

# Introduction

ACE as an environmental justice group has always struggled with its relationship with the more traditional or mainstream environmental and sustainability groups. We've played with them. "Clean Buses for Boston" was quite intentionally, on my part, an effort to reach out to more mainstream groups in coalition, to bond with them. . . . Frankly, we didn't need them, but we were doing similar work. . . . The Boston Foundation stepped up and then the Public Welfare Foundation and everybody stepped up because what were we doing? We were bringing neighborhood environmental justice organizations together with mainstream environmental and sustainability organizations.

—Bill Shutkin, co-founder,  
Alternatives for Community and Environment

The relationship between environmental justice and sustainability groups has traditionally been uneasy. What might at first glance seem like an obvious case for partnership, for coalition, is fraught with ideological and other concerns, despite the obvious enthusiasm of funders. How has it come to this, and more to the point, how do we move forward?

## *Environmental Justice and Sustainability*

Environmental justice and sustainability are two concepts that have evolved over the past two decades to provide new, exciting, and challenging directions for public policy and planning. *Environmental justice* can be understood as a local, grassroots, or "bottom-up" community reaction to external threats to the health of the community, which have been shown to disproportionately affect people of color and low-income

neighborhoods. *Sustainability*, on the other hand, refers to meeting our needs today while not compromising the ability of those that follow to meet their needs. It emerged in large part from “top-down” international processes and committees, governmental structures, think tanks, and international nongovernmental organization (NGO) networks, although it is now, like environmental justice, at the grassroots level that much-needed change is happening. Both concepts are highly contested and problematized, but they nevertheless have tremendous potential to effect long-lasting change on a variety of levels, from local to global.

Environmental justice organizations emerged from grassroots activism in the civil rights movement. Whether these organizations are based on neighborhood, community, university, or region and whether they are staffed or unstaffed, they have expanded the dominant traditional<sup>1</sup> environmental discourse, based around environmental stewardship, to include social justice and equity considerations. In doing this, they have redefined the term *environment* so that the dominant wilderness, greening, and natural resource focus now includes urban disinvestment, racism, homes, jobs, neighborhoods, and communities. The *environment* became discursively different; it became “where we live, where we work and where we play” (Alston 1991). The environmental justice movement has been, and continues to be, very effective at addressing the issues of poor people and people of color, who are disproportionately affected by environmental “bads” such as toxic facilities, poor transit, and increased air pollution and who have restricted access to environmental “goods” such as quality green and play spaces.

At the same time, sustainable development and sustainable community advocates have mostly, but not exclusively, come from the traditional environmental movement<sup>2</sup> and are generally professionally qualified, often in a cognate discipline. They are usually from a different social location from people in the environmental justice movement. Wary of interest-group pluralism, where individuals in groups become the principal actors in democratic politics, with its attendant problem of capture, or domination, by powerful interests, sustainability advocates promote the use of innovative deliberative and democratic processes. These so-called deliberative and inclusionary processes and procedures (DIPS) are being increasingly used in Europe, North America, and, more recently, Australia.

DIPS include visioning, study circles, collaboration, consensus building and consensus conferencing, negotiation and conflict resolution, and

citizen's juries. The overall aim is to involve a broad cross-section of lay citizens in the development of shared values, consensus, and a vision of the common good. This deliberative focus is integral to the sustainable development and sustainable communities project (Renn et al. 1995; Dryzek 1990; Smith 2003). As a very general rule, DIPS differentiate sustainable development and sustainable communities organizations from much of the environmental justice movement in that sustainable community advocates tend, through deliberation, to be more proactive in saying what kind of communities we should be aiming for. Most but not all groups in the environmental justice movement are trapped in the traditional pluralistic decision-making processes, common in much environmental law, that make reaction the norm and proaction much more difficult.

Indeed, much of the activity of the environmental justice movement, certainly the small neighborhood groups as distinct from the movement's professional<sup>3</sup> not-for-profits and university centers, is *reactive*—that is, focused on stopping environmental bads as they threaten the community. This is not what the Principles of Environmental Justice (see Appendix), the theoretical and ideological foundation of the movement advocate, but reaction is the political reality for many communities starved of resources. The purveyors of environmental bads, such as large multinationals, are favored in pluralistic decision-making processes because of their disproportionate influence, economic muscle, and knowledge. This David-and-Goliath struggle has nevertheless propelled the movement a long way over the past twenty years. Where the movement has been less successful, though not completely unsuccessful, is in developing consensual visions and taking ownership of the assets and resources necessary to bring such visions to fruition.

