

## **Connecting the Red, Brown and Green: The Environmental Justice Movement in South Africa**

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### **Introduction**

On a hot Saturday morning in the summer of 2003 about eighty people crowded into a small garage on the outskirts of Vanderbylpark. Packed closely together on wooden benches and sitting on the concrete floor, they seemed to represent our 'rainbow nation' including black workers and white small holders from the surrounding area. Despite the fresh green of the willow trees and the blue sky, it was impossible to ignore the grey slag dump dominating the skyline, as well as the smell and clouds of smoke belching from the ISCOR plant a few kilometres away.

The occasion was a meeting of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee, a group formed in 2002 to indict ISCOR for their pollution of the air and water of the area which had resulted in loss of livelihoods, and serious health problems ranging from kidney disease to cancer for 450 people. Everyone listened intently as the legal team explained what the legal processes would involve. The meeting seemed like a vindication of the triumphalist claims sometimes made about the contemporary environmental movement; an illustration of the capacity of environmental issues to overcome ethnic, racial and class divisions and unite various 'particularistic identities' in a common cause. This chapter, however, questions this conclusion, demonstrating the inadequacy of this depiction as an accurate reflection of developments in South African environmental struggles.

The central research question this chapter addresses is whether there is a single, coherent environmental movement which is mobilising under the comprehensive banner of *environmental justice* and whether the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF) is its organisational expression. Answering this question involved site visits, focus groups, participant observation, interviews with 30 key informants selected for their expertise on environmental activism and a literature review of primary and secondary sources.

The chapter argues that there is no single, collective actor that constitutes the environmental movement in South Africa and no master 'frame' of environmentalism encoded in any blueprint. The environmental movement has no coherent centre and no tidy margins; it is an inchoate sum of multiple, diverse, uncoordinated struggles and organisations. So it is argued, however that a nascent environmental justice movement is emerging which has the capacity for mass mobilisation. This is best described as a web-like universe made up of highly interconnected networks clustered around a few key nodes or hubs, namely EJNF, Groundwork and Earthlife Africa. It is characterised by a radical decentralisation of authority, with no governing body, official ideology or mandated leaders, minimal hierarchy and horizontal forms of organising.

This embryonic environmental justice movement is bridging ecological and social justice issues in that it puts the needs and rights of the poor, the excluded and the marginalised at the centre of its concerns. It is located at the confluence of three of South Africa's greatest challenges: the struggle against racism, the struggle against poverty and inequality and the struggle to protect the environment, as the natural resource base on which all economic activity depends. The movement is stratified in a complex layering involving national networks, NGOs and local grassroots groups. Within this multiplicity of organisational forms, the vitality of the movement flows from the bottom up, being driven by the unemployed and lower working class, 'the poors'. This social base is distinctively different from the middle class composition of the mainstream environmental movement which focuses on the 'green' issues of curbing species loss and habitat destruction.

### **The Environmental Movement**

Some of the most exciting forms of new social activism in post-apartheid South Africa are focused on 'brown' or urban environmental issues. As McDonald writes, 'The lack of basic services like sewage and sanitation for millions of urban South Africans is arguably the most pressing environmental justice problem in the country today' (McDonald 2002: 10). Several informants stressed the inter-connection between brown and green issues. For example, 'You can't separate brown and green issues; they complement each other. The environment is not only about brown issues. The conservation and welfare of animals is important' (Interview, Mentoor, 2003). Nevertheless the broad environmental movement in South Africa is

extremely fragmented.

This fragmentation revolves around a fault line which divides the movement into two main streams: those organised around the discourse of sustainable development, and those organised around the discourse of environmental justice. Both of these are powerful discursive strategies. The discourse of sustainable development is an advance on earlier protectionist models of environmentalism in that it is concerned with human needs, but is generally marked by technicist, pragmatic and reformist attempts to bring environmental externalities into the marketplace through ecological modernisation. The concept has been extensively criticised for the vagueness which has enabled it to be incorporated into neo-liberal approaches (Bond 2002; Sachs 1999). It can also mean that environmentalism is voided of political content and 'be defined as a public concern with environmental deterioration - a concern, not necessarily the object of a social struggle, a cause without conflict' (Acselrad 2002: 18).

Two South African environmental NGOs are the organisational expressions of this approach, the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and the Wildlife and Environment Society of Southern Africa (WESSA). Both are socially shallow with a mainly white, middle class support base and are predominantly concerned with preserving biodiversity. The discourse of environmental justice provides a radical alternative, questioning the market's ability to bring about social or environmental sustainability. It asks the question 'What is morally correct?' instead of 'What is legally, scientifically, and pragmatically possible?' The difference between the two approaches can be illustrated by the different responses to corporate power on the part of EWT and a key, environmental justice organisation, Groundwork. While EWT relies on corporate sponsorship, Groundwork has developed a critical approach demanding corporate accountability. It is one of the key environmental justice organisations which have brought about a reconfiguration of the discourse on environmentalism.

