EYE ON THE PRIZE

Promising Practices at the Intersection of Environmental Justice and Racially Equitable Community Development

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"Our communities are drastically, demonstrably, and increasingly self-evidently contaminated. On fire. Uninsurable. Storm-battered. Overheated. Underwater. And if you've developed even a cursory understanding of how segregation, disinvestment, and gentrification work in the United States, you're not going to be surprised about who's living with the biggest impacts of climate change."

– The People's Practice, Issue 07

Let's face it: The state of our planet is not great. The consequences of our failure to act are showing up. The impacts on communities of color and communities with low incomes are enormous. But this document isn't intended to be a place for despair. It's a place to focus on promising practices for bringing environmental justice and racially equitable development together. Given the existential stakes, it's pretty easy to get stuck in mindsets that might not be all that helpful. If we fall into climate "hopium," we can have an optimism that cuts against making the transformative changes and investments we need to make. If we fall into climate doom, we can grow so pessimistic that we fail to act at all, or we can bring an energy into our community work that turns people away instead of welcoming them in.

There's a lot of room in between those two extremes. We can acknowledge how challenging things are and how much worse they will be if we fail to act. And we can believe wholeheartedly that grassroots, on-the-ground action can make a difference for individuals, families, communities and the whole planet. In this document, we're focusing on what pragmatic but visionary work can look like and what it can mean. Across the country, folks are doing important and meaningful work at the intersection of environmental justice and racially equitable community development, and it's making a difference, even in difficult circumstances.

eight PROMISING PRACTICES

A core advantage of both community development and environmental justice are that, because they're so responsive to different geographic contexts, resident priorities, and resident solutions, they're constantly experimenting with ways of working. We can review a whole range of promising practices to determine what might be meaningful in our own work and what similarities and differences we're seeing across those practices. We don't all have to do everything, but we can all do something. Our stakeholder interviews and literature review pointed to eight practices that we think are worth considering.

PROMISING PRACTICE 1: ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS COMMUNITIES' ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS BEYOND CLIMATE CHANGE.

Even though there's a long history of communities of color leading environmental work, there's arguably an equally long history of minimizing those communities' concerns while prioritizing environmental concerns of white communities. That can understandably lead to skepticism in some communities regarding climate action, especially for those dealing with other environmental concerns. Community development and environmental justice have clear links far beyond climate vulnerability, including in addressing the legacy of federal land use policies supporting urban renewal and suburban sprawl, which caused widespread environmental harm in communities of color. Especially for those that don't specialize in place-based work, that demands attention to long-term trust-building and taking the time to understand local geographic context, including in rural communities.

That's not to suggest that communities of color aren't investing in really sophisticated environmental justice work … or that they don't care about climate change. They just disproportionately face a range of other environmental harms that might feel more immediate, such as failing septic tanks, illegal dumping, oil drilling and lead poisoning. In communities like Flint and New Orleans, communities of color's first-hand experience with environmental disaster has led to cross-sector, cross-issue work but also potential skepticism about environmental work that doesn't center resident voice. Many environmental health concerns have clear linkages to climate change, but overlooking these concerns can do real damage to coalition-building. Addressing other environmental justice concerns can strengthen casemaking for climate action, helping to overcome cynicism that local action can make a difference by focusing on containing other pollutants where the case for hyperlocal action can be more obvious.

PROMISING PRACTICE 2: TIE GREEN INVESTMENTS TO EQUITABLE COMMUNITY ACCESS TO EDUCATION, JOBS AND WEALTH.

Global efforts to reduce carbon emissions have long run up against a powerful dominant narrative – that transitioning to a green economy will cause disruptions that will result in everyday people paying more, losing jobs and being more susceptible to market conditions. Today, there are lots of clear examples of exactly the opposite happening – green investments opening up new job and wealth opportunities for communities, and potentially, for communities of color and communities with low incomes specifically, especially where there's emphasis on Just Transition principles and practices.

Integrating green economics into community development isn't without challenges. We have to make sure that green economy investments are made equitably, *and* that community development is equitable, *and* that those two efforts are well-integrated. Even work attempting to reduce environmental hazards and increase community benefits has the potential to surface new unintended consequences. That's why this work requires attention to complex structural barriers to wealth-building and employment, and it requires long-term assessment to ensure investments deliver in equitable ways. There are lots of roles that state and national organizations can play in supporting patient, cross-sector equity work – folks like national networks, and CDFIs – and hyperlocal efforts can demonstrate clear attention to equitable green economies. It can look like community-owned green infrastructure that reduces energy expenses and preserves energy access even opposite disasters. It can look like ensuring residents have reliable, paid access to training in green industries or to employment opportunities tied to green investments. It could look like connecting on-the-job training with cultural heritage or harnessing cultural heritage to inform how to address priorities like access to sustainable housing.

PROMISING PRACTICE 3: DRAW EXPLICIT CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND AFFORDABLE ACCESS TO QUALITY HOUSING.

