

A 20-Point Plan for Building an Effective Environmental Health and Racial Equity Movement

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ATLANTA – More than 100 studies now link racism to worse health. Similarly, some 200 environmental studies also have shown race and class disparities. One of the most important indicators of an individual's health is one's [zip code](#) or street address. Eliminating environmental health and racial disparities will make us a much stronger nation as a whole. Researchers at the Environmental Justice Resource Center ([EJRC](#)) at Clark Atlanta University developed the twenty-point plan in an effort to support and strengthen the work around environmental justice, health and racial equity in the United States. The research findings and recommendations are presented in [Environmental Health and Racial Equity in the United States: Building Environmentally Just, Sustainable and Livable Communities](#), a new book published this month by the American Public Health Association Press ([APHA](#)).

Strategy 1: Support efforts of the larger Environmental Justice Movement and its member organizations to “re-invent” themselves, refine their message, and articulate a proactive vision. Environmental justice organizations, networks, and university-based centers and programs need to better articulate their broad and diverse scope of work that falls under the environmental justice umbrella. Reinvention alone is not enough as long as institutionalized racism remains ingrained in the fabric of American society. Unfortunately, the Environmental Justice Movement and individual environmental justice organizations in the 21st century must still combat stereotypes and artificial barriers that block opportunity.

Strategy 2: Assist organizations build economically vibrant and socially just communities with emphasis on health and well-being of families and children. Build networks, partnerships, and collaboratives that create trusting and nurturing relationships. Influence public policies that support safe, healthy, sustainable, and socially-just communities. Support launching initiatives to clean up and develop degraded and vacant land exemplified by the following: use economic incentives to attract clean technology businesses; support job training and retraining the workforce that develops and produces “green jobs” for clean technologies; use zoning ordinances and other land-use tools to ensure healthy housing, adequate greenspace, and access to healthy foods and quality health care; and support transportation equity that ensures efficient and health-enhancing transit, safe biking, and walking routes.

Strategy 3: Support programs and strategies that strengthen the capacity of organizations to analyze and solve place-focused problems at the national, regional, statewide, and local community level. Nongovernmental organizations need support to grow a movement and leaders that emphasize solution-oriented, place-based strategies and approaches such as “Sustainable Development Zones,” “Green Impact Zones,” and “Health Impact Zones” to transform dying, redlined, and burdened neighborhoods into thriving centers of social connection, economic activity, and health-enhancing environments.

Strategy 4: Foster strong collaborations, alliances, and multigenerational networking.

Assist with multigenerational, multidisciplinary, cross-issue collaboration, networking, and training opportunities for young people and emerging leaders who are transitioning to greater leadership roles. Broaden support for organizations that are in the process of leadership transition and expansion and collaborate with organizations to access organizational development consultants, researchers, scientists, educators, health professionals, and other “experts” with specialized training.

Strategy 5: Support youth and student work that intersects with a broad range of organizing areas across the broader environmental, health, and racial equity fields.

Investing in youth and student organizing around environment, health, and racial equity provides an opportunity to connect youth leadership and young people to the broader goals of social change. Every successful social movement in the U.S. has had an active and informed youth and student component. Community-based organizations and university-based programs provide an important training ground for future leaders, technical experts, and professionals.

Strategy 6: Invest in work that intersects environmental health and reproductive health.

Encourage multi-sector approaches that seek to change policies and practices designed to reduce toxic exposure and environmental degradation on women, children, and families. A number of groups are working on campaigns to regulate, disclose, and ultimately eliminate toxic ingredients in consumer products, including cosmetics, cleaning and household products, and toys/products for infants and children. Groups are also calling for the elimination of toxic chemicals from consumer goods because of their long-term, cumulative impacts on human health and reproduction.

Strategy 7: Invest in long-term campaigns and programming. Demonstrating improvement in health outcomes takes time. A long-term commitment is necessary to change the conditions in underserved and environmentally-burdened communities. Support long-term campaigns, organizing, educations/training, community-based participatory research, and policy infrastructure to enhance networking and collaborations nongovernmental organizations within the Environmental Justice Movement and with other organization allies working on similar topics and initiatives.

Strategy 8: Broaden the base of foundations and government funding of environmental justice and health equity work that extends beyond funding “silos.” Environmental justice is integrative and holistic in its approach—encompassing a broad array of solution-driven protocols, including “anti-toxics” campaign, pollution prevention, precautionary principle, chemical reform, green chemistry, green products, food security, green jobs, green economy, etc. Incentives are needed to promote investment in clean technologies and healthy products, including renewable and non-polluting energy, safer chemical and materials, organic and sustainable agriculture, and sustainable fish harvesting, by using revenues from taxes levied on especially damaging consumer products and technologies.

