

The Construction of Environmental Justice in Latin America: Communities, cosmologies, and collaboration

David Barkin

Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco, Mexico

EJ is a relatively new concept that has become an important part of the self-identification of many communities around the world seeking to reaffirm their right to a decent quality of life while caring for their ecosystems. Although many nations assumed the responsibility to implement programs of “environmental governance” to assure these conditions for their peoples in international fora, the experience of recent decades is that both the quality of life and the environment have deteriorated with global integration and the imposition of neoliberal economic policies. As a result, numerous social and environmental movements sprung up, spearheaded by affected communities concerned about the impact of the rapid advance of international capital, attempting to control their resources, their territories and their very means of livelihood. A vivid depiction of the global scope of these actions can be readily accessed in the international online Atlas of Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade that a group of academics prepared in collaboration with the communities (<http://www.ejolt.org>).

These social movements have been particularly evident in Latin America, where there is long-standing tradition of community activism in response to the inability or unwillingness of national governments to fulfill their commitments ratified in international treaties and conventions. This lack of responsiveness is not only for lack of money or expertise, but also rather because of a profound clash of cosmologies, of socio-political projects, and visions of how society should advance and the actors responsible for this process. The presentation builds upon this background, examining this clash of ideologies and the principles of the environment justice movement in Latin America. It emphasizes the demonstrated capacities of the communities to implement their own programs, achieving significant improvements in social welfare and environmental conservation while strengthening their ability to forge alliances among themselves and to negotiate with their governments.