Achieving Environmental Justice in the UK:

A Case Study of Lockleaze, Bristol

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ABSTRACT

Despite a number of seemingly progressive Government initiatives, recent studies show environmental injustice continues to be a real and substantive problem in the UK. This case study focuses on one possible reason for this – the lack of inclusion of deprived communities in environmental decision-making. It uses a case study of Lockleaze, a deprived area of Bristol, drawing on findings from a literature review, participant observation and interviews with local activists.

The findings suggest that, though people in this particular community are interested and active on environmental matters, their achievements are limited largely as a result of the asymmetry of power in environmental decision-making ‘partnerships’. They seemed to have little influence over agendas and decisions and lacked access to environmental information. Useful policy responses to this would be to guarantee that local state agencies act in accordance with the expressed needs of people in deprived communities; to enforce the Aarhus Convention on environmental rights to information, consultation and justice; and to train relevant professionals in community approaches to enable them to work constructively with deprived communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to record my thanks to everyone who has contributed to this research, especially the members of Lockleaze Environment Group who agreed to be interviewed.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Please note that this research has been undertaken as an independent piece of work. The opinions and conclusions which it contains are therefore my own and should not be attributed to any organisation.
Achieving Environmental Justice in the UK: A Case Study of Lockleaze, Bristol

What do we need to do to achieve environmental justice in the UK? I set out to answer this question by studying my own community, Lockleaze, a deprived area on the outskirts of the city of Bristol, in the South West of England. Lockleaze is a fairly typical working class outer estate, facing the usual environmental issues associated with such areas – lack of access to healthy food, poor quality public space, transport problems, bleak visual appearance and lack of amenities. I have lived in the area for the last 15 years and been involved in many resident-led campaigns and projects to improve the local environment. However, our success in these efforts seemed to be blocked and I wanted to understand why this was and to find out how policy can help. The study took place in 2007, using methodological techniques of participant observation and interviews with local environmental activists.

Background to Environmental Justice in the UK

Although the UK does not yet have an environmental justice movement that compares with that of the US, over the last ten years the environmental justice debate has been steadily gaining momentum here (Eames, 2006). However, in contrast to the US, the discourse has focused more on socio-economic status than race and ethnicity. There is a large overlap of these factors in the UK, with 70% per cent of all people from ethnic minorities living in the 88 most deprived local authority districts (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Thus, whilst the

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1 The few specific studies about black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in the UK, show that hazardous waste sites do tend to be located in areas with a higher proportion of BME people (Walker, Fairburn and Bickerstaff, 2000) and that BME communities do not receive adequate attention to their
focus of most UK studies is on ‘deprived communities’, it is important to note that this will disproportionately affect black and other minority ethnic groups.

In 2004, a key study by the UK Sustainable Development Research Network (SDRN) concluded that ‘Environmental injustice is a real and substantive problem within the UK’ (Lucas et al., 2004). This confirmed previous research which uncovered many examples of environmental inequality, especially with regard to higher levels of pollution in deprived areas; fuel poverty; transportation inequities; and lack of access to healthy food and green space (DoE, 1996; DETR, 1998, 2001; Boardman et al., 1999; Donkin et al., 1999; McLaren et al., 1999; Agyeman, 2000; ESRC, 2001; FOE, 2001; Lucas et al., 2001).

Over the last 10 years, members of the UK Government have made a number of comments that indicate recognition of the need for environmental justice, though they have generally shied away from using the term, referring instead to ‘environmental inequality’, or ‘environment and social justice’ (Eames, 2006). They have since initiated a number of programmes which promised to tackle social and environmental problems together (ESRC, 2001). However there have been major criticisms that these programmes and initiatives have not delivered on the ground (Sustainable Development Commission 2003).

Previous studies suggest the reasons for this include: a lack of political commitment and resources (Church and Elster, 2002); problems with local Government organisation and resistance to change (ibid.; ESRC, 2001; Morpeth, 2000; Morris, 1999; Porritt, 2001); private sector need to maximise profits (Church and Elster, 2002); inadequacies in the tools and procedures for assessing and implementing environmental justice (ibid.; Walker et al., 2005); and environmental decision-making not involving those affected (ibid.). Of
these factors, I have chosen to focus here on the issue of the lack of involvement of deprived communities in environmental decision-making. This is increasingly being recognised as fundamental to environmental justice (Bloomfield et al., 1998) and my own community experience seemed to confirm this.

Despite the UK Government’s espoused commitment to public involvement, evidence from the UK shows that the perspectives of disadvantaged communities have rarely been incorporated into environmental planning, policy or decision-making (Evans and Percy, 1999; Brown, 2000). There seems to be a prevalent view that disadvantaged people, themselves, are to be blamed for this because they are unable to objectively engage, are unwilling to get involved in decision making processes and are somehow passive and not interested in local issues (Burton, 2003). Some studies support this view, suggesting that people living on low incomes are not interested in, and are even apathetic about the environment (Greenbaum, 1995; Witherspoon and Martin, 1992; Mintel 1991). These findings have usually been explained according to the ‘post-material values thesis’ (Inglehart, 1990), which suggests that poorer people are too preoccupied with meeting their basic needs for food, warmth and security to be able to think about, or be active on, environmental issues.