### **Environmental Justice: a reconfiguration of the discourse on environmentalism**

During the apartheid regime, environmentalism operated effectively as a conservation strategy that neglected social needs (Beinart and Coates 1995; Kahn 1990; Mittelman 1998). The notion of environmental justice represents an important shift away from this traditional authoritarian concept of environmentalism which was mainly concerned with the

conservation of threatened plants, animals and wilderness areas, to include urban, health, labour and development issues (Cock 1991). It is linked to social justice as ‘an all-encompassing notion that affirms the use value of life, all forms of life, against the interests of wealth, power and technology’ (Castells 1997: 132).

This concept of environmental justice as a mobilising force emerged in the US in the last forty years, in opposition to practices that were classified as environmental racism. This is defined as ‘any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intentionally or unintentionally) individuals, groups or communities based on race or color’ (Bullard 2002: 16). Several informants stressed the relevance of the concept in post-apartheid South Africa.

In this context the concept of environmental justice potentially provides an organising tool for mobilising multiple, diverse communities into political action on a variety of rights and claims. Some of these rights have a constitutional grounding as the Bill of Rights Section 24 states that ‘everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well being’. The core of the notion of environmental justice as a powerful mobilising force lies in this notion of rights - rights of access to natural resources and to decision making. The notion of rights is used to legitimise demands and claims. The counter-hegemonic potential lies in the challenge to power relations that this notion of rights implies.

While the concept of environmental justice emerged from the US there are important differences in the South African adaptation of the concept. Here the focus is on total change driven by majority rather than minority interests, and includes class issues, whereas in the US it is class-blind, focusing exclusively on environmental racism. Also the movement here frequently addresses the root causes of environmental degradation - processes such as privatisation and deregulation - whereas the US focus is on symptoms. In the South African context environmental justice means social transformation directed to meeting basic human needs and rights. It is the central idea in a nascent grassroots movement which is fueled by the growing contradiction between the discourse of rights and the experience of unmet needs.

A few key nodes or hubs provide organisational resources to this nascent environmental justice movement. The following three organisations operate at different levels and show how this movement is growing in terms of geographic spread, political reach and social

cohesiveness.

## **Key Nodes of The Environmental Justice Movement**

### *(i) The Environmental Justice Networking Forum*

This is potentially the organisational expression of a coherent, comprehensive environmental justice movement in South Africa. It describes itself as a ‘democratic network, a shared resource a forum which seeks to advance the interrelatedness of social, economic, environmental and political issues to reverse and prevent environmental injustices affecting the poor and the working class’ (Interview, Madihlaba, 2003). It aims to achieve this through 2 broad inter-connected programmes - environmental governance and community campaigns - which focus on mining and ecological debt, energy, food security and waste. It is a nation-wide umbrella alliance of over 400 participating organisations (POs) characterised by an ideological and social diversity. An example is Soweto’s Mountain of Hope (SOMOH). Founded by the former EJNF Gauteng co-ordinator, Mandla Mentoor in 2001, this project is transforming the rocky Tshiawelo koppie in Soweto which was a feared crime and litter-ridden space into a green project as a continuation of the 80s peace-park movement. This is a concrete expression of the linkages between environmental and social justice issues which EJNF emphasises. ‘Social justice and environmental justice go together, they are interlinked . . . The framing of issues doesn’t matter that much . . .’ (Interview, Madihlaba, 2003).

EJNF was initiated at a conference hosted by Earthlife Africa in 1992. From the outset there was a clear and strong commitment to social transformation through an expanded conception of environmental justice which was directed towards meeting basic human needs. To signal a decisive break with the dominant, narrow, authoritarian conservationism, the pioneer founder Chris Albertyn promoted a very inclusive understanding of the environment (Albertyn 1995).

Over the 10 years of its existence, EJNF has changed a good deal. In its pioneering phase, the period 1994 - 1998, the emphasis was on policy formulation in close collaboration with the state. Since then, the focus has shifted to grassroots campaigning, its ideology has become increasingly racialised and, as a key component of the Social Movements Indaba, relations with the ANC and the post-apartheid state have become increasingly confrontational.

Overall, by naming the experiences of the poor and the marginalised and drawing out from

those experiences the connections between power, development, rights and social and environmental justice, EJNF contributes to the reconfiguration of the discourse on environmentalism in South Africa. It is building the social infrastructure for a strong environmental justice movement in the country in collaboration with other key organisations such as Groundwork.

