

## **Environmental Interventions for Social Justice: Imperial County's Pollution Crisis**

### ***Unveiling Environmental Health Priorities: Imperial County's Toxic Pollution Challenge***

Aguilera, author of the article "Living in one of the Most Polluted Places in California," wrote that Imperial County is among the most polluted places in America. The air quality in the County is below federal air quality standards. The air quality is so toxic that the Federal Clean Air Act in 2014 has labeled it as a non-attainment area. The County also received the lowest grade from the American Lung Association due to high degrees of particle pollution and high ozone. Toxic vapors evaporate off of the nearby Salton Sea, where it's been collecting farm run-offs for decades.

The area has the highest rates of hospitalizations and emergency room visits for adolescents having asthma attacks. To help residents, an organization by the name of Comité Civico set up 40 monitors around the area. The monitors measure the toxicity of the air and alert the residents on days when the toxicity is too high. Officials plan to decrease pollution over the next decade by subjecting factories to more regular smog check requirements, and local farmers will have tighter rules regarding field burning. Imperial Valley Democrat Eduardo Garcia works to sponsor new laws addressing air quality. Officials estimate goals will be set by the year 2030.

To aid the residents of Imperial County in clearing up the pollution, it would be wise to approach the problem with a model specifically for resolving environmental problems. One of the many models is the Precede-Proceed Model. The model is used to assess environmental health problems and their causes. Once the causal factors are addressed, we can create an intervention to resolve environmental health problems by targeting the causal factors (Edberg, 2018). The Precede-Proceed Model is organized into 9 phases, but for now, we will only focus on phases 1-6 because the issue is still unresolved.

Phase 1 is social assessment, which is assessing the environmental health problem in a social/community context. The assessment can also be used to see what environmental health problems a community sees as the top priority. Basically, social assessment wants to know how a health problem relates to what goes on in the community and what issues should receive priority. In the case of toxic pollution in Imperial County, we can see that a large portion of pollution comes from local farmers (Vice, 2016).

### **Unveiling Environmental Challenges: Pollution Sources and Health Impacts**

“There is increased competition through NAFTA and the world global market. Therefore, farmers have to resort to cutthroat practices in order to get the most out of their crops” (Vice, 2016). So, for the local farmers, trying to stay afloat in the competitive agricultural market is their top priority. For them, the end justifies the means.

Phase 2 is the epidemiological assessment. This is where we gauge the prevalence of the environmental health problem and the nature and extent of the problem. Thanks to the social justice organization Comite Civico, they’ve given us a resource by setting up 40 monitors around Imperial County, which allows us to see levels of pollution in real-time (Aguilera, 2019). Also, by communicating with the community, we discover the residents are becoming ill from the toxic dust evaporating off the Salton Sea (Aguilera, 2019).

Phase 3 is the environment assessment. Here, we assess environmental risk factors connected to the health problems we want to address (Edberg, 2018). By doing so, we can identify environmental conditions that need to be targeted in an intervention (Edberg, 2018). When we assess the environment in Imperial County, we find that the Salton Sea contains decades of run-off from the farms and toxic sewage flowing in from the New River (Vice, 2016).

The New River that flows into the Salton Sea is a sewer line for the neighboring city of Mexicali. The River is so toxic border patrols are prohibited from touching anything in the River, including illegal immigrants. Burning agricultural fields is a contributing factor to pollution as well (Vice, 2016).

### **Fostering Collaboration: From Assessment to Environmental Justice Solutions**

Phase 4 is the educational/ecological assessment. Here, we try to assess the attitudes and social norms that contribute to environmental risks found. By assessing the attitudes and social norms, we can identify more factors that contribute to the environmental health problem (Edberg, 2018). When we reach out to the local farmers in the community, we learn that they believe they have to resort to fielding burning in order to get the most out of their crops due to world global market competition (Vice, 2016). On top of that, farmers are now being punished with fees when they have to resort to fielding burning (Vice, 2016).

Phase 5 is the administrative/policy assessment. This is where we assess any available resources, such as committees, organizations, and political groups. With these resources, we can begin implementing an intervention needed to resolve the environmental health problem. Because of Comite Civico's involvement, it drew the attention of assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, an Imperial Valley Democrat. He now works to sponsor new laws addressing pollution and has included communities in the process (Aguilera, 2019).

Phase 6 is finally implementing our plan to resolve the environmental problem. It seems the ultimate goal should be to have the entire community on the same page. We should have the farming legislative and community residents come to a mutual agreement. What we are facing is

an environmental justice dilemma (Vice, 2016). We should create an intervention where all sides are heard because everyone just wants to survive.

Imperial County's toxic pollution levels are overwhelming the area. Pollution created by farmers who just want to stay in business is infecting the waters and the air, rendering the area deadly to all life forms. With the community's involvement, we can use the Precede-Proceed Model to create an intervention for the environmental problem. The model is used to assess health problems and their factors. Once causal factors are identified and understood, an intervention is created to target the causal factors to resolve the environmental problem.

**References:**

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2. Edberg, M. C. (2018). Essentials of health behavior: social and behavioral theory in public health (3rd ed.). Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning.
3. [Vice]. (2016, March 10). Toxic tourism in california's imperial valley. Retrieved from <https://video.vice.com>