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Recommended Citation

Krings, Amy and Thomas, Hillary. Integrating Green Social Work and the U.S. Environmental Justice Movement: An Introduction to Community Benefits Agreements. Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work, , , 2018. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Social Work: School of Social Work Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Integrating green social work and the US environmental justice movement:

An introduction to community benefits agreements

Amy Krings and Hillary Thomas

Introduction

The attainment of environmental justice requires the *participation* of residents who are affected by land-use decisions, as well as the equitable *distribution* of environmental resources, including access to clean air, land, and water. Urban land-use decisions are a necessary, although under-examined, intervention point for green social workers in preventing or mitigating environmental injustice. This chapter suggests that community benefits agreements (CBAs) are a mechanism by which green social workers can ally with residents and community organizations to protect the health and well being of people living in proximity to undesirable development.

In this chapter, the authors begin by defining environmental justice and examining the scope of environmental inequity in the United States (US). As with any social issue, the conditions that give rise to the problem must be understood in order to design and implement effective interventions. Therefore, the authors apply growth coalition theory to explain how the political economy shapes land use decisions that culminate in environmental injustices, incentivizing the disproportionate placement of hazardous,

undesirable facilities in neighbourhoods occupied by racial minorities and the poor. To prevent or mitigate harm from undesirable land uses (such as waste incinerators, hazardous industries, or heavy transportation facilities), the authors suggest that green social workers consider community benefits agreements (CBAs). In some cases, CBAs have enabled host communities in the United States to secure local accountability and investments in schools, housing, and green spaces in exchange for hosting new development. The chapter will conclude by discussing potential limitations associated with CBAs and suggests opportunities for green social workers to strengthen local influence and, ultimately, promote environmental justice.

Environmental injustice in the US

Scholars, policymakers, and environmental justice advocates have documented the widespread placement of what urban planners call 'locally undesirable land uses' or 'LULUs' within low-income communities of colour (Bryant, 1995; Bullard, 1993; Mohai and Bryant, 1992). Examples of LULUs include heavy industries, airports, interstates, waste facilities, and other land uses that contaminate the air, land, or water. The placement of LULUs matters because they can negatively affect the health of host community residents. For example, nearly all (94 per cent) of the 23,000 largest polluting facilities in the US release their waste on site into the air, water, or soil (Gee and Payne-Sturges, 2004). As a result, people who reside nearby are exposed to industrial pollutants and chemicals that, in some cases, can result in birth defects, miscarriages, cancers, breathing difficulties, and damage to the central nervous system (Rogge and Combs-Orme, 2003; Rainey and Johnson, 2009).

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Children, in particular, are vulnerable to chemical exposure as they grow and develop. These contaminated neighbourhoods have been described by environmental justice advocates as 'sacrifice zones' (Lerner, 2010) because, when LULUs are spatially concentrated, the health of the environment and its proximate residents may be sacrificed to drive profit. Residents of sacrifice zones may experience other social inequities including crumbling infrastructure, deteriorating housing, inadequate public transportation, unemployment, high poverty, and an overloaded healthcare system, all of which can exacerbate environmental health impacts (Bryant 1995; Bullard 1993; Srinivasan et al., 2003).

Low-income communities of colour are disproportionately burdened by other problems in addition to the nearby placement of LULUs. Environmental regulations and laws are not enforced as strongly within neighbourhoods that are predominately populated by the poor and racial minorities. Companies are also less likely to reduce the capacity of LULUs in neighbourhoods where racial minorities live so as to minimize impact (Been 1994). When fines are levied against polluting industries, White communities see faster action, stiffer penalties, and stronger enforcement than communities where Blacks, Hispanics, and other racial minorities live (Lavelle and Coyle, 1992).

Environmental burdens are not experienced equally across populations. Instead, the most polluted urban communities in the US are disproportionately populated by people of colour, the poor, women, and children (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, and Wright, 2008). These burdens influence the magnitude of issues to which social workers respond, including health and mental health disparities, poverty, child safety, and the lack of access to housing.