Simultaneously addressing the housing and climate crises offers tremendous opportunity for cross-sector action. Low-income housing is more proximate to environmental hazards, and that's particularly true for public housing. In older lower-income housing stock, environmental hazards are even in materials like flooring and insulation, and there's insufficient support for remediating this. Climate change is increasing likelihood of homelessness and the immediate emergency risks the unhoused face. Communities with lower incomes are less able to absorb climate-related increases in housing insurance costs and are at greater risk of climate gentrification after natural disasters.

Those harsh realities are probably why this intersectional focus is increasingly showing up in analyses of housing and environmental policy and the state of environmental justice in federally-assisted housing, and policy assessments in places like New York City, Boston and California. The current landscape is keeping quality, sustainable housing out of reach for many households. With some thoughtful, cross-sector action, though, we can ensure that investments in sustainability also improve housing equity. We can invest in home outreach initiatives that offer resident employment opportunities *and* help residents address environmental health impacts like asthma. We can develop interventions like cooling and heating stations to address climate impact for the unhoused. We can put time and resources into equity planning around investments like energy efficiency programs. We can make sure that we're centering residents in our sustainable housing strategies, especially groups like public housing residents that haven't traditionally been invited into the work. We can make sure that when we're investing in affordable housing, we're also addressing environmental issues, whether in federally-assisted housing, housing cooperatives or tribally designated entities.

PROMISING PRACTICE 4: INTEGRATE INDIGENOUS LAND PRACTICES INTO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORKS.

Despite occupying relatively small geographic footprints and contributing little to carbon emissions and other pollution, Indigenous communities face high climate-related health impacts. Native leaders have identified environmental stewardship as a priority area, but historically, they have not been well represented or funded in environmental work.

In the U.S. context, there's considerable opportunity to elevate the voice of Native American stewards and invest far more in their work – but also in efforts to amplify Afro-Indigenous, Native Alaskan, Native Hawaiian and Latin American Indigenous environmental practices. Rather than exploit natural resources, many Indigenous communities actively work to protect them. They are simultaneously stewarding the natural environment and addressing other priorities, like investing in affordable career training and providing safe space for those recovering from violence.

Structural barriers have prevented those practices from scaling, including the long history of land theft from Indigenous communities in the United States (and elsewhere). The Land Back movement has offered one avenue for returning land to Indigenous stewardship, albeit to date in limited circumstances. Land transfers have occurred in places like Eureka and Oakland, and even in an individual Los Angeles landowner's transfer (sadly, that land was severely damaged by wildfires, although Indigenous stewardship practices may have limited the devastation). While Land Back has particularly strong momentum in western States, it's also taking root in communities far removed from what we typically recognize as "Indian Country." Beyond land transfer, Indigenous environmental work deserves considerably more funding support, whether through federal funding like the Native American Lands Environmental Mitigation Program; state funding like the Colorado Environmental Justice Grant Program; or philanthropic funding like the Alaska Conservation Foundation's Indigenous Voices Fund. Native-led and -informed work also benefits from learning supports, both to increase understanding of people like state legislators and federal workers and to increase access to relevant information, technical assistance, and in-person exchange for Native leaders advancing their own environmental work.

PROMISING PRACTICE 5: SUPPORT EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE PLANNING AT STATE, MUNICIPAL AND NEIGHBORHOOD LEVELS.

Federal policy can play a core role in either enabling or disabling environmental justice and community development work, through new support infrastructure like the Tribal Environmental Justice Assistance Program or by incentivizing specific on-the-ground strategy work through presidential actions like Executive Orders 14096 (2023) and 12898 (1994) (both were revoked in 2025 by Executive Order 14173). While many communities might do this kind of strategy work anyway, federal standards and funding criteria can incentivize it through devices like Priority Climate Action Plans. The result is broad environmental planning work being done across the country in places like Kansas, tribal communities in Mississippi, central Oklahoma, greater Providence, Oakland and El Paso. Such planning varies in detail, sophistication and attention to equity practices, but there's at least some value in just getting government entities to be explicit about how they approach environmental justice and community development. Those plans can be even more meaningful when they're specific about different kinds of government impacts on environmental justice, such as zoning reform or hazardous waste management.

So can funding to actually implement those plans. That might be securing federal dollars, but it can also happen at a state level, such as Transformative Climate Communities, which has provided more than $200 million in funding to community initiatives like Watts Rising. It can also come from within local government budgets themselves, such as through Pittsburgh's exploration of priority-based sustainability and equity budgeting. Funding can be particularly impactful when it helps make plans more accessible to residents, both so implementation can be informed by lived experience and so there are ongoing accountability opportunities. Accountability work can happen by analyzing infrastructure like municipal sustainability offices or through ongoing tracking of environmental justice policies.

It takes on different meaning when grassroots organizations and residents are invited into review and implementation, like when the Minneapolis Climate Action and Racial Equity Fund encourages applicants to review the city's Climate Action and Racial Equity Action Plans; bcWORKSHOP and the Texas Organizing Project engage residents in disaster recovery leadership development; or the New York City Housing Authority offers funding support for residents' own sustainability efforts.

PROMISING PRACTICE 6: COLLABORATE TO CREATE POLICY AGENDAS AND ORGANIZING LED BY COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND RESIDENTS.

