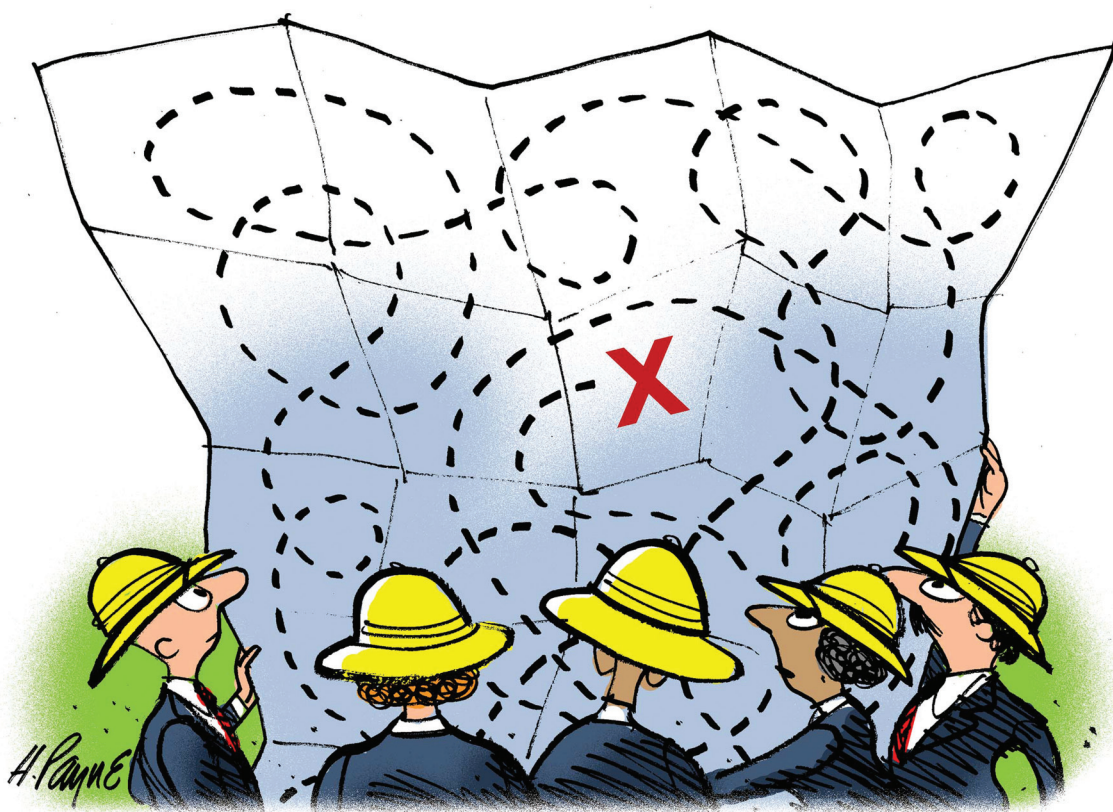


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Sustainability at the Environmental Protection Agency

Environmental justice advocate Deeohn Ferris gave an incisive analysis of a recent National Research Council report on the range and reach of the agency's efforts at a recent ELI Associates Seminar

My organization, Sustainable Community Development Group, works across the public, private, philanthropic, academic, and community sectors to advance environmental sustainability, equitable development, and global smart growth. Working internationally, in neighborhoods around the nation, and at the federal level, our bulls eye is where environmental quality and public health meets community and economic development. Our emphasis is on meeting the interdisciplinary needs of underserved constituencies — people of color and the poor from many cultures — particularly with respect to the benefits of the emerging green economy.

A critical issue we face today centers on sustainability and environmental protection, specifically, the operational framework for integrating sustainability into regulatory and other processes. As the National Research Council report “Sustainability and the U.S. EPA” aptly notes, the Environmental Protection Agency is the lead federal agency in fulfilling the nation's environmental and human health protection mandates — so it's important that we get this right.

