

SnRE Committee meeting
Bindu Panikkar
January 21, 2022

Good Morning everyone!

I am pleased to be invited to this panel to testify in support of the Environmental justice bill introduced by Senator Kesh Ram Hinsdale.

Some key points to state are that EJ is important to define because not everyone experience the environment in the state. In our work when we define environmental justice, we looked at the intersection of those with fewer privileges including BIPOC people, those living in poverty, mobile home residents, people who have limited English proficiency, those who are renters in the state and so on.. but particularly we also examined the environmental and health risks this population faced. We drew upon about 28 different variables to create a spatial tool called Vermont environmental health disparities index. Each tract in Vermont was given a score based on these 28 variables, and that is how we have identified those most at risks to environmental and health disparities in the state. That is by looking at the demographics and the environmental risks the most marginalized in the state face to define environmental justice. But BIPOC population, ppl with limited English proficiency and those with lower median income are a good proxy to understand environmental justice as defined in the EJ Bill S.148.

it is clear from our study that the black, indigenous and people of color in the state are especially more exposed to historic environmental risks than the rest in the state, this association was not seen among the poor in the state interestingly.

What we found in our studies is that the tracts with BIPOC and ppl with limited English proficiency were significantly more at risk from historic environmental risks, historic sites of pollution, heat vulnerability, and air pollution than the rest of the population.

Our state-wide survey results on the other hand showed that both BIPOC people and those living under poverty in the state had less access to environmental benefits. BIPOC people were twice as likely to report exposures to mold, lack of access to public transportation, not own a vehicle, have trouble paying for food, not have a primary care doctor, report autoimmune disorders. And three times more likely to rely on public transportation, have trouble paying for electricity, go hungry in a month, and report higher rates of lyme disease compared to the white population.

Those below poverty were also twice as likely to have lower access to fresh food, report asthma, cardiovascular diseases and cancer. And three times more likely to use public transportation, own a personal vehicle, go hungry a month, have trouble paying for electricity, etc compared to those above poverty. But about 46% of the poor were also people of color.

To have justice, it becomes imperative to first identify injustices that exist to then address underlying causes of them. This process of inquiry conducting spatial analysis both quantitative and qualitative studies, should be a part of any state department to help explain the root causes of

inequities, oppressions, and power structures that create vulnerabilities and risks to particular communities.

we have a unique opportunity to elevate environmental justice. Environmental protection is not just about protecting wilderness and keeping it beautiful for Vermonters. This is about making our urban and suburban neighborhoods safe, clean places to live, work and raise a family. It's about ensuring that the water and air are clean no matter where you live. And it's about showing communities that have been left out and left behind that their environmental and social concerns matter.

We know that environmental injustice have been built on centuries of unequal social relations, through processes of colonization, industrialization, and capitalism, communities of color and low-income communities have been trapped into systemic inequities, that subject them to higher historic environmental risks, lower environmental benefits and premature deaths. These social and civil rights inequities and the environmental and health crises we face in the world are totally connected. Harms suffered by ecosystems today mirror the harms experienced by the marginalized. The environmental and health crises we face in our nation and the world today cannot be addressed without addressing injustices. Our economic future and our environmental future are also inextricably linked. Environmental justice is an affirmation of an unequal present and a yearning for a better future.

In Vermont in short,

- Social and environmental concerns are deeply entangled.
- Environmental and health disparities are prominent in BIPOC and low income population
- Some of these disparities are historical and Many are related to lack of access
- These inequities are preventable
- Targeted responses, policies and action, are required to address these systemic inequities, why we need to support state based EJ policy, S148, as soon as possible
- Proper investments and community centered programs are required to address these systemic inequities in Vermont – why we need to fund green justice zones
- We will need communities centered, grounds up approach to build a just and sustainable Vermont

Vermont should not be one of the last states to incorporate Environmental justice within state policies. We need the state support and resources to carry out this transformative work forward of building back a just and sustainable VT. This is our chance to break the cycle of systemic racism in the state. Thank you Senator Ram for introducing this bill again.