

Wedging equity and environmental justice into the discourse on sustainability

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Introduction

Sustainability has become a term of art, although there is very little agreement on just precisely what the term is supposed to include, and how it might be measured as an aid to the assessment of policies designed to achieve it. This paper examines the problems and prospects for including meaningful indicators of intragenerational equity into the city-based regional planning efforts unfolding around the globe. The central focus of the paper is on the challenges that environmental justice activists face as they attempt to frame the problem of equity in ways that the general public would see as not only informative, but compelling.

The selection of indicators for inclusion in development planning scenarios is constrained in part by the relative absence of data about economic and social disparities among the resources usually relied upon for land use and transportation planning. In addition, there continues to be disagreement about the nature of the factors that actually cause, or produce the relatively few disparities that are routinely captured within official statistics.

The environmental justice (EJ) frame has been described in terms of its history and in terms of its limited success in capturing the attention of the news media. Its success in capturing a place on the public issue agenda, even among those who are at least marginally concerned about the environment is even more limited. Among those who have mobilized in support of environmental sustainability, most have tended to discuss their interests in equity in intergenerational terms, as is reflected in its standard definition in the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report that defined sustainable development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Environmental justice activists are more concerned about focusing public attention on the maldistribution of ecological harms in the present in ways that further burden communities already disadvantaged by race, gender and social class. Their arguments are often framed in terms that reflect the civil rights heritage of the movement’s traditional leaders.

After reviewing examples of successful efforts to reframe debates about equity, the paper concludes with a discussion of a set of EJ concerns and indicators that have the greatest potential for capturing public attention and commitment despite mounting resistance to the use of redistributive policies in support of sustainability goals.

Background

The publication of the Brundtland Commission's report in 1987 marks the emergence of sustainable development as an international policy goal (Redclift, 2005). The definition presented by the UN Commission focused primarily on the relationships between present and future generations. In some constructions and extensions, this linkage implies a kind of intergenerational equity, in that each generation should be able to pursue its own interests, despite the fact that they are likely to differ from the interests of future generations.

Intragenerational equity was also raised as a concern through references made to the needs of the "world's poor." Although this working definition has been criticized for its imprecision as well as for its failure to address inherent contradictions between growth and environmental sustainability (Redclift, 2005), many recognize that its broad acceptance depended on a certain level of strategic ambiguity regarding this and other fundamental tensions (Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien, 2005; Sneddon, Howarth and Norgaard, 2006).

Sustainability

The meaning of sustainability has changed over time, in part as a response to rather dramatic socioeconomic and technological shifts that developed in the 1980s along with a rise in the importance of markets, neoliberalism, and neoclassical economics as guiding principles for state action. One assumes that continually evolving notions of sustainability would reflect shifting points of emphasis on the status of the environment, the economy, and the equitable sharing of the benefits and burdens within each.

In the view of some, relations between the "three pillars" of sustainability: economic, social and environmental, have shifted so that the economic dominates, followed by the social, with environmental concerns becoming almost marginalized (Adams, 2006).

Although few promoters of the idea of sustainability rarely identified the ideological basis upon which their policy recommendations had been built, this powerful constraint can be reliably identified in the discourse and documents that were produced along the way (Giddings, Hopwood and O'Brien, 2002; Davidson, 2011).

Fundamental shifts in the ideological orientation within the development planning regime have been accompanied by an increased emphasis on problems of measurement and assessment of performance. At the same time, arguments about power and distributional equity appear to have been suppressed (Redclift, 2005: 218). The most often cited measures of sustainability tend not to include distributional, or other commonplace indicators of equity (Singh, et al., 2009).

Fortunately, periodic international events, such as the United Nations' Earth Summits, have helped to stimulate and revive public and governmental interest in addressing some of the more severely marginalized problems of development that would otherwise have slipped from view (Quental, Lourenco and daSilva, 2011).

It is also true that over time, the terms used to evaluate the status of nations or the global system have come to mean different things, depending upon the perspectives of the users. As Michael Redclift (2005: 223) puts it: "if you view sustainability as sustaining households and people, then the distribution of resources and rights in them is central to your objectives. If however, you view 'sustainability' as the protection and

conservation of the environment, then ‘justice’ consists primarily of ensuring it continues to play its vital ecological function.”

Many researchers and activists who are seeking to elevate the position of equity in the sustainability framework have adopted the concept of “just sustainability” as a move in the right direction (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2002; Agyeman and Evans, 2003; Pavel, 2008).

