

Environmental Justice: The Overlooked Prerequisite for Transition to a Sustainable and Democratic Future



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Until recent decades, natural resources had no major role other than serving as the fuel to run the engine of economic development and growth in the eyes of society, experts, and policymakers. Even in developed societies, extracting and exploiting such resources were seen as a sign of progress and success of economies. Over time, the effects of this mentality and the unrestricted exploitation of natural resources proved that unsustainable development creates serious obstacles to economic growth. The growing global environmental crises and their effects on health (e.g., epidemics, cancers, and lung, skin, and gastrointestinal diseases) as well as their social, political, and security impacts (e.g., mass migration and regional/ethnic conflicts), have left no doubt that the environmental consequences of unsustainable development are not limited to the economic sector.

Yet, the environment still does not play a decisive role in elections, political struggles, and battles, and despite its close relationship with livelihood, health, basic rights, and human survival, political groups and human rights movements and groups, particularly in developing nations, still do not pay enough attention to the issue. After a brief overview of some aspects of the environmental justice concept, this article calls for the efforts and fights to fulfill environmental human rights and justice as an essential step to build and achieve a sustainable and democratic future.

Environmental justice

"Environmental justice" is still a dynamic and developing concept that does not yet have a set and unified definition. But its roots can be traced back to a social movement in the 1980s that