### *Cooperation?*

Despite the historical and geographical differences in origin between *environmental justice* and *sustainability*, there exists an area of theoretical, conceptual, and practical compatibility between them. Each concept has its own particular discursive frame<sup>4</sup> and paradigm,<sup>5</sup> which can be seen as opposite ends of a continuum. At one end is the Environmental Justice Paradigm (EJP) of Taylor (2000), which is a framework for integrating class, race, gender, environment, and social justice concerns.

It represents the theoretical underpinning of the environmental justice project and activism. At the other end is the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) of Catton and Dunlap (1978), which sets out an environmental stewardship and sustainability agenda that currently influences the work of most environmental and sustainability organizations but has little to say about equity or justice. Notwithstanding these differences, which are primarily about the issues of race and class, justice and equity, and not about the need for greater environmental protection, there is a rich and critical nexus where proponents of each paradigm are engaging in *cooperative endeavors* (Schlosberg 1999) regarding common issues such as toxics use reduction and transportation.

Yet such cooperation has so far largely been based on what Gould et al. (2004:90) call “short-term marriages of convenience” rather than “longer-term coalitions.” In this respect the cooperation currently falls well short of Cole and Foster’s (2001:164) concept of *movement fusion*, “the coming together of two (or more) social movements in a way that expands the base of support for both movements by developing a common agenda.” If and when this happens, the result may be a broad, integrated social movement to create just and sustainable communities for all people in the future. This possibility is the inspiration for this book.

In order for the environmental justice and sustainability movements to develop a common agenda, changes to both will be required. One change is already happening within the sustainability paradigm, in part as a result of the influence of the environmental justice project. It is the emergence of a “just sustainability” orientation as a counter to the dominance of “environmental sustainability.” This development is the focus of this book.

### *Just Sustainability*

In the fall of 2002, the eleven-year anniversary of the landmark 1991 National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit took place in Washington, D.C. Earlier that year, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the ten-year follow-up to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), took place in Johannesburg, South Africa. Despite battles in Johannesburg between the “green” or *environmental* agenda of wealthy countries representing the North and the “brown” or *antipoverty* agenda of poorer

countries representing the South, the discourse of both conferences revolved around what Agyeman et al. (2003) have termed *just sustainability*, or what Jacobs (1999:32) calls “the egalitarian conception of sustainable development.” The concept of *just sustainability* highlights the pivotal role that justice and equity could and should play within sustainability discourses. In so doing, it fundamentally challenges the current, dominant, stewardship-focused orientation of sustainability, which has as its main concern the conservation of the natural environment, namely *environmental* sustainability (Dobson 1999, 2003), or what Jacobs (1999:33) calls “the non-egalitarian conception” of sustainable development.

Why should race and class, justice and equity play a role in sustainability? Has the environmental sustainability movement not done a good job? No, according to Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004:12) in *The Death of Environmentalism*:

Why, for instance, is a human-made phenomenon like global warming—which may kill hundreds of millions of human beings over the next century—considered “environmental”? Why are poverty and war not considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications of framing global warming as an environmental problem—and handing off the responsibility for dealing with it to “environmentalists”?

Irrespective of whether we take a global, statewide, or more local focus, a moral or practical approach, inequity and injustice resulting from, among other things, racism and classism are bad for the environment and bad for sustainability. What is more, the environmental sustainability movement, typified by the National Audubon Society, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Natural Resources Defense Council, does not have an analysis or theory of change with strategies for dealing with these issues. While researching a film in the early 1990s, I asked a Greenpeace UK staffer if she felt that her organization’s employees reflected multicultural Britain. She replied calmly, “No, but it’s not an issue for us. We’re here to save the world.”

Yet research has shown that, globally, nations with a greater commitment to equity and a correspondingly more equitable society tend to also have a greater commitment to environmental quality (Torras and Boyce 1998). Good examples are the Nordic countries of Sweden,

Denmark, Norway, and Finland. In a survey of the fifty U.S. states, Boyce et al. (1999) found that those with greater inequalities in power distribution (measured by voter participation, tax fairness, Medicaid access, and educational attainment levels) had less stringent environmental policies, greater levels of environmental stress, and higher rates of infant mortality and premature death. At a more local level, a study by Morello-Frosch (1997) of counties in California showed that highly segregated counties, in terms of income, class, and race, had higher levels of hazardous air pollutants.

If sustainability is to become a process with the power to transform, as opposed to its current environmental, stewardship, or reform focus, justice and equity issues need to be incorporated into its very core. This, as the title of my book suggests, is the gauntlet the environmental justice movement has thrown down to the development of sustainable communities. Our present green or environmental orientation of sustainability is basically about tweaking our existing policies. Transformative or just sustainability implies a paradigm shift that requires sustainability to take on a redistributive function. To do this, justice and equity must move center stage in sustainability discourses, if we are to have any chance of a more sustainable future.

