

Environmental Justice Movements in Southeast Asia and the United States: A Macro-comparison

Abstract: This paper takes a sweeping look at the current state of the environmental justice movement in the United States. Then, by comparing both problems, causes, and outcomes of the environmental justice movements in the developing countries of Southeast Asia, analyzes the current successes and failures of the movement, and determines that greater social linkages with NGOs and governmental policymaking institutions would likely help transition environmental justice issues to the forefront of social dialogue.

Introduction

The environmental justice movement is not even half a century old, yet its foundations are just being built. Many communities are just becoming aware that they are victims of environmental racism, and are educating themselves about environmental hazards to which their families and communities may have already been exposed. Others, aware of their situation and powerless on their own to help themselves, are learning the ways to petition the government and fight against industry to give their families and themselves a more healthy future. Academics and researchers are opening up whole new realms of study in linking zoning, housing discrimination, and other factors to environmental racism and discrimination, and most major research can not even be completed as far back as desired, the field and data is so young. Therefore, one of the best ways to analyze the progress and shortcomings of the movement is to compare it to similar movements abroad.

Although not explicitly called the environmental justice movement, many regions of the world share similar large-scale movements involving environmental or ecological injustices based on discrimination. In particular developing countries, as opposed to the more advanced democratic Western Europe, share this burden of discriminatory environmental practices for two reasons. First, these countries have a continuing population and economic growth that puts pressure on industry and land. (Hirsch & Warren, 1998) Second, they tend to have great wealth disparity and/or society is often broken up by class, which can breed another dimension of discriminatory actions. (Guha & Martinez-Allier, 1997) Among the regions that feature many developing countries with environmental issues, Southeast Asia makes a good parallel because it is the fastest-

growing area in the world, making it vulnerable to environmental meltdowns, it has substantial links to the West, mostly through colonialism, and there are many studies and data available to compare environmental justice trends with the United States. This paper will attempt to show that the problems of the environmental justice movement in the United States are less hazardous and extreme than in Southeast Asia. Additionally, there is more of an effort by government and industry to conform to acceptable discriminatory standards, but the social linkages and the potential to politically mobilize around an issue like environmental justice seems to be much stronger among the movements in Southeast Asia, which could be a potential benchmark for the environmental justice movements in the United States.

Background & Procedure

The environmental justice movement is still a relatively young phenomenon in the United States. Birthed from the civil rights movement of the sixties and seventies, the movement began in the protests of those community members in Warren County, NC. (Ringquist, 2003) The movement began really taking off with the emergence of greater environmental awareness, specifically with hazardous waste sites and pollution as they relate to quality of life standards, a linkage that did not emerge in the public eye until the Love Canal controversy in 1979. Considering the relative youth of the environmental justice movement in the United States, as well as the ingrained racial tensions and discrimination practices that exist in the US as opposed to many other countries, it may come as surprising to some that the environmental justice movement is not a social movement unique to the United States. Indeed, while environmental issues often toiled in

ambiguity, and were completely ignored by the important leaders of the US Civil Rights movement, environmental injustices were already being addressed in Southeast Asia.

The Chipko movement, more colloquially known and lampooned as “tree hugging,” involved fighting loggers in India with direct action to protect their resources in the 1960’s and 70’s, but also relied on almost exclusive female leadership and lent credence to gender equality issues as well. (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986) This movement was copied both in India and elsewhere throughout the region. Also, in the mid 1970’s, the student-led TEMCO movement in Thailand forced the Prime Minister to withdraw extremely favorable (and illegal) mining concessions in southern Thailand, providing another example of early grassroots environmental movements of the less powerful. (Hirsch & Lohmann, 1989) The best example, and earliest, of a cognitive grassroots environmental justice movement comes from the Saminists of Indonesia at the start of the 20th century. Unhappy with the Dutch’s increasing policing of the woods, the Saminists’ main belief was that the state had not created the wood, just like it had not created the wind, water and earth, and that they all belonged equally to everyone. (Peluso 1994) Therefore, they refused to speak to Dutch forest rangers, continued to take wood from the forests, and refused to pay taxes. The Saminists were eventually persecuted, their leaders arrested, and the movement had practically subsided by 1910, but the idea was planted.