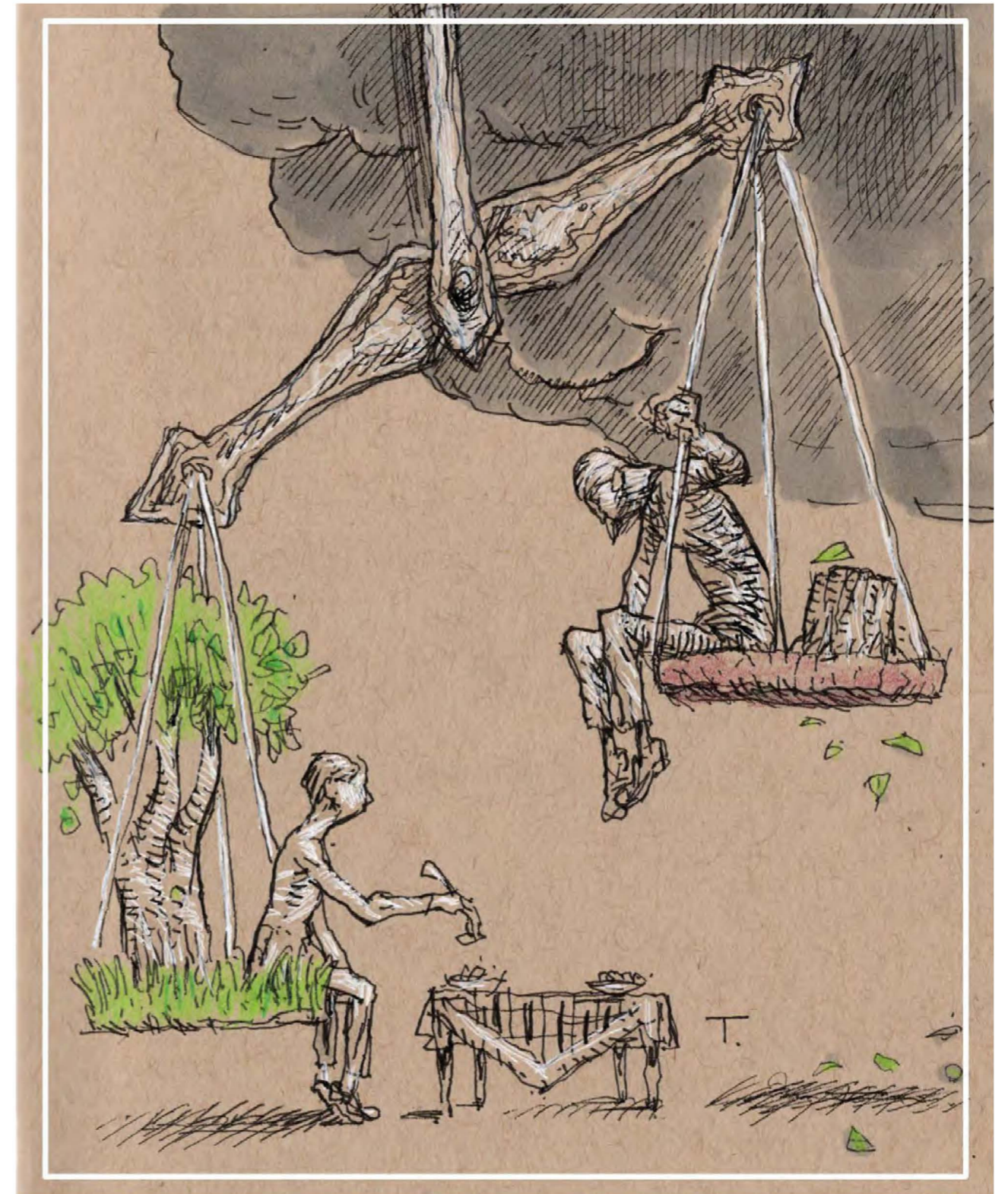


Illustration: Touka Neyestani

was heavily influenced by the American civil rights movement. While this movement initially focused more on the environmental harms of economic development on marginalized racial groups in developed countries, environmental justice eventually became an international concept that encompassed various aspects (beyond just racial).

The “equitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits” is perhaps the simplest and most tangible definition of environmental justice. In a world free of inequality and injustice, both environmental benefits (e.g. clean water, clean air, and a healthy environment) and environmental hazards (e.g., polluted air/soil) are distributed equally among citizens, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, color, gender, social status, wealth, political power, and other social, economic and political attributes.

Efforts to establish social justice are necessary as generally, the deprived, politically weaker, more vulnerable, and less economically developed have a more limited capacity to deal with and adapt to the environmental impacts and risks that they often not played a part in creating. In contrast, the more privileged, politically powerful, and economically developed groups are more resilient and less harmed by environmental threats. This difference is important as the latter group has historically had a greater capacity to exploit natural resources and essentially, played a bigger role in creating environmental problems. In other words, not only did the more impoverished and disadvantaged groups not have a share of the economic and welfare benefits of extracting and exploiting natural resources but have been left to deal with the adverse conditions created by the environmental crises that they played no role in creating.

Focus on the impact dimension

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a reminder of the importance of fighting inequality, as it continues to illustrate the implications of the unequal capability to mitigate and adapt to risks and disasters for the more vulnerable groups in society. Although the COVID-19 virus was insensitive to the social and economic background of humans once it reached their bodies, more economically privileged groups and societies had better access to medical care, thus less impacted by the virus before and after contracting it. Additionally, more affluent and developed nations had both faster and wider access to vaccines, but also the possibility to “stay home” without their economies collapsing, significantly increasing their capacity to deal with the damage caused by COVID-19. In contrast, less privileged communities and nations were more vulnerable to the pandemic, due to a lack of adequate medical facilities and infrastructure as well as more limited economical means to provide the vaccine and withstand the economic pressure of the pandemic.

Concerns about the disproportionate impacts of the evolving environmental harms and crises and the greater vulnerability of the weaker groups are the main driving force for social justice activists, experts, organizations and politicians around the world. These concerns, reminiscent of the Persian proverb “the cripple will always find a stone to kick”, are mainly focusing on the “impact” of environmental injustice. But in practice, this focus does not necessarily lead to meaningful changes in the real world as less privileged societies that are already victims of the existing global economic and political conditions and structures, do not normally have the means to create the necessary changes that lead to social justice. To

achieve such changes, privileged groups and societies must take responsibility and be more willing to disrupt the conventional political, economic, and social structures.

