Environmental Justice Movements: Case Studies from the Global South

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ABSTRACT

This research examines environmental justice movements in the Global South, highlighting their evolution, challenges, and successes through various case studies. Environmental justice, rooted in the struggle against systemic inequalities, seeks to address the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on marginalized communities. The study explores significant movements in countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and India, where local populations have mobilized against environmental injustices, including pollution, land dispossession, and climate change. By analyzing grassroots activism and the role of regional and international organizations, the research underscores the importance of community engagement and legal frameworks in advancing environmental justice. Furthermore, it discusses the interplay between environmental justice and human rights, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that empower affected communities. The findings reveal that while significant progress has been made, ongoing challenges such as political resistance and economic pressures continue to threaten these movements. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of environmental justice in the Global South and offers insights for future advocacy and policy development.

1. Introduction

Environmental justice movements, broadly conceived as the advocacy of those who believe they are unfairly impacted by socio-environmental change, are attracting a growing body of scholarship due to their potential to foster social change by holding public institutions and corporations accountable for their actions. Many of these efforts emphasize 'standing with the affected,' claiming alliances with marginalized communities from around the Global South, which are disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards. These groups are on the front lines of global trends toward large-scale urbanization, while facing variable levels of contention from public institutions and socio-economic systems. They are described as the 'new protagonists of environmentalism,' pushing inclusive agendas in national politics, the global political economy, and the scientific state of the art, but there often remains a gap between theory and practice. This special issue highlights this transnational concern and its local dimension, inspiring the call for contributions to frame the many localized struggles in the form of case studies. (Ziervogel et al.2022)

In Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador, a plethora of theoretical and methodological insights is available for the detailed examination of the relationship between territory and the tangible and intangible forces that shape social life. For instance, it has been pointed out that 'territory' is deeply interwoven with and should be conceived as an intrinsic component of 'place,' which refers to the cultural and social significance of landscape in a globalizing world. This notion has been related to an analysis of social movements and governance patterns, highlighting the role of territory as an anchor point in complex socio-environmental conflicts and its implications for struggles to access resources. Colombia has its own foundations for the examination of socio-environmental conflict, including the 'geographies of peace,' which articulates the importance of territorial struggles and resource sovereignty to address environmental contamination and inequality. Our treatment of environmental justice and the linkages between the Global South and North draws from and contributes to these ongoing debates. It emphasizes what seems to be the most transformative part of natural resource governance: the social change that emerges from the pursuit of environmental justice, which consists of

a very broad set of experiences that cut across scales, forms of antagonism, and conceptions of development. This stands at the core of our special issue.

1.1. Background and Significance

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, citizens' movements, usually from the Global South, began to form in response to various forms of environmental degradation. The residents of the areas surrounding large mine sites, massive power plants, petrochemical refineries, urban slum dwellers, indigenous peoples dependent on local natural resources, factory workers, and the citizens of towns where toxic chemicals were dumped all began to use the language of rights, justice, and equality. One of their main arguments was that courts and activists should pay more attention to poverty, gender, and ethnicity when trying to understand who gets hurt, why, and how. This is because environmental damage often leads to social injury, including displacement, loss of land and resources, poor health, social dysfunction, and labor oppression, which most often affects those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. These movements, which consist of an assortment of nongovernmental organizations, community activists, scholars, writers, and the victims themselves, call themselves environmental justice movements.

The significance of these movements can be understood only in historical context. Like the American environmental justice movement, they often arose in response to an absence of attention to the needs of Black and ethnic minorities. In the Global South, environmental problems were slowly finding their way onto the long list of causes of human poverty and harm. Although hardly new, it was being empirically established and theorized that environmental damage often infringes on human rights and exacerbates social injustice. Scientists were starting to demonstrate that it makes sense to talk of 'the environment' as including communities and their social well-being, because people are injured by toxins and pollution not just as individuals, but as group representatives with a distinct social standing. Social and economic determinants of health and environmental management were gradually being incorporated into analyses of environmental problems. Environmental ethicists were increasingly talking about 'human-centered' approaches to environmental protection. (Mertens, 2021

