

# Equity and the Environment: Rebuilding Green – Rebuilding Black

A Roundtable Interview by Jesse Clarke and Juliet Ellis

This round table interview was organized with the support of Paloma Pavel from Earth House and is part of an ongoing Sustainable Metropolitan Communities Network (See [www.metroequity.net](http://www.metroequity.net).) convened by Carl Anthony of the Ford Foundation to promote equity in metropolitan areas across the U.S.

## Participants

**Robert Bullard**, Director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia

**Don Chen**, Executive Director, Smart Growth America

**Ben Jesse Clarke**, Editor of Race, Poverty and the Environment

**Juliet Ellis**, Executive Director, Urban Habitat

**Paul Epstein**, Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School

**Michel Gelobter**, Executive Director, Redefining Progress

**Manuel Pastor**, Co-Director of the Center for Justice, Power and Community at U.C. Santa Cruz

**Paloma Pavel**, Earth House (Moderator, Co-Host)

**John Talberth**, Director of the Sustainability Indicators Project at Redefining Progress

**Lynn Wolf**, Advocacy Coordinator with the Center for Social Inclusion

**Ben Jesse Clarke:** New Orleans stands as an all-too-powerful example of what the future may hold if we fail to advance progressive alternatives to the ongoing planned disaster of current models of economic development. In looking at global economic situations, it is clear that we need to promote green economic development as a significant part of the solution, both for climate change and rebuilding, in the wake of disasters. **But how can this solution be integrated with historic equity challenges faced by low-income people in communities of color in the distribution of public and private resources?**

**Manuel Pastor:** Katrina ripped the veil on environmental inequity and differential responses in terms of disaster-readiness and recovery. While many people were surprised by the images on their television screens of people left stranded by a government that didn't seem to care, there was one group that was not at all surprised, both by the disaster, and by the lack of access to transit that had left people behind.

Environmental justice advocates, for years, had been looking at who was exposed to chronic risk, especially the kind of acute risk that comes with disasters, and what the differential responses of the

government was. We detailed that extensively in our report.<sup>1</sup> Because really, there are a set of small-scale Katrinas happening daily in many of our neighborhoods and communities around the country.

When Katrina happened, and the nation seemed shocked and surprised, it was an opportune moment to see whether something can be done on the issues of environmental equity, poverty reduction, and an eco-social approach to rebuilding.

**Robert Bullard:** The first disaster was the lethargic response from FEMA and the federal government. The second, more slow-moving disaster is the lack of



interest in addressing the institutional inequities. The reconstruction and recovery programs seem to be on a trajectory to repeat and compound the inequities and disparities that existed pre-Katrina.

When I started looking at how grants and SBA loans were being awarded, and insurance claims being settled (wind vs. water damage); and the reconstruction process itself, in terms of which neighborhoods were being targeted for rebuilding and which areas—formerly residential—were being designated as potential green spaces or allowed to revert to swamps, I could see clear discriminatory patterns.

This is not rocket science. “Low-lying areas” was code for areas that were inhabited largely by African Americans and poor people. Restrictions on the subsidies that would be available to people on fixed and low incomes, and the whole idea of promoting a smaller and upscale New Orleans is code for a whiter New Orleans.

The studies coming from the New York Times, the Rand Corporation and others, verify a lot of these things that I had predicted back in December in the article “Katrina and the Second Disaster: A Twenty-Point Plan to Destroy Black New Orleans” and it’s even more apparent now.<sup>2</sup>

When we look at the history of urban renewal or community development or eminent domain, in terms of slum clearance, it’s clear that these things have never been race, or class-neutral in this country. History has taught us that it repeats itself in a very negative way when it comes to people of color.

So we started to ask the question: To what extent will the new plans build on past inequities? In other words, people that were victims of discrimination and racial redlining before Katrina, will most likely be disproportionately impacted when these “plans” go into place.

**Juliet Ellis: Do you see a racial divide in environmentalist responses to Katrina?**

**Bullard:** A couple of the notions being bantered about were “green” building codes and “green” economics. Many of us, including myself, support this concept. We need to make sure that we create greener buildings and healthier communities. But at many of these “green” conferences called after Katrina, there were hardly any people of color. And when other people speak for us, they generally get it wrong.

