



Environmental Justice CSU Justice Roundtable Series

EJCSU Roundtable Brief #4: Environmental Justice Amid Shifting Political Economies

Event Date: 5/1/2015

Authors: Environmental Justice Working Group (Melinda Laituri, Stephanie Malin, Tara O'Connor Shelley, Dimitris Stevis, Stacia Ryder, Kathryn Powlen)

Editorial and Transcription Assistance: Megan DeMasters, Kathryn Powlen and Stacia Ryder

This brief is based on the Environmental Justice Roundtable Series hosted by the Environmental Justice Working Group (formerly EJCSU), which is supported by CSU's School of Global Environmental Sustainability's (SoGES) as one of its Global Challenges Research Teams (GCRT). The series began on February 12, 2015. For more information about EJCSU, please visit their website at: (<http://environmentaljustice.colostate.edu/>)

This document is part of a series of roundtable briefs highlighting how environmental justice is conceptualized, discussed, researched, and put into practice locally, regionally, and globally. The purpose of these briefs is to highlight the variety of contexts within which environmental equity and justice (EEJ) frameworks are imperative. In particular, the goal is to emphasize the transdisciplinary nature of EEJ, highlighting common themes and differences of interpretation and application that emerge in the EJ community at Colorado State University and among additional colleagues in our network. This particular roundtable brief is focused on issues of EEJ in governance.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Table of Contents	2
Event Announcement.....	3
Executive Summary	4
Event and Panelist Introduction	5
Open Discussion	9

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AMID SHIFTING POLITICAL ECONOMIES

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



STEPHANIE MALIN
Department of Sociology, CSU



CORINA MCKENDRY
Department of Political Science, Colorado College



ANDREAS RECHKEMMER
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver



TARA SHELLEY
Department of Sociology, CSU



DIMITRIS STEVIS
Department of Political Science, CSU

Free and open to the public

Friday
MAY 1, 2015
2pm - 3:30pm
Lory Student Center rm 386

Hosted by Environmental Justice CSU,
a School of Global Environmental Sustainability
Global Challenges Research Team



SCHOOL OF GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
Colorado State University

sustainability.colostate.edu/events/ej-roundtable

Executive Summary

“Environmental Justice Amid Shifting Political Economies” was the fourth roundtable event in the Roundtable Series hosted by Environmental Justice CSU. Professors Andreas Reckhemmer (Graduate School of Social Work, Denver University), Corina McKendry (Political Science, Colorado College), Tara Shelley (Sociology, Colorado State University) and Stephanie Malin (Sociology, Colorado State University) discussed the implications that economic development, environmental regulations, and energy production can have on environmental justice. Professor Dimitris Stevis (Political Science, Colorado State University) facilitated the roundtable event.

Panelists’ initial comments connected political economic shifts to broader environmental justice concerns. Andreas Reckhemmer discussed how current policies related to sustainability often prioritize economic development over human needs and highlighted the need to re-conceptualize environmental justice. Corina McKendry shifted the discussion to focus on how the adoption of sustainability policies can result in social justice issues by identifying unintended consequences of policy choices. Using her research on oil and gas development in Colorado, Tara Shelley focused on procedural justice and the role of environmental governance in environmental justice. Stephanie Malin used her work in the Western U.S. to illustrate how perceptions of environmental justice can include both sites of resistance, or organized opposition to industrial development and sites of acceptance, or organized support for industrial development. Stephanie’s example highlighted the tensions between economic stability and human well-being.

Key questions raised included:

- How could a re-conceptualization of environmental justice be influential in environmental governance and decision-making?
- How do actions at one level of governance affect the ability (or willingness) of other actors operating at other levels to move towards cleaner forms of energy production?
- Who has a seat at the table, and not, when making decisions related to energy policy and how can we make these decision-making processes more equitable?
- What should be done when community-based perceptions of environmental justice diverge and seem to contradict each other?

Over the course of the roundtable discussion, panelists and audience participants focused on multi-scalar aspects of environmental governance and mobilization – and the ways these dynamics affect political economy and environmental justice. Panelists and participants drew on their areas of expertise to showcase examples at the local, national, and global levels.

Event and Panelist Introduction

The fourth roundtable event took place on May 1, 2015 in the Lory Student Center at Colorado State University (CSU). Participants included Dr. Stephanie Malin (Sociology, CSU), Dr. Corina McKendry (Political Science, Colorado College), Dr. Andreas Rechkemmer (Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver), and Dr. Tara Shelley (Sociology, CSU). Dr. Dimitris Stevis (Political Science, CSU) introduced the group and moderated the roundtable. Each participant highlighted how shifting political economies within their area of research has resulted in a variety of environmental injustices.