*(ii) Groundwork*

The second node in the embryonic environmental justice movement in South Africa is Groundwork (GW), a non-profit, environmental justice service and development organisation. It was founded in 1999 by 3 ex-EJNF activists to improve the quality of life of vulnerable people in Southern Africa. It has four main projects focusing on air quality, health care waste and incineration, industrial landfills and corporate accountability. The organisation makes no claims to speak on behalf of others; nor does it claim to represent the environmental justice movement. 'We are not defining the agenda, we don't want to control it, we're trying to participate in it' (Interview, Peek, 2003). It provides crucial support to about 12 different communities and a number of community based organisations including the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) led by Desmond D'Sa which it helped to establish.

GW has redirected DEAT's strategy for pollution control; has gained publicity for community issues; provided community access to decision makers; and combines science and policy work with action. However the director believes that 'The crucial task is to take the environmental debate into the social movements, that's where the energy is' (Interview, Peek 2003).

*(iii) Earthlife Africa*

Another key node in the environmental justice movement is one of EJNF's participating organisations, Earthlife Africa (ELA). This is a loose, nationwide alliance of volunteer activists, grouped into local branches. It is a flat, non-hierarchical, decentralised organisation, which one member described as 'democratic to the point of inertia' (Interview, anonymous, 2003). It produces and distributes a newsletter, and has monthly meetings of four different action groups: toxics, nuclear, zero waste, animal action and climate change report. The organisation is known for their very imaginative tactics. For example in the 1998 campaign against air pollution in Johannesburg three prominent sculptures were decorated with gas

masks. They disseminate information on issues such as climate change, genetic engineering and nuclear energy.

A key project is the Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Partnership (SECCP). The project aims to link renewable energy and energy efficiency to advocacy around climate change, with a view to influencing relevant development policies. Earthlife's anti-nuclear campaign demonstrates its capacity to both reach down into grassroots communities, particularly those living in the vicinity of Pelindaba such as Attridgeville and Diepsloot and up into policy work such as making parliamentary submissions and attending public hearings on the Draft Radioactive Waste Bill. Strategies include producing a popular book, meeting with the national nuclear regulator, mobilising health professionals to undertake an epidemiological study of communities living near Pelindaba, court action arguing that the environmental impact assessment was flawed as well as demonstrations. The campaign is working with EJNF to create an anti-nuclear alliance and is making 'strong efforts to involve the trade unions, particularly COSATU and NUM' (Interview, Palane, 2003).

Along with EJNF, ELA played a crucial role in several iconic moments which helped to generate a reconfiguration of the discourse on environmentalism in South Africa. One such moment was the exposure of pollution by Thor Chemicals, a corporation which imported toxic waste into South Africa. ELA worked closely with the Legal Resources Centre, the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, affected workers and local communities. The case illustrates the importance of alliances between environmentalists and organised labour and according to Barnett (2003), was the crucial turning point in the re-framing and 'browning' of environmentalism in South Africa.

The Chloorkop campaign against the siting of a toxic waste dump in Chloorkop between 1993 and 1996 was another watershed event. The lead organisation was the EJNF affiliate, Earthlife Africa and involved the establishment of a broad coalition which included the Tembisa branch of the ANC, the PAC, the Transport and General Workers Union, the Democratic Party as well as the AWB (Phadu 1997). According to a participant, 'the Chloorkop campaign was a rainbow group organised against environmental injustice' (Interview, Sugre, 2003). The ANC branch in Tembisa played a very active role which illustrates how established organisations may be a source of resources facilitating movement emergence. The South African Youth Congress played a major role in the third iconic

moment, the Mafefe asbestos exposure of the devastating health impacts of asbestos mining on the village, and was part of a struggle which ‘combined research with advocacy and grassroots mobilisation’ (Interview, Felix, 2003).

These three iconic ‘moments’ provided the impetus to a growing grassroots environmental justice movement in South Africa driven mainly by EJNF and Earthlife Africa. The 1998 EJNF Poverty hearings were particularly important in this process as the impact of environmental degradation on poor communities was highlighted. Also significant was the leadership of visionary individuals such as Chris Albertyn, Bobby Peek, Mandla Mentoora and Thabo Madihlapa. They frame(d) the issue of environmental justice in ways that resonate with people’s needs and experience.

These three organisations are most effectively promoting environmental justice in South Africa. However this focus on the three organisations as nodes or hubs should not imply a highly centralised picture. The nascent environmental justice movement in South Africa is untidy with many loose ends and rough edges. As one key informant said, ‘There are lots of pockets of good environmental stuff going on’ (Interview, anonymous, 2003).

#### *Other significant environmental justice organisations*

While it is argued that EJNF, Earthlife and Groundwork are the key nodes in the nascent environmental justice movement, other significant organisations are the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG) and the Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM). New coalitions are forming around issues such as genetic foods, and the water and energy caucuses are particularly significant.

