

# ***Green Development***

## **for Environmental Justice & Healthy Communities**

*Not only is another world possible, she is on her way...  
...on a quiet day...I can hear her breathing.*

- Arundhati Roy

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**M**odern development occurs within a web of unequal power relationships dominated by capital and political influence. Little of which can be found in communities struggling for environmental justice. In a wasteful society where land use decisions are influenced by race and class, low-income communities and communities of color are readily turned into dumping grounds for every imaginable form of waste. As a former staff member of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation once said in reference to a proposed waste facility for a South Bronx neighborhood, “the City is like a body, and every body needs a colon to process its waste.” While the comment was a blatant insult to the community, it rings disturbingly true.

Like the steam-release valve of a pressure cooker, the presence of communities able to serve as dumping grounds keeps the system from exploding. Environmental racism thus becomes a necessary part of maintaining a wasteful, and otherwise unsustainable, society. Moving beyond it requires an alternative form of development, producing nothing that needs to be dumped, using components that are not hazardous to people or other living things. This more ecological, or “green”, approach to development incorporates concepts that go by various names, such as industrial ecology; zero waste; and green design. All of these names speak to the need for reducing our impact on the earth. But for the environmental justice movement there is also the need to reduce impacts on communities, a need rooted in the struggle for racial and economic justice.

### **EJ and the early focus on the “NO!”**

Since its origins in the late '70s and early '80s, the driving force of the environmental justice movement has been the defeat of incinerators; landfills; and other polluting facilities. Adopting an anti-toxics approach was a logical starting point. At the time of the movement's birth people across the United States were only just beginning to understand the dangers of the pollutants being released into the air, earth, and water with reckless abandon. In communities of color, where the concentration of polluting facilities is greatest, local residents began to see the presence of these facilities as particularly life threatening. Because of this, the community-based groups that form the core of the movement have maintained a defensive position, always on guard against the next imminent threat. Lacking any advanced warnings about a proposed facility, the only strategy available to most groups is a last-minute mobilization of their community against the latest polluter.

### **“Necessity is the mother of invention”:**

#### **EJ visions for the future**

While the focus of much of the environmental justice movement has been on directly opposing polluters this doesn't mean that community-based groups haven't been dreaming up visions of a better world. Yet while many of these groups imagine zero waste; pollutionless industry; green neighborhoods; and solar power as possible answers to the question “what other way is there?”, most of them haven't had the luxury of time or resources to focus on bringing the alternatives they'd only dreamed of into reality.

With time however, many community groups engaged in battles against polluting facilities have begun to develop their own alternatives. For these organizations, green

development has been a natural progression of their activities. The motivating forces usually revolve around preventing the siting of a polluting land use or reducing existing pollution. Such efforts have gained a slight push thanks to federal and state level programs created to assist the clean-up of abandoned and contaminated properties, known as brownfields, located largely in urban low-income communities and communities of color. While these initiatives should make it easier for community groups to promote their own vision for a site, what should go on the site; how it should be built; and by whom, are still largely determined by outside interests.

### **From wishing to reality:**

#### **EJ approaches the world of development**

The world is ripe with models for those interested in greener communities and more sustainable economies. In recent years in New York City alone several initiatives have been undertaken in the name of environmental justice involving green buildings, alternative energy, and green manufacturing. These efforts hold great promise and are worth supporting, as the values of environmental justice bring valuable insights and new dimensions to what would otherwise be mere technical eco-innovations that fail to address fundamental inequities in the distribution of wealth, power, and pollution.

#### *Greening Buildings*

While New York contains many non-profit affordable housing developers, only one, We Stay/Nos Quedamos, has been an integral member of the city's environmental justice movement. The group was formed by South Bronx residents opposed to an urban renewal plan that would have evicted many of the neighborhood's remaining residents. The group ultimately defeated the proposal and forced the city to adopt the community's alternative redevelopment plan. The organization has since been a vocal advocate for environmental health, drawing attention to the South Bronx's high rate of asthma.

It is no accident then that Nos Quedamos is a pioneer among non-profit developers for its emphasis on creating "green buildings", buildings that reduce environmental impacts through increased energy efficiency and careful selection of sustainable and non-toxic building materials. Through the use of built-in air filters and design features that inhibit mold growth, Nos Quedamos' buildings have been designed to address indoor air quality without ignoring the poor quality of the air outdoors. Their buildings have received numerous awards not only for these and other green design features but also for the detailed community planning process used to get community feedback and support.

