

Environmental Justice Campaigns Provide Fertile Ground For Joint Efforts with Reproductive Rights Advocates

By Chinué Turner Richardson

Human health is intimately tied to environmental conditions, and a substantial body of evidence has identified the threats environmental toxicants specifically pose to reproductive health and fetal development. However, research in this area is complex, and definitive cause-and-effect conclusions—for example, tying individual contaminants to specific health outcomes that often develop many years after exposure—are sometimes impossible to draw. Given the costs that would be involved, it is perhaps not surprising that both government and private industry have been slow to respond when health problems resulting from environmental degradation arise. This may be especially so when these problems occur in low-income, often predominately minority communities.

Meanwhile, frustrated residents of communities situated near landfills, incinerators and power plants increasingly are mobilizing in response to pervasive health problems they are experiencing, including breast cancer, infertility, spontaneous abortion and birth defects. Local activists are demanding protection from the hazards they say the nearby waste sites pose and are mounting campaigns to ensure that their communities are safe and healthy places for children and families. The sum of these campaigns has come to be known as the environmental justice movement.

Despite the linkages between environmental conditions and reproductive health, mainstream reproductive rights organizations have had little involvement in the environmental justice movement. Yet advocates in both camps could learn and gain much from each other. Local environ-

mental justice campaigns would benefit from the organizing, research, message development and fundraising experience of more established reproductive rights groups. And by incorporating environmental justice issues into their work, pro-choice organizations would demonstrate their commitment to a comprehensive vision of reproductive rights that goes beyond family planning and abortion rights to include the rights of all women to bear and raise healthy children.

Assessing the Evidence

Environmental toxicants can adversely affect human reproduction and development in several ways. One way is through endocrine disruption—the process of synthetic or naturally occurring chemicals altering the body's normal hormonal activity. Studies of laboratory animals and wildlife suggest that chemical exposure can cause a host of reproductive health problems and birth defects, including feminization of males, abnormal sexual behavior and testicular cancer. Furthermore, human experience with one endocrine disruptor in particular demonstrates that fetal exposure can cause significant health effects that may appear years later. Between the 1950s and the early 1970s, a group of pregnant women were treated with diethylstilbestrol (DES), a synthetic estrogenic agent that allegedly reduces the chance of miscarriage, although its efficacy was never shown. In the 1970s, daughters of these women were found to have an increased risk of vaginal clear cell carcinoma and other reproductive abnormalities, whereas sons had an increased risk of genital anomalies and other adverse outcomes.

Environmental toxicants also can affect reproduction and development through other mechanisms. For example, a chemical can enter the blood through the skin or lungs and be directly toxic to cells. Substances such as lead and mercury can disrupt brain development in fetuses and young children. Furthermore, exposure to contaminants such as pesticides can cause spontaneous abortions and birth defects in offspring.

Even as the evidence mounts, however, few studies have been able to capture the full breadth of human health implications. To a large extent, the research fails to assess the cumulative risk of exposure to multiple chemicals and the effects of exposure at different stages in development. A chemical may have a completely different effect on an embryo or a fetus than it does on a mature adult, and the timing of exposure is an important determinant of its effect. The research is further clouded by the difficulty involved in assessing the impact of exposure across generations. As seen in the example of DES, the effects of exposure often go undetected until the offspring of the exposed adults reach maturity, at which point it may be impossible to trace the abnormalities back to a specific source.

Official Responses

In 1992, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created the Office of Environmental Justice for the purpose of integrating environmental justice issues into the agency's programs and policies. Two years later, President Clinton issued an executive order establishing environmental justice as a national priority. The order directs various federal agencies to independently identify and address disproportionately impacted communities of color and low-income populations and to revise policies to promote the enforcement of all health and environmental statutes in these areas.

Despite these actions, environmental advocates say little of consequence has been accomplished. "There is no overall compliance with Clinton's executive order," according to Kim DeFeo of the Sierra Club, a national environmental organization which has an environmental justice organiz-

ing program of its own. This sentiment is supported by the EPA's own inspector general, who issued a report in 2004 concluding that the EPA had not fully integrated Clinton's executive order. According to the report, the EPA has failed to develop clear standards for enforcement, thereby creating inconsistencies throughout its programs and regional offices.

Moreover, in June 2005, the EPA drafted a strategic plan that, if adopted, would revoke the Clinton administration's special emphasis on protecting communities of color and low-income populations. The following month, nearly 80 members of Congress criticized the plan in a letter to the agency, saying that by failing to "identify the key recipients of environmental justice actions," the plan is "ultimately another attempt to de-prioritize the importance of focusing on our nation's most vulnerable populations." A coalition of 52 environmental, public health and social justice organizations similarly objected to the plan's overall premise. In Congress, legislation repeatedly has been introduced that essentially would codify the Clinton executive order into law, but no action has been taken.

Meanwhile, "companies continue to target low-income and communities of color for locating their facilities," charges the Sierra Club's DeFeo. However, a 1998 report published by the Center for the Study of American Business at Washington University in St. Louis disputes that claim. Environmental injustice is not due to systematic discrimination, the report says; rather, poor and minority individuals seek out communities where property values have fallen as a result of nearby industrial and waste sites. For its part, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce adamantly opposes the EPA's environmental justice program, which it says "introduces an intolerable level of uncertainty into the regulatory process" and "prevents economic development in the nation's most disadvantaged communities."