The actions of both the water and energy caucuses demonstrate how the re-ordering of the political opportunity structure since 1994 in South Africa has created space for previously excluded groups to contribute to policy formulation, to make claims through the courts, and to mobilise. The post-apartheid constitution provides the framework for a rights-based approach to social mobilisation. But the context is one of increasing deprivation and degradation. The contradiction between the discourse of rights and the experience of unmet needs is the main source of growth of the environmental justice movement. The emphasis on ‘rights’ in the post apartheid dispensation, linked to vast areas of unsatisfied social needs which are increasing with the privatisation of basic services and the use of cost-recovery

mechanisms, provides the main impetus to the movement.

The growth of such popular organisations outside the established framework of political representation has evoked a hostile response from the post-apartheid state. A striking characteristic of the state response to various forms of recent social activism has been criminalisation in the form of arrests and the use of force expressed in teargas, rubber bullets, live ammunition and stun grenades, as well as mockery and abuse. The state has clearly embarked on a political propaganda campaign that portrays these new social movements and their activists as ‘the ultra-left’, as ‘criminals’ and ‘anarchists’. This is the context in which mobilisation around environmental issues is increasing and engaging a wide repertoire of strategies and tactics.

### **Characteristics of the Environmental Justice Movement**

The environmental justice movement is a realm of dynamic and complex interactions, but it is possible to point to the following characteristics: It is stratified with a complex layering ranging from national networks, to NGOs to communities at the local level. The movement is increasingly organising around key nodes. Organisations like EJNF, Earthlife and Groundwork are providing a social infrastructure for environmental justice. It is characterised by what Escobar (2004) terms ‘meshworks’ meaning flexible, non-hierarchical, decentralised, horizontal networks and forms of organising with no governing body, official ideology, blueprints or mandated leaders.

The environmental justice movement involves untidy struggles lacking a coherent, coordinating centre. It is a loose network; like the global justice movement it involves new forms of organising, new alliances and presents a contrast to the traditional membership based bureaucratic and hierarchical means of organising in civil society. Their power is not expressed in quantitative terms like numbers of members but in their potential capacity for mass mobilisation. For this reason one informant argued that the new social movements require new kinds of analysis involving reading patterns of interaction and social mobilisation rather than a reliance on numbers.

There is a pluralist conception of power. Networking is the dominant relational form and in a decentralised social network there is no centre of power. The decentralised networks

structure of the environmental justice movement enhance its democratic nature. There is no elected body that makes decisions on behalf of multitudes of others without consultation. It is a dense space of thick, interconnected networks that links organisations, individuals and resources around diverse strategies and tactics including policy advocacy, legal demands and claims, in addition to direct, popular mobilisation. These strategies are often (but not invariably) interconnected. For example all of the new social movements are using the language of new rights to both mobilise and seek enforcement through the courts. Many initiatives are counter-hegemonic which implies an alternative world that challenges the legitimacy of the current social order.

It operates at multi-levels, local, national and global. As a movement it is embedded in multiple 'militant particularisms' (Harvey 1997); it uses grassroots needs as the point of mobilisation; the focus is on daily realities, on survivalist issues of direct relevance. While the emphasis is on the local, grassroots groupings are finding new ways to combine local activism with horizontal, global networking.

### *Leadership*

Leadership depends on a handful of charismatic leaders who are 'bridging individuals'. They operate in both local, national and global social spaces and bridge issues and organisations. Some key informants were highly critical of the current leadership of the new social movements, and specifically of Trevor Ngwane because of his hostility to the ANC. 'The new social movements are driven by activists who are confrontationist - they don't build organisations with membership structures. There's no accountability' (Interview, anonymous, 2003).

Others stressed the role of leadership in connecting immediate needs to a broader, alternative vision, as illustrated by Trevor Ngwane, talking about the links between daily local concerns and global capital: 'In Soweto its electricity. In another area, it is water. . . . But you have to build a vision . . . electricity cuts are the result of privatization. Privatization is the result of GEAR. GEAR reflects the demands of global capital . . . connecting with what touches people on a daily basis, in a direct fashion, is the way to move history forward' (Ngwane 2003: 56). This is a good example of passionate 'framing work', providing frames that justify and dignify collective action, shaping grievances into broader claims.

### *Social base*

A key question concerns the social base of the environmental justice movement. Does it articulate the needs, demands and aspirations of subordinate groups? What are the social characteristics of the participants? It has been claimed that environmental issues can be a catalyst for very broad civil society mobilisation, in that they have a 'supra-classist dimension' (Acselrad 2002: 20). This 'rainbowism' was articulated by Nelson Mandela in 1995 when he referred to how 'environmental concerns can unite South Africans going beyond economic and political barriers' (Cited by McDonald 1998: 76). Despite the expectations around the Steel Valley Crisis Committee very few current struggles involve socially inclusive, multiracial coalitions. All environmental issues have a class pertinence and the differences between the social base of the old and new environmental struggles is significant. This is a new moment in the history of environmentalism in South Africa. The environmental concerns of the past - preservation and conservation - driven by a largely white, middle class constituency, are being supplanted by new struggles with a different social base.