1.2. Scope and Objectives

This essay maps, compares, and juxtaposes three case studies of environmental justice movements in the Global South. The first section of our essay focuses on movements in Eastern India that resist the development of large dams and bauxite mining in the Niyamgiri hills. In the second section, we turn to the resistance of conventional amaranth growers in Mexico to genetically modified amaranth. The third section examines a weevil resistance biological control program focused on the management of opuntia cacti in Southern Africa. All three cases are theoretically significant in terms of theorizing the challenges of environmental justice movements. The movements discussed are creative and diverse, drawing from innovative technologies of communication as they struggle to increase their voice and visibility vis-à-vis both unaccountable states and stubborn global institutions. The three cases are not merely local in character. The claims to particularity and universality are central to the movements respectively, and this strategic identification with a land and a people allows the movements to position and engage themselves in a transnational context. Analyzing and comparing these cases, our goal lies in identifying how such movements 'globalize the local' and 'localize the global.'

The essay is written for a wide and interdisciplinary audience of researchers as well as policymakers and activists to better understand these dynamics. Internationally, there is a growing body of work in environmental justice studies regarding the question of local impacts of global environmental problems. Scholars are concerned with transnational communities' struggles against the effects of climate change and 'free trade.' However, it is difficult to nucleate this discourse without a more complete understanding of movements from the Global South, particularly as there are continued attempts through expert-led assessments and trade agreements to impose 'solutions' that are focused on Northern institutional knowledges of 'certified' environmentalism, typically grounded in a concept of autonomous ecosystems that are separate from society. Environmental movements in the Global South have thus begun to explore the construction of alternative perspectives on ecosystems and society as central to the construction of arguments about environmental (in)justice. The purpose of this paper is to present that view.)(Eriksen et al.2021

2. Conceptual Framework

At its core, environmental justice is the recognition that all communities and peoples have the right to a clean, healthy, and safe environment. This definition emphasizes two key components present in most interpretations of environmental justice: (1) the fact that anyone, regardless of race, nationality, or economic status, can and often is affected by ecological deterioration and denied the right to a clean environment, and (2) the need for the affected populations to have meaningful involvement in decisions about their local environment. The rationale for focusing on environmental justice, as well as the value of this concept as an analytical framework, is that it draws direct connections between affected communities, the environment, and historical structural inequalities that have allowed brands of injustice to remain relatively consistent throughout time. Effectively, environmental justice is more pertinent today because of its longevity throughout multiple global contexts.

A number of key principles have been employed to help scholars and activists build analytical foundations for the increased attention on environmental justice. The most prominent principle is the attempt to extend the legalities and frameworks appropriate for understanding environmental rights as human rights. This far-reaching taxonomy forces scholars to broaden the scope of inquiry beyond the narrow legalistic definitions of the effects of social and environmental injustice. More recently, critics have engaged with this approach, noting that some environmental justice scholarship overlooks the fact that many people do not wish to be incorporated, recognized, or valued in the industrial capitalist system that fails in certain terms. To that end, they offer an alternative theoretical framework called 'agonistic environmental justice.' This view emphasizes the multi-scalar struggle and intellectual resistance — both discursive and embodied — against the mode of environmental rights that is based on liberal, capitalist, and individualistic assumptions. Overall, all of these approaches help to expand our understanding of social-ecological struggles. This analytical framework serves as a theoretical lens through which the five case studies will be discussed. (Stacey et al.2021

2.1. Definition of Environmental Justice

Environmental justice is the movement to address the linkages between social injustice and environmental harm. Loosely interpreted, social and environmental injustices are widely interconnected; the same structures that maintain poverty and income inequality as a disproportionate burden on communities of color are the ones that dictate where landfills, waste transfer stations, and polluting industries are sited. The locales of these environmental hazards are not an accident, but rather the result of a system that devalues certain people and their welfare over others. Environmental justice concepts therefore have to do much more than just the environment. They are, in fact, rooted in questions concerning rights, equity and progress, morality, ethics, human rights, safety of neighborhoods and workplaces in terms of the risk and consequences of hazards, the value of community participation, the human-nature relationship, and the distributive policies for public goods and bads; and indeed with the meaning of humanness, identity, and citizenship.