I concur with the NRC's conclusion that policy must incorporate a strong focus on the three pillars of sustainability decisionmaking — environmental factors, economic factors, and social factors. The significance of these three factors and the importance of integrating them can't be overstated. I'd like to expand on this finding, particularly as to how it affects vulnerable communities and people in neighborhoods facing the challenges of environmental, health, social, and economic disparities.

There is no environmental decision today that does not occur within the context of land use and community and economic development, including open space, greenfields, wildlife preservation, natural resources conservation, and biodiversity; for example, mountaintop mining and drilling in the Arctic Refuge. Environmental decisions are community and economic development decisions and vice versa. These are the places around this nation where land use, zoning, and long term governmental and private sector disinvestments have given rise to distressed neighborhoods. These same disinvestments, which simultaneously subsidized sprawl, aggravated any economic and social disparities already evident in these neighborhoods.

This is the era of the perfect storm — climate change, peak oil, the Deepwater Horizon disaster,

Environmental justice is about quality of life, public health, equal protection under law, and participatory democracy

globalization of the credit crisis, high unemployment, profound health disparities, seismic-level foreclosures, and shrinking budgets. It's also the dawning of the green economy and growing global consensus about the significance of environmental protection. This intersection of good trends and bad ones presents historic opportunities to ensure that disadvantaged communities are engaged in and benefit from strategies to achieve sustainability.

In many of our communities, if sustainability is going to be sustainable, we need to address the impacts produced by discrimination and the governmental subsidies that developed suburbs and exurbs at the expense of urban and rural cities and towns. In other words, public policy and the investments that flow from those policies must reflect the undeniable fact that all communities are not at the same starting point.

In underserved or disadvantaged communities, the on-ramp to sustainability is addressing environmental, socio-economic, and health impacts in our neighborhoods, ensuring that these communities can deploy the tools and participate in the benefits of the emerging new green economy. This means rebuilding our communities — not just bricks and mortar, but also the social and economic fabric. This goal is not solely EPA's mission. However, the agency is sufficiently crucial to sustainability nationally that these issues cannot be overlooked by it or any of the sister-federal agencies with related jurisdiction.

Negative environmental impacts, disproportionate impacts, vacant properties, brownfields, health disparities, blight — these are nearly synonymous with neighborhoods where low income people and people of color live, work, learn, worship, and play. Race and class are firmly embedded in this scenario. For decades, the shift of investments and development went to sprawl. All across this nation, there are dedicated folks working against massive market forces and demographics to address these disparities. But people of color and low and moderate income are losing their homes and jobs faster and looking for employment longer. What is necessary is reversing separate and unequal patterns, patterns that persistently segregate entire populations from crucial benefits.

Some examples of green economy priorities and tools that could address these disparities include: Distributing the economic and health benefits of energy

conservation through green retrofits of low income and affordable housing. Creating jobs that are green and upwardly mobile. Emphasizing workforce preparedness, development, and training. Providing financial and other incentives that encourage minority entrepreneurship in renewable energy and renewable energy technologies. Ensuring that there are sufficient transportation options, including affordable public transit that gets people to jobs. And ensuring the highest quality education for all of our children.

As the NRC notes, dealing with the three pillars means incorporating the interests and views of affected populations. Sustainable decisionmaking centers the community, involves the community, and engages the community from the outset. This requires taking a progressive look at a re-evaluation of EPA's statutory public participation authorities to ensure the effectiveness of, in most cases, decades-old mechanisms and, where needed, to improve them.

It also means determining ways to provide support for the quality of community engagement that is vital to effectively addressing issues on the ground. Compared to the availability of government and industry resources, many neighborhoods face time and monetary handicaps that impede full engagement. There are benefits to taking advantage of the capacity of the entire community, combining local skills and talents with those of governmental and private sector decisionmakers. Projects showcased in the NRC report are a small slice of the progress being made by neighborhoods in every state.