Nos Quedamos' work and the continuing innovations in green building design, such as planted rooftops (a.k.a. green roofs), have inspired other affordable housing developers to also bring better air quality and energy efficiency to the people who need them most. Decentralized waste and energy infrastructure are additional advantages of green design. Instead of targeting centralized wastewater treatment and energy generation facilities in a few select communities, these processes can be handled within individual buildings at a scale that doesn't overwhelm the neighbors with dangerous health impacts. Some states like New York are making tax credits and other incentives available for developers who adopt green building designs. The development of the

Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system by the US Green Building Council has raised the profile of green building designs and has provided eager developers a vehicle through which they can access these benefits.

### *Green Energy*

In the summer of 2000, the State of New York rammed ten small-scale power plants in five exclusively low-income neighborhoods in New York City with almost no advanced warning and no environmental review. Since their construction, both state and city officials and power plant industry boosters have called for additional electrical generating capacity, capitalizing on fears related to recent power outages actually caused by transmission failures. As a result, communities that are the usual suspects for every form of polluting infrastructure are nervous about the threat of additional power plants and have become active proponents of renewable energy generation such as solar, tidal, and wind energy.

Their fears are warranted. The increasing pressure for new energy in large cities, combined with fears of terrorism and greater financing hurdles for power plant developers, is likely to lead to a more distributed network of smaller power plants in urban areas. Unless there is a commitment to renewable energy, new capacity will likely arise from the latest in conventional polluting technologies such as gas-fired mini-power plants and so-called “waste-to-energy” cogeneration plants - a rather grandiose name for an incinerator.

While renewable energy is relatively new to the environmental justice movement, a longer tradition exists of EJ groups advocating for the conversion of diesel bus and truck fleets to cleaner alternative fuels. From Los Angeles to New York, EJ groups have waged successful campaigns to get local transit authorities to switch to compressed natural gas and other cleaner fuels.

In an effort to address emissions from diesel trucks in one South Bronx neighborhood where the number of daily truck trips matches the number of residents, one local environmental justice group, Sustainable South Bronx, partnered with a private company, Idle Aire, to install electrical anti-idling units at a local wholesale food distribution center. Now, instead of idling their diesel trucks for hours on end as they rest or await their next delivery, truckers can run their appliances and receiving their heating; air conditioning; cable and internet access, from one of these electrical stations. Options such as these are critical to cleaning up and protecting the environment.

The burning of fossil fuels is a major contributor to air pollution in communities inundated with highways, trucks, and buses. It requires the maintenance of environmental injustices and other human rights abuses throughout much of the world's oil producing regions. In Ecuador and Nigeria, multinational oil companies have decimated the environment of indigenous communities while local activists have been killed or threatened. In Palestine, Israel's record of human rights abuses, including restricting Palestinian food and water supplies, has historically been supported by the

U.S. government in an attempt to leverage support against other Middle Eastern countries with vast oil reserves. The U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, home to the world's second largest oil reserve, is only the latest of such efforts to appease American oil addiction. Such oil wars are expected to continue as reserves dwindle, threatening to drive up the cost of fuel and prompting more and more people in the U.S. to demand domestic fuel production and the development of renewable energy sources in the name of "energy security."

For the environmental justice movement, the push for green energy comes less out of the desire to keep the price of gas down, and more out of the need to eliminate the pollution that plagues our communities. But it is also a means of declaring solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the world who live in fear for their lives and the land, air, and water they rely on.

### *Creating Green Collar Jobs*

One of the most frustrating arguments to hear in favor of a polluting facility is the argument that it will bring jobs to a community. It is frustrating because experience has shown us that few of the promised jobs ever materialize, and even fewer go to local residents. When community members do get jobs at these facilities it's usually the most temporary and dangerous work with the least, if any, benefits. Yet despite this experience, the promise of jobs is frustratingly difficult to disprove, thus some residents who would otherwise be opposed to a polluter moving next door will inevitably remain silent in the hopes that they, their family, or their friends, will get to work there.

There is no denying that there is a desperate need for work in communities already inundated with pollution. The loss of blue-collar manufacturing jobs in cities and towns across the United States has robbed many working class communities of their most accessible means out of poverty. The result is a widening gap between the country's richest and the increasingly larger pool of it's poorest. The South Bronx, facing the highest unemployment rate in all of New York City, upwards of 27% in some areas, is just one of the many places hit by deindustrialization. A mixed bag of waste facilities and power plants to the area has failed to replace the lost jobs. The situation is likely to worsen as states pour more funds into incarcerating young people of color while shrinking financial support to public schools.

Given these dismal prospects, a challenge for the movement is job creation without exposing workers and their families to environmental hazards. It is a challenge that many have already accepted.

