

Environmental Justice

By Vivian Pacheco

In 2006, parents living the Addams community in Southwest Fresno launched a campaign to protect the health of their children by drawing attention to the links between industrial pollution and the high rates of asthma in their community. A poor, predominately Latino and African American community, the Addams neighborhood has to contend not only with the poor air quality of the Central Valley as a whole, but also with the pollution from the nearby freeway, industrial plants, and military airport. Citing their concerns that additional industrial sites would lead to more pollution and increase the already high childhood asthma rate, Addams residents advocated for a moratorium against additional industrial development in the neighborhood. Although the moratorium ultimately didn't pass, the campaign did help to establish resident leaders who have gone on to advocate for community necessities such as sidewalks, youth centers, parks, clinics, and supermarkets.

The Addams community's efforts to organize around environmental health concerns is reflective of a broader environmental justice movement. Environmental justice demands that everyone is "entitled to equal protection and equal enforcement of our environmental, health, housing, land use, transportation, energy, and civil rights laws and regulations."¹

Although the principles underlying environmental justice have a much longer history, the impetus for the modern environmental justice movement came in 1987, when the United Church of Christ's (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice published *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*. This landmark study highlighted the disproportionate environmental burdens facing people of color and low-income communities, and found that race was the most important variable predicting where hazardous waste facilities were located. Subsequent research has sought to measure the negative effects of environmental pollutants on human health. Although causal relationships between pollution and human health are difficult to prove, researchers have begun to document the extent to which communities of color and low-income people are at increased risk for illnesses such as asthma, cancer, diabetes, and birth defects as the result of exposure to environmental pollutants.² The UCC report and subsequent community organization also spurred significant policy reform, and in 1994, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12898 which requires the "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies."³

While recognition of the problems of environmental justice have grown over the last twenty years, low-income people and communities of color continue to bear the brunt of environmental pollution, whether due to the siting of hazardous waste facilities in their neighborhoods, the legacy of industrial development and its attendant brownfields and contaminated land, freeway noise and pollution, or lead exposure from paint in older housing stock. For example, a recent study found that California, Nevada, Washington and Arizona all had large racial disparities where hazardous waste sites were located, with the majority of waste facilities located in neighborhoods with people of color representing the majority population.⁴ The same study found that in states including Arizona and Nevada, poverty rates in neighborhoods with hazardous waste facilities were more than two times greater than in neighborhoods without hazardous waste facilities.

Overcoming the disproportionate burden of pollution and environmental hazards in these communities will require the active engagement of the community development field, since decisions regarding land use, housing, economic development, and neighborhood revitalization can all influence the environmental quality within a community. Increasingly, land use planners are encouraging more efficient land development, mixed-use and mixed-income developments, and the reuse of brownfields and former industrial sites. Comprehensive community development initiatives—which often incorporate considerations for open space, habitat preservation, and recreation facilities, as well as for urban agriculture and community food security—can further promote environmental justice. Perhaps most importantly, most planning processes require community outreach and public participation in land use decisions to ensure in principle, if not always in practice, that low-income communities have a voice in the decisions affecting their communities. As in the Addams neighborhood, where residents had the opportunity to become active participants in re-envisioning their neighborhood's future, it is this kind of political empowerment that may have the most lasting impact on low-income communities.

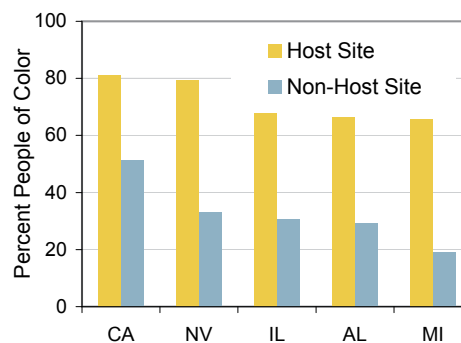


Figure 1. Populations residing in areas within 1.8 miles of hazardous waste treatment, storage and disposal facilities ("Host Sites") in the U.S. are disproportionately composed of people of color. 12th District states California and Nevada are among the states where hazardous waste facilities are most concentrated in minority neighborhoods.⁵

CI Notebook

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It's Getting Easier to be Green

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- Since then, criticisms have emerged about the degree to which this Executive Order has been implemented, and in September 2006 the Office of the Inspector General of the Environmental Protection Agency issues a report chastising the agency for failing to meet its mandate of implementing environmental justice reviews. (U.S. Office of the Inspector General (2006). *EPA Needs to Conduct Environmental Justice Reviews of Its Programs, Policies and Activities.*)
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Triple Bottom Line Investing

- This article is based upon a larger report titled: *Where Money Meets Mission: Creating a Unified Investment Strategy* published in May 2007 by the same authors. The larger report is available at www.blendedvalue.org.
- United Nations Environmental Programme Finance Initiative. Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI).
- The term "Unified Investment Strategy" was first presented in *A Capital Idea: The Unified Investment Strategy and Total Foundation Asset Management* and explored in related papers the reader may find at www.blendedvalue.org.
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- 'Market rate' is defined as a return on investment that matches generally accepted principles of risk and return at any given time for an investment in the financial markets. This is representative of Conventional Wisdom, and is not embraced but duly noted by the authors.
- 2005 Report on Socially Responsible Investing Trends in the United States*, Social Investment Forum, January 2006. The private equity figure comes from the RISE Report of 2003.
- For an expanded discussion of the array of assets available to organizations, please see both *The 21st Century Foundation: Building Upon the Past, Creating for the Future* and *An Essay in Two Parts: Total Foundation Asset Management—Exploring Elements of Engagement within Philanthropic Practice*, both of which are available at www.blendedvalue.org. The reader may also find *Blended Value Investing*, which provides case examples of alternative investment approaches and was published by the World Economic Forum, of interest. That paper is also available at the Blended Value web site.