Measurement and Indicators

The development of indicators of environmental risk or sustainability continues to be marked by inter- and intra-disciplinary contention and debate. A good part of the disagreement surrounds the uses for which these indicators can reasonably be expected to serve (Mayer, 2008). Some of the greatest concern arises in relation to the disputes about the appropriateness of indexes as tools for policy and planning (Barnett, Lambert and Fry, 2008; Boulanger, 2008). Political as well as scientific conflict also arises with regard to the assignment of appropriate weights to the individual measures included in an index.

Vulnerability, and its opposite, resilience, have emerged as important frameworks through which to assess the differences within and between societies in exposure to and management of risks and hazards in the environment (Eakin and Luers, 2006; Nelson, Adger and Brown, 2007). Some researchers “use the term vulnerability when describing how social constructs of race and class can amplify the effects of environmental exposures” (Morello-Frosch, et al., 2011: 882).

Different, but no less spirited debates have developed around their utility of these measures for international, or inter-regional comparisons. Even greater difficulties arise when measures are being considered as tools useful for the assessment of inter-generational equity. There really is no solid basis for estimating what future generations might think they need (Okrent, 1999). It is simply not enough to assume that some indicator, such as loss of forests would be of equal value across generations (Pan and Kao, 2009), even if those assessments incorporated estimates of the likely status of forests in the not too distant future.

The nature of possible future states of the environment are increasingly being estimated on the basis of sophisticated scenario analysis techniques (Pulver and VanDeveer, 2009). Paul Baer (2009) discusses the role that equity plays in some of the scenarios used to represent alternative futures in terms of green house gas emissions (GHGs) and their consequences. It has also been suggested that because of the importance of scenarios to policy development, implementation and evaluation, it will be important for researchers guided by environmental justice concerns to determine “how scenarios engage, reproduce, and/or challenge global patterns of inequality, representation, and resource consumption” (Pulver and VanDeveer, 2009: 10).

Further complications are raised for considerations of equity, in that traditional average or per capita measures ignore differences in the outcomes or impacts likely to be experienced by different segments of the population (Dilworth, et al., 2010: 31). However, one measure of income inequality, the Gini coefficient, is routinely used in the assessment of scenarios that are evaluated in terms of equity, or fairness (Baer, 2009).

An international commission (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009) is bringing considerable attention and resources to bear on the evaluation of measures that would help us to move beyond the limited information provided by measures like Gross

Domestic Product (GDP). The Stiglitz Commission's goals included a dramatic shift in emphasis away from traditional measures of production and consumption, toward indicators of their consequences, such as might be reflected in measures of "well-being" (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi, 2009: 12-15). A substantial part of the Commission's effort is focused on the development of measures of equity and inequality.

Equity and Inequality

However it is measured, it is clear that the levels of poverty around the globe continued to be quite high, while the level of inequality actually seems to be growing (Adams, 2006). Of course, recent analyses suggest that it is in the wealthier nations, such as the US, where levels of inequality have increased most dramatically over the period during which the pursuit of sustainability has become such a global policy concern (Hacker and Pierson, 2010).

Despite increased attention being paid to rising levels of inequality, it is not clear that public concern has kept pace. In a report on trends in political attitudes among Americans, the Pew Research Center reported a substantial decline in the share of the population that sees the nation divided between the "haves" and the "have-nots" (PEW, 2009: 71-2).

Equity and inequality are concerns that operate on two related, but distinct dimensions (Hopwood, Mellor and O'Brien, 2005; Povlsen, Borup and Fosse, 2011). Equity is frequently used to refer to the fairness of distributions of resources and goods and services. It is less often used in relation to the equality of the results of the policies, procedures and institutions that control these distributions.

Unfortunately, we lack a firm basis upon which to base assessments of the relationship between inequality and fairness (Walker and Eames, 2006). In part this reflects the absence of conventional metrics for equity that might support empirical assessments of the relations between equity and inequality (Polvsen, Borup and Fosse, 2011: 53).

The presence of inequalities in access to basic goods is routinely characterized as an injustice, in part because in the view of some, a just society would not tolerate unequal access to health care, or political representation. Still, in the absence of some conventional standard for determining when some inequality is an injustice, we are unable to determine which disparities, or gaps will be characterized as unjust or unfair (Bithas, 2008: 225). In addition, access to fundamental resources, goods and services are rarely discussed in terms of equality, instead they are debated in terms of minimal requirements.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicated that the state of environmental equity could be assessed through periodic equity "audits": "Such audits would focus on broad issues of environmental equity such as: the social and geographic distribution of benefits and burdens, the allocation of scarce resources for risk reduction/management, and of communities' participation in risk allocation decisions which could affect the quality of their lives (US EPA, 1992: 71).