Andreas Rechkemmer—Social Work, University of Denver

Andreas Rechkemmer opened as the first panelist and discussed the connection between environmental justice and broader sustainability goals. Andreas began working in environmental governance in the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when many global efforts were initiated to prevent further environmental degradation. This experience in global environmental governance contributed to his interest and understanding of international efforts to address sustainability. Andreas referenced efforts, such as the Brundtland Commission Report and Agenda 21, to discuss how the current sustainability model prioritizes economic development and human needs rather than taking a view that humankind is just a thread woven into the web of life. That is, the current model is extraordinarily anthropocentric. He explained how this can be problematic, repeating the well-known adage that *“the earth does not belong to man [sic], man belongs to earth.”*

The traditional approach to sustainability by international organizations has resulted in major international programs that are considered pragmatic and progressive in terms of human and social development. However, issues of environmental sustainability and environmental justice are severely underrepresented. Andreas suggested that for the purpose of sustainability, we must rethink conceptualizations of environmental justice in terms of social-ecological systems. Instead of the traditional approach, he suggested that:

“...we take the social-ecological model and use it in the context of justice. Which means that we don’t always start from the premise that we need human development first and economic growth first and then try to make it as sustainable as possible... I would suggest that we should embark on a new way of thinking on social environmental justice... that is no longer utilitarian.”

Andreas presented the idea of a capabilities approach as a non-utilitarian approach to sustainability. He asserted that the capabilities approach allows social-ecological justice to be operationalized in a more holistic and balanced way. Furthermore, he suggested that this approach could be more influential in both governance and law-making decisions.

[To learn more about Andreas' work, check out his profile on the University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work page here.](#)

Corina McKendry—Political Science, Colorado College

Corina's work focuses on sustainability within urban areas. Corina discussed the contradiction inherent in cities adopting "green" or pro-environment policies when these same policies result in gentrification and other social and environmental justice problems. Specifically, as cities become "greener" and more desirable to live in, the costs of living in these areas can increase and push lower-income residents to other areas. Thus, policies that are helpful for the environment can be simultaneously detrimental in terms of exacerbating inequity in housing.

Turning to climate change, she asserted that it's multi-scalar nature makes understanding the roles of cities in climate change and climate justice complex. To understand how we can achieve climate justice at the municipal level, it is necessary to consider the broader political context and economic conditions affecting cities. Corina drew upon examples from the Global North to highlight this, such as the successful closing of coal fired power plants in Chicago in 2012. She observed:

"There's these two coal fire power plants right in the middle of a Latino neighborhood in Chicago... They're major sources of point source pollution for air pollution... A big problems of asthma in the neighborhood, so a very typical environmental justice case. After years of organizing, plus a very successful campaign in which the local EJ group and some of the big green groups came together in a very effective coalition, these power plants shut down."

Corina argued that this event represented a success for both local and global climate justice advocates and was made possible by broader market conditions. She pointed to the EPA's mercury emission rules, along with competition for natural gas development, as reasons for the success in closing the power plants. Essentially, the local victory for climate justice in this case was *"facilitated in many ways by these broader regulatory changes in the economics of energy."*

Corina then turned to a contemporary example from Birmingham, England, where broader energy and economic conditions have had the opposite effect:

“Birmingham, the second largest city in England, has very high levels of poverty, particularly fuel poverty... In 2010, they started a program called “Birmingham Energy Savers”, and the goal was to combine efforts to address fuel poverty with efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. And they had this goal of helping 26,000 households out of fuel poverty... but as of late 2014, fewer than 2,000 efficiency improvements have been put in place... way below the goal of 26,000 households... It was reflective of a wider policy failure nationally to reduce energy use.”

Corina gave a final example from Vancouver, B.C. to illustrate how sustainability policies can have unintended consequences. These problems were a result of Vancouver’s desire to become “the greenest city in the world” while also lacking affordable housing that accompanies new and more stringent building standards. Corina pointed out that while Vancouver has worked to put policies in place to promote affordable housing, the global market and other levels of government have made this increasingly difficult. Corina concluded by suggesting that while local governments should be aware of and working within the broader economic and regulatory contexts, they are still responsible for and should consider how adoption of sustainability policies affects social justice.

[To learn more about Corina’s work, check out her profile on the Colorado College’s page here.](#)

Tara O’Connor Shelley— Department of Sociology, Colorado State University

Tara is an affiliated faculty member of the Department of Sociology at Colorado State University. Her research on environmental justice focused on the regulation of newer forms of energy production such as hydraulic fracturing. Drawing on her research in Colorado, Tara suggested that little is known about citizens’ experiences with governance processes related to unconventional oil and natural gas production. She then provided three reasons for this. First, Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission’s goals to enhance energy development and to engage in conservation/environmental protection are contradictory. This has resulted in the perception that energy development is prioritized over conservation. Second, Colorado is said to have some of the most stringent oil and gas regulations in the U.S. And finally, the complexity of a split estate (which divides surface property rights from mineral rights) has impacted how citizens are able to participate in energy governance.

These observations from Tara’s fieldwork have led her to assert that unconventional oil and natural gas development raise environmental justice questions worth discussing, both in terms of procedural and distributional equity. In terms of procedural equity, Tara questions whether or not citizens are able to participate in a meaningful way in the zoning and other aspects of unconventional oil and gas extraction. Per her research findings in Colorado, procedural equity had not been achieved in the regulatory process and has thus resulted in inequitable participation in the governance process. In her fieldwork, Tara interviewed citizens that felt as though their concerns had not been heard, and that their desires were not being adequately represented by their government, particularly the COGCC. She shared an interview quotation to depict the frustration of one of the citizens:

“My honest opinion of the COGCC is I think they are the fox in the hen house. I think they are pro oil and gas, I don’t think they are pro surface owner, I don’t think they’re pro-environment. As a land surface owner you are almost powerless. That’s how I felt, you have no power.”