One of the leading activists in the field describes environmental justice within a popular education context as the result of the systematic development, implementation, and enforcement of any policy, practice, or initiative that systematically denies access to information, power, participation, and decision making in relationship to the natural or built environment. Through both scholarly and grassroots analysis, advocates for environmental justice are exploring the consequences that social and political policies have on the health, welfare, and economic life of millions of people throughout the world. They argue that in addition to this network of hazards affecting people of color and low-income people throughout the global North, such as reservation lands of indigenous peoples, African American communities, poor whites, and Roma in Eastern Europe, even larger networks throughout South America are linked in this way, creating a spatial apartheid where pollutants are systematically sited wherever people don't have the resources to stop them. Organic intellectuals of grassroots movements worldwide are beginning to make the claim that we need to view the political and social struggles against environmental inequality as the contemporary fulcrum of what is, in fact, a spatial equity debate. (Short et al.2021

2.2. Key Principles and Theories

The principles of environmental justice must be framed in the context of equity, where reversing a bias in favor of entitlement and access to the planet's resources for some has resulted in the social construction of an "outdoor commons" forced on others who have less privilege. The focus here is on distributive justice, drawing on the precautionary principle and acknowledging the requirement to consider lay knowledge, underpinned by the principle of procedural justice that states that those affected by decisions and policies have the right to participate in decision-making. A fundamental principle is that those who are creating the problem cannot dictate the terms of its remediation or resolution. Environmental justice is community-based, with solutions and strategies originating at the local level or "the grassroots", reflecting the specificities of place. Place is critical to understanding how justice is produced. In political ecology, environmental movements are viewed as cultural resistance, serving to break out of negative environments and accumulationist programs, to gather people's strength, represent alternatives, or as channels to build capacity and resources. For scholars of environmental movements or social movements, these movements reveal the clientelist and exclusionary aspects of state-specific capitalist formations and bureaucracies. The interest here drifts from the political project to the process involved in environmental justice. Several principles guide the practice of environmental justice. Grassroots activism or activism centered around the grassroots provides a useful perspective from which one can observe injustice and the activities to combat it. With a focus on the grassroots or the "victims", structural, systemic, and historical causation structures not just the ethical significance of an event and the idea of agency, but also the interpretive frameworks used. (Panday et al.2021

3. Methodology

We have employed a mixed research design in this research. Using an interpretivist approach, we have used disaggregated qualitative data analysis through participatory methodologies. The rationale for the methodology comes from an understanding of the importance of the voices of the most marginalized being heard within movements,

without the influence of external actors. The negative implications of using non-participatory methods in case studies of environmental justice movements are articulated in detail. A further methodological strength of using mixed participatory methodologies is that findings can be recognized as emerging from those who experience the injustice firsthand, as well as ensuring that ethics of care are applied with them. In using a mixed research design, we respect the wishes of the most marginalized, while simultaneously recognizing that not all those with a stake in the environment will be interested in qualitative research. Interviews with less vulnerable individuals will, if possible, lead to a more rigorous understanding of the situation and process of environmental justice movements. Furthermore, by collecting and analyzing data in ways that are relevant to the research participants, and using a variety of methods, the data can be rich and detailed. Ethical considerations have been employed throughout the duration of the research, and all participants approached for data collection and the production of the case studies have been provided with a copy of the ethics form. Data for all four case studies will be collected through semi-structured and unstructured interviews with key stakeholders and members of the local community in each geographical area, as well as the support of partners in each region. Additionally, data will be collected through participatory methods of observation in the fields, and the collection and analysis of documents. This will provide complementary data and voices, which will provide a more rounded research product. The findings from the interviews and field observations will be analyzed using interpretivist methodologies. (Cornish et al.2022