However, considerations of equity tend to generate problems for traditional forms of benefit/costs analyses, because of the fact that in the environmental realm, as in many others, those who pay the costs or bear the burdens are rarely the same persons, or from the same groups who derive the benefits (Farrow, 1998). Mainstream economists also seem comfortable with the conclusion that equity and efficiency are largely incompatible

because considerations of efficiency have come to dominate the policy debates in which their views carry much weight (Bithas, 2008).

The traditional opposition that gets drawn between equity and efficiency re-emerges in the context of sustainability when efficiency is defined in terms of economic growth and development. The conflicts between equity and efficiency are distorted still further when concerns about preserving the environment are placed within the mix (Budd, et al., 2008: 258).

Distribution of Benefits and Harms

Although the primary lens through which environmental inequality is viewed is one that focuses on the inequality of the exposures to harm experienced by people and communities, some researchers have argued that inequality can also be used as a frame through which to understand the distribution of harms to the environment itself (Boyce, 2008)

Within consideration of distribution, it is also suggested that it is necessary for observers to consider relevant outcomes, or impacts on the quality of life that accompany differential access to resources, experiences, and relationships. This is especially true with regard to those segments of the population that are already burdened by deficits in basic needs (Kreig and Faber, 2004; Gandy, 2009). As has been widely noted, “methods of cumulative impact assessment are currently undeveloped and often reliant on simplistic models of what may be intensely complex processes and interactions” (Walker and Eames, 2006: 8).

Understanding the nature of vulnerability to environmental hazards involves the incorporation of information about specific populations in specific locales. It also requires including information about differences in their resilience or adaptive capacity (Eakin and Luers, 2006). Efforts to explain health disparities have also been focused on identifying patterns of exposure to an expanding list of environmental toxins. However, additional concerns have arisen with regard to the relative absence of health affirming resources and opportunities (Brulle and Pellow, 2006; Cutts, et al., 2009).

Environmental Justice

Dorceta Taylor (2000) describes the path through which the environmental justice (EJ) paradigm or framework unfolded as it claimed a position within the environmental discourse of the 1990s. Most reviews comment on the historic impact of the President Clinton’s issuance of an Executive Order (1994) establishing widespread responsibility for Federal agencies to “make achieving environmental justice a part of its mission” especially with regard to the impacts of their programs on minority and low income communities. The “environmental justice communities” that became the focus of government attention and legal action tended to be composed primarily of people who were both poor, and racial or ethnic minorities (Kang, 2009).

Although the emphasis on government agencies and programs established by Clinton’s Executive Order did raise the level of awareness of the role of regulators, it took mobilized social movement organizations (SMOs) to bring attention to bear on the activities of transnational corporations (Simon, 2000).

The contributions of Robert Bullard (1990; 1993) to the development of this movement are especially important. Members of the EJ movement (EJM) point with

pride at a number of its early accomplishments (Bullard and Johnson, 2000), including important court decision that often involved opposition to the siting of hazardous waste processing facilities in African American communities. Under the umbrella of the EJM, we also see claims being made on behalf of “climate justice,” in response to heightened risks of catastrophic weather events associated with climate change (Dawson, 2010).

The failure of government agencies to plan for, or respond to environmental disasters, such as the hurricane named Katrina that wrought such destruction upon the poor black people in New Orleans, was a prime example of an injustice that served to expand the scope of the EJ framework in the US (Colten, 29007).

Although many of the concerns of activists mobilizing against environmental racism (Bullard, 1993), were to some degree included under the master frames of the EJM, many still contend that there are important distinctions to be maintained (Holifield, 2001). In part, this reflects the realization that communities defined by race or ethnicity are more likely to bear the burdens of cumulative environmental insults than communities defined along other lines (Krieg and Faber, 2004; Gandy, 2009).

Later assessments of this history (Sze and London, 2008) emphasize the challenges the movement faced as its framework was applied to new issues, populations, locales and sites of contention (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2001; Popescu and Gandy, 2004).

While racial discrimination actually plays a significant role in the distribution of environmental insults in a number of European states, it is far more common for EJ efforts in the European context to be focused on issues of class exclusion linked to the political economy of a particular neighborhood, city or region (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2001).