Our goal is a seamless transition to sustainability, a transition that ensures inclusion in the benefits of the green economy, while ensuring that historically excluded and disadvantaged communities are prioritized. Values and choices, in terms of which communities are built and rebuilt and how, have far-reaching impacts in achieving sustainability. Addressing the issues requires directly linking environmental justice, social and economic equity goals, and sustainability objectives.

Since the NRC report mentions markets I want to say one thing about them. Market forces alone will not achieve sustainability. Market forces alone will not ameliorate the public and private sector disinvestments affecting many of our neighborhoods. There are deeply interconnected issues, many of which markets on

their own do not address. These include poverty, poor health, crime, lack of services, transportation barriers, and the like. Furthermore, equity is indispensable to the nation's transition to sustainability. Equity connects the dots between the goal of improving quality of life and addressing the complex issues that persist.

Correctly, the NRC report refers to community benefits and burdens. In the exercise of governmental and corporate power, we need to look closely at who bears the burdens and achieves the benefits — to see through an equity lens as we evaluate options and set public policy. In general in our society, the benefits accrue to those with the most resources and the burdens fall on those with fewer resources.

Since the NRC study identifies legal standards as a crucial component of sustainability and highlights the precautionary principle of “do no harm,” I want to interject this thought. Should the national transition to sustainability contemplate addressing the legal standard of burden of proof whereby those harmed must prove it while companies that produce chemicals do not have the burden of proving the safety of these substances?

To the NRC team responsible for the report, a few friendly recommendations:

First, environmental justice is defined by more than cumulative environmental impacts. Environmental justice is about quality of life, public health, equal protection under law, and participatory democracy.

Second, environmental justice experts and advocates don't get the credit they've earned for advancing the sustainability discourse at EPA and other agencies. For example, due to these advocates, we now know that environmental discrimination exists, is wrong, and the government has a duty to redress it.

Third, please read Professor Bunyan Bryant's definition of environmental justice. Professor Bryant is a leading scholar in the field from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. His definition is framed in the same vein as the definitions applauded in the NRC report. Furthermore, this definition is a clear articulation of environmental justice ideals. “Environmental justice refers to those cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing, and productive. Environmental justice

is served when people realize their highest potential without experiencing the ‘isms.’ Environmental justice is supported by decent paying and safe jobs; quality schools and recreation; affordable housing; adequate health care; personal empowerment; and communities free of violence, drugs, and poverty. These are communities where both cultural and biological diversity are respected and highly revered, and where distributive justice prevails.”

Fourth, please appoint environmental justice experts to the National Academy of Sciences and its sister organizations. This expertise is indispensable to the framing and analysis of the critical issues assessed by the academies. Inclusion of these perspectives will augment the academies' high quality work.

I'd like to share something hopeful about our nation's transition to sustainability. I detect something fresh in these times. While current political and economic events constrain my exuberance, nevertheless, I'll call it a shift in the wind in our favor — due, in no small part, of course, to the hard work of community leaders, affected constituencies and their allies in government, the public interest sector, and the private sector. Right now there seems to be more public and political discourse on issues of equity than I can ever remember since the civil rights era.

There's a difference in the wind now that advocates must take advantage of to make sustainability concrete in ways that benefit our communities. These are the issues of our times: climate change, peak oil, the Deepwater Horizon tragedy; globalization of the credit crisis; armed conflicts and famines around the world; the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear contamination incident. What's happening in the world is tantamount to environmental wake up call after environmental wake up call. What's happening in the world is tantamount to sustainability wake up call after sustainability wake up call.

To advance sustainability, we've got to capitalize on the media and public attention to the significance of the global environment. Together with the emerging green economy — these are new opportunities for us — even in these difficult times. Even in these times, community quality of life, environmental and economic justice, public health and natural resources stewardship should be at the center of decisions and programs that involve and affect communities. •

Projects showcased in the NRC report are a small slice of the progress being made by neighborhoods in every state