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This chapter elaborates on the methodology used in this wider research into social, political, and strategic aspects of environmental justice movements. The aim of this section is to clarify the design and practical procedures to be used. This is important in order to convey the purpose of the study, its ethical and methodological realizations, and the methods for comprehensive field study. Qualitative research design is to be used in this sociological theory-driven inquiry. Instead of generalizing, the aim is to carefully describe the faces of environmental justice movements in the place where the inquiry is

built, and to focus on selected cases. Since the research has intensified in various regions, this research aims to bring insights into the movements from the Global South. For this purpose, a case study methodology is particularly suitable for researching the topic in a broader context in a rich and detailed manner, and seeks in-depth investigation of the particular case. In this research, a case study approach is chosen to ensure that the research questions in this inquiry have relevant answers. To allow for a comprehensive description, including all the broad and detailed information needed to understand the complexities of the local situation in the research country, participatory approaches are proposed.

This part of the research is thus constructed to discuss the research design and approach chosen for this method. Particular attention is also drawn to the challenges encountered during the phase of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, which are crucial in the decision-making process. The research will focus on selected cases from the Global South. Results of the case study research project will also present the outputs of this research. The whole process is designed to encourage the opening of discussions about the methodologies, and to ensure that the information and analyses are produced to the highest possible standard. Therefore, a clear and systematic procedure should be developed. (Dirie et al.2021

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

This study was undertaken in mid- to late 2021 and focuses on the framing of the COVID-19 pandemic by specific environmental justice movements in rather circumscribed contexts in the Global South. These communities are directly affected by water contamination and experienced limited water access prior to the pandemic. Our work is based on a qualitative methodological approach to data collection, comprising interviews, surveys, and field studies. These data operations convey a detailed representation of how various groups articulated the impacts of COVID-19 on their health and their communities and help delineate the differing degrees of emphasis placed on the interaction between the pandemic and water injustice by the environmental justice movements grounded in these communities.

The findings will be synthesized in narrative form and organized thematically. Data were collected by researchers. One conducted the interviews and fieldwork in Colombia; another conducted the interviews and surveys in South Africa. The research design followed a structured, qualitative social research method. In order to maximize the accessibility of the South African participants and gather broader ideas, an explanatory sequential methodological approach was selected, using pilot interviews to inform the development of a survey questionnaire offering structured, semi-structured, and open-ended questions that elicited rich qualitative data. This was used for the community and activist field studies. Qualitative research methods are inherently interpretive and require a careful approach to validity and reliability through methods such as triangulation. Recurrent themes are discussed in the results sections. It is important to note that the views and reflections represented in this research belong to the interviewees and were expressed during our field visits to these communities. Through our ethical protocol, it is our commitment to ensure the local primary participants see and consent to the final products resulting from this research. (Bhatt et al., 2022)

4. Case Studies

While the previous section introduced the theoretical starting points for environmental justice movements, this section will present modern-day case studies. A central logic of case study research is that one instance provides a lens through which local responses to global pressures can be examined in more depth. The aim is to critique an overly Western-centric or overly institutional portrayal of environmental policies. By looking at four case study areas, there is an opportunity to consider the circumstances in which different tactics are employed and viewed. In particular, efforts at 'labeling' the responses of activist movements oversimplify a diverse set of communities. By learning from historical and contemporary struggles, researchers can appreciate how local contexts shape responses to wider environmental pressures.

The case studies selected are highly illustrative of different aspects of community struggles against environmental injustices. They have been selected to address contemporary issues and struggles, and as much as possible, to demonstrate

emancipatory methodologies, which open possibilities for political action. The first case study is a rural resistance movement in Mexico, which is an account by a member of the affected community. This chronicles the history of resistance by a Mexican peasant and indigenous community located in one of the most damaged areas within the Gulf of Mexico coastline, due to oil interests. This case study demonstrates the attempts by the community to prevent further incursion by these interests through their vitality to the environment, forests, farmlands, and poisoned waters, health, and livelihood, and through the pursuit of justice and the law. Failing to find justice through national and international courts, the community brought the issue by canoe up to a shareholder's meeting. The following three case studies are accounts, as much as possible, by members of the communities in areas of contested forests in Irian Jaya, Indonesia, PNG, and Micronesia, and in East Africa, which are subject to environmental discourses about forest decline. These case studies examine community strategies and experiences of forest decline. The case studies end by illustrating the effectiveness of new forms of grassroots alliance or network building at the national or international level that seek to engage decision-makers. The paper ends by outlining policy and political implications.