In this macro-comparison, I will analyze many case studies within the environmental justice movements of Southeast Asia, and match them up with similar case studies in the United States. The region of Southeast Asia is vaguely defined, but for the crux of this paper it will be confined mostly to the countries of India, Indonesia, the

Philippines and Thailand. These countries can be looked at as representative of environmental justice movements in developing countries at large, not just Southeast Asia. For the sake of organization, the paper will break the environmental justice movement into three divisions: the problems, or injustices present (i.e. illegal dumping poisoning groundwater); the causes, or the actors responsible for the injustice (e.g. industry, government); and the outcomes, both the actions being taken by these movements to address the problem and the results of their efforts (e.g. community organizations, public rallies). Through this framework, comparisons can be made between movements in the two regions, and help shine light on what the United States Environmental Justice movement has accomplished so far and in what arenas it can improve. The conclusion of the paper will reflect back on the comparison by examining the trends of the data from a different framework: the “Taxonomy of Environmental Justice.” (Kuehn, 2000)

Problems

Environmental problems that citizens in the United States face share one major similarity with those in Southeast Asia: both movements are almost always addressing a negative change to the status quo. On principle, this sounds rather elementary, but looking at a field like conservation or even an issue like education, policymakers and activists are both campaigning very strongly to maintain or improve their sector, even if nothing is yet going wrong. Due to the nature of those targeted in environmental justice problems, the poor, minorities, and less fortunate; it is not surprising that those looking to scrape by from week to week would not seek to address an issue like water contamination

or industrial expansion until the problem is figuratively in their back yard. One such example is Buttonwillow, a small town in California that was fighting to close or at least stop the expansion of one of the largest toxic waste dumps in the US. In this case, citizens become wary of the plant after an abnormal and particularly devastating amount of birth defects were occurring among newborns in their small community. This, along with child illness rates far above the state average, caused community members to begin actively paying attention and attempting to take part in government decisions affecting the toxic waste site. (Cole & Foster, 2001) The toxic waste site had been around for a long time before this environmental movement started, but the drastic change in the well-being of the community quickly changed the interest of the people there.

Similarly the San Fernando community in the southern-most island of the Philippines had never objected to the heavy commercial logging that in decades, had taken 80% of the island's forests away, until their soil had eroded away and they had lost much of their arable land that supplied their only form of sustenance. (Broad 1994) After their discovery, the citizens united in full force to sit down in front of logging trucks passing through town and staging fasts to save the forest that received much publicity. This is not to say that the citizens in either community are insincere to their cause, it is more important to point out that almost all action is mitigated by a problem in the environmental justice sector.

One problem that tends to be very different between the cases in Southeast Asia as compared to cases in the United States is this idea of land use vs. land preservation. In Southeast Asia, continued population growth and fast depleting resources, including good farm land and forests, creates a problem that is centered on land use. Oftentimes many of

the poor and disenfranchised are literally displaced by their government in favor of industry, or may lose the value or sustainability of their land and/or job in the event that a richer, more powerful actor took it instead. Using the Philippines once again as an example, the small community of Itogon had been mining gold as part of small-budget operation for decades. When a corporation moved in with a vast concession from the government to strip mine this very same area, the people of Itogon literally lost their livelihood, in addition to the additional health dangers that the encroachment of industry can cause. (Broad, 1994)

In the United States, most environmental justice issues involve an externality of a site or pollution source, not the actual land itself. In the case of Convent, Louisiana, residents grew especially resistant after studies indicated that the new chemical plant would contribute to the air pollution that was 93 times greater than the average air pollution for the state of Louisiana as a whole. (Kuehn 2000) As with most cases in the US, the people of Convent were not concerned with the actual land, they do not care about owning it or using it, but what it would be used for, or if it would be a use that is harmful to its children. In developing countries as a whole, the greater percentages of natural resources that are left in proportion to developed countries, and a greater percentage of poor citizens who live off these resources, make land use the biggest issue in their environmental governance.

The second way that US environmental justice problems often differ from those in Southeast Asia has to do with the nature of the problems themselves. As reflected by the aforementioned communities in the Philippines, many of the victims of environmental injustices in Southeast Asia are losing their land, their homes, or their occupation when

they give way to government or industry. In the state of Gujarat in western India, construction of a new dam precluded 41,000 families being displaced, and this is not a rare occurrence, it is estimated India has displaced 33 million people in the last 50 years, due simply to damming. (Taneja & Thakkar, 2000) This is not to say the people of Gukarat did not protest or go down without a fight, but in India the process is fairly systematic and 41,000 families is not a significantly noticeable number.