The Problem of Place

Environmental insults tend to be associated with particular places, and indirectly, with the kinds of people who make their homes in those places (Walker, 2009b). Research that attempts to explain the distribution of harms and benefits as a function of place routinely explores the extent to which those distributions vary with race, ethnicity, and social class (Downey and Hawkins, 2008; Morello-Frosch, et al., 2011).

William Budd and his colleagues (2008) remind us how little we actually know about the factors that help to shape how different urban areas respond to the challenge of sustainability. Critics note that there is a tendency for elite oriented planning to favor forms of “green gentrification” that put affordable housing at a premium (Budd, et al., 2008: 266).

It is certainly the case that the nature and distribution of environmental inequality varies among metropolitan areas, but what apparently remains beyond the reach of measurement and analysis is the role that race, ethnicity, and income inequality plays in determining the level of inequity that each city displays (Downey, et al., 2008).

Gordon Walker (2009a) has described how the environmental justice frame has developed in distinctive ways in different regions of the globe. He notes that although most national frameworks reflect the historical influence of the EJM in the US, there are important differences that have emerged, especially with regard to the presence or absence of racial or ethnic identity subthemes.

Reframing Sustainability

With increased media coverage of sustainability as a concept and as a social policy concern (Holt and Barkemeyer, 2011), it seems likely that efforts to reframe the discussion will involve attempts to provide targeted messages about the importance of equity as an aspect of its identity. To the extent that sustainability is presented in the media in the context of international policy debates, or in response to critical events, such as natural disasters increasingly linked to climate change, the opportunities for attracting media attention to stories about inequality are somewhat limited (Holt and Barkemeyer, 2011).

It has been suggested that the three pillar approach to sustainability (economy, society, environment) should be expanded to six main policy pillars, among which “developing human capital” would serve to elevate a focus on equity in the context of human rights and political liberties (Quental, Lourenco and daSilva, 2011: 27). The United Nations’ commitment to monitor progress toward achieving a set of comprehensive development goals suggests that its efforts might be identified as a target for efforts to reframe and reactivate the global commitment to equity (United Nations, 2010).

Framing Social Problems

Not all social problems can be framed in quite the same way. To a great extent, environmental concerns have been presented in the context of quite sophisticated arguments about the implications that can be derived from the “facts” that have been gathered by researchers. Much of the debate is about how these facts should be interpreted, and the potential for conflict over those interpretations is especially high when the facts are supposed to inform policy about the management of risk (Miller and Reichert, 2000).

Strategic efforts have been designed to characterize the facts and the scientists that generate and interpret them as wrapped in uncertainty, if not cloaked in veneer of falsehoods and misdirection (Nisbet, 2010).

Framing and Social Movements

Robert Brulle (2010) identifies eleven “significant frames” that define the major segments or divisions within the environmental movement. While there is no discursive frame within this set that captures the core values of those activists who are most concerned about just sustainability, Brulle does find a cluster of concerns that have converged around the idea of environmental justice and the need for “fundamental social change” (Brulle, 2010: 386).

Although the EJ frame has gained visibility in relation to a limited number of issues in which claims of injustice are easily buttressed by images of sympathetic victims, and heartless corporate managers, or disinterested regulators, its impact and reach beyond these cases is limited. It has been far more difficult to raise injustice claims with regard to climate change and other issues that have diffuse and temporally distant impacts, and multiple sources of harm, threat, or risk (Vandenberg and Ackerly, 2008).

Benford and Snow (2000) have extended the earlier contributions of Snow, et al. (1986) in characterizing the approaches taken by social movement organizations (SMOs)

to utilize message framing as a resource for attracting, motivating, and mobilizing support, as well as for shaping the public's response to critical policy debates.

Collective action frames are used by SMOs to move both associates and institutional targets toward recognition of the presence of an injustice at the heart of the social problems being debated (Noakes and Johnston, 2005; Manheim, 2011). Often, the struggle between SMOs and their targets is over the association of particular values with an institutional actor they desire to defend, punish, or transform.

SMOs attempting to deal with environmental justice concerns have to struggle continually with the problems involved in building coalitions across what are often substantial barriers to convergence in worldview, or ideological perspectives. Often these differences are derived from vastly different concrete social experiences (Beamish and Leubbers, 2009).

It seems clear that social position helps to shape the way members of different groups understand the nature of the problems, and the solutions that they believe are available to them. Among the many positional differences that can get in the way of successful collaboration between groups, the time-value of outcomes and objectives is especially important. We note for example that: "working class social movements emphasize tangible and immediate outcomes such as economic gain, while middle class movements tend to emphasize universal values and less immediate goals like education and legal challenge" (Beamish and Leubbers, 2009: 652).