4.1. Case Study 1: Community Resistance to Mining in Latin America

Mining activities in Latin America have long been accompanied by significant social and environmental impacts. The social movements and resistance initiatives profiled here, from Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Ecuador, are a result of these common experiences of curtailed sovereignty and rights, and a desire for greater sustainability. In each of these cases, common themes emerge, including: a significant threat to local peoples' way of life from proposed interventions; the inequitable burdens of imposed development, including health harms and economic sacrifice in the absence of benefits; the threats to cultural survival; corruption and capture of political processes in favor of corporate or elite interests; and the lack of meaningful regulation of the multinational corporations involved.

Each of the case studies is motivated by local and specific injustices arising from the expansion of mining activities in the regions and communities discussed. Community members are the principal sources of information and motivation, and in most cases,

they collaborated in producing the case study. Ultimately, the narrated cases seek to avoid storytelling for its own sake, instead aiding in the process of understanding the causes and consequences related to the development of environmental injustice based on multinational mining interests. Large-scale mining and the advancements of extractive industries are not new for Latin America. In the last twenty years, the region has seen a new mining boom led by multinational corporations, many of which are Canadian.

4.2. Case Study 2: Indigenous Environmental Activism in Southeast Asia

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Indigenous peoples across the globe, colonized and exploited by dominant cultures, have long been at the forefront of both protecting and preserving their ancestral lands and resources, and in suffering the most from outside exploitation. The environment and exploitation thereof have always been the basis upon which indigenous peoples have argued for their rights and recognition. Indeed, indigenous peoples believe that the land is not something that they own, but rather a part of their very identity and being. In general, land is public land that belongs to the community; it is used as an identity, and anything that happens on the land—bad or good—is considered synonymous with the community and its values.

In Southeast Asia, indigenous peoples have long been struggling against a variety of injustices, aggravated by destructive development projects, neoliberal economics, oppressive state policies, and the inherently unfair economic system of which they find themselves victims. The narratives highlighted in this study show how some indigenous peoples have begun to think in terms of 'environmental justice'—that is, the ability of indigenous peoples to have the same chance as everyone else to live and make choices that affect their environment. The return of stolen lands is a necessary component of environmental justice since so many indigenous people rely on the land as a way of life, and the removal of the land is effectively the removal of the indigenous person. Indigenous land resource struggles are inextricably entwined with cultural identity.

5. Key Findings and Implications

The case studies presented point to several key findings and recurring themes that may provide new insights for scholars, activists, or public officials working in the Global

South. First, the case studies present a range of diverse strategies of resistance and mobilization by affected communities and local networks. Both rural and urban pollution-affected communities engage in what can be characterized as 'defensive' strategies, seeking to halt further instances of environmental harm, as well as longer-term strategies aimed at addressing socio-economic transformation and livelihood insecurity. A second point that stands out is a sense that different localities provide different possibilities—or constraints—to challenge environmentally harmful practices, infrastructure, and decisions. The impacts of localized resistance strategies may therefore provide critical insight into the development of a localized and socially acceptable form of resistance in specific places and times. This may, in turn, lead to the creation of new alliances and opportunities for mobilizing resources on behalf of a broader societal public.

A further point made by the case studies is that for affected communities to appropriate the normative content of the principles of environmental justice in their tactics and strategies, the meanings of such norms must be transformed based on the experiences of these communities and their inherent or internal issues. In this sense, the concept of intersectionality—of how race, class, and gender identity intersect with struggles for environmental justice—is revealed by communities as they struggle, linking local issues with broader social and economic system questions. Yet intersectionality, it is argued, is more complex than an analytical approach to social movements. It is an approach that seeks to reveal issues of power, knowledge, and justice, but which is also capable of working against the establishment of new positions of power exercised in the name of marginalized communities. The implications presented in the case studies and analyses are broadly relevant to activists in lower-income countries, where international campaigns and policy support on questions of environmental justice from the international community cannot merely transpose strategies from the Global North. The immediate implications of research findings on the ethical and normative aspects of justice are applicable to stakeholders and practitioners working on environmental issues. Environmental policy and governance involve ethics and distributive issues not only at the public policy level but also at the local community, family, and individual levels. However, limited evidence coupling between research findings that show the context