The often disastrous and immediate consequences of environmental injustice in India are contrasted by the US cases. Like the citizens of Buttonwillow, residents of Barrio Logan experienced increased birth defects, cancer rates, and adult and childhood respiratory problems; which lead to their concern in the Port Authority's use of Methyl Bromide, among other hazardous waste-producing facilities located nearby. (Holtzman 1998) These types of situations that residents in Barrio Logan go through in comparison to the situation in developing countries are a double-edged sword. While it is understandable that the displaced people of Gujarat, India are in far worse and immediate shape than the people of Barrio Logan, the people of India are in a predicament that is easily connectable to the problem and therefore, are often publicly assisted by the World Bank, or any number of international NGOs that have an interest in the downtrodden people of developing countries. The people of Barrio Logan, in contrast, are never seen in the context of having been a victim, and in this case as well it is near impossible to prove that the methyl bromide is the direct cause of birth defects, or any other health problems. Thus, while there are health risks associated with the residents of Barrio Logan, they are often not immediate enough to garner attention or funding to fight against their situation. It might be this difference, this shaping of the context between a human rights violation

and an environmental injustice, which accounts for increased funding international NGOs contribute to developing countries every year while continuing to ignore environmental justice issues in the US.

Causes

The all-important linkage between the causes of environmental justice issues both domestically and in developing countries is that industry and government often have shared interest in pursuing path of least resistance. In countries like India and Thailand, huge economic growth places pressure on the economy to keep up with population, and in turn encourages government concessions to industries, which can lead to unrestricted degradation of the environment. On the other hand, for US industries, staying domestic might not be the most cost-affordable choice, and staying in business might require cost-cutting that results in a lack of environmental safeguards. Similarly the US government will do what it can to retain industry, and that includes subsidies and tax riders to get a corporation off the ground. Market forces are the only realistic explanation for the consistent discrimination of minorities and the underclass, and industry everywhere will almost always follow the path of least resistance. (Cole & Foster, 2001) What makes the US link up with the developing world in this regard is that the country still has an exploitable group of people, whereas in many countries in Europe, until recently in any case, there would not be such a 'path of least resistance,' so to speak, making it harder to take advantage of one group repeatedly.

The main difference in the causality of the environmental injustice encountered is that the US cases tend to be more unintentional, or at least seem more unintentional, in

their discrimination than many of the cases in developing countries. This idea of unintentional institutional racism in the US has been documented extensively and meshes very well with the cases in the environmental justice movement. In unintentional institutional discrimination, intentional discrimination in a related sphere can carry over into another sphere to produce a discriminatory outcome. (Feagin & Feagin, 1986) In the case of the US, many discriminatory practices in housing and employment leave minority or poor households in neighborhoods with bad air and water pollution, even though it was not necessarily the intent of anyone to put these people in the way of pollution.

Cases in Southeast Asia, however, show government and industry officials to be much more direct in their discrimination of underprivileged communities. The Sarawak region of Malaysia has often been entangled in corruption, with government officials interacting heavily with logging companies, and passing out 320 timber licenses in the meantime, most likely for favors. Despite the fact that there are two indigenous tribes on this land, the Malaysian government has ignored or showed open hostility toward the people who are already on the land. (Gardner, 1995) The reasons for this behavior are numerous; the rural poor and indigenous tribes have even less political clout and access to the media or government than do the underprivileged in the US, with less money and more resources to monitor, enforcement of laws is often unorganized or nonexistent within government officials themselves, and with less government restrictions corporations can be more bold in their practices of coercion or intimidation.

Outcomes

There are two major parallels between the outcomes associated with environmental justice movements in Southeast Asia and those in the US. First, the spread of horizontal social constructs to create a movement. The spread of horizontal constructs, or social capital, is the idea that ideas from one area, and groups of people and political groups, can spread to other areas, and there is a tremendous amount of spreading through organizations in both the US and Southeast Asia. In the US, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and 70's created institutions that would become adaptable to environmental justice activism. The Commission of Racial Justice, originally a civil rights group that was part of the United Church of Christ, was instrumental in helping to compose the United Church of Christ survey on hazardous waste sites and minority living that started the research on the subject back in 1987. (Bernier 2005) Similarly, the Assembly of the Poor, a democratic and class-based institution in Thailand attempting to give the poor subsistence farmers a political voice, has transferred seamlessly into raising awareness of resources and social justice, what one member calls an "environmental democracy movement." (Fahn 2003)