While the required changes seem logical and fair, disrupting the power, economic and political structures would limit many interest groups who vehemently resist them, as well as other essential changes to address global environmental issues such as global warming. Such resistance does not mean that the global environmental justice movement is pointless and ineffective, but that it is necessary to also focus on the “cause” of environmental crises, like climate change, in addition to their “impact” to achieve and implement practical and effective changes. For example, the dream of achieving climate justice only comes true when, in addition to expressing concern about the vulnerability of poor countries to climate change due to their limited capacity to mitigate and adapt, we seriously ask the rich and developed countries, who have played a major role in causing this global damage since the Industrial Revolution, to take responsibility, provide the necessary resources, and meaningfully change their development models.

The “trans-temporal” and “trans-spatial” dimensions

In addition to the “impact” and “cause” dimensions, the “time” and “space” dimensions are also of fundamental importance. Most environmental harms are not immediately visible. Thus, the environmental issues we are currently dealing with are the products of decisions that may have been made decades or centuries ago. Many environmental impacts of management plans and construction projects only emerge when their designers

and executors are no longer in charge. This greatly reduces the quality of environmental monitoring, accounting, accountability, and compensation. For example, it is nearly impossible to hold those who built Los Angeles in a dry part of California accountable. Neither one can take those who caused the air pollution problems in this city by constructing many highways and unsustainably expanding its non-public transportation system to the court. Were it even possible, it would be impossible to make up for and reverse the damage caused by those decisions to restore the city to its previous state. Another example to illustrate the trans-temporal nature of environmental problems is the well-known climate change problems caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change, considered a human-made issue by the scientific community, is the product of the cumulative impacts of the various decisions made by governments, planners, industry owners, and other stakeholders since the Industrial Revolution. Is it now possible to summon and prosecute the policymakers and inventors who are long dead to make up for the enormous damage that currently threatens human survival on earth? If it were even possible to prosecute them, would it be conceivable to quickly solve this problem and reduce the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to previous levels? The negative answers to these questions remind us of the great significance of the concept of environmental justice being trans-generational. In other words, just as we are the victims of wrong decisions made by previous generations, our decisions today will affect future generations without any opportunity for us to make up for our mistakes. Fulfilling environmental justice is therefore a trans-generational mission and an ethical duty. Even in the absence of representatives of future generations to hold us accountable, monitor



Illustration: Touka Neyestani

our performance, and punish us for bad decisions, we must strive for a fair distribution of environmental benefits and risks between different generations.

The environmental impacts of management decisions and development plans are not only limited to the "time" dimension. The impacts are also hard to be bound in the "space" dimension, meaning that the decisions in one part of the world may impact other parts as well. For example, the geographical area affected by China's decision to continue burning fossil fuels and coal is not limited to its own geographical borders and covers the entire globe. In contrast, the electric vehicle industry in Europe and Northern America may help reduce air pollution in those regions but the

resulting increase in lithium mining in countries like Bolivia will cause environmental destruction and irrecoverable health damages in lithium supplying countries. Another good example is the growing dust problem in the Middle East. The poor and unsustainable management of water resources in most Middle Eastern countries has led to desertification and drying of rivers and wetlands. As a result, they have exacerbated the dust storms, a problem that transcends geographical and political boundaries and affects humans and nature miles away from the dust sources and hotspots. A wetland drying up in Egypt and turning into a dust hotspot could cause respiratory problems in the Asian countries of the Middle East or a water body drying in Syria due to the construction of a dam in Turkey could lower productivity in Iraqi farms. Although the "space" dimension