Strategy 9: Help local governments, particularly public health departments, build and prioritize healthy communities initiatives. Cities and counties must reorient their planning and operations, establish new methods of collaborating across sectors, and focus much more on

prevention. Public health, medical, and social scientific research should continue to establish the link between health and community conditions, assess the effectiveness of existing policies, and help identify the priorities within and across communities.

Strategy 10: Strengthen the collaborative work on climate justice, public health, and vulnerable communities. Climate justice looms as a major environmental justice issue. Investments are needed in the growing Climate Justice Movement since the most vulnerable populations will suffer the earliest and most damaging setbacks because of where they live, their limited income and economic means, and their lack of access to health care. Yet, low-income people and people of color contribute least to global warming. Unless appropriate actions are taken to mitigate its effects or adapt to them, climate change will worsen existing equity issues within the United States.

Strategy 11: Leverage public and private resources to support translations of environmental health and racial equity research. Information is power. Foster translation of research and technical reports and documents to highlight the link between community conditions and individual health and to provide insights about the effectiveness of different approaches. Getting “community-friendly” research materials in the hand of local leaders can sometimes make the difference between victory and a loss.

Strategy 12: Increase organization capacity and access to scientific data, policy analysis, and communications expertise. Support translation of on-the-ground experiences of communities working on an array of campaigns. Nongovernmental organizations that represent low-income communities and people of color need rigorous research and scientific data, economic analysis, and the ability to communicate their work to constituencies in larger policy arenas.

Strategy 13: Document and disseminate “success stories.” Environmental justice leaders have always subscribed to the principle of “people must speak for themselves” and telling their own stories. In order to be authentic, “success stories” need to be told through the voices of the individuals who produced the successes. Vulnerable and environmentally-burdened communities need to sense that change is possible in their lifetime. Stories about advocacy and policy change need to highlight how change can happen and the ways it can make a difference.

Strategy 14: Help frame proactive communications and media campaigns. Stories about environmental, health, and racial equity need to emphasize communities, organizations, and people “overcoming” challenges and creating change. They also need to highlight the connection between health and protective factors in the social, physical, and economic environments. Media stories need to provide possibilities for replication and attest that the broader movement can make a difference in communities across the country.

Strategy 15: Maintain a focus on racial equity and eliminating environmental and health disparities. Apply a racial equity lens to grantmaking. Achieving racial equity remains a core tenet of the Environmental Justice Movement. Community advocates need to be involved in decision making about the specific environmental and health challenges confronting their communities, the approaches to address them, and broader societal issues, to ensure that new

policies and practices are equitable and overcome previous barriers to full inclusion and participation.

Strategy 16: Help align formal and informal systems that support environmental justice, healthy communities, and racial equity and promote optimal health outcomes for vulnerable families and children. Build innovative education, training and learning partnerships between schools, families, grassroots groups, communities, government, and the business community that strengthen the conditions for healthy communities. Programs should be relevant to community needs, support community change agendas, should be designed to document and better understand local issues, and provide diverse stakeholders with information needed to bolster efforts seeking policy change.

Strategy 17: Support movement for “toxic-free” neighborhoods and healthy schools. Healthy people and healthy environments are related. Advocates are fighting to get access to affordable housing in “toxic-free” neighborhoods and healthy schools. They are working on strategies to address the root causes of environmental risks, eliminate racial and ethnic disparities within geographic areas, and increase public sector investments in prevention, and health promotion.

Strategy 18: Increase the percentage of grant dollars devoted to advocacy, community organizing, and civic engagement. Nongovernmental organizations need sustained resources to respond effectively to current challenges. They also need funds to plan for the future, capitalize on the philanthropic initiatives already underway, and leverage access to government benefits programs that support safe, healthy, and socially-just communities.

Strategy 19: Increase general operating support and multi-year grants. The vast majority of environmental justice and health equity work is cross-disciplinary, holistic, and in most instances “fit” into several categorical program areas. In general, organizations prefer multi-year, reliable core support to project support, where the strategic goals of the funder and the nonprofit organization are substantially aligned. Reliable, predictable, and flexible multi-year core support allows organizations to carry out their mission and respond to new challenges and opportunities.

Strategy 20: Invest in community-university partnerships (CUPs) that advance the new “corporate environmental justice performance scorecard” and related Health Impact Assessment tools that assess the potential human health risk of toxic emissions at industrial sites. The time is right for achieving the goal of clean and safe environments for all Americans. More community-university partnerships (CUPs) are needed to support the health and racial equity goals of the Environmental Justice Movement. There is a need to use Health Impact Assessments ([HIA](#)) to evaluate objectively the potential health effects of a project or policy before it is built or implemented. HIAs should also be used to provide recommendations to increase positive health outcomes and minimize adverse health outcomes. More emphasis should be on planning for good health rather than managing risks. Since communities of color are on the frontline of chemical assault, we can reduce environmental health threats and racial disparities through defending and extending the right-to-know, linking modeling and monitoring, shifting pollution standards to assess cumulative impacts, and encouraging community, shareholder and consumer activism.