



capacity global

living in a clean and healthy environment is everyone's right



So what is environmental justice?

Sometimes environmental justice may seem like a complex issue. But the principles of environmental justice are pretty simple.

Living in a clean and healthy environment is everyone's right. So the aim of this briefing is to provide a starting point for understanding what that means.

Environmental justice is based on the notion of social justice, equality and a healthy environment for all.

In the UK, Europe and across the world, the most vulnerable people with the least power and money see these rights denied on a daily basis. For example, air pollution, the siting of hazardous installations, flooding, inadequate enforcement of environmental laws, bad urban planning, or simply not having any access to the natural environment can create environmental injustice for the poorest people.

Working on environmental justice involves tackling poor environmental conditions, natural and built, from a social justice perspective. In essence it means working to ensure everyone, especially vulnerable communities, get equal access to the benefits of a healthy environment.

Key Points About Environmental Justice

One: The human right to life is fundamental. Living a dignified life means getting access to natural and built resources. This means access to basic human needs like safe housing, clean drinking water, or not having to live next to polluting factories.

Two: Everyone knows that rights come with responsibilities. There is an overall responsibility for everyone to protect the environment for present and future generations.

Three: Carrying out these responsibilities require certain resources. That means people need accessible information to help make better decisions about protecting their rights and the rights of others. They also need fair legal systems. Last but not least they need to be able to get involved in making decisions or stopping acts that can cause environmental injustices.

Four: Environmental damage, whether caused by climate change or pollution, takes it toll on the poor. When making decisions about the environment – the streets we live in, natural beauty spots or the world's oceans – ordinary people must be allowed to participate.

What environmental justice is not:

- **Only about environmental law and enforcement.** Of course environmental laws are an important part of environmental justice. However, there needs to be an equal focus on social inclusion, and access to decision making and information.
- **Simply about protecting the natural environment and ignoring poverty and people.** First, tackling environmental injustice is also about improving local urban environments, i.e. what people see when they open their front door. Second, reducing poverty and protecting the environment are linked. For example, it is crucial to make sure the polluter pays for the pollution they cause and not the vulnerable community affected by it.
- **About assuming everyone is equally responsible for the state of the environment today.** Of course everyone has a role to play in improving the environment, locally and globally. But in both poor and rich countries, it is predominantly the wealthy that cause greater environmental damage.

Around the world

People around the world are tackling issues of environmental injustice. When talking about environmental justice, the grassroots movement in the United States is often referred to. However, there are campaigns, projects, laws and policy in many other countries. For example, South Africa, along with over fifty countries, has the right to a healthy environment written into their constitution.

Environmental justice can be referred to in a number of ways. Some of the terms emphasise a particular element of the principles of environmental justice. It is likely that new terms will be used to describe environmental justice or aspects of it, but here are just a few:

Environmental Equality – focuses on the notion that present and future generations should have a fair share of a healthy environment. The UK government has often separated the discussion on environmental equality from the discussion on the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations.

Environmental Racism – refers to situations where environmental decisions, directly or indirectly, have the most negative impact on Black, Asian or minority groups. The US and South African grassroots environmental justice movement has highlighted environmental racism where, for example, research findings show that the most polluting industries are based in predominately Black or minority group neighbourhoods.

Environmental Rights – generally deals with the debate on the human right to a healthy environment. Some people however believe (we think incorrectly) that environmental rights are solely about protecting the environment and not humans.

Putting environmental justice into practice and policy

We can all do something to support environmental justice. Whether acting as individuals, or collectively, in our homes, offices, departments, organisations, or communities. Everyone can make a difference. If you want to be part of the solution and not the problem, contact Capacity Global.

Capacity Global has five main programmes:

- **Advocacy:** promoting and developing environmental justice initiatives that deliver better places in which to live, work and play.
- **Community Projects:** supporting diverse community projects that challenge urban deprivation and promote community cohesion.
- **Policy:** creating forums to influence and develop fair environmental policies and decisions.
- **Research:** providing accessible information, reports and recommendations to help tackle environmental injustice.
- **Training & Employment:** offering opportunities to learn, gain employment and develop skills so that people can have their say and influence decisions that are made about the environment.

We can provide free seminars for people who are unemployed or on low wages or, through the Every Action Counts project, offer practical action on what you can do to reduce the possibility of environmental injustice. We also work with policy makers to develop research and policies that tackle environmental injustice.



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Resources: You can use the Capacity Global virtual resource centre to find useful links, publications, research, policy, reports and materials on environmental justice. www.capacity.org.uk/resourcecentre



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