



## ***Environment, Justice, and Human Development***

Breena Holland,  
Political Science & the Environmental Initiative,  
Lehigh University

### ***How does environmental degradation affect social justice?***

Contemporary environmental problems often occur at a scale that is global in nature. Climate change and habitat loss, for example, are best understood in the context of large-scale ecological processes that cut across state borders, and therefore remove any clear cut division between those who cause these problems in one place and those who suffer their consequences in another. Even within a single growing economy, resource demands that degrade the environment can provide economic benefits to one part of society while leaving those dependent on that environment without the benefits of economic growth, increasingly exposed to a degraded environment, and without the mechanisms for adapting to these new environmental conditions. Such circumstances exemplify a maldistribution of environmental benefits and burdens: Those who benefit most from activities degrading the environment do not share proportionally in the burdens this degradation creates. If we accept that social justice, broadly conceived, concerns how a society makes decisions about or otherwise distributes the benefits resulting from social and economic cooperation, then the maldistribution of benefits and burdens resulting from environmental degradation is central to questions of social justice. These questions concern both the justness of procedures through which policies are designed and implemented, and the relative distribution of benefits and burdens that results from the policies themselves.

### ***Does climate change exemplify the effect of environmental degradation on social justice?***

Scientists believe that the speed of climate change is largely the result of burning fossil fuels, which releases greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Activities that accompany and follow industrialization are highly dependent on fossil fuels, and thus, the primary beneficiaries of climate change are citizens in industrialized countries. In contrast, citizens in the least developed countries (as well as many of the poor within developed countries) reap few of the benefits of industrialization; they are also more vulnerable to climate change because they have the fewest resources to adjust to the challenges climate change will pose. For example, climate change will produce increases in flooding, drought, and disease that compromise the basic means of subsistence for many poor people, forcing them to migrate for the purpose of attaining food, water, shelter, and an environment free from disease. From the perspective of

justice, this exemplifies a problematic maldistribution: The benefits of social and economic activities enabling industrial and post-industrial processes accrue to one group of people, while the most serious environmental burdens that these processes create (i.e. the impact of climate change) afflict another group of people. Furthermore, the policies governing allocation and use of fossil fuels are often the result of processes that exclude the people for whom the burdens will be the greatest. When regarded in this light, climate change also raises important questions about the justness of procedures for making decisions about the nature and extent of resource use.

### **How much environmental protection does social justice require?**

Theories of justice define what justice is, or what justice consists in. Some theories define justice entirely in terms of the processes through which decisions are made. In this context, justice usually requires that decision-making procedures be accessible and fair to the people the decisions will impact. Other theories focus more on the justness of outcomes, that is, on the distribution and protection of things a society values. Here, justice at least requires that all people are allocated some minimal amount of a good (such as a portion of the economic benefits resulting from activities that produce carbon emissions), or some minimal level of civil and political freedom (such as basic protection of an individual's right to vote). Although the most well-known theories of justice do not consider how the natural environment relates to the processes and outcomes that define justice, it is possible to expand these theories in ways that allow for defining the environmental conditions of justice. For example, if justice requires that people have an equal opportunity to pursue personal and professional advancement, then justice requires that all people be free from debilitating diseases caused by exposure to polluted air or disease ridden water. Alternatively, justice might require that all people be able to participate in decision-making processes in which they can voice their needs with a real possibility of having their needs met. This conceptualization of justice requires protecting environmental relationships that provide for people's needs, at least until people are able to advocate for themselves in decisions that might influence those relationships. Likewise, if future generations are included in the group of people for whom the justness of decision-making procedures is relevant, then justice will require the present generation to protect whatever environmental conditions are necessary for enabling future people to pursue the range of environmental relationships accessible to people living in the present.

### **Do the environmental conditions of social justice have implications for the human development approach?**

Environmental degradation directly bears on human development because it can limit the range of people's choices and undermine their capabilities to do and be different things. Many of these impacts are not accounted for in approaches to policy design and evaluation that measure individual well-being in terms of preferences or utility, or that measure social progress in terms of economic growth or efficiency. The human development approach can improve policy design and evaluation by illuminating the multiple dimensions of human well-being that environmental degradation can undermine. For example, if we follow Martha Nussbaum in defining basic conditions of justice as including the capability to "live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature," then policy evaluation can go beyond measuring the environment's instrumental value to well-being, and also account for the environment's value as a component of well-being to which people attribute intrinsic value. Likewise, if we follow advocates of environmental sustainability and consider how present policy will undermine the capabilities of people living in the future, then we cannot simply account for the environment's future value by discounting the present generation's preferences; we actually have to consider how present policies might, over time, undermine the environmental conditions necessary for enabling future people to experience the same range of capabilities that the present generation experiences. In these ways, the relationship between environmental degradation and the various aspects of human well-being is central to critiquing policies that produce economic benefits for some people, while causing environmental problems that directly burden the poor and other minority or marginalized

groups (including future generations). By making it possible to understand this maldistribution of environmental benefits and burdens as a failure to meet the environmental conditions of social justice, policy practitioners can use the human development approach to operationalize an entirely new framework for policy design and evaluation—one that seeks to expand freedom rather than satisfy preferences or utility functions, and one that fosters the conditions of social justice, not just economic growth and efficiency.

**Some general sources:**

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