All informants agreed that 'the Poores' (the unemployed and lower working class) were the most relevant political force in the environmental justice movement. 'It is the poors who have opposed the water and electricity cut-offs and evictions' (Desai 2003: 3). The movement is giving them voice in the sense that it provides a means of expressing their interests and values and of translating these into policy. Many of the activists in these grassroots environmental justice initiatives are young people and women. The female activist role often stems from traditional women's socialisation to be the administrators of household consumption. In this capacity they are the shock absorbers of environmental degradation. It is women who struggle with the dust from a defunct gold mine in Kagiso and so constitute the driving force in the Kagiso Environmental Awareness Forum which is campaigning for the rehabilitation of the Tailings dam. It is women who have to walk further and struggle harder to obtain access to clean water so the largest social category attending mass meetings called by the Coalition against Water Privatisation are older women, 'the grannies'.

### *The nature of social bonds*

The nature of social bonds varies. Some of the organisations and the loose-knit networks which constitute the environmental justice movement involve high levels of social cohesion and solidarity. Several informants described Earthlife Africa as marked by durable relations

of trust and co-operation. The social relations among members of the Coalition Against Water Privatisation are marked by concern and practical action to support participants arrested in protest actions. Other examples of these social groupings acting as an informal resource pool include providing shelter for those evicted and help with disconnections of water and electricity. All of these organisations are an important source of resources. People with limited resources cannot sustain contentious collective action. Several informants stressed that the collapse of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee was partly due to a lack of organisational resources. But overall the nature of the social bonds established between participants in environmental justice struggles are very different. In the case of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee, as will be demonstrated below, that they were transient, perfunctory, friable and short lived; involving no long-term commitments and obligations. In the case of participants in actions like those around the WSSD they could best be described as what Bauman calls 'carnival bonds' rooted in intense, public displays (Bauman 2001: 72). Generally, the environmental justice movement contains pockets of strong personal relations, collective identities, thick social networks marked by a social cohesiveness, what Tarrow (2003) terms 'embedded networks, rather than "contingent alliances" which are short term and instrumental' (Tarrow 2003: 19). For many activists social interactions have a depth and intensity that contrast with the thin, atomised identities of citizen and consumer. In this sense the movement is disseminating new images of solidarity and connectedness.

#### *A bridging of social and environmental issues*

While there is no master frame of 'environmentalism', the movement is bridging ecological and social justice issues - in this sense there are strong connections being forged between the 'red', the 'green' and the 'brown'. As Harvey writes, 'the movement for environmental justice twins ecological with social justice goals in quite unique ways' (Harvey 1997: 387). He stressed the links between the environmental justice movement and the broader movements that have been termed 'the environmentalism of the poor'. 'This means that the environmental justice movement is very inclusive and in this sense is 'virtually boundary less' as Foreman writes of the movement in the USA (Foreman 1998: 12).

The movement has the potential to address root causes. According to an activist, 'environmental justice is able to bring together all of these different issues to create one movement that can really address what actually causes all of these phenomena to happen and gets to the root of the problems' (Cited by Di Chiro 1998: 124). For many 'the root of the

problem' is the privatisation and cost recovery policies that constitute the foundation of neo-liberalism. The Anti-Privatisation Forum is a significant example of what Ruiters has argued for, 'a deeper approach to environmental justice' which involves 'a focus on the production . . . of injustices' (Ruiters 2001: 112). As McDonald states, all the evidence is that 'privatization worsens access to core services for the urban poor and ultimately exacerbates environmental degradation' (McDonald 2002: 296).

### *Strategies and tactics*

All the decentralised networks which comprise the environmental justice movement engage in a variety of struggle activities. These include strikes, litigation and court applications, advocacy, negotiation, boycotts, organised marches, public petitions, use of media, internet connections, and demonstrations. Particularly significant here are the use of strategies which emphasise constitutional rights as a way of countering hegemonic practices. These rights strategies may strengthen marginalised communities trying to leverage the state to access resources.

Not all of these tactics are 'new' which points to the importance of not exaggerating the distinctiveness and 'newness' of movements like the Environmental Justice movement. Not only is there a degree of continuity in the repertoire of tactics and strategies but there is some transference of leadership from the old to the new struggles. Trevor Ngwane, for example was both a prominent anti-apartheid activist as well as being central to the Anti Privatisation Forum and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee. There has not been a total rupture with the past because of strong traditions of social movement unionism which linked struggles in the workplace to the community issues.

Some of these forms of social activism among poor and vulnerable communities are new in the sense that they involve new targets (corporations and multinational institutions rather than states), a global terrain, innovative connections between issues (such as militarisation and environmental damage) and novel forms of horizontal organising which connect people and information through the internet. These new patterns of social mobilisation go beyond political parties, trade unions and NGOs; they represent a new type of populist politics. But the crucial question is whether these are largely ephemeral, incapable of establishing a sustained, durable presence? Or could they move beyond the confines of 'militant particularisms', and generate a broader, transformative politics which involves a deepening

of democracy.