The Just Sustainability Paradigm (JSP) is an emerging discursive frame and paradigm. It is not, however, rigid, single, and universal; it is linked to both the EJP and the NEP. In this sense, the JSP can be seen as both flexible and contingent, composed of overlapping discourses that come from recognition of the validity of a variety of issues, problems, and framings. The JSP arises from the definition of sustainability of Agyeman et al. (2003:5), “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems,” a definition that prioritizes justice and equity but does not downplay the environment, our life-support system. In essence, the JSP is malleable, acting as a bridge spanning the continuum between the EJP and the NEP.

While it is growing in acceptance, just sustainability has not yet been recognized as a pivotal concept by all scholars in the field. In 2000, Brulle created a typology of nine different discursive frames within the U.S. environmental movement: manifest destiny, wildlife management, conservation, preservation, reform environmentalism, deep ecology, environmental justice, eco-feminism and eco-theology. He did not identify just sustainability as a frame, nor did he name sustainable development

as one. Instead he posited sustainable development as a subset of the conservation frame, with the note that “although sustainable development may be a latter day version of conservation, it has interjected ecological concerns into industry” (Brulle 2000:158).

However, I believe that sustainability as the theoretical component and sustainable development and sustainable communities as the practical components is a far more durable, influential frame than Brulle’s research shows (cf. Campbell 1996), especially outside the United States. Indeed, what seems remarkable is that nearly twenty years on, the Brundtland Report, which popularized the term *sustainable development* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), and agreements made at UNCED in 1992 are still having cross-sectoral influence. And this influence is increasing. For example, greater numbers of multinationals (such as BP, now tellingly “Beyond Petroleum,” and IKEA), national governments (the Netherlands and Denmark plan to be sustainable by 2050), and local governments (250 North American cities, out of 600 globally, have signed up to the Cities for Climate Protection Plan) seem to be taking sustainability increasingly seriously.

While most are firmly in the NEP, the JSP influences the work of a few national environmental and sustainability membership organizations, and there is a growing number of local organizations, programs, and projects that utilize the discursive frame and paradigm of just sustainability to practical effect in U.S. cities, as I shall demonstrate. This paradigm underpins the leading-edge cooperative endeavors that are described in this book. Further down the line, it will be both a *precondition* for movement fusion between the environmental justice and sustainability movements and the *cement* that keeps the coalition together.

The emergent JSP is a far bigger tent than could be filled solely by just sustainability and by most environmental justice organizations. My work concentrates on this paradigm and the movements and organizations that espouse it because they are founder members. I hope that future researchers who want to go further in characterizing the JSP will look more broadly toward initiatives such as the Just Transition Alliance, “a voluntary coalition of labor, economic and environmental justice activists, Indigenous people and working-class people of color [that] has created a dialogue in local, national, and international arenas.”<sup>6</sup> This and many other alliances that are forming around the world could, I believe, unite under the JSP.

In order to be truly successful at both alleviating environmental bads

and bringing about substantial community-envisioned change, the environmental justice movement and its organizations will have to take a more proactive, deliberative, sustainable communities–type visioning approach. While support for this approach is now gaining traction, the antecedents of this thinking go back at least as far as 1993, when Goldman (1993:27) suggested that “sustainable development may well be seen as the next phase of the environmental justice movement.”

At the same time, the sustainable development and sustainable community movement will need to fully respond to the environmental justice movement’s ongoing critique of its overeagerness to focus on *environmental* sustainability rather than on a more holistic conception of sustainability that sees justice and equity, and the interlinkages between environmental, economic, and social issues, as the necessary focus of activism. When these conditions are met, as I believe they are beginning to be in organizations using the JSP as their frame, Cole and Foster’s (2001) concept of movement fusion has a chance of taking place. Indeed, Cole and Foster see such fusion as “a necessary ingredient for the long term success of the environmental justice movement because, put simply, environmental justice advocates do not have a large enough power base to win the larger struggle for justice on their own” (165).

