



ROBERT BULLARD

Clark Atlanta University's Dr. Robert Bullard was fresh out of graduate school in the late 1970s when he began to collect data for the first lawsuit to challenge environmental racism; a middle-class black community in Houston was trying to prevent a landfill from moving into the neighborhood. His early efforts spawned a major movement, and now Bullard travels the world as a researcher, activist, policy analyst, and expert witness. He recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of the landmark "Toxic Waste and Race" report. Melissa Maynard talked with him about where the movement's been, where it's going, and why the government's response to Katrina was to be expected.

The term "environmental justice" is being thrown around more and more, but the concept seems a bit nebulous in the public consciousness. As the movement's "father," you're in a unique position to clarify its mission. What is environmental justice? Environmental justice really is based on the premise that no community should become the dumping ground for things other people don't want. At the same time, it also means that all communities have a right to the good things that somehow get distributed in an unequal way. And so it's about goods, and it's about bads, and it's about sharing, and it's about equity.

What are some "goods" that aren't distributed equally? It's not random, where African Americans and other people of color live. I've traveled across this country, and I've been to hundreds of communities. When I go to low-income communities and communities of color, I've never seen an oversupply of libraries, an oversupply of full-service grocery stores, parks, recreation facilities. Those are residential amenities that most middle-income folks take for granted. But at the same time, I've seen and observed and documented an oversupply of locally unwanted land uses—or "LULUs." Gar-

bage dumps, landfills, bus depots. We all produce garbage, but we all don't live next to a garbage dump. So it means making sure that the benefits and the externalities and the costs are distributed in a way that does not overburden one community. That's environmental justice.

How is the environmental justice movement evolving? What started out as grassroots groups fighting landfills and toxic waste facilities has evolved into addressing equitable development, land use, transportation issues, smart growth issues, looking at which communities have an undersupply of grocery stores. You may not think of something as simple as a grocery store, but all the studies show that if communities don't have access to supermarkets and fresh fruits and vegetables, it translates into ill health. If communities don't have access to transportation, that means they don't have access to jobs. The movement is now dealing even with climate issues—what we call "climate justice."

How does climate justice apply to Atlanta? Because it seems to me that it's pretty hot everywhere. [Laughs] We have deforested so many acres of trees in this region, and we've laid so much concrete, that it's creating a heat island. That heat island is impact- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 130]

ing weather, so we get very dangerous thunderstorms. And because we get this concentrated heat here, we get lots of problems in the summertime, when we get all these unhealthy ozone alerts. This is all part of climate issues and human intervention in climate, and the people most negatively impacted are low-income people, elderly, children—the vulnerable populations that don't have air conditioning. With transportation, for example, a third of African Americans [in metro Atlanta] don't own cars. So that means people who are more dependent on transit are also in many ways the same ones—low income, transit-dependent, African American—who are most impacted by respiratory problems and asthma. Transportation is the biggest contributor to dirty air. So when we talk about environmental justice, we're talking about making sure people who contribute most to the pollution problem also have to cut back in terms of the amount of emissions they generate. Which means if you've got one person driving in the Lexus lane and you're not funding transit, that's an inequity.

It's interesting that transportation has been such a focus in your research—it's not as obvious an environmental justice issue as, say, hazardous waste dumping. The environmental justice movement builds on the civil rights movement. And if you look at the modern civil rights movement, it's grounded in transportation. You're talking *Plessy v. Ferguson*, you're talking Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. But for a while, with the environmental justice movement, transportation got left off the radar.

One of the biggest barriers to employment is transportation, so when you start fixing transportation, you start fixing a lot of issues. Transportation also is a major issue when it comes to environmental justice because of air quality, health, and asthma. Transportation is the biggest user of energy; 64 percent of all energy used in this country is transportation-related. As a hook to organize, ozone and climate change go over a lot of people's heads. But when you talk about transporta-

tion—how you're going to get to work and where the freeways are going—people can understand. They can relate.