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Environmental justice and its resulting health impacts are social justice issues in which social workers must intervene (Dominelli, 2012; 2013).

The resolution of these inequalities is a goal of green social work (Hoff and Rogge, 1996). Towards this end, green social workers are called to advance environmental justice which the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) defines as:

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, ethnicity, income, national origin or educational level with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no population, due to policy or economic disempowerment, is forced to bear a disproportionate burden of the negative human health or environmental impacts of pollution or other environmental consequences.

(US EPA, 1998: 2)

To address what has been called 'environmental racism', a term that refers to racial inequalities within environmental policy-making processes such as the siting of polluting industries and waste disposal and the unequal enforcement of environmental regulations and laws (Chavis, 1993; McGurty, 1997), affected residents should be included in decision-making processes. They deserve to be protected from environmental impacts associated with LULUs or compensated to address these impacts. However, to design effective interventions that advance environmental justice, social workers must begin with an understanding of the root causes of environmental injustices. They need a theory to connect land-use decisions with human and environmental health disparities. In the next section, the authors will apply growth coalition theory to explain power dynamics within urban

development decisions and we emphasize opportunities for residents, community-based organizations, and green social workers to secure the right of all people to live in a healthy environment.

Growth coalition theory and urban development

Urban political theorists suggest that, within a capitalist economy with private property, market competition, and economic inequality, the most important concern of cities and their governmental leaders is *growth*, which happens through development (Molotch, 1976). Yet, land-use decision-making processes are frequently ignored by social workers. As a result, social workers may miss important opportunities to influence policies and political decisions that benefit a small proportion of the population and burden others. We suggest that growth coalition theory not only helps to explain power dynamics within land-use decisions, but also can shed light on why environmental justices occur.

Growth coalition theory asserts that cities depend upon private investment for public revenues. Local government officials, who must compete with leaders of other cities to retain or attract capital, are therefore incentivized to create formal or informal ‘pro-growth coalitions’ with business leaders to prioritize policies that promote economic development (Stone, 1989; Molotch, 1976, Mollenkopf, 1989). Given these constraints, urban theorists conceptualize the city as a ‘growth machine’ in which governmental leaders enter formal or informal coalitions with business leaders to promote development. Consequently, these government–business pro-growth coalitions are reluctant to attach restrictions to development policies for fear that they will burden developers and scare off

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capital (Peterson, 1981). For example, leaders may offer incentives, such as limiting corporate taxes, resisting environmental or labour regulations, and providing businesses with the infrastructure and transportation facilities. In some cases, city leaders will even subsidize new developments with tax incentives in an effort to provide a good business climate. They are likely to resist policies in which citizens can disrupt or delay new development or in which businesses are required to pay higher taxes, additional labour costs, or investments in the surrounding community.

In contrast, residents and local stakeholders may oppose new development, particularly if it means that public spending goes towards private development as opposed to city services. Additionally, if the development is proposed for construction in proximity to their homes, residents may have fears relating to displacement (through eminent domain or gentrification) or attendant pollution, traffic, noise, and other nuisances. In short, residents want to have a 'good neighbour' rather than to have local land used for what they deem undesirable purposes (Salkin and Lavine, 2008). As a result, civic groups will sometimes organize to prevent the construction of a new facility or to influence project design and impacts.

Growth coalition theory predicts that the business sector will support land-use policies and decisions that allow for the commodification and privatization of public goods to generate profits while residents will favour policies that preserve resources, such as land, for public use to support, service, and sustain community (Cain, 2014; Mollenkopf, 1989; Stoecker, 2010). These conflicting ideals centre on the Marxist theoretical distinction between exchange values--the commodification and production of goods and services for exchange with others--and use values--the production of goods and services for one's own

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use. In general, the city leadership will align with the business sector to promote exchange values through economic development. However, in some cases, new developments will be contested so as to protect use values and the growth coalition is constrained by local resistance. In part, this is because city leaders are motivated to remain in power and they understand that to do so they need to maintain their legitimacy through the support of community members (O'Connor, 1979). Thus, they need consent from potential challengers such as neighbourhood organizations, community groups, organized labour, or environmentalists who may oppose new development. In some cases, particularly when the anti-development groups possess economic and political influence, city leaders will cater to citizen demands by opposing new development or requiring developers to engage with residents.

