Environmental Injustice in Africa

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This paper explores the nature and impact of local and global environmental injustice in Africa. It shows that some people have been and still become toxic victims, carrying the brunt of inequitable environmental costs because of the transfer of risks and environmental hazards to some African countries through the export of toxic waste and hazardous industries. This paper suggests that besides local and national efforts global governance should be in place to address the current global environmental injustice. Distributive, participatory, and recognition justice along with measures that promote human capabilities is required to promote ecological democracy in the world.

This paper examines the nature and impact of local and global environmental injustice in Africa. My aim, then, is not to offer an examination of environmental injustice in Africa in its entirety; rather, I offer a series of critical reflections on some of its most significant aspects. In doing so, I highlight how environmental injustice has undermined the struggle of the African people to protect their environment. Although the cases examined are largely from Ethiopia, most of the issues are relevant for other regions of Africa. The first part focuses on the nature of environmental justice. Part two looks into environmental injustice in Africa. Part three briefly examines environmental justice movements in Africa. The last part offers concluding remarks.

1. What is Environmental Justice?

Environmental justice movement began in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the United States. In particular, environmental justice has attracted the attention of civil right activists, community-based activists and public agencies in the 1980s. It is a contested term and has been defined in various ways. Some writers argue that poor people and people of color have been affected by a disproportionate burden with exposure to environmental hazards. They thus stress that race plays a crucial role in identifying the location of hazardous waste facilities. For instance, although there were many precursors to the environmental justice movement, the protest of a rural and mostly African American community
against the proposed landfill for disposing of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in Warren County, North Carolina, incited a study by U.S. General Accounting Office (1983) that found that three out of the four off-site commercial landfills were located in predominantly African-American communities, while African Americans constituted only about one-fifth of the total population of the southeastern United States. Likewise, in 1987, the United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice found out that African-American neighborhoods were the victims of 37.6 % of US landfills. On the other hand, Robert D. Bullard (1990) links environmental quality with issues of social justice. He examines disparities in environmental hazards that adversely affect African-American communities in the southern United States.

Another important development in the environmental justice movement’s history is the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. This meeting outlined the agenda of the environmental justice movement, and identified the struggle against toxics, issues of public health, worker safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation, and community empowerment as the major concerns of the environmental justice movement (Alston 1992, cited in Bullard 2005, 20).

James Sterba also addresses the issues of environmental justice. For him the first principle is a Principle of Procedural Justice: “[e]veryone, especially minorities, should participate in the selection of environmental policies that affect them” (1998, 142). But this principle should be supplemented by principles governing the weight to be given to minorities’ votes to be complete. Sterba also emphasises the need for sharing environmental risks to health and well-being either proportionately to the pollution and contamination one produces, or preferably in proportion to the amount of resources one consumes (1998, 143). But Sterba did not explain how we can deal with the pollution caused by poor people.

In October 2002, the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (Summit II) took place in Washington, D.C. This meeting attracted over fourteen thousand individuals from different groups residing in North America, the Caribbean, South and Central America, Asia, Africa, and Europe (Bullard 2005, 22). The participants discussed a wide range of issues that can affect the growth of the environmental justice movement. Among others, they agreed that in order to address environmental injustice in the world, environmental justice has to be the primary concern of all nations in the twenty-first century. Finally, the delegates adopted the “Principles of Working Together” and agreed to uphold the Principles of Environmental Justice adopted at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991, including the commitment to eradicate environmental racism in their communities.

Some, however, criticized environmental justice advocates, and argue that hazardous waste facilities are more likely to be located in neighborhoods with larger proportions of workers employed in industrial activities (Anderton et