Post-Katrina New Orleans has been described as the mother of all toxic cleanups. But there is no comprehensive cleanup plan for neighborhoods that were impacted by the contamination and there is no repopulation plan in terms of low-income and public housing, and even owner-occupied housing that was destroyed.

This is made possible by a political structure that was basically set up to disenfranchise black people. It’s about money and political power. By taking away the redevelopment money from the city and the elected officials, and routing it through the Louisiana Redevelopment Recovery Authority—an unelected, external body—they have taken away home rule and the sovereignty of the city.



**Lynn Wolf:** Look at what the EPA has said to these communities about the serious environmental risks from the soil. That it was bad before and they weren't dealing with it then, so they're not going to deal with it now. There's also some level of denial as to neighborhoods needing clean up. They're saying, 'It's safe to go back, but we wouldn't send our own children back there.'

**Epstein:** Just a quick point on the soil. It's full of fungus, toxins and oil. Floods foster fungi. Toxins are all over from the petrochemicals. And there's an oil spill the size of the Exxon Valdez—about 11 million gallons. And it's all in the wetlands and soils.

**Pastor:** Regarding the racial divide, I think this was yet another tremendous opportunity for the mainstream environmental movement to build alliances with the environmental justice movement. But there have not been as many close coalitions based on common interests as would be desirable.

**Ellis:** Many advocates see a long-range solution to climate change in a green economy. It can simultaneously reduce greenhouse gases and provide a just transition for workers in petroleum-based industries. Do you see a way for low-income and communities of color to participate in this economy?

**Epstein:** The cost of disasters is now up to \$225 billion, which is way more than the four billion dollars

that disasters were costing in the 1980s. The pace and magnitude of recent climate disasters have moved the financial community—I'm talking Goldman Sachs and J. P. Morgan Swiss Re—and they are looking for opportunities and the right political way forward. So we have some interesting friends to think about. Perhaps this can help to unite a movement of the Big Ten environmental organizations, and the environmental justice movement, and some parts of the economy that are scared shitless right now.

**Pastor:** Most progressives react to economic changes with notions of distribution and justice: "Can we get our share and make sure that it doesn't pollute too much?" This is good, but a major shift that needs to occur in our paradigm is thinking about the production side. We need to really develop an economic strategy that generates wealth and well being, and that is also environmentally sustainable. The hope of this discussion is that the move to a green economy actually create an economy that works, with basics like job training programs, transportation connections, and the whole equity agenda. The Apollo project is quite interesting in this regard, and we need more alternative economic models like that.

**Epstein:** Green job creation, and the economic stimulation it could bring, is being blocked by the oil industry. General Motors and Ford need to make some moves. Job creation, the climate, and fuel independence are all interrelated.

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**Bullard:** Sixty percent of the energy we use in this country is tied to transportation. Environmental justice, climate justice, and transportation equity are converging with the wider movements for social justice. We reject the idea of sending more of our people to fight wars for oil. Increasing numbers of people are ignoring the army recruiters.

**Clarke:** Many advocates for rational urban planning in the redevelopment of New Orleans support mixed income housing (for example, Smart Growth America's proposal states, "redevelopment policies must avoid the continued or further concentration of poverty.")

**How can mixed income housing policies be carried out without strengthening the hand of those who seek to decrease the concentration of black political power in New Orleans and other urban centers?**

**Chen:** I'm not sure if I have the answer to that question because it's a very complex one. Katrina showed us a place where poverty was incredibly concentrated, not by natural forces but by a federal policy towards recipients of housing aid. What can we do to change that?

One response has been a bill currently before the legislature, which makes inclusionary housing policies an option for local jurisdictions. But because Louisiana limits municipal powers to those explicitly

granted by the state (the Dillon rule), the cities have to have permission from the state to implement inclusionary housing.

I regard the inclusionary housing law as a positive development because without it there's really no guarantee that African Americans and low-income people will be able to get into those units.

