

The Sustainable Communities Initiative



EQUITY IN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ISSUE BRIEFS



EQUITY ISSUE BRIEF Executive Summary

Advancing Environmental Justice through Sustainability Planning

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Executive Summary

This brief is one in a series that PolicyLink and the University of Southern California Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) are assembling for the federal Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI), an interagency effort coordinated by the U.S. EPA, the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). The series is intended to support a learning community of regional and local governments focused on integrating equity (economic, social, and environmental) into plans and projects. In this brief, we explain how SCI participants can work to achieve environmental justice in their communities—and why this is a key aspect of creating sustainable regions. The full-length version of the brief can be found [here](#).

What Is Environmental Justice?

Environmental justice (EJ) is rooted in the belief that all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or income, have the right to a clean and healthy environment in which to live, work, go to school, play, and pray. Study after study, however, has shown that low-income communities of color disproportionately bear the health and environmental burdens—and, concurrently, do not experience the benefits—that come from planning and development. Regions can achieve EJ when everyone enjoys equal access to decision-making processes and can engage meaningfully in decisions regarding the distribution of both benefits and burdens of new plans and projects.

While initial EJ efforts focused on the disproportionate siting of toxic waste dumps in low-income communities of color, environmental justice has since expanded to include a range of issues. Some (but certainly not all) of the most pressing environmental injustices facing communities today include:

- **Industrial pollution:** While sectors like manufacturing and warehousing provide much-needed jobs, industrial facilities release toxics that contribute to both air and water pollution—but this pollution is not distributed equally. In fact, a 2007 study found that race, regardless of income, is the dominant factor in an individual’s likely proximity to industrial pollution.
- **Goods movement:** Goods movement industries rely heavily on diesel-run vehicles, namely ships, trucks, and trains, which release hazardous particulate matter into surrounding neighborhoods. Communities adjacent to trade hubs and corridors—predominantly low-income communities of color—disproportionately suffer from health conditions such as respiratory problems, cardiovascular difficulties, and cancer.
- **Urban sprawl:** Racial discrimination in the U.S. housing market resulted in concentrated poverty among people of color in urban cores, while more affluent white Americans settled in the suburbs. The concurrent explosion of U.S. highways designed for suburban residents commuting to urban workplaces physically and culturally severed urban communities. Ironically, communities of color in city centers, which have much lower access to private automobiles, suffer the health consequences of increased pollution without the benefit or convenience of highway use—as well as a lack of access to adequate transit options.

What Does Environmental Justice Have to Do with Sustainability?

Environmental justice is good for everyone. While EJ has its foundation in different environmental outcomes by race, a 2010 study found that wherever toxic exposure is worse for some, it is worse for all. Other studies have found that closing the income gap and leveling the political playing field can also lead to healthier environments for all Americans. In that sense, EJ and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked.

Why Tackle Environmental Justice at the Regional Level?

While reversing environmental injustices is indeed necessary at the local and national levels, SCI participants would do well to pay attention to EJ at the regional level for three reasons:

1. Each region has its own set of industries and accompanying pollution problems;
2. Regional bodies coordinate transportation and goods movement systems that have significant environmental impacts; and
3. Land use systems and policies to create sustainable regions are most likely to be changed at regional levels.

SCI Grantees Advance Environmental Justice through Sustainability Planning

In **New Orleans**, SCI consortium members are working to reconnect predominantly low-income neighborhoods that were severed by the 1960s highway construction. The City plans to re-vision the corridor as an integral part of the regional transit system, connecting public transit, pedestrian, and bicycle networks in the hopes of relieving families of rising transportation costs and better connecting residents to jobs.

In **California's San Joaquin Valley**, SCI consortium members—including government agencies and community—are working together to curb urban sprawl and address poverty by redirecting investment from new development on the urban fringe to existing neighborhoods and along major corridors closer to city centers. In particular, the **City of Fresno** recently updated its general plan to require that new growth stays within a narrow buffer surrounding the city center in the hopes of minimizing sprawl and improving quality of life for existing residents through affordable housing, improved transit, parks, and grocery stores.

In the **Puget Sound** region, SCI consortium members are working to ensure that the construction of the region's new light-rail system adequately serves the community without displacing current residents. For example, the City of Seattle is granting transit-oriented development acquisition loans that help developers purchase vacant land near light-rail stations to build mixed-use projects that include affordable housing and commercial space for small businesses and community facilities.

- **Smart growth and displacement:** Cities and regions have started to implement smart growth strategies that encourage compact development to reduce the environmental and health effects of urban sprawl and auto dependence—which is resulting in improvements to quality of life in city centers. Increasing the desirability of living in urban neighborhoods, however, may increase real estate prices beyond the reach of low-income residents already living there and displace existing communities.
- **Transportation inequity:** Urban sprawl has also led to a jobs-housing imbalance and, increasingly, a lack of affordable homes near workplaces. This is particularly burdensome for low-income workers who rely on infrequent and often unreliable public transportation.

What are some ways that those involved in SCI activities can tackle environmental justice in their regions?

Despite the many environmental injustices facing communities, there are solutions to the problems that will help make regions both more equitable and sustainable. While we recognize that environmental justice is a vast field ranging from air pollution to transit availability to housing affordability, we focus here on three specific areas that help advance environmental justice through sustainability planning: 1) **developing tools** to measure health risks and environmental hazards that threaten local communities; 2) **authentically engaging and collaborating with communities** facing these problems in their daily lives; and 3) building in concerns about environmental disparities into the **next big issue facing regions—climate change**.