Given that developers and city leaders want new development, and also want to appease opposition to its construction, they are incentivized to select host communities that are perceived to have less capacity for resistance, perhaps due to lower levels of education, income, or limited political networks--systemic injustices that disproportionately affect racial and ethnic minorities (Hoff and Rogge, 1996; Logan and Molotch, 2007). Similarly, poor communities may be chosen to host LULUs because of their potential willingness to tolerate pollution-generating development in the hope of gaining associated jobs and civic improvements (Pellow, 2004; Austin and Schill, 1991). Critics have described these dynamics as 'economic blackmail', suggesting that economically depressed communities are so desperate that they have to choose between employment and public health (Kazis and Grossman, 1982). In the absence of universal and robust policies designed to protect low-income communities of colour from the construction of new LULUs or to

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address racial and economic inequality, it is probable that developers and members of the growth coalition will continue to build LULUs in the most vulnerable communities, ultimately producing and reproducing economic inequalities.

Disproportionate placement of LULUs in poorer communities of colour occurs across the globe as well ([Dominelli, 2013](#)). Scholars outside of the US have also critiqued the neoliberal assumption that unrestricted land-use policies benefit everyone. As an example, [Romao \(2016\)](#) evaluated the distribution of oil revenue within Brazilian municipalities and found that, despite growth in profits and income inequality grew while life expectancies in these locations remained lower than the national average. As a result, the local growth coalition which included the owners of private business and political elites reaped the fiscal benefits of the oil extraction, but failed to include the people most likely to be negatively affected by the associated environmental contamination. Furthermore, [Piketty and Saez \(2014\)](#) extensively examined the relationship between economic growth and collective wellbeing. Their analyses of the global market economy suggests that, although wealth grew at an average of 6–7 percent per year from 1987 to 2013 for those in top income fractals, income inequality was also on the rise. Thus, evidence suggests that development projects enabled by free market economic policy and supported by strong growth coalitions may not inherently distribute benefits equitably and may in fact exacerbate socio-economic inequality ([Storey and Hamilton, 2003](#)). In sum, urban land development can produce winners and losers.

Community benefits Agreements (CBAs)

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In an attempt to pre-empt opposition to economic development, growth coalition members may suggest that development benefits all community members due to its associated job creation and tax revenue (Cain, 2014; Saito, 2012). However, as environmental justice advocates and the residents of sacrifice zones suggest, economic growth does not inherently benefit all people and, in some cases, passes along financial or health burdens, particularly to those living in proximity to a LULU. Perhaps New York City's master planner Robert Moses summarized this dynamic best when he justified the demolition of neighbourhoods to construct an interstate system by stating that 'you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs' (Caro, 1974).

Community benefits agreements (CBAs) aim to mitigate harm associated with new development while sharing the benefits of anticipated positive outcomes with existing residents of the host community (Gross, 2008; Gross, LeRoy, and Janis-Aparicio, 2002; Salkin and Lavine, 2007). CBAs are legally binding agreements between a private developer and coalition of community-based organizations, such as environmentalists, neighbourhood groups, and labour unions in which the coalition agrees to support a development in return for local investments and decision-making authority (Parks and Warren, 2009). Under some conditions, CBAs can advance environmental justice by reducing power inequalities between pro-growth coalitions and local stakeholders. At their core, they rely upon the organizing power and influence of the community for their emergence, implementation, and enforcement. CBAs attempt to shift power dynamics by building trust and promoting shared decision making between community members and developers, effectively advancing local self-determination.