Reframing Inequality

Inequality as a threat to well being around the globe has been introduced into the media stream by the publication of critical work that expands our understanding of the relationship between inequality and social dysfunction around the globe (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009: 495) have identified an extensive list of social problems that are associated with income inequality.

Of course, it will not be enough to remind people that inequality is associated with poor health and other social problems. It will be necessary to offer compelling explanations of the processes that generate this almost universally observed pattern (Lynch, et al., 2004). It will be especially important to focus these explanations and examples on the characteristics of the *environments* in which the least fortunate make their lives.

Promising areas for the development of framing strategies appear to be in the domain of social capital and interpersonal trust. Social status differentiation, reinforced by mass media promotion of conspicuous consumption (Dauvergne, 2010) and amplified through social media, suggest aspects of the social environment that need to be included in the discourse of sustainability (Adams, 2006).

Part of the difficulty that activists will have to face as they attempt to reframe public thinking about inequality is the fact that the news media, like other institutions in society (Bartels, 2008), tend to be more responsive to those who are privileged, than than they are to those who are in need (Carragee and Roefs, 2004).

Thus, as John Pollock's (2007) extension of the community structure approach (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien, 1980) suggests, "the higher the proportion of privileged groups in a city, the less favorable the reporting on... issues challenging a valued way of life for privileged groups"(Pollock, 2007: 260). This suggests that framing arguments and

stories that emphasize the hardships and misfortunes of unsympathetic groups, or represent threats to the comfortable lives enjoyed by a nation's elite is not likely to find an easy pathway to the target audiences (Manheim, 2011).

At the same time, studies of media and community structure suggest that stories framed in terms of "legitimate" interests of the poor, such as expanded employment opportunities, are more likely to be distributed by media outlets in markets where the impact of poverty is more visible (Pollock, 2007: 193).

Wedging Equity and Justice into Sustainability

Because of the complex network of interests that involved in environmental debates, it is often necessary for SMOs concerned about social justice and inequality to find ways to limit the harmful impact of conflicts between potential members of a coalition (Pellow, 1999). Some suggest that the challenge is one of finding a "new identity" under which seemingly disparate views can be integrated into an approach that binds cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of a commitment to common goal (Pastor and Ortiz, 2009).

We understand that the challenge we face in achieving sustainability is based in the kinds of choices that we are able to make as individuals, and as political collectives that operate at the local, regional, national and international levels. Choices are about goals as well as means. They have to be guided by values (Paehike, 2000) as well as by our understanding of quite complex systems of relationships. Part of the challenge is to better forge links between knowledge, attitudes and behavior.

The literature on framing has largely been focused on changing attitudes, rather than on shaping the behavior of citizens, legislators, or regulators. Advocates not only have to affect public understanding of the factors that threaten the goal of sustainability, but they also have to develop ways to help activate and amplify the political will that achieving those goals will require (Leiserowitz, Kates and Parris, 2006: 435).

Message framing and communications strategies will have to link public values with the objectives and expected outcomes of policies intended to achieve sustainability (Shields, Solar and Martin, 2002; Schultz and Zelezny, 2003). They will also have to incorporate values, such as equity that are rarely at the center of public policy discourse. Such an emphasis on values is consistent with the recommendations provided by the FrameWorks Institute for advocates planning to engage problems of racial disparity (Davy, 2009).

Responding in part to the American preference for equality of opportunity, FrameWorks recommends focusing on programmatic efforts to improve access to opportunity, while also noting what some of the existing barriers to opportunity just happen to be. The "opportunity frame" is consistently linked with appeals for innovation and ingenuity in developing solutions to the problems that cause, worsen, or are generated by inequity.

Their recommendations underscore the importance of calling attention to a lack of fairness with regard to systems, institutions and places, rather than with regard to individuals. Finally, their strategic framing recommendations emphasize the importance of using the concept of *interdependence* to reinforce the view that eliminating racial disparities is for the common good, and beneficial for society as a whole (Davy, 2009: 8).

In the view of many, there is little benefit in continuing to focus our communications on the threat horizon. Instead, it will be necessary for us to focus on the kinds of opportunities that we can bring into being with our collective energy and creativity.

Of course, there are risks in the development of these messages of hope and delivering them through the increasingly narrow and personalized channels of communication that the rapidly evolving global network sets before us. At the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that there are fundamental values that divide groups within and between nations (Dietz, Fitzgerald, and Shwom, 2005). These value differences are central to the organization of ideological and political perspectives on public issues, and as a result, they must be considered in the framing of messages that will activate, or prime those value conflicts (Blamey and Braithwaite, 1997).