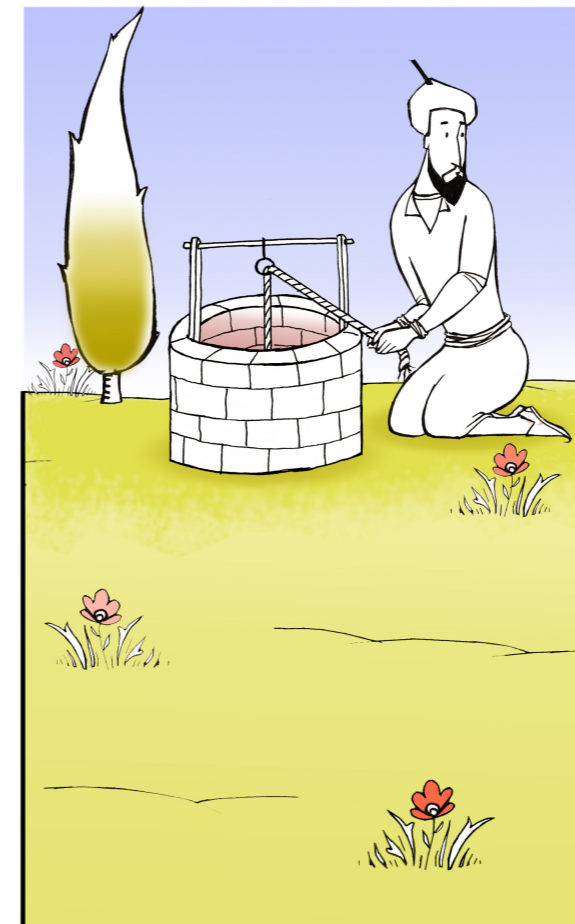
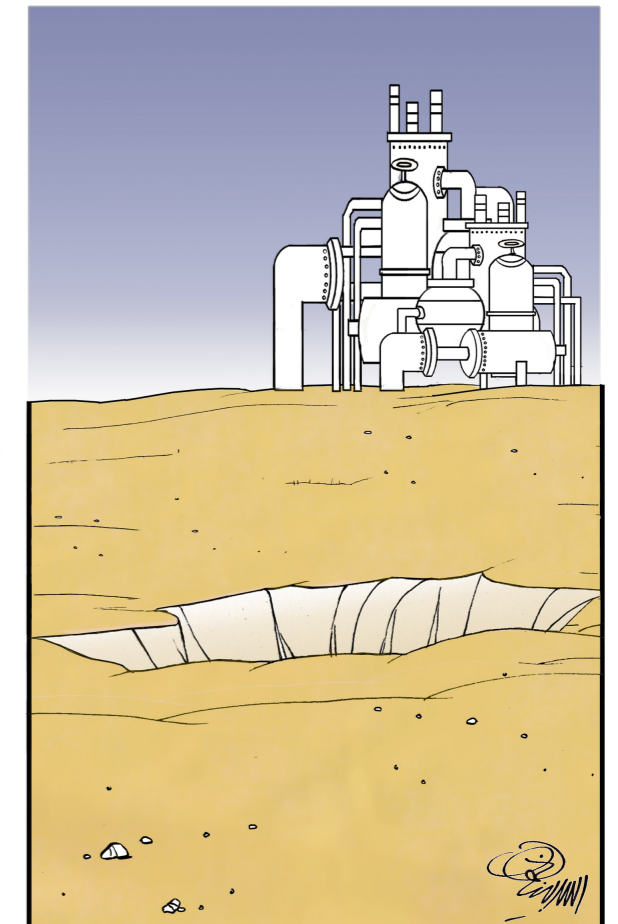


Illustration: Assad Binakhahi

of environmental management seems more obvious and tangible than the "time" dimension, the complicated and complex aspects of environmental phenomena limit our understanding of their spatial dimension and our ability to manage their trans-spatial effects. Given these constraints, and in the absence of appropriate legal mechanisms to manage the transboundary dimensions of environmental decisions, fulfilling trans-spatial environmental justice is currently more of a logical and ethical necessity than a legal mandate.

Environmental human rights

An unhealthy environment threatens human life and health. Those citizens who suffer health problems and do not have access to a



clean and healthy environment cannot benefit from their legal and human rights. On the other hand, those governments that frequently violate human rights are normally unsuccessful in sustainable management of the environment. Despite the correlation and interlinkage of human rights and the environment, the attention of human rights activists and organizations to environmental matters and their relevant actions have been very limited.

One can claim that the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment marked a turning point in creating a stronger linkage between the environment and human rights, significantly strengthening efforts in this space. While the right to a healthy environment is recognized and protected by the constitutions of more than 100 states, so far, no binding

international law has been adopted to reclaim, enforce, and develop an appropriate legal mechanism to punish the violators of environmental human rights. But in the most important recent development and as the result of efforts by environmental activists and human rights defenders along with some member states, in October 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution that recognizes access to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as an important human right. Though not legally binding, this historic and promising achievement paves the way for the necessary developments in the future to elevate the environment's position in human rights events, movements, and laws.

