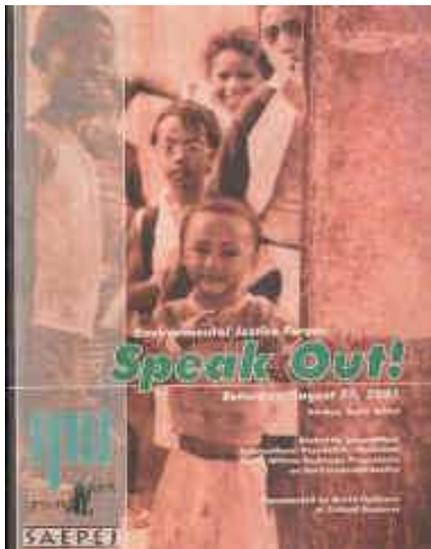


Environmental Justice Forum: Speak Out!

Executive summary

We are killed but have no right to cry. Our environments are destroyed and we have no right to complain. – Nnimmo Bassey, Nigeria.



The Environmental Justice Forum drew participants from eleven countries around the world. Bobby Peek of groundWork welcomed them to South Africa. The concepts of environmental racism and environmental justice have their origins in the USA but respond to a global phenomenon. With these concepts people of colour around the world recognise a common experience and build links across race, class and gender lines. At the heart of the experience of environmental injustice is the abuse of power. Poor people, and particularly people of colour, live in damaged environments which damage their health and their livelihoods.

The USA is the richest nation on earth but people of colour are constituted as the South in the North. Toxic industries and dumps are located in their neighbourhoods. Their rights are given less weight than those of whites and subordinated to the rights of corporations. Legal protection falters at the racial border. The roots of this racism lie in the history of colonisation and slavery and its legacy remains in the unequal life chances afforded people of colour. For indigenous peoples, the colonising state remains an invading force of occupation on land taken from those they dispossessed, and responsible for genocide.

These experiences are shared throughout the global South as testified by people from Africa, Latin America, Australia and the USA. Apartheid planning located dirty industries on the door steps of black people in Durban and Sasolburg, South Africa. In Secunda a black township was located in an area where pollution from proposed projects was anticipated. More recently, in Swaziland, an explosion occurred in a coal mine used to store toxic waste. The company, whose majority share holder is a US corporate giant, filed for bankruptcy within days of claims for compensation being made. In Australia, global mining corporations bulldoze the sacred sites of Aboriginal people under the protection of a policy declared to be racist by the United Nations. In the US, migrant agricultural workers from Mexico receive minimal wages and are exposed to a cocktail of toxic pesticides and herbicides. And one of the most powerful organisations on earth, the US military, has trailed

destruction from Memphis, where a secret chemical weapons dump leaked toxics for 40 years, to the Marshall Islands, utterly destroyed by weapons testing.

In Nigeria people's livelihoods, their fields and fish, have been destroyed by oil. The people attempt to speak, but have been met with the dialogue of guns. The story is repeated in all tropical oil producing countries. The elite corporations of the industry take from places where people have no voice. In Ecuador, the oil installations spill and burn and the people are left in poverty with up to 40% of them suffering from cancers.

Globalisation comes together in Nogales on the Mexican-US border. The 'Maquilladora industries' escaped the US regulatory regime just across the metal border and corrupted local unions. They assemble components made in the USA and re-export the finished product and the profits to the USA. A week's wage in Mexico is equivalent to a day's wage in the US. Women are favoured as workers because, in a macho society, they do not cause trouble. Trouble is externalised into the community as their latch-key children grow up to join gangs. The companies leave their wastes behind in contravention of agreements that the wastes would be returned to the US. The service infrastructure is not developed either to deal with the pollution or to meet the growing population. Housing options are reduced to squatting options as high prices force people out of the market.

The North America Free Trade Agreement described globalisation as the people of Nogales were already living it. It described an open door for free trade while the militarisation of the border closed the door on poor people.

Maquilladora is the image of the new global regime. Agenda 21, the centrepiece of the Rio Earth Summit, put in place a process for industrial self-regulation to coincide with globalisation advanced through the international economic governance regime. And self-regulation will be consolidated through the UN sponsored Global Compact negotiated with the perpetrators of abuse and likely to be a centrepiece of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg next year.

Participants felt that resistance needs to be built on communities creating their own democracy. The power is in us, they said. People hurt in spirit and body, in the places where they live, work and play can find the strength in the way they deal with pain to create alternatives. The challenge is to translate neighbourliness and caring into economic policy. Yet participation in the formal system remains important. The task is to educate state and corporate decision makers on the link between environmental rights and human rights, to expose abuses and to use the tools of law and planning to help people claim rights.

Reunion with ancestral spirit is at the heart of the response of indigenous people in the Americas, in Africa and in Australia. Outside Australia's parliament an Aboriginal Diplomatic Camp keeps spiritual fires burning to attack the negative spirituality of the colonisers. Religious traditions that see all humanity as equal are also a source of spiritual strength against a Western rationalism that divided soul from body, because profits are made only from the body, and divided people into classes – those with rights to consume and those without rights.

We need to get back to our own prophets and the modern prophet to whom I would commend you is Ghandi. – Fatima Meer.

* The Speak Out was hosted by groundWork, the South African Exchange Programme on Environmental Justice, and International Possibilities Unlimited and supported by the Ford Foundation.