

And Justice For All

An environmental expert talks about the challenges of helping disadvantaged communities deal with pollution and climate change at a local level.

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NEWSWEEK

The way people are affected by the environment is often presented on a global scale—tides rising or forests dying as a result of climate change. But the way human beings have a direct impact on the planet is often more visible on a local level. Communities closer to industrial areas may be affected by higher than average asthma rates, for instance, and towns with poor water treatment or slow clean-up from disasters may show a disproportionate number of children with developmental problems.

A report released today by two environmental organizations, the Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross Switzerland, found that localized pollution is the leading contributing factor to disability and disease in communities across the world. Even in the United States, air pollution and contaminated water sources result in death, persistent illness and neurological impairment for millions of people. And children, researchers found, are usually disproportionately affected.

Activists for environmental justice claim that the people most affected usually lack the time or resources to fight against factors that will affect their health. But the problem, says Julie Sze, director of the Environmental Justice Project at the University of California, Davis, is rarely politically motivated, at least not explicitly. It's more an issue of business-focused zoning and lax regulatory control. It can also be a symptom of the larger inequality in America, which often falls along race and class lines. Sze spoke to NEWSWEEK's Daniel Stone about the extent of environmental injustice and what can be done. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: What's the scope of this type of environmental injustice? How large is the problem?

Julie Sze: Globalization has really allowed injustice to really go global. The term really describes all different types of problems. Some people use it to describe climate change and how that affects people disproportionately in the third world. It's not [a single] issue but more an analytic frame that describes environmental injustice, so you can apply it to lots of different topics.

Problems like ground-water contamination and lack of clean air are found more in developing countries and more disadvantaged communities. How big is the problem in the U.S.?

You see it more and more in the U.S. There's a huge body of research that looks at the kind of global contaminants that you're talking about—groundwater contamination, toxic expulsion from refineries, whatever—in the U.S. It's definitely [happening] in the U.S., because there's inequality in the U.S.

What causes that? Is it local governments that are corrupt? Or officials who are out of touch with the people their decisions affect?

It's hard to generalize. A lot of it is different in different regions. For example, in the Southeast, you have large communities of African-Americans who live around the oil refineries down there. It can

also be a factor of employment discrimination. If you look at [the effect of] nuclear mining on uranium[-rich] communities, that's very different, it's an entirely different problem. It's very hard to say what causes it. It's often historical and plays in with different factors, things like race, class, both class and race, zoning laws and, of course, [who has] interests in political decisions.

New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina comes to mind as affected by environmental factors and lack of appropriate policy. Are there other communities with similar issues?

I've looked at New York. A lot of it there is industrial pollution. Black and Latino child-asthma rates are almost eight times the national average. That plays into the zoning history that concentrated all these industrial developers in the same place. Asthma is just one case. I've looked at the San Diego and Tijuana area, where people are affected by trade between [the two cities] because zoning around the border can often be more lax.

Is it possible to chart who's to blame in each instance?

A lot of it has to do with very general things. In New York, again, it's an issue of zoning. It's not targeted. Decision-makers made decisions to make Manhattan less industrialized and that pushed a lot of industrialization—which usually pollutes the most—into the outer parts of the city. So how do you implicate that? It's just the law and regulations, but it's never politically calculated [to target people].

Is the problem compounded by the fact that these communities lack the resources and time to assemble?

Absolutely. It's all about resources and access to decision making. One of the slogans behind environmental justice is giving people "a place at the table." There are lots of elements to environmental justice: access to decision makers, access to legal resources and many others. It's not surprising that middle- and lower-class communities mobilize differently.

Is there a solution?

On some levels, people are very aggressive in trying to deal with this, both with regulatory framework and through legislation. California, for example, has over 20 laws that deal with environmental justice. So I wouldn't say it's a lost cause. I wouldn't want anyone to think that there's no way we can deal with any of this.

The term "environmental injustice" implies morality — that those who aren't affected have a responsibility to act and speak up for those who are. Is there a national, even global responsibility here?

Yes, I think part of the responsibility is understanding that different groups experience their world according to circumstances that are different. Even if you're not affected, you're still connected to that person.

So how can unaffected communities play a more vocal role in protecting affected communities?

In Europe, and I think this is really interesting, they have a very different fundamental approach to dealing with this. It's called the precautionary principle, which California is now also using. It basically says that instead of proving that something causes harm, you have to prove that it *doesn't* cause harm. That affects how things get produced and how people think about development. That's a really concrete example of how we can do better, and where we'll end up, in comparison to the Europe, if we don't.

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