1. Measuring Environmental Justice with a Cumulative Impacts Approach

While there are multiple ways to measure EJ, assessing the **cumulative impact (CI)** of environmental injustices can provide planners and residents with a more comprehensive understanding of inequities by going beyond traditional measures of toxicity. In addition to measuring environmental and health hazards, CI methods examine social and economic vulnerabilities that affect communities' susceptibility to environmental injustices. One such measure includes the **Environmental Justice Screening Method (EJSM)**, which was developed jointly by researchers and community members. The EJSM derives a CI score based on 29 indicators that are organized into three categories: 1) hazard proximity and land use; 2) air pollution exposure and estimated health risk; and 3) social and health vulnerability. The score reflects an area's health burden, which helps local and regional governments, community groups, and other stakeholders identify and prioritize areas of high need within their area. (See Figure 1 below for a list of other available tools to assist those involved in local and regional planning in meeting EJ principles and goals.)

2. Authentically Collaborating with Communities

Community involvement is at the core of achieving environmental justice. It is critical at all stages of planning, not just at federally mandated public meetings that take place late in the planning process. Authentic community participation requires an earnest investment in resources and community-based partnerships to get people involved early in the process—including on-the-ground data collection and analysis. Traditional means of community engagement, such as one-time public meetings held at inconvenient times and locations near the end of planning processes, may disenfranchise low-income residents or those for whom formal methods of gathering community opinions are intimidating. In sum, to ensure that the benefits and burdens of new plans and projects are equally distributed, those involved in SCl activities should get people involved early, provide them with resources so they can fully participate, and ensure that outcomes reflect participation and local needs.

3. Planning for the Next Major Environmental Justice Issue: Climate Change

While climate change will affect everyone, evidence suggests it will deeply impact the most vulnerable communities. For instance, with the onset of climate change, these communities will suffer more extreme weather events, breathe dirtier air, pay more for basic necessities, and have fewer or shifting job opportunities. And while addressing climate change could therefore serve the imperative of EJ, policymakers cannot assume that all climate change strategies promote health and equity. For instance, while smart growth initiatives help reduce overall vehicle emissions through compact development, these strategies could lead to the concentration of pollutants around transit centers. Therefore, policymakers may need to consider supplemental strategies such as surcharges to force emissions reductions in highly impacted areas and "community benefit" funds to support neighborhoods that disproportionately bear the climate change burden. Currently, community-based efforts are leading the charge in putting forth equitable climate change planning initiatives, and planners would do well to partner with community-based organizations doing "climate justice" work through consultation, funding, and/or other resource allocation.

Figure 1. Other Environmental Justice, Climate Change, and Health-Related Tools

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH TOOLS	
<u>EJView</u>	<p>EJView is a mapping tool hosted by the U.S. EPA that allows users to create maps and generate reports which examine multiple variables that may affect human and environmental health within a community or region. Users can search by address, area, or EPA facility.</p> <p>Key data: Institutions, EPA reporting sites, health service areas, health risk/demographic, natural boundaries/water features</p>
<u>NEPAssist</u>	<p>NEPAssist is a mapping tool that supports the environmental impact review (EIR) process and project planning in relation to environmental considerations. Users can search by address, area, geographic coordinates, watershed, or congressional district.</p> <p>Key data: Institutions, EPA reporting sites, health service areas, health risk/demographic, natural boundaries/water features, transportation, soil maps, FEMA flood warning areas, topography maps</p>
<u>National-Scale Air Toxics Assessment (NATA) dataset and mapping tool</u>	<p>NATA is a dataset compiled by the U.S. EPA that provides broad estimates of health risks arising from breathing air toxics emitted from a variety of sources. The EPA also provides interactive Google Earth maps so users can view the distribution of risks in specific geographic areas.</p> <p>Key data: Stationary, mobile, background, and secondary formation air toxics</p>
<u>National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program</u>	<p>The National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program is a tool of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and provides information on environmental hazards, exposures, and chronic health conditions. This tool allows users to select by environmental risks/health conditions, demographics and geography, and displays data through mapping, charts, and tables. It also allows users to examine trends over time.</p> <p>Key data: Health, air quality, climate change, demographic</p>
<u>EnviroMapper for Envirofacts</u>	<p>EnviroMapper is a mapping tool which draws from several EPA data sources to display the location of activities that may affect water, air, and land anywhere in the U.S., from the neighborhood to national level.</p> <p>Key data: Data from facilities required to report activity to a state or federal system</p>
<u>Community-Focused Exposure and Risk Screening Tool (C-FERST)</u>	<p>Although this tool is not yet available, it will soon operate as a one-stop-shop community mapping and assessment tool for understanding cumulative risks.</p>

Figure 1. Other Environmental Justice, Climate Change, and Health-Related Tools (Continued)

PUBLIC HEALTH TOOLS	
<u>HealthLandscape</u>	<p>HealthLandscape is a web-based mapping tool that allows users to analyze and display demographic and health-related information at a variety of geographic levels. The tool draws from multiple socio-economic and health data sources.</p> <p>Key data: Health-care facilities, health status/risks, demographic</p>
<u>Health Professional Shortage Areas - Medically Underserved Areas/Populations</u>	<p>The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services developed this tool to allow users to identify areas that have a shortage of health professionals and/or are considered medically underserved.</p> <p>Key data: Health professional shortage areas, medically underserved areas and populations</p>
CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISASTER PLANNING TOOLS	
<u>OnTheMap for Emergency Management</u>	<p>This tool is operated by the U.S. Census Bureau and maps current natural hazard and emergency-related events, with available geographies ranging from the city to national level.</p> <p>Key data: Natural disaster</p>
<u>Sea-Level Rise Maps</u>	<p>This tool is run by the Pacific Institute and allows users to map flood warning, wetland, and coastal erosion zones and layer atop the locations of at-risk infrastructure.</p> <p>Key data: Hazard zones, at-risk infrastructure</p>

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