Tara concluded by saying that meaningful environmental justice requires people having a seat at the table and the ability to participate in the development of regulations. That is, there must be environmental justice in environmental governance.

[To learn more about Tara’s work, check out her profile here.](#)

Stephanie Malin—Department of Sociology, Colorado State University

Stephanie, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at CSU, researches the ways in which community quality of life intersects with extreme energy development, focusing on issues of EJ, environmental health, and political economy. She has a specific focus on social movements, power, and impacts of neoliberalization.

Stephanie suggested that environmental justice scholars have not fully interrogated sites of acceptance, or places where people willingly take on the risks of industrial development such as hydraulic fracturing. Many of these sites have histories of natural resource dependence, which can complicate notions of environmental injustice and make them less transformative in these sites of acceptance. In sites of acceptance, the power of neoliberal, market-based ideologies (and other potent variables Stephanie discusses in her book) can gut notions of environmental justice and can distract from very real legacies of industrial development.

She utilized two environmental justice cases related to uranium in the Western U.S. to highlight this:

“A community of about 1900 people, Monticello (UT) has about 600 confirmed cases of cancer and at least 200 other cases of severe respiratory problems. People in the community have been noticing health abnormalities as early as 1960... which they relate to they had four enormous uranium tailing piles... This was cleaned up in the 1990s... but there are still contentions that health impacts have not been addressed enough... When we look at legislation, like RECA, the communities, individuals who were working for the industry have been compensated to some extent, but I would argue not enough for health problems”.

Going further, Stephanie discussed how the Victims of Mills Tailings Exposure, a community-based environmental justice group, has been working diligently to bring attention and compensation to those suffering health effects from the legacy of uranium milling and mining. In Monticello, we can see a mobilized site of resistance to further uranium development, particularly without more regulatory oversight. Activists in this site express concerns over public health, procedural equity, and legacy management. On the other hand, sites of acceptance have emerged in communities like Nucla and Naturita, Colorado, where a proposed uranium mill won the fervent support of many local residents who view environmental justice as developing their local resources to combat persistent poverty. In this case, the community developed significant levels of trust in Energy Fuels Resources, a private company that would own and operate the mine. Stephanie concluded that as activists are at odds with each other, as shown in these examples, environmental justice is pulled in divergent directions. This, she believes, is an area that should be explored further.

[**To learn more about Stephanie’s work, check out her profile on the Department of Sociology’s page here.**](#)

Open Discussion

During the open discussion, both panelists and participants grappled with environmental justice and governance as they relate to multiscale issues of regulation. The discussion was centered primarily on land and water management with attendees pointing to several tensions amongst these dimensions. For example, in relation to time, Stephanie’s work provided a glimpse of how

past policies related to energy development can have long-lasting health, ecological, and economic consequences.

Geographic tensions related to land use across scale (from the local to the global) and differences between urban and rural land management were discussed heavily. A speaker pointed to the continent of Africa as a developing region attempting to industrialize and gain economic autonomy. However, due to environmental concerns, developed countries use international governance institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, to dictate how development can occur. This control is strengthened by the power of the Global North, whose support routinely comes with strings attached, allowing development to only occur under specific conditions.

Looking at policies in the United States, Tara noted that environmental justice has moved beyond inequitable distribution to also examine land use. She suggested that this is apparent when activists are at odds with each other over oil and gas development. Peter Hall also raised an issue related to land management and split estate. The audience discussed cross-jurisdictional tensions, exploring what they mean for environmental justice. Dimitris argued that one of the positive points of environmental justice is that it addresses governance across jurisdictional boundaries. A common observation across these discussions was that current literature and environmental justice approaches must be critically evaluated. This further supported the points raised by Andreas and Stephanie in the introduction; first, that current approaches to environmental justice are anthropocentric and result in less ecological justice, and that a more reflexive approach is needed in order to move away from current elitist views.

The roundtable finished with a discussion of multiscale concerns as they relate to environmental justice, land management, and governance. Professor Steve Mumme pointed out that environmental justice programs may in fact work against each other at different scales and criticized existing environmental justice literature for failing to account for this. Because issues of scale are so important to environmental justice and governance, he suggested that a greater emphasis should be placed on how various environmental justice programs work together and against one another.

Ending on a positive note, Stephanie recognized Lois Gibb's national organization, The Center for Health, Environment and Justice (CHEJ). This organization serves as an umbrella organization for grassroots community EJ groups learning how to mobilize action and inform their neighbors about pressing local issues. Stephanie noted that this organization has the potential to serve as an example and model for how various groups can work together across

multiple scales and jurisdictions. Their mission and current efforts can be viewed here at chej.org.

With this, the Roundtable concluded and adjourned after thanking the panelists and audience.