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It is unlikely that a developer will be initially willing to cut profits by investing in the surrounding community. Thus, community coalitions are more likely to compel a developer to negotiate with them when bargaining is perceived to be less costly than ignoring the community concerns. [Baxamusa \(2008\)](#) traced CBA negotiations associated with the expansion of the Los Angeles Airport and a stadium in San Diego, California. He suggested that community coalitions are most influential when a new project requires some form of public participation and approval process, especially when projects use public funds. When local groups were mobilized and able to slow down or complicate the project approval process, they created uncertainty for the developer. To reduce the risk of having their project delayed or denied, developers will sometimes engage in CBA negotiations. Thus, cities that have a rigorous public approval process, combined with organized grassroots coalitions, are comparatively likely to secure CBAs as opposed to those with a strong growth coalition and limited civic engagement.

During CBA negotiation processes, community members pledge their support for the development in exchange for investments, such as funds for green space, affordable housing, or training for living wage jobs ([Salkin and Lavine, 2007](#)). Additionally, community members can negotiate for decision making authority, including access to clear and timely information about the project's environmental or health impacts. This strategy aligns with green social work practice by amplifying the voices of residents and communities that often go unheard ([Dominelli, 2012](#); [Teixeira and Krings, 2015](#)).

Given that CBAs are negotiated within highly contextualized environments rather than based upon standardized regulations, their strength--and thus their ability to reduce

environmental health disparities--varies. In their evaluation of CBAs, [Salkin and Lavine](#) emphasized:

It should not be assumed that [CBAs] are always ideal vehicles to promote social justice issues. Practical problems – from organizing coalitions of community groups to negotiating with legally and politically sophisticated developers – sometimes combine to make the process of negotiating a CBA an unwieldy exercise.

[\(2008: 293\)](#).

[Krings \(2015\)](#) warns that, to effectively compel a developer to bargain with a host community and, ultimately, implement a CBA, grassroots power is required. Thus, while CBAs have been found to mitigate harm and promote the health of host communities that are confronted with LULUs, it should be noted that not all communities are powerful enough to secure them. In the following section, the authors will suggest that green social workers are ideally positioned to align with and support host communities as they pursue CBAs as a means to advance environmental justice at a local level.

Opportunities for green social work practice

Urban growth coalitions, including developers, are incentivized to place locally undesirable land uses (LULUs) in low-income communities of colour because land is comparatively affordable and residents are perceived to be less politically powerful than those in more affluent areas. These are the same neighbourhoods in which many social workers practice. Green social workers can ‘think globally and act locally’ to promote accountable

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development by assisting with the creation and implementation of meaningful community benefits agreements (CBAs) that allow communities identified for the placement of a LULU to influence subsequent decisions while securing investments that mitigate associated health and environmental impacts.

When a LULU is proposed for construction in a vulnerable community, green social workers can utilize skills relating to community organizing, coalition building, research, and negotiation. They can support and collaborate with residents, community-based organizations, environmentalists, and organized labour. Social workers can use their clinical, observational, and assessment skills to assist in documenting concerns expressed by community members in order to help prioritize their concerns (Teixeira and Krings, 2015).

Green social workers can support residents and environmental justice advocates when they call for transparency and accountability from developers. This may involve utilizing economic or political pressure to encourage developers to provide meaningful local investments that protect residents' health and the surrounding environment. They can raise critical questions to ensure that participation processes and development decisions are locally relevant, culturally appropriate, and environmentally sustainable, as advocated by the green social work model. They can help translate scientific jargon into accessible language to facilitate community innovation and ingenuity or to inform individuals and families about physical and psychosocial risks associated with pollution and contamination.

Green social workers can also apply skills and knowledge relating to policy practice to change socio-political and economic systems of oppression that cause harm to oppressed groups and give rise to environmental and racial inequalities (Teixeira and Krings, 2015).

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To do this effectively, green social workers should be aware of the policies and processes that facilitate or have potential to interrupt the creation of sacrifice zones. At the organizational level, green social workers may develop programmes that facilitate the participation of young people in projects that emphasize leadership development and civic engagement skills so that they are able to effectively engage with policymakers and people charged with monitoring and regulating polluting facilities.