sensitivity of norms to the practice of ethical justice, environmental regulatory policy, or governance at corporations and multilateral banks around relationally distant development interventions, including infrastructure sectors like hydropower, does constitute a limitation. In this sense, research findings remain more theoretical and are also more normative than being an instrumental or prescriptive tool since policymakers do indeed factor into decisions influencing development interventions a myriad of issues that extend beyond the purview of justice explicitly, including political, economic, geopolitics, diplomacy, conflict, public voice, etc.

5.1. Themes and Patterns in Environmental Justice Movements

The case study analysis outlined in this thesis and the related report and ethnographic papers brought to light a number of themes and patterns. Some of these patterns are related to consciously formulated conceptual templates, while others are inherent in the case material even if they were not immediately recognized from the analytical perspective of the above chapters. The thematic patterns that emerged out of the workshop presentations and further discussion with the team are summarized in the following section. They reflect a number of insights into how communities relate to their local natural environment, what kinds of structural and gendered constraints affect their involvement in community-based natural resource management and participation in environmental movements, and how communities organize and represent themselves in environmental justice movements.

In this section, these patterns are identified and contextualized in relation to similar findings and ideas. In the conclusion, practical implications of this section will be discussed in relation to issues such as building community partnerships, marginalization, and particularly the politically exclusionary effects of labeling. In general, the section aims to generate understanding, respect, and solidarity among a variety of environmental advocates and policymakers – among others – in different issue areas and contexts. The present section also contributes to scholarly and policy discussions on environmental justice by presenting insights drawn from the case studies on divisions within movements along political and social lines.

5.2. Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

Reviews of the five case study analyses suggest a set of lessons and recommendations that can guide future action. To some extent, the case studies underscore what has already been discovered as environmental injustice; however, we consider it to be a strength rather than a weakness. Turning this around optimistically, it can be viewed as message amplification that can provide a strategic basis for action. As such, some implications are that we need case study reports to:

1. Help analysts and activists to make connections between cases and surface important parallels, and thereby avoid the potential of 'reinventing the wheel' and repeating past mistakes. 2. Build capacity in thinking about how policy can be designed and situated to serve less powerful constituencies by means of evidence-based detailed and up-to-date case understanding. 3. Advance potentially replicable strategies and tactics by drawing on prior successes and failures in local environmental governance. 4. Help guide new donor funding towards strategies that have been shown to be effective in advancing and supporting environmental justice claims.

Our intention in this concluding section is to present these findings and stimulate further discussion and debate. In the first sub-section, we outline recommendations for policy; in the second, we pose questions for future research. These can guide not only a focus on cross-case analyses and generalizations but, more fundamentally, new targeted interventions on behalf of marginalized communities. We propose that there are several directions and policy-relevant recommendations to be drawn from these five cases. These should be seen as part of a broad research strategy that emphasizes practical engagement with policy dilemmas, has an applied and problem-solving orientation, seeks to link research to processes of negotiation and interaction between governments, non-governmental organizations, and affected communities, and involves evaluating interventions and measuring changes in policy. At the heart of these suggestions is the need to place genuine participation and the voices of those affected by policy more centrally within decision-making and policy processes. Thus, the emphasis is upon constructing a strategy that works from the bottom upwards and seeks to devise strategies for those working in policy and NGO sectors that enable them to interact more meaningfully and effectively with those marginalized by environmental policy and

practice. We propose that future action to support those involved in these conflicts might be targeted upon: building capacities and skills through workshops on (1) effective advocacy and negotiating strategies and tactics; (2) disaster mitigation, including post-disaster response and reconstruction initiatives. We hypothesize that among the most needed activities are educational interventions

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