Tactics are often extremely innovative, such as the 'toxic tours' organised by the SDCEA in South Durban, and the Greenwash Academy Awards aka Green Oscars targeting infamous corporate environmental abusers organised by Groundwork at the WSSD in 2002. Direct action has involved the re-connection of electricity and water and is sometimes dramatic. For example, in 2002 a total of 52 municipal workers union members were arrested after emptying buckets of shit outside the municipal offices. This echoes a protest which took place in 1993 when a group of women in Ivory Park, furious at the suspension of sanitation services in the township, protested by marching to the administration offices with 140 buckets full of shit from overflowing toilets and hurled the contents of the buckets at local authority officials (Bhagowat 1993). This protest illustrates what Arjun Appadurai (2002) has called 'the politics of shit', meaning struggles around the most basic of human needs. The phrase seems particularly significant at this moment when the Igoli 2002 privatisation plan has been renamed 'E. coli. 2002' for a good reason: excrement from the pit latrines of Johannesburg's slums regularly pollutes Sandton's borehole water supplies (Bond 2002). Some of these recent protests have involved women's use of their sexuality. For example in 1996 a group of women from Orange Farm, protesting about water cut-offs marched to the municipal offices with a memorandum and some of the women undressed. In 1999 women from Orange Farm initiated the closing off of the Golden Highway by blocking the flow of traffic.

Another strategy is to provide expert engagement in policy processes. Examples are Groundwork's submissions on the Air Quality Bill, or Earthlife Africa's comments on the Draft Radioactive Waste Bill. This policy engagement does not only involve expert reports in the conventional sense. It also involves the recognition of local, indigenous knowledge and experiential evidence. For example, in November 2002 Groundwork facilitated an active member of the Sasolburg Environmental Committee, to travel to Cape Town from Zamdela to address the Minerals and Energy Portfolio Committee in parliament.

All the networks which comprise the environmental justice movement use the internet to coordinate their activity and give visibility to their issues. They also produce publications such as EJNF's quarterly publication *The Networker*, the Earthlife newsletter and Groundwork's series of annual reports. These publications are an important vehicle by which the

environmental justice movement is able to amplify grassroots voices, experiences, and participation in policy formulation. This is also achieved through critical research, especially when it builds capacity in grassroots communities. The research on Orange Farm undertaken by the Coalition Against Water Privatisation involved training some 60 members of that community. Groundwork has emphasised the development of community air monitoring programmes in selected communities affected by industrial pollution. And as will be demonstrated below in the case of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee the emphasis on litigation displaced collective mobilisation. This is in stark contrast to the other case study, the Coalition against Water Privatisation, where litigation was only one tactic in a wide repertoire of struggle.

The main mobilisation strategy is to reframe needs as rights. ‘We take what people experience as needs and re-formulate them as rights to mobilise around’ (Interview, Madihlaba, 2003). This reframing clearly relates to the new political opportunities presented by the Bill of Rights in the post-apartheid constitution.

Litigation to claim these rights is one of the main strategies used by various components of the movement. Many legal challenges have recently been brought by civil society against industries for environmental health damages. For example, damage claims have been made by asbestos workers, vanadium workers, ex-workers of Thor Chemicals and the Steel Valley community. However, the case of Steel Valley demonstrates the limitations of litigation. As Ruiters writes, ‘litigation occurs after the event, and the high costs of litigation and the expertise require to engage effectively in the legal system discourage environmental activism’ (Ruiters 2001: 102). Furthermore it does not address class injustices, which are central to the growing global mobilisation around environmental justice issues.

### *Local and Global Alliances*

The networks which make up the environmental justice movement are all locally embedded but globally connected. For instance in its campaign against the siting of a hazardous waste incinerator in Sasolburg, the Sasolburg Environmental Committee got support from the Global Anti-Incinerator Alliance which is based in the Phillipines. In its campaign against Mondi’s plans to build a boiler in South Durban the SDCEA threatened to launch an international boycott of Mondi Paper products and claimed to have the support of 189 organisations in 55 different countries.

So, do these localised, but globally connected organisations present a new ‘vision of how the global and the local can become reciprocal instruments in the deepening of democracy?’ (Appadurai 2002: 25). Appadurai argues that ‘transnational advocacy networks’ (TANs) provide ‘new horizontal modes for articulating the deep democratic politics of the local’ and ‘create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization . . . on behalf of the poor that can be characterized as “grassroots globalization” or . . . “globalization from below”’ (Appadurai 2002: 272).