Coalition building through a convenient common focus such as toxics, transit, or antinuclear issues is not without precedent. Antiglobalization protests in Seattle, London, and Washington, D.C., among others, consisted of a range of environmental, peace, indigenous, spiritual, women’s, civil rights, labor, antiracist, and other groups who would also be candidates for the JSP. Gould et al. (2004) have begun to investigate what they call “Blue-Green” or “Seattle” coalitions between labor unions and environmentalists. To do this they pose four fundamental problems, the last three of which we will be returning to in later chapters in this book: “(1) the problem of reciprocation and unbalanced expectations by environmentalists for unionists; (2) the problem of extending short term marriages of convenience into longer term coalitions; (3) the debate over whether local or national levels are better places to make these coalitions; and (4) the class issue” (96). The researchers’ conclusion is that, because of fewer ideological obstacles and the structural positions and origins of such groups, “the environmental justice and environmental health wings of the green movement are more suited to making long term coalitions with labor than are habitat-oriented green groups” and that “in many ways, the tensions between labor and

the mainstream greens echo the tensions between the environmental justice movement and mainstream greens” (108). This reasoning is precisely why, as I will show, the best chance for more cooperative endeavors and ultimately movement fusion between the environmental justice and sustainability movements will be for environmental justice groups to work with just sustainability groups, as opposed to those of an environmental sustainability orientation.

There is good news and bad news on the environmental justice and just sustainability coalition front. The good news is that there is evidence that the JSP, which links the frames, concepts, language, programs, and repertoire of action<sup>7</sup> of organizations in the environmental justice and sustainability movements, is already emerging at the local, national, and international levels. This linkage is happening more within and through larger environmental-justice-based organizations such as Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE) in Boston, Center for Neighborhood Technologies (CNT) in Chicago, and Urban Ecology in Oakland, California, than in smaller, neighborhood-type environmental justice groups which often do not have the time or the resources. ACE, CNT, Urban Ecology, and other leading-edge organizations of the JSP are being both reactive and proactive: they are operating within an environmental justice framework<sup>8</sup> (Bullard 1994) but are also exploring the wider and emerging terrain of sustainable development and the development of sustainable communities. At the national level, membership-based groups such as the Center for Health, Environment and Justice, Environmental Defense, Center for a New American Dream, and Redefining Progress, and internationally, the Earth Council, the Heinrich Boll Foundation, and the Stockholm Environment Institute, among others, are espousing the language, framing, and paradigm of just sustainability.

The bad news is that local governments, which were charged at UNCED in Rio in 1992 with delivering Local Agenda 21,<sup>9</sup> a community-led plan for local sustainability, are not making as much progress as local, national, or international NGOs are in this linkage.<sup>10</sup> In a study of sustainability projects in the largest U.S. cities, Warner (2002) found that few even acknowledged environmental justice as an aspect of sustainability. Similarly, the Environmental Law Institute (1999) analyzed 579 applications to the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) 1996 Sustainable Development Challenge Grant Program. Fewer than 5 percent of applications had “equity” as a goal, and interestingly, fewer

than 1 percent addressed “international responsibility” through local-global linkages.

### *Theory, Method, and Analysis*

This book is meant for people in a range of academic disciplines in the social and political sciences, the environmental sciences, environmental justice, environmental policy and planning, geography, and sustainability and for readers who do not identify themselves as part of any discipline, be they practitioners, activists, or the like.

To characterize and chart the rise of the JSP with a theoretical, methodological, and analytical rigor and robustness that is both acceptable and understandable to a diverse audience and at the same time useful to them is no easy task. The literatures drawn on in this study are wide-ranging. In essence, the book takes both a discourse analytic and interpretive approach to the emergence of the JSP, fully characterizing it and differentiating it from the discursive frames of both the NEP and EJP. One could argue that discourse, in and of itself, is no basis to make such claims. Brulle (2000:97), however, argues that “the discourse of a movement translates the historical conditions and the potential for mobilization into a reality that frames an organization’s identity. This identity then influences the organization’s structure, tactics and methods of resource mobilization.” Carmin and Balser (2002:371) add another, interpretive approach in that “experience, core values and beliefs, environmental philosophy, and political ideology contribute to interpretive processes that take place within Environmental Movement Organizations (EMOs) that in turn shape the selection of a repertoire.” In essence these contributors act as filters that affect how the political environment is interpreted by an organization, the programs it develops, and the actions it takes. Put another way, “these filters lead to interpretations and the construction of meaning that in turn can provide a foundation for action” (Carmin and Balser 2002:367). My research uses a combination of discourse analysis and an interpretive approach that I believe will give a clearer picture.

I use a content analytic approach based on available literature to differentiate the discourse of civic environmentalism (the dominant sub-national environmental policymaking discourse) into two foci: narrow and broad. Narrow-focus civic environmentalism represents the NEP:

business as usual, reform, or unreconstructed (Agyeman 2001) environmentalism. Broad-focus civic environmentalism represents a more politically based construct, namely that environmental quality and economic and social health are inextricably interlinked (Shutkin 2000). In this sense, in discourse and issue framing, it is close to the transformative JSP.