Green social workers can challenge growth coalitions to advance alternative visions of development that include paradigms of sustainability and equity. They can challenge ideas about the deserving and undeserving poor in order to transform the belief that sacrifice zones are places where 'disposable waste' is dumped among 'disposable people' to generate 'disposable income' for others (Martin-Brown & Ofosu-Amaah, 1992). They can use their creativity and imagination to challenge neoliberal assumptions about the merits of unregulated development while emphasizing care for vulnerable people and the environment (Dominelli, 2012).

Implications for social work education

Green social workers, who often practice in the same communities that are contaminated by locally undesirable land uses, possess knowledge and skills that can be applied at micro, mezzo, and macro levels to advance environmental justice. However, we want to conclude by reminding social worker educators and students that many environmental justice advocates have been organizing to promote inclusive decision-making and equitable access to environmental resources for years. Therefore, social workers must not only bring assets

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to community partnerships, but they must also learn from residents' wisdom and practice knowledge. In addition to learning from residents and activists, social workers can align themselves with urban planners, public health officials, and economists to better understand and influence urban development patterns.

In this chapter, we have demonstrated that hazardous and contaminating facilities are disproportionately placed within neighbourhoods where residents are poor and racial minorities. These land-use patterns contribute to health and mental health disparities. Thus, it is imperative that social work educators include content on urban politics and the mechanisms that shape economic development so that social workers can use this knowledge to inform community interventions that effectively prevent environmental injustice. Curricula should include content about the individual and community health impacts of living in proximity to hazardous facilities so that green social work can be cultivated across micro-, mezzo- and macro-levels of practice.

Additionally, the authors suggest that social work scholars should evaluate CBAs to determine to what extent, and how, community organising efforts can effectively challenge urban growth coalitions. Are there similar interventions available outside of the US and, if so, how does the local political-economic context influence land-use decisions? This question has grown in relevance given that a chief economist of the World Bank has recommended the migration of 'dirty industries' to less developed countries (Liu, 1997).

Finally, we suggest that CBAs provide an important case example for students to consider ethical and strategic dilemmas found within community interventions. For example, CBAs offer a means to mitigate harm and share benefits associated with new development in some cases. However, not all communities are powerful enough to secure

them. Additionally, in her political ethnographic study of a CBA campaign in Detroit, Michigan, [Krings \(2015\)](#) found that the decision to pursue a CBA was made, in part, because residents and organizers did not believe that they held sufficient political power to prevent the construction of a LULU. CBAs do not always represent a community's true preference but may instead represent a 'second-best' option when a proposed development cannot be stopped. Thus, green social workers should be aware of strategies to cancel infrastructure projects including highways ([Gotham, 1999](#); [Gregory, 1999](#)), airports ([Flores Dewey and Davis, 2013](#)), heavy industries ([Almeida and Stearns, 1998](#); [Checker, 2005](#); [Pulido, 1996](#)), and waste facilities ([Pellow, 2004](#); [Sze, 2007](#)).

Conclusion

The advancement of environmental justice--which requires local participation in decision-making as well as an equitable distribution of environmental resource--is central to the practice of green social work. This chapter has demonstrated that, although land-use decisions influence environmental and human health, social workers can do more to ensure that the benefits and costs of land development are distributed evenly. The chapter has built upon [Dominelli's \(2012\)](#) contention that, within a market economy in which stakeholders struggle for access to valuable natural resources, those who are least able to mobilize resources will most likely bear the brunt of environmental harm. The authors suggest that growth coalition theory can help to explain some of the root causes of environmental inequalities and that, without protective mechanisms such as community benefits agreements, it is probable that developers will continue to disproportionately

place locally undesirable land uses in communities populated by low-income people of colour. Social workers, who often practice within these 'sacrifice zones' and whose mission includes the advancement of social justice, have an opportunity to join community-based coalitions with residents, community organizations, environmentalists, and organized labour to promote sustainable, equitable, and healthy development practices in accordance with green social work principles.

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