In some places, government may be resistant or even hostile to this kind of work. In those cases, community-based organizations and residents may be able to incrementally push government in positive directions or develop infrastructure that allows the work to continue even in the absence of government. Even in places where government is supportive, robust agenda-building and organizing has the potential to ensure lived experience informs policy development and implementation; identify and address unintended consequences; create strong external accountability; and stretch collective imagination of what's possible.

Agenda-building and organizing around environmental justice and racially equitable development can occur nationally (like the National Black Climate Agenda); statewide (like in Comunidades Organizando el Poder y la Acción Latina's legislative agenda in Minnesota or in NY Renews' agenda-building); or locally (like People for Community Recovery's work in Chicago or Casa Familiar's efforts in San Diego). Coalitions can also do powerful work that cuts across geographies, like the Black Appalachian Coalition's story-based work across a very large region, paired with its Freedom to Breathe program's initial specific focus on Allegheny County.

This work to build long-term coalitions requires time and effort, but it also benefits from reliable support infrastructure, including accessible learning resources like Community-Driven Climate Resilience Planning and professional supports like Greenlining the Block. It also includes reliable funding, especially support that values the process of building up engagement (since it's not always easy to predict the results of long-term coalition-building). That might look like the Rural Democracy Initiative's focus on rural civic infrastructure, Social Justice Fund NW's explicit support of environmental justice organizing across five states or the Emergent Fund's rapid response organizing grants, as well as sustained learning support for *funders* of organizing, such as the Midwest Organizing Infrastructure Funders program.

PROMISING PRACTICE 7: DEVELOP DATA AND LEARNING SUPPORTS THAT ENABLE TARGETED EQUITABLE INVESTMENTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

Long-term learning supports, like accessible data sets, can pull together information that's relevant for both environmental and community development practitioners. Mapping can be particularly relevant for finding linkages between environmental justice and development, marking where inequities are localized (and potentially why). It can be powerful to define terms that are relevant at that intersection and map it, like raising visibility of "fenceline communities." Scoring is another way to make place-based conditions clearer, aggregating data into systems like CalEnviroScreen, which enabled analysis that people of color are overrepresented in pollution-impacted communities.

Scoring can also facilitate side-by-side comparisons around equity practices and outcomes. In Leading with Equity, for example, clean energy scoring coupled with equity scoring enables us to see which government and utility equity practices are most and least common.

Of course, data sets can also present structural barriers that prevent people from non-scientific backgrounds from understanding it. Citizen science efforts that put research directly into the hands of residents can address some of these barriers, such as in the Rural Empowerment Association for Community Help's work to support resident learning in the aftermath of Hurricane Floyd and the North Carolina Environmental Justice Network's emphasis on resident organizing training and environmental justice data training. That kind of program speaks to the promise of increased investment around environmental justice and racially equitable development learning, whether to increase understanding of funders around the role of community self-determination in environmental justice work, community development practitioners in how to integrate environmental justice attention into their work or community leaders in how to develop green workforce development supports. This kind of programming can be particularly impactful when it brings people together across sectors for extended peer-to-peer learning, like the California Climate Leaders Fellowship.

PROMISING PRACTICE 8: SUPPORT FRAMEWORKS THAT BRING TOGETHER RACIALLY EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

Cross-sector collaboration is important, impactful … and hard work. Social sectors have their own values and principles, language and terminology (often including jargon), industry standards, status quo and alternative practices, funding sources and policy mandates. Those aspects of sectors aren't always visible or easy to understand. That's one reason that sectors can remain pretty siloed … even when they might be trying to tackle the same issues of inequity. It can be tough, but it's not impossible. Take the example of ArtPlace America, which over a decade, brought together different kinds of organizations to apply different cultural practices to different development priorities in different geographic contexts. That work necessarily required cross-sector collaboration and strong support infrastructure. ArtPlace organized themes into a community development matrix. It financially supported around 300 community-based projects (including environmental projects like Re-locate Kivalina), invested in research scans across themes (including an Environment scan and a Water scan) and brought folks together in convenings and theme-based groups (such as an Environment working group). At the conclusion of the initiative, it reaggregated learnings to highlight cross-cutting themes that extended across sectors.

It's not always easy to predict where this kind of concerted cross-sector work will end up, but it can strengthen organizing and policy outcomes. It can help us reimagine what our coalitions can look like, such as Building a Regional Voice for Environmental Justice's focus on organizing, philanthropy and research and the Coalition of Communities of Color's focus on environmentalist, labor union, health, business and faith communities. It can facilitate the creation of new tools that get to more holistic metrics, like the Equitable Development Principles and Scorecard. It can lead groups to experiment with practices well outside their sector norms, like Ironbound Community Corporation's use of tours and documentary film to expose people to real-life consequences of environmental injustice. To arrive at those kinds of outcomes, it helps to have platforms sharing and comparing learnings – and resourcing to do that learning work. Peer learning groups that pair funding support with structured opportunities for folks to share across sector and geographic lines, like Climate Change, Health & Equity and the Strong, Prosperous, And Resilient Communities Challenge, can be particularly impactful.

The People's Practice

We hope you've found something promising in these practices!

Feeling inspired to keep going deep on anti-racist community development?

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