In order to assess organizations' commitment to the JSP, I have created a Just Sustainability Index (JSI). I used a hybrid of discourse analysis, content/relational analysis, and interpretive analysis. The JSI assesses the discourse of organizations through the language and meanings inherent in their mission statements and in prominent contemporary textual or programmatic material available on the Internet. In my experience on the boards of several environmental and sustainability organizations in the United States and Europe, mission statements have been like meditational mantras, from which organizational and individual action and work plans flow. They could, however, be criticized as a form of purely aspirational discourse, rather than being based on "experience, core values and beliefs, environmental philosophy, and political ideology" (Carmin and Baiser 2002:371). For this reason, I also looked at prominent contemporary textual or programmatic material that specifies the programs an organization will implement or has implemented and the resulting actions it will take or has taken in pursuance of program goals. This material represents an organizational interpretation of the political environment, and what the organization intends to do about it.

Based on the inclusion or exclusion of certain key words or concepts in the organizational mission and programs, and their relation to other key words or concepts, the JSI assigns organizations a score on a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 means that there is no mention of equity or justice in the core mission statement or in prominent contemporary textual or programmatic material and 3 means that the core mission statement relates to intra- and intergenerational equity and justice, and/or justice and equity occur in the same sentence in prominent contemporary textual or programmatic material.

I analyzed thirty top national environmental and sustainability membership organizations in this way. My intent was solely to provide support for my assertions about the dominance in the United States of the stewardship-focused orientation of sustainability, or of environmental sustainability over just sustainability. In addition, I selected three

vignettes in each of the following sustainability categories: land-use planning, solid waste, toxic chemical use, residential energy use, and transportation. These vignettes are of representative programs or projects, managed by organizations with a JSI of 3, that are providing proactive, balanced efforts to create a just sustainability in practice in U.S. cities. I therefore include in this book a total of fifteen vignettes, each of which illustrates different practical aspects of the JSP.

In order to move beyond discourse and interpretation—from words to deeds—I also employ a case-study approach to provide a rich description of one organization and its programs that I believe in many ways represent the JSP. ACE in Boston has been attempting to create change, initially in the city’s Roxbury district but latterly on a more regional basis. I assess the organization’s links to the discourse, framing, and paradigm of just sustainability through a variety of sources of evidence, such as programs, documents, archival records, participant observation at meetings, and interviews with staff and board members.

The goal of this book is twofold:

- To characterize and illustrate the discourse of the JSP. I will illuminate the nexus between the concepts of sustainability and environmental justice both theoretically and by presenting a range of local or regionally based practical urban models in land-use planning, transportation, residential energy use, solid waste, and toxic chemical use.
- To identify an organization engaging with the JSP. Boston’s ACE works locally, within an environmental justice framework, but is increasingly taking a more proactive, (metro) regional, systemic sustainable communities–type approach in creating alternative visions and solutions. I explore its programs and repertoires, including tools, techniques, and strategies, through an in-depth case study;

Chapter 1 takes a brief tour through the historical construction and discourse(s) of environmental justice in the United States. It looks at the Principles of Environmental Justice both as the source of inspiration and unison in the movement and also as the site of a major cleavage between activists and academics. The chapter continues by defining and framing environmental justice and looking at the EJP. It concludes by looking at the issues inherent in developing environmental justice policy.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the history of sustainable development as currently practiced through the NEP. It problematizes this current practice through an examination of the pivotal role of justice and equity, and of “new economics,” then moves on to look at the characteristics of a sustainable community and the discourse(s) of civic environmentalism and their relevance to sustainable communities.

Chapter 3 looks at the differences between the discourses of the JSP, the EJP, and the NEP. It concludes that there are five key differences between the JSP and the EJP: the JSP has a central premise of developing sustainable communities; the JSP has a wider range of progressive, proactive, policy-based solutions and policy tools; the JSP is calling for, and has developed, a coherent “new economics”; the JSP has much more of a local-global linkage; and the JSP is more proactive and visionary than the typically reactive EJP.

Chapter 4 develops the Just Sustainability Index, which can be used to assess an organization’s discourse and texts and thereby its stated commitment to the JSP. The chapter continues by investigating the JSP through practical urban examples in the issue areas of land-use planning, transportation, residential energy use, solid waste, and toxic chemical use.

Chapter 5 offers an in-depth case study of Boston’s ACE in order to provide a rich description of one organization that, while historically working within an environmental justice framework, is actively exploring the JSP.

Chapter 6 asks where we are now and if we have a map of where we need to go to develop more long-term cooperative ventures and ultimately movement fusion.