A growing body of research makes it difficult for anyone to deny that environmental inequities occur; disagreement now lies more in why or how. Do you believe the disparities to be a result of the lack of mobility among low-income/minority populations or the product of intentional and systematic discrimination? Well, you're right when you say that there's not a whole lot of dispute today that there is a disparity in terms of environmental and health impacts on low-income and minority communities. Ten years ago, that was a big debate among people who didn't want to see what was in front of their eyes. Now the data is all in. It's not a matter of toxicology, epidemiology, or hydrology; it's a problem of political science. If you look at almost every major city and do the mapping, it's not rocket science. When you color code these maps in terms of income and minorities, you almost get a perfect match as to where the worst pollution is. Whether it's by design, or whether it's by default, or whether it's by accident, the negative health impacts are the same. So we're not even arguing about the intentionality anymore. What we're saying is, if a kid is being impacted by lead, or by industrial pollution, or whatever—whether the community was there first or the plant was there first, the kid can be just as sick. So that should not be an argument. The good question is, "What are we going to do about it?"

But are the inequities racially motivated? Can't much be attributed to economic mobility? Race trumps class. For example if you look at South DeKalb—very affluent, middle-income African American neighborhood, suburban—you would not expect to have so many of the locally unwanted land uses there because of the demographics. But that area has many of the incinerators, landfills, garbage dumps that you would expect to be in a low-income area. You cannot find another area in Atlanta that's affluent, middle-income homeowners, mostly white, where you could have the same number of types of facilities like that. So race and class are interrelated, but being middle class and

living in an affluent black neighborhood does not take you off the map when it comes to where these facilities are located. And even when you control for class and income, there are still certain amenities that really don't accrue to black neighborhoods in Atlanta. So the argument that, well, if you're rich enough, those things don't follow you—that's not true.

In *Sprawl City*, you argue that Atlanta's growth has been disproportionately hazardous to minorities, at one point even calling this "apartheid." Is this comparison really fair? Many environmental problems caused by sprawl affect everyone. Sprawl does affect everyone in a negative way, but it affects some groups more so. Just like saying, "Well, everyone breathes the same air." Well, everyone doesn't breathe the same air when your house or subdivision is next to a huge automotive plant and if all the buses in South Fulton are diesel buses and the buses in the north are compressed natural gas. Do you understand? That's apartheid, that's illegal, and we documented that fact. There was a Title VI discrimination complaint against MARTA on that. If you look at how development occurs when it comes to the groceries, the shopping, the access to parks and recreational facilities, etc., and if you plot that on a map and look at how almost all the amenities are located disproportionately [in the] north—we did this in the book, and you could see there were 18 [new commercial activity centers], and 15 were located north of I-20. Now that's apartheid. I've been to Johannesburg a dozen times, and I've been in Atlanta for 12 years, and I know apartheid when I see it. This is apartheid.

Right before Hurricane Katrina happened you were reportedly already beginning to research the potential of natural disasters to disproportionately affect minorities. Was this just a strange coincidence? Wow. It's really strange because a colleague and I had embarked on a study looking at environmental disasters—natural disasters, man-made disasters. We were basically almost eight months into the study. We presented the study in Phoenix in May of 2005—preliminary results—and we were getting ready to start the

analysis as it related to hurricanes and floods, weather-related disasters. Of course that was in May, and Katrina hit in August. [We were] looking at government response to emergencies in African American communities in the South, and we were going back 80 years or so. We had documented that government operates very slowly when it comes to getting this nasty stuff out of black communities. When Katrina hit, it flooded us.

Katrina flooded you, but it doesn't sound as though you were terribly surprised by the response. [The slow response] was not a fluke, and we documented this in terms of case study after case study with Superfund. If you are a low-income or a minority community, it takes longer to get listed, it takes longer to get cleaned up, and you get the cheapest cleanup. Years and years and years of waiting and waiting and waiting. While you're waiting, you're getting sicker and sicker. When you look at the 1927 great Mississippi flood, who was evacuated? Whites. Black folks were evacuated to a levy and forced to work on the levy; 300,000 were put in concentration camps and forced to work at gunpoint at fixing the levy. That's an example from 1927. But fast-forward to the evacuation of the Superdome and people waiting days and days and days. We can slide our troops into Iraq and Afghanistan in 24 hours and it takes five days to drop water to the Superdome?

How much collaboration is there between the environmental justice movement and other environmental groups? Twenty years ago there was very little. A lot of the environmental groups didn't have a clue as to what we were trying to do. A lot of them told us, "We're an environmental group. We don't work on social issues." But today it's very different. A lot of these groups now have environmental justice components. Many of the civil rights groups also didn't have a clue in terms of what we were doing with environmental justice. So it has taken two decades to get the environmentalists and the civil rights people together. We're not perfect; it's still a work in progress. But I think our movements are much more diverse today, and because of that, we're stronger and much better able to make our voices heard. ☘