Democracy, good governance, and the environment

When it comes to environmental human rights, what usually comes to mind is limited to the right to a healthy living environment, clean water, and clean air. However, it should be noted that in addition to these substantive rights (such as the rights to a healthy living environment, clean water, and clean air), environmental rights include procedural rights (inclusive and equal participation in determining the future of the environment). Thus, to uphold environmental rights, not only are governments obligated to ensure their citizens have access to a sustainable environment, but they must provide equal opportunities to the public and different stakeholders to participate in the planning, managing, and determining the fate of the environment and natural resources. Some key questions are necessary to ask in this regard:

- Can one be hopeful that societies and governments that violate different human

rights will uphold environmental human rights?

- Can an undemocratic regime or government be expected to provide effective mechanisms for fulfilling social justice and inclusive and equal participation in environmental management?
- Is it possible for a country that does not adhere to the basic principles of sustainable development to manage the environmental sector sustainably?
- Will leaders whose incompetence is evident in the economic, social, political, health, education, construction, etc. sectors be able to establish good and effective governance in the environment sector?

To answer these questions, one must consider the environment's interrelationships with other sectors affected by economic, social, and political institutions. In an interconnected and complex system, due to the nexus between different components, the variations in the status of one component can change the status of other components. In such a system, the unsustainable development of a component makes the whole system unsustainable, or the violation of basic principles of democracy in managing one component makes the whole system undemocratic. Thus, the answer to the questions posed is negative and the status, changes, and fate of the environmental sector are not independent of the status, changes, and fate of other sectors and ultimately depend on the governance system's structure and performance. Consequently, it is impossible to find a country in the world that: is suffering from an unsustainable development model but has sustainable natural resources; is a known human rights violator but fulfills the environmental human rights; or has succeeded

in establishing environmental justice but has an unjust executive and judicial system.

Final word: the environment's missing space in political movements

The growing environmental crises around the world have better exposed the environment's nexus with other sectors (e.g., health, sanitation, economy, agriculture, and energy). The impacts of these crises and degrading natural resources have, over time, inevitably engaged more governments and politicians in environmental issues. In some countries, environmental issues have been pushed into election debates and political races. Nevertheless, the environment still does not play a prominent role in political activism, movements, and competitions, and usually does not play a decisive role in the outcome of elections even in the most developed countries. On the other hand, reforming laws and implementing effective policies to protect the environment and fulfill environmental justice usually have no tangible and visible impacts in the short run other than increased costs for the society and stakeholders (such as a hike in water and electricity prices, pollution fines, taxes, and environmental fees). This limits the incentives for political leaders to enter this space as the political and economic costs of implementing environmental policies are significant.

The pivotal role of the environment in sustainable development inherently links the environment to politics. The destruction of a country's natural resources and environmental degradation are often irreversible, perpetuate human rights violations and injustice, resulting in unemployment and forced migration, escalate tensions, ethnic and regional disputes, civil war, and security problems, and ultimately

lead to the destruction of a country. Under such circumstances, even the reform, change, and collapse of the ruling political system will not necessarily resolve the issues, as the lasting impacts of land destruction will not vanish with the replacement of the ruling political system. A country that has lost its most vital resources, faces serious obstacles in meeting the basic needs of its citizens. A society composed of citizens with unsatisfied basic needs will have a very limited chance and bandwidth to establish a democratic system, fulfill justice, and protect human rights. Thus, social activism and political fights to stop human rights violations, reform or replace the ruling political system, and achieve democracy will remain fruitless and unsuccessful if they dismiss the environmental sector. Nonetheless, over time, as environmental issues intensify and their impacts emerge in other sectors, entering the environmental space will become an inevitable necessity, even for those politicians and political activists who are reluctant to address environmental issues. Ultimately, the rising cost of society's indifference to the important issue of environmental justice must be borne by future generations of citizens and politicians.

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This article is the translation of the article that had been originally written by the author in Persian. The translation has been permitted and approved by the author.