Another positive development was Mayor Nagen's announcement that the city will open up the sale process for the 2,500 or so abandoned properties currently in its control. We would like to talk to them about working with nonprofit developers. However, the way the RFP is written allows developers to kind of pick the properties that they want to develop. It's more like a land rush.

**Wolf:** Part of what's helpful is to pull back a little and think, not so much about mixed-income housing, but about what it means to create opportunities that give people choices. What structures need to be in place to ensure that excluded communities are connected to opportunities and have meaningful choices about where and how to live, in terms of schools, jobs, and access to public transportation?

Mixed-income housing is probably one of those ingredients, but it's obviously not the only thing. As Bob has mentioned, we can look back in history and see how those policies have often failed, because we haven't had in place the other structures to ensure that the policies actually benefit the intended people.

For example, we have to prevent the creation of



eligibility barriers to newly redeveloped housing. People shouldn't be forced into mixed-income housing but be given an informed choice. What's more, mixed-income housing needs to be provided in communities that are rich in opportunities.

**Ellis:** Low-lying areas of New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf Coast are likely to be some of the first lands that will be submerged in the event that climate change continues to raise sea levels and increase storm strength.

**How can equity advocates best defend the rights of poor, predominantly black communities to resettle where they choose to, without exposing them to another round of contamination, disaster, and displacement?**

**Bullard:** I think a lot of the solutions really lie in addressing centuries of institutionalized discrimination as it plays out in housing and school locations, land use decisions, industrial facility siting, etc. And I think we could resolve some of the environmental and land use issues overnight, without really addressing the other institutional barriers that often make certain populations vulnerable. When we talk about shoring up the levies and storm-proofing and hurricane-proofing, we must ensure that the benefit accrues through to all of the residents of those areas, and not only to those who happen to live on high ground.

This is a tall order, but these are communities that

historically have not been counted. The solution is to make sure that there are no throw-away communities or sacrifice zones. And the only way to do that is to eliminate the discrimination and the racial redlining by insurance companies and banking and lending institutions. Even when you solve the environmental problem, it is still possible for communities to be left behind economically because businesses and jobs and other amenities don't go into areas that are considered undesirable, even when they are not contaminated. All these things have to be worked into the framework beyond the sole notion of toxic contamination, because racism is toxic.

**John Talberth:** Let's take a look on those high ground areas, the exclusionary housing zones, to see the willingness of those people to move towards mixed-use housing. Given that people have really been touched by this tragedy, I think there's potential for responsible infill, mixed-use in some of the wealthier areas. It should be a first-choice for potential resettlement options, instead of being taken off the table right now.

**Pastor:** If past public policy had been focused on reducing the disparities in cancer alley in Louisiana, the government might have been treated with less suspicion when it said that the low-lying areas shouldn't be resettled for environmental reasons. The government has shown little evidence of caring about the environmental conditions of those who were living in those areas before. Why is it different now?

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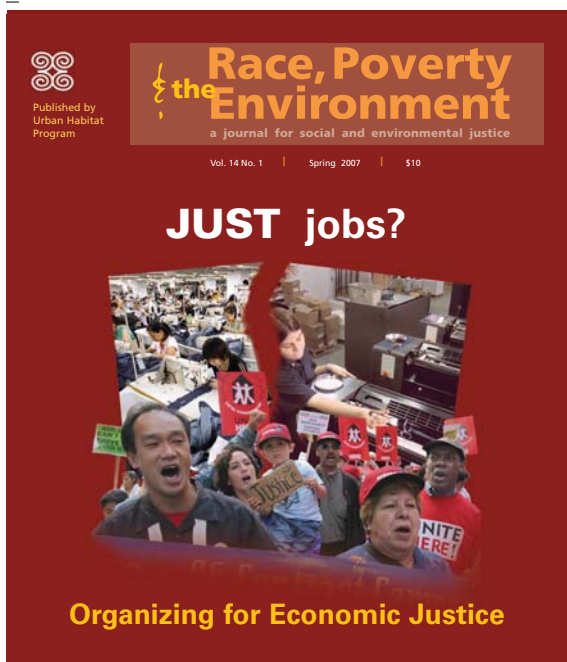
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