As an example, during the late 1990s the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance partnered with the Carpenters Union to operate a highly successful worker training program that allowed NYCEJA member groups to get local residents trained in the building trades and into one of the local unions, and potentially a job on a local brownfield redevelopment project. But it will require more than residents taking on pollution abatement and construction jobs to create vibrant local economies based on well-paying work that doesn't kill people, communities, or the earth.

One opportunity for creating this type of work lies in the area of green manufacturing. Whether it's the production of alternative energy technologies or reused, remanufactured, or recycled goods, the ability to transition out of polluting energy and waste disposal systems requires the creation of a new type of industry capable of creating jobs through waste reduction and renewable energy.

Several environmental justice activists have engaged in discussions on this issue with labor unions, environmentalists and manufacturing advocates. Recently these different sectors have come together in coalition under the name NYC Apollo Alliance, to support the creation of green manufacturing jobs in New York City.

The Apollo Alliance is a national coalition of labor, community, and environmental advocates focused on getting the U.S. to invest in domestic alternative energy production with the same intensity used to send the Apollo mission to the moon. In New York, environmental justice groups expanded the coalition's focus beyond alternative energy to include green manufacturing based on waste reduction. Such a focus is in keeping with current local efforts to get New York City to adopt a zero waste plan, whereby the city would divert 100% of its waste for reuse, composting, recycling, and remanufacturing.

A zero waste strategy would avoid the need to continue sending our waste to landfills and incinerators in other low-income communities and communities of color. With decreasing landfill space and disposal costs on the rise, particularly in the northeast, there is increasing pressure to find alternatives that will enable cities and towns to reduce the generation of waste.

In the fall of 2003, Green Worker Cooperatives was launched to realize the vision of a green manufacturing sector. We are dedicated to the creation of worker-owned enterprises that can actually improve environmental conditions in the South Bronx. The organization is based on the idea that addressing environmental degradation and economic inequality requires the development of work that doesn't exploit the earth or human labor. Our first cooperative aims to salvage building materials for local reuse thereby reducing the amount of material sent to waste transfer stations for export to distant landfills.

Ultimately, the ability of the environmental justice movement to put a halt to the dumping of waste in the communities and nations least able to resist, will rely on our ability to both cut the production of waste at its source and to keep all materials in circulation, whether in their present or altered form. Doing this requires a coordinated investment on the part of public agencies to advance a new vision for manufacturing.

In the South Bronx, Green Worker Cooperatives and Sustainable South Bronx are working together to promote the development of a Recycling Industrial Park (also known as a Resource Recovery Park) in order to encourage the growth of green manufacturing similar to the way in which airports helped boost the growth of air travel. The design of

such a facility should exclude smokestack industries that contribute to air pollution and should instead incorporate green building design features; alternative energy for all equipment, including vehicles; and other features like landscaping and public access for worker and community enjoyment.

### **What about the workers?**

#### **EJ, labor unions, and worker cooperatives**

While green businesses are a key part of green development, it is important to keep in mind that these are still businesses operating within the boundaries of conventional capitalism. The social injustices inherent in the capitalist marketplace cannot be ignored merely to reduce environmental impacts. Care ought to be taken by anyone engaged in green development activities to ensure that in the end both workers and communities are empowered. At Green Worker Cooperatives, our belief is that by empowering community residents as both the workers and owners of an enterprise we are able to directly tie the cooperative to the community; maximize the distribution of profits to both workers and community; and create truly democratic workplaces. In order to adequately address social injustices green development must be based on more than technical innovations, it must provide solutions for economic injustices as well.

The potential for the creation of new “green collar” jobs provides a special opportunity for environmental justice groups to build strong alliances with organized labor. While this has proven to be difficult for many EJ groups, mainly due to the legacy of racial discrimination within the union movement and opposing interests in construction projects, several effective partnerships have taken place.

Over the past few years, several of the regional environmental justice networks have been working in coalition with organized labor, such as the Just Transition Alliance. The Alliance’s aim is to transition workers in polluting industries into more sustainable and non-toxic jobs with no loss in income. Their work, and that of the NYC Apollo Alliance and Green Worker Cooperatives, drives home the point that if we are intent on the abolition of entire polluting industries we must be equally intent on the creation of work for those who would otherwise have none to look forward to.

### **Conclusion**

Since its beginnings, the environmental justice movement has been about people taking control of their communities for the benefit of all future generations. The push for green development shows that communities are now gaining the tools to be able to bring their own vision to reality. That vision, like the movement itself, is based on the realization that environmental degradation and social injustices are linked. By dealing with both we will eventually be able to bring forth the world we seek to live in. As the Indian social justice activist and writer Arundhati Roy has described it,

*“not only is another world possible, she is on her way...  
...on a quiet day...I can hear her breathing.”*



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