affordable housing, transit-oriented development, reduced parking requirements and mixed-use projects. It provides information to municipalities and citizen groups about private developers that have applied these principles in their projects. Urban Ecology also runs workshops for the public on how to review new projects and advocate for sustainable land development. In the Bay Area, the issues of urban sprawl, environmental preservation and social justice are deeply linked together, and groups such as Urban Ecology are working with many communities in pursuit of more local and regional just sustainability.

On the governmental side, an example of a city in the United States that is grappling with implementing the *Just Sustainability Paradigm* is San Francisco. Aside from its leadership in implementing the precautionary principle and the many just sustainability projects and programmes in the Bay Area, the *Sustainable San Francisco* website represents the most advanced integration of justice and equity of any city in the United States, as a part of its sustainability policy (Warner 2002). As evidenced by its website (and there are, of course, problems with this form of evidence), San Francisco appears to be making an effort to incorporate (environmental) justice into its sustainability policy and is taking steps towards implementation. The plan was initiated in 1993 by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Sustainable San Francisco organized the process of drafting a plan to include broad, long-term social goals, long-term objectives, specific actions, and community indicators for each topic area. Broader public comments were solicited in June to September 1996. The Sustainability Plan was adopted as official policy of the City and County of San Francisco in July 1997. Environmental justice is one of 15 'topic areas' of the Sustainable San Francisco Plan. Each topic area has five goals:

Sustainability Plan/Environmental Justice/Strategy

Goal 1	To establish meaningful participation in the decision-making processes that affect historically disadvantaged communities of San Francisco.
Goal 2	To create a vibrant community-based economy with jobs and career opportunities that allow all people economic self-determination and environmental health.
Goal 3	To eliminate disproportionate environmental burdens and pollution imposed on historically disadvantaged communities and communities of color.
Goal 4	To create a community with the capacity and resources for self-representation and indigenous leadership.
Goal 5	To ensure that social and economic justice are established as an integral aspect of environmental well-being and sustainability.

(<http://www.sustainable-city.org/Plan/Justice/strategy.htm>)

The San Francisco plan also delineates three sustainability indicators that can be used to assess progress in the area of environmental justice:

Sustainability Plan/Environmental Justice/Indicators

Mean income level of people in historically disadvantaged communities.

Proportion of environmental pollution sources in historically disadvantaged communities with respect to San Francisco's other communities.

Participation of historically disadvantaged communities as a whole and their indigenous self-selected representatives in decision-making processes.

(<http://www.sustainable-city.org/Plan/Justice/indicato.html>)

### Summary

The dominant orientation of most sustainability discourses and practices has been 'environmental' or 'green', with little or no interest in, or conception of, the role or effects of inequity and injustice, racism and classism. The Just Sustainability Paradigm foregrounds four, albeit related, focal areas of concern that are not *all* represented by either the green/New Environmental Paradigm or the brown/Environmental Justice Paradigm:

- Quality of Life;
- Present *and* Future Generations;
- Justice and Equity;
- Living within Ecosystem Limits.

It is only through a just sustainability focus that the true potential of sustainability and sustainable development will be realized.

### Notes on contributor

Julian Agyeman is Associate Professor, and Chair of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, Boston-Medford, MA, USA. He is co-founder, and co-editor of the international journal 'Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability'. His books include 'Local Environmental Policies and Strategies' (Longman 1994), 'Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World' (MIT Press 2003), 'Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice' (NYU Press 2005) and 'The New Countryside? Ethnicity, Nation and Exclusion in Contemporary Rural Britain' (The Policy Press 2006). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts (FRSA), a member of the Board of the Center for Whole Communities in Vermont and is on the Editorial Boards of *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, *The Journal of Environmental Education*, and the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*.

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