The expansion of smaller simple community movements into larger well-rounded and influential organizations responsible for massive social change is the second shared outcome between the US and Southeast Asia. The Chester Residents Concerned about Quality of Life (CRCQL) is the best example of this type of expanding organization, although there are others such as West Harlem Environmental Action (WE ACT). What started as a single-protest against a factory later led residents to pursue action about truck traffic, argue their case at the Supreme Court, and form a partnership with a local college. (Cole & Foster, 2001) Along the way, residents who had volunteered to start the

organization saw it grow into a massive direct action group that is capable of tackling a handful of environmental justice issues. The Association for Social Change (SPS) in India follows a similar lifeline to the CRCQL. Originally formed by fishermen downstream from a factory to fight against the pollution of a river, SPS soon was active in many regions of the country working against the Pulpwoods Corporation to keep from eliminating all of the region's raw natural resources. (Guha & Martinez-Allier, 1997)

What is impressive about both organizations and what follows an increasing trend as these grassroots organization get older and learn more about what is effective, is their ability to use a variety of channels to get their message across and attempt to dissuade industry from continuing with their plans. Both of those organizations used petitions, litigation, media attention, non-violent protests, and personal appeals to government officials in an effort to reach their goals, and both represent the ideal of what many small grassroots environmental justice organizations strive to be.

One outcome that is different between the US and developing countries is the focus of environmental justice issues as part of the spectrum on environmental issues as a whole. Because of the increasing percentage of the poor who are politically active in Southeast Asia, and because of the successful linking of this "environmental democracy movement" to the Green Party, the environmental justice movement *is* the mainstream environmental movement in the region. In the US, however, environmental justice issues still take a backseat to mainstream environmental issues like air and water pollution, wilderness conservation and other deep ecology issues. (Guha & Martinez-Allier, 1997)

One reason for this could be the lack of the US environmental justice movement to really connect with a party. While it is true that the Democratic Party would be far more likely

to side on that size of the issue, many members have of the movement feel little connection to any political party, and prefer to get things done through other pathways. In either case, the lack of focus on the US environmental justice movement by its own citizens and organizations is somewhat unsettling, especially considering how similar the development between Southeast Asia and the US are.

Conclusion

The environmental justice movement in the US has flourished in the last couple decades almost entirely on a grassroots level. A typical successful environmental justice case involves a community taking on industry and government officials and institutions in order to overturn or prevent discriminatory environment practices. These communities usually receive only minor help or resources from private law firms or academics, and must learn to fight against injustice from a variety of areas. Where communities are often unsuccessful, it is easy to point out that they often lack the power and resources necessary to win necessary legal battles with the industries, and sometimes the areas of government, that are often the cause of their outrage. By looking at the environmental justice mechanisms in institutions, communities, and organizations within Southeast Asia, lessons and possible improvements to the US model were illuminated.

In terms of distributive justice, the problems in Southeast Asia are generally more dangerous and immediate threats to the livelihood of the people involved. This is not to say that the US cases do not feature a tremendous amount of risk and possible death, but in many cases, communities are losing their ability to stay above the extreme poverty line, or the ability to even feed their families when they lose their land or resources on

which to make a living. With the population growth and advancement in this global economy, often the rural poor in developing countries are the only ones that are left to make the sacrifices for sustainability, which is completely unfair. By continuing to eliminate practices of discrimination and racism, intentional or not, the mentality of “the path of least resistance” and “the bottom line” can be avoided, and extreme poverty will not become a major factor here in the United States.

When it comes to procedural and corrective justice, the environmental justice organizations in Southeast Asia need to work to establish more rights and awareness of their fight in fixing these issues. The bureaucracy in large developing countries like Indonesia or India is large and slow, and oftentimes people without power and money are simply swept under the rug in a form of unintentional discrimination that results in a lack of information and enforcement on environmental justice issues that matter, especially to the poor and those in rural areas. Raising awareness, most likely through grassroots efforts such as non-violent protests and petitions, may garner assistance from an NGO or shine the spotlight on the state government itself, which would then likely address the issue.

In the area of social justice, there are lessons that the US environmental justice movement could take from its peers in developing countries. The environmental justice movement has flourished in Southeast Asia due to its linkages with traditionally dissident and minority parties, women’s rights, and rights of the impoverished and farmers. By linking together more on all fronts, including both the basis of civil rights and environmental and quality of life issues, the environmental justice movement can become more of a political force. The environmental justice movement in the US has always

been, in a way, very exclusionary. It originally came into being as an extension of the civil rights movement, and it has long been thought of in this country in terms of race, not class. It is time to grow the social capital, link with NGOs and political parties, who will be more accepting of a diverse and mainstream angle at attacking issues, and in doing so provide acceptance and assimilation to interested parties of different races and classes. The more diverse the movement can become, the sooner it can become a nationwide issue, instead of the romanticized picture of local communities fighting the good fight, being victimized unbeknownst to the public.

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