As has been demonstrated in numerous studies, the relative weights that people place on the values of freedom and equality help to explain their affiliation with opposing political camps (Cowan et al., 2002). Those on the left tend to place a relatively higher value on equality, while those on the right tend to evaluate freedom as more important (Wilson, 2005: 211). A similar opposition has been observed with regard to value clusters identified in terms of altruism, and those associated with self-enhancement, or egoism (Dietz, Fitzgerald and Shwom, 2005). Thus, debates about regulations that would limit individual freedom in the interest of equal opportunity are likely to be marked by tension, and as a result, will be limited in their potential for producing influence over policy decisions (Manheim, 2011).

An even more critical problem may be in actually bringing about a change in the values that are used to justify, and mobilize support for what will unquestionably involve substantial change in the quality and character of the lifestyles we will be able to pursue (Schultz and Selezny, 2003).

It seems clear that at the global level there is not a clear commitment to equity as a goal, nor is there a readiness to reject consumerism as a way of life (Leiserowitz, Kates and Parris, 2006; Hamilton, 2010). Indeed, there still appears to be a fundamental incompatibility between core values, such as prosperity and environmental protection, and individual freedom and equality, when we are faced with deciding on a particular course of action (Dietz, Fitzgerald and Shwom, 2005). Yet, “these divergent values and priorities are rarely explicitly discussed” and as a result, we face “greater misunderstanding, intensified conflict, and gridlock” (Leiserowitz, Kates and Parris, 2006: 440).

This central conflict may explain, in part why the effort to “incorporate wider questions of social justice, governance and equity” into the debates about long-standing international economic policy has not met with much success (Redclift, 2005).

Part of the solution may be to focus the discourse of sustainable development on health, rather than on the economy (Paehike, 2000: 81-2). Perhaps framing a campaign in terms of expanding opportunity for all of us to live a happier, healthier life might be focused on seeking alternatives toward dependence on the automobile. It would be hard to identify a technological system with a greater negative impact on the sustainability of the earth and its people. On the other hand, greater “expenditures on education, social services, health care, or the arts and entertainment... add little to the burden borne by the environment” (Paehike, 2000: 89).

Reframing the debate in terms of health as an aspect of well being will not be easy, given the kind of opposition that has arisen as governments have been forced to confront the rising costs of medical care. However, if the problem of health can be framed in terms of the role that environmental quality, including the role that stress plays in the need for medical intervention, a different conversation might emerge.

Of course, there is still a contradiction in treating health as an expansion of both quality of life, and life expectancy. Both of these outcomes have the potential to impose additional burdens on the natural environment and its carrying capacity, unless we change the technology of living full and satisfying lives.

Unfortunately, efforts to reframe environmental debates in an attempt to reestablish the central role of equity within the master frame will also have to confront new challenges related to the changing scales of environmental thinking. To the extent that EJ themes have been most effective in campaigns at the local level, especially in urban areas, the recent tendency for planning efforts to shift to regional and larger scales seem likely to limit the effectiveness of traditional appeals to justice (Benner and Pastor, 2011).

It is suggested that “the issues likely to gain traction at a megaregional scale are different from those at a metropolitan level and may not have as immediate an impact on patterns of inequality as processes, such as housing, labor markets, and transportation decisions, that primarily unfold at a regional scale” (Benner and Pastor, 2011: 317). The problem for organizers is heightened by the fact that problems may become apparent at megaregional scale, but “the actual policy levers often exist elsewhere” (Benner and Pastor, 2011: 338), perhaps even at the national level. Addressing these problems will almost certainly require the creation of even larger, more dispersed and diverse coalitions.

An additional problem, at least in the United States, is that it will be difficult to mobilize public support for the development of plans and regulatory proposals in a political environment that has become even more conservative and mistrustful of government than it had become with the rise of the neoliberalism and marketplace solutions (Alexander, 2004; Gandy, 2009).

In Conclusion

It should be clear that reframing the debates on sustainability to incorporate concerns about equity and inequality is not going to be easy. The Environmental Justice Movement represents only a small fraction of the politically engaged public that is concerned about sustainability. However, it seems clear that there are a number of potential components that can be utilized in developing collective action frames that can be integrated into the master frames already being used by organizations working to reduce disparities in health, and to expand the opportunities for greater personal and community development.

We have both the opportunity, and the obligation to see what we can do to lend a hand.

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