For this grassroots globalisation the World Social Forum (WSF) is an important social space. According to one key informant what defines new social movements as different and distinctive from other political forms is that they are aware that they are part of a global justice movement. The WSF is widely understood to be at the core of this. About a hundred thousand people from 100 different countries attended the fourth WSF in 2004, and all indications are that it is likely to grow further. However connections to global civil society are somewhat thin at the grassroots.

The environmental justice and other new social movements also have to confront the important strategic question of their relationship to the mass based organisations of COSATU and the ANC. Do they link up with labour? Several informants expressed a scepticism about existing trade unions and political parties, though all stressed that the relations between the labour and environmental justice movements should be strengthened as the corporate plunder of nonrenewable resources is growing. Environmental organisations could be invaluable allies to worker organisations in opposing capitalism. However while there may be shared goals, as in COSATU’S and SAMWU’S opposition to the privatisation of water, the strategies of the labour and environmental justice movements are very different.

As stated above, this specific struggle is driven by older women. These ‘grannies’ are the most vulnerable, powerless social category. They are ill equipped to move beyond particularistic struggles and confront the systemic patterns and causes of environmental injustice. What such a confrontation involves may be illustrated by a case study which demonstrates the difficulties in challenging the powerful corporate interests which are at the forefront of both environmental and social injustice.

## Case Study: Water

The case study focuses on water, a natural resource that is a basic need, framed as a right by the post-apartheid constitution. Access to clean water is threatened by 2 processes: *pollution and privatisation*. The case study focuses on *two organisational responses* to this threat: the Steel Valley Crisis Committee which is mobilising around the pollution of the groundwater by ISCOR, and the Coalition against Water Privatisation, which is mobilising against the installation of pre-paid water meters which are having devastating health and social impacts on poor communities.

### *(i) Access to water: the Coalition against Water Privatisation*

Formed in 2003, this organisation, of which EJNF is a member, illustrates what Greenstein (2003) terms the 'legal-activist' route to social mobilisation. The Coalition uses a rights discourse to challenge the state's commitment to cost recovery in basic service delivery. The challenge involves litigation and direct action, as means for grassroots mobilisation. The main demand is for the decommodification of water which makes this a Polanyian type struggle (those defined by the need to oppose commodification in the market) as opposed to Marxist type struggle defined by exploitation in production (Burawoy 2003).

The Coalition is extending its international linkages, and an international solidarity campaign is growing around the world as water is being privatised. Once understood as a commonly held resource, to be managed by communities and states for the public good, it is now being redefined as a commodity to be managed by market forces. Solidarity is a strong theme in the Coalition and involves support of comrades charged in court, through, for example, providing legal aid and raising bail money for the 'water warriors'. In this respect it acts as an important source of resources which deepens strong social bonds. Sometimes this solidarity extends to assisting impoverished households with illegal connections.

Some violent confrontation has resulted. The post-apartheid state's response to coalition activities has largely been criminalisation leading one activist to say, 'It is not easy to stand up for your rights today' (Interview, Khensani, 2004). Ironically, the language of rights is also used by Johannesburg Water which links this to an appeal to modernity. It tries to sell the pre-payment system as a modern, post-apartheid development enabling consumers to exercise choice.

The main participants in mass activities are older women, and this clearly results from their role as administrators of household consumption. For some of them, the water issue is about survival. Several residents interviewed in Orange Farm maintained that we can cope with pre-paid electricity meters, because we can use other sources like coal stoves and primuses for cooking but we can't cope without water' (Interview, Motumi, 2003). Another said, 'we don't want things for free, we are loyal to our government, but the problem is affordability' (Interview, Daniels, 2003). For others the issue is embedded in the wider struggle against neo-liberalism. For all participants, mobilisation is about transforming needs into rights. This differs significantly in the second case which focused almost exclusively on a legal strategy, which became disempowering.

*(ii) The Steel Valley Crisis Committee.*

The Steel Valley Crisis Committee (SVCC) emerged in 2002 from action to indict ISCOR for their pollution of the groundwater of the Vanderbylpark area which had resulted in loss of livelihoods, and serious health problems ranging from kidney disease to cancer for 450 people. Initially it appeared to illustrate the capacity of environmental issues to overcome the racial and class divisions between victims such as the Matsepo and Cock families and unite their 'particularistic identities' in a common cause.

Strike Matsepo cashed his pension to buy a smallholding in the area and has lived there since 1993 but has now lost most of his livestock due to contaminated water. He says, 'It used to be a good place, but my 26 cows have died, 5 sheep and 6 goats, 3 tortoises, 1 pig, 3 dogs and 4 cats (Interview, Matsepo, 2003). Mr Matsepo himself is sick and his sister who lived with him has just died. He asserts, angrily, 'My sister would be alive now without ISCOR' (Interview, Matsepo, 2004). Strike Matsepo's sister had high levels of cadmium in her blood and scientific evidence has confirmed the presence of a number of other dangerous and carcinogenic substances in the groundwater.