Finding Common Ground

In disparate communities across the country, local activists have organized grassroots campaigns aimed at the removal from their living

Local Activists Mobilize for Healthier Communities: Three Case Studies

In the Air

In 1998, several San Francisco Bay Area social and environmental justice groups formed the Coalition for Healthy Communities and Environmental Justice to protest the operation of two medical and solid waste incinerators located in a low-income community of color in East Oakland. Operated by Integrated Environmental Systems (IES), the incinerators were notorious for excessive dioxin and mercury emissions, and for ignoring repeated fines from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. Dioxin is a known human carcinogen that has also been linked to increased rates of endometriosis and infertility, and mercury can cause adverse developmental outcomes in children exposed during fetal development.

As IES continued to ignore officials' warnings, advocates began organizing seminars and "toxic tours" to showcase IES' violations. Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice joined to specifically raise awareness of dioxin as a reproductive health threat. In December 2001, the four-year battle came to an end when IES closed its doors amid mounting protests, large fines and pending legal action. It was the last medical waste incineration facility in California.

On the Job

Another collaborative of Bay Area activists coalesced to advocate on behalf of Asian and Pacific Islander women, who are disproportionately employed in the garment and cosmetology industries and are overexposed to the chemicals used in nail polish, hair spray and other beauty supplies. One class of chemicals widely used in salon products are phthalates. Recent studies in animals suggest that prenatal phthalate exposure is likely to cause genital abnormalities in males. Julia Liou of Asian Health Services, a community health clinic for Asian and Pacific Islander women in Oakland, says women in her clinic often suffer from chronic asthma and skin rashes, and fear working during pregnancy because of the probable effects on their developing fetus.

This campaign has organized in response to a bill introduced by California Assemblymember Judy Chu in February 2005 to ban the manufacture, sale and distribution of phthalates in cosmetic products. (The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has only limited regulatory authority over cosmetic products.) Assemblymember Chu's bill did not pass, but a less far-reaching measure introduced by State Senator Carol Migden did. The legislation as enacted requires manufacturers to disclose the harmful reproductive and carcinogenic effects of certain chemicals to the state health department.

In the Water

Finally, during the 1960s and early 1970s, a former automotive manufacturing plant routinely buried barrels of hazardous waste in an unregulated landfill in Dickson, Tennessee, a town located approximately 40 miles from Nashville. The barrels, which contained trichloroethylene (TCE), have since started to disintegrate, and the chemical is seeping into the city's water supply and into residents' private wells.

Area residents have reported chronic illnesses such as skin rashes, heart disease and cancer, and an unusual number of their children have been born with cleft palates. In 2000, the Orlando, Florida-based organization Birth Defects Research for Children reported that 14 of 1,700 children in Dickson were born with cleft palates over a three-year span; the expected rate for a city the size of Dickson is one for every 1,000 children. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention confirm an association between exposure to TCE and impaired fetal development.

Though the state and federal governments both have conducted investigations into the matter, authorities continue to throw blame back and forth. Meanwhile, a coalition of community activists, religious leaders and the Nashville chapter of the NAACP continues to organize rallies and press conferences to bring public attention to the issue.

and working environments of toxic sources that have been found to cause adverse reproductive and developmental effects. Their record of success has been mixed: One campaign in California led to the permanent closing of a privately owned incineration facility, another effectively mobilized an immigrant population to advocate for state-level policy action, and a third continues its struggle to bring national attention to pervasive health problems in a dangerously contaminated city in the South (see box).

Campaigns such as these would appear to provide a golden opportunity for advocates from the reproductive rights and environmental justice communities to coalesce around common goals.

To date, however, that does not seem to have happened.

Loretta Ross, national coordinator for SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, a national organization made up of grassroots environmental, social justice and reproductive health organizations, suggests that the lack of involvement may stem largely from mainstream advocates' holding to a conventional view of reproductive rights that she thinks is too narrow. "Many within the mainstream reproductive rights community support abortion and family planning as the primary means of achieving women's empowerment," says Ross. "Meanwhile, those within the environmental justice movement see no separation between human health and the environment, and are working first on remedying the ills in their community as a means of empowerment."

Ross is not alone in seeking closer ties between reproductive rights and environmental justice advocates. "I'm here working as a volunteer, often feeling beleaguered," says Bruce Wood of the Dickson campaign. "We would absolutely welcome reproductive rights groups into our community." And with a proven track record in fundraising, organizing and coalition-building, the reproductive rights community has much to offer. Prochoice groups have extensive experience in organizing large-scale, issue-oriented

campaigns, and they could help local environmental justice activists develop research and public messaging tools to help broaden public awareness of the dangers of toxic contamination on reproductive health specifically. Armed with these tools, local environmental justice activists would be more empowered to rally communities and call for policies that would protect them from intrusive companies and harmful chemicals.

All of that aside, a powerful argument for greater collaboration between the mainstream reproductive rights and environmental justice movements is that the lack of such collaboration is frustrating the ability of each community to achieve what are at bottom shared objectives. For now, perhaps, the most important step for the prochoice community to take is to

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better appreciate the fact that champions of the environmental justice movement are already rallying around an essential reproductive rights issue: women's ability to bear and raise healthy children in threatening environments. For her part, SisterSong's Ross points out that both the reproductive rights and environmental justice communities are working fundamentally on empowerment issues. However, both camps should improve their understanding of the other's priorities; "there are blinders on both sides," she says.

In short, by working more closely, environmental justice and reproductive rights advocates will be more effective in reaching common *reproductive justice* goals. People living in low-income communities and communities of color will be better able to have sustainable and healthy families; women within these communities will be more empowered; and a prochoice movement that embraces a human rights framework inclusive of the full range of issues affecting low-income communities and communities of color will be broader and stronger for having done so. •

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