The Cock family lived for 14 years on a smallholding on the edge of the unlined ISCOR canal carrying water to the dams. Mrs Cock states, 'We were a farming family and had goats, sheep, ducks, horses, geese, but they all died. Many animals were born malformed. We left when the whole family got sick, skin growths, emphysema and cancer. My one daughter has been diagnosed with three types of cancer. The doctors relate these cancers to the canal

water. As a youngster she played in it and we drank it. The ISCOR water has made all my children and my grandchildren sick' (Interview, Cock, 2004).

The SVCC was formed to mobilise the community and coordinate efforts to engage ISCOR, the courts and the government to deal with the pollution crisis. Actions included a protest march to ISCOR in 2001, picketing action at the WSSD conference and litigation. But this had no effect in changing the company's practices or in getting compensation. And pollution of groundwater continues.

The SVCC is an example of a failed struggle against environmental injustice. The main reasons for this failure was the power of ISCOR and the SVCC's reliance on a legalism which displaced social mobilisation. The collapse of the SVCC is part of the social disintegration of the entire Steel Valley community. This was previously 'a strong community' with social infrastructure in the form of shops, schools, churches and bus services, which have all now collapsed. Mr Matsepe was part of the 2002 protest, but, he says, 'there is nothing happening now. The people who organised the protests are no longer here. There is no money for travel in buses. We are waiting for the people to unite again. We are now ruined and hopeless' (Interview, Matsepe, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

These two struggles illustrate a number of themes: both involve legal strategies but the differences between the two demonstrate thin and deep levels of mobilisation. In the case of the SVCC the major flaw was a legalism that was disconnected from mass action. Secondly, the organisations demonstrate how environmental justice is embodied in many contemporary struggles, but they are not necessarily labelled as environmental justice struggles. Neither the pollution nor privatisation of water were framed as environmental justice issues. Both struggles were framed in terms of health and economic issues. The discourse is that of impacts on health or livelihoods due to the lack of access to clean water either because of pollution or privatisation. Both struggles are rooted in the growing contradiction between the discourse of rights and unmet needs in post-apartheid South Africa.

Both struggles illustrate globalisation from above and from below. Globalisation from above is evident in the international linkages of the corporations involved. In June 2004 the

Competition Tribunal approved the takeover of ISCOR by global steel giant LNM which operates in 22 countries and expected revenues to be worth more than fifteen billion dollars in 2004. The company installing the pre-paid water meters, Johannesburg Water, is linked to Suez, one of the 10 'global water lords' (Barlow and Clarke 2002: 109 - 112). The corporate interests in both cases used the law to suppress resistance. For example there was court action and gagging orders against both the ISCOR litigants and the Phiri resisters. However, while the Phiri protestors' actions were framed in heroic terms, as those of water warriors, the ISCOR litigants largely became depressed and demoralised. Both local struggles against powerful corporate interests attempted to link with international organisations, and in this sense they illustrate grassroots globalisation or globalisation from below.

Clearly the Coalition and the SVCC are part of significant new patterns of grassroots mobilisation that are emerging in post-apartheid South Africa which involve a mix of 'red' (social justice), 'brown' and 'green' issues. The anger and energy of these struggles generally comes from the crises experienced by poor, vulnerable communities without access to jobs, housing, land, clean water and sanitation. In this context it is unclear whether the notion of environmental justice could provide a platform to address these issues; a master frame with a unifying potential, a source of shared claims, demands and goals.

Perspectives on the capacity of EJNF varied, but most informants agreed that it was potentially the 'carrier' of a strong environmental justice movement in South Africa. . This is increasingly connected to a global justice movement which, according to Naomi Klein, is marked by 'two activist solitudes'. 'On the one hand international activists fighting issues which are not connected to people's daily experience', and on the other hand, 'thousands of community-based organisations fighting daily struggles for survival' (Klein 2002: 245). This conception parallels what Castells has described as two forces in the 'back alleys of society': 'alternative electronic networks' and 'grassrooted networks of communal resistance' (Castells 1997: 362). This is where he has 'sensed the embryos of a new society' (Ibid). In South Africa these two different kinds of networks are merging and providing powerful models of resistance to corporate globalisation. This could be part of the 'sea change from Marxian to Polanyian struggles' that Burawoy (2003) has pointed to; part of a Polanyian second movement in civil society, that could have great potential.

Such a movement is crucial. Corporations are driving the process of globalisation which is

widening inequalities throughout the world, and are doing so through the increasing commodification of natural resources. A focus on the role of corporations illustrates how environmental and social justice issues are indivisible. While the trajectory of the Steel Valley Crisis Committee exploded any romantic notion of a 'rainbow coalition', this chapter has argued that EJNF and other organisations constitute key nodes in a nascent environmental justice movement that is growing in terms of geographic spread, analytical depth, political impact and social cohesiveness.

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For reasons of confidentiality 5 informants are cited as anonymous.

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