However, there is now a growing body of evidence which is challenging this view, suggesting that the affect of demographic factors on environmental attitudes has been exaggerated and misrepresented (Buttel, 1987; Jones and Dunlap, 1992). In general, there is evidence of high levels of sustained community activity in disadvantaged areas of the UK (Dinham, 2005). However, people in deprived communities need to see results in order to sustain motivation (Brown, 2002; Burningham and Thrush, 2001) and want to work on their own agendas rather than those imposed on them (CDP, 1977). A number of
studies have raised questions about the public participation processes. For example, whether the participation is genuine; whether those that do participate represent a broad spectrum of the public; and whether these are in fact no more than rituals designed to satisfy legal requirements (Brennan et al., 1998; Fitzpatrick, Hastings and Kingtea, 1998; Eames and Adebowale, 2002). Evidence from the UK shows that local people’s experience of participation has not been enjoyable or empowering (Berseford and Hoban, 2005; Dargan, 2004). There are also recognised problems around how statutory, commercial and voluntary agencies interact with local communities (Eames and Adebowale, 2002). For example, Lowndes et al. (1998) report the anxieties of officers and members of local authorities with regard to greater public involvement. There is an attempt to galvanise people into a sense of responsibility for delivering targets set by Government or local authority, rather than responding to local concerns (Dinham, 2005). In addition, local people in deprived communities are engaged in prescribed ways, such as being expected to sit on organisational bodies like Neighbourhood Renewal steering groups (ibid.). Duncan and Thomas emphasise the need for a change in institutional cultures to address the asymmetries of power that exists in ‘partnerships’ between local people and others (1999).

This imbalance of power could possibly be partly addressed through the support of outside environmental agencies. However, though a few environmental NGOs in the UK, particularly Friends of the Earth, have now incorporated the concept of environmental justice into their campaigns (FOE, 2002), most mainstream environmental agencies in the UK do not pay attention to equalities issues (Jeffries, 2005). In addition, people in deprived areas do not join environmental organisations because of their lack of local presence and

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2 Dargan reported how residents in Newcastle viewed participation as ‘a battle, a struggle against authority’ and described going to meetings as ‘lambs to the slaughter’ and having to get very angry in order to avoid ‘colluding in our own oppression’ (2004: 13).
accessible information (Burningham and Thrush 2001).

Thus, a review of the UK literature shows that, though the policy context for environmental justice is generally positive, there are numerous barriers to implementation including inadequate and inappropriate community involvement.

**Primary Research**

The primary research that I undertook in Lockleaze looks further into the issue of resident involvement in environmental decision-making. Lockleaze residents were interviewed between July and August 2007; all members of Lockleaze Environment Group (LEG)\(^3\). This research data has been triangulated with participant observations, to provide context and detail.

**Background information about Lockleaze**

Lockleaze is an outer city estate in Bristol with multiple indicators of deprivation (ODPM, 2004)\(^4\). Part of the ward is one of the 10% most deprived areas of England (BCC, 2006a). There is a high concentration of disadvantaged groups, such as older people, minority ethnic people, disabled people and people living on low incomes (ibid.). A large proportion of residents (34%) live in houses rented from the City Council (ONS, 2001). Particular problems in the area are unemployment, high levels of road accidents, poor health, low levels of educational attainment and lack of facilities (ONS, 2001; BCC, 2006a). Life expectancy is two years less than the Bristol average and six years less than the

\( ^3 \) There were 70 members of the group at this time and there are now around twice that number.

\( ^4 \) These indices of deprivation consist of 7 aspects of deprivation: Income deprivation (I); Employment deprivation (E); Health deprivation and disability (H); Education, skills and training deprivation (S); Barriers to housing and services (B); Living environment deprivation (L); and Crime (C). (ODPM, 2004)
wealthiest wards in Bristol (DOH, 2006). There are very few shops in the area and little provision of fresh, healthy food (LNT, 2006). Most people have to go out of the area to shop, yet 32% of people have no car or van (ONS, 2001). In general, there are few amenities in the area, providing little opportunity for people to meet and consequently high levels of isolation (LNT, 2006). In recent years Lockleaze has lost a number of facilities including the local Area Housing Office, the secondary school and a primary school. The area does have more than the average amount of green space for Bristol (BCC, 2005), however, but most of this space has no trees, landscaping, play facilities, seating or any other facilities.

In 2002, Bristol City Council prioritised Lockleaze, along with ten other neighbourhoods, for action under its Neighbourhood Renewal strategy. The stated aim was ‘to **close the gap** in quality of life between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of Bristol’ (emphasis in original) (Bristol Partnership, 2007:1) and to address economic, social and environmental factors in an integrated way (Bristol Partnership, 2004:7).

A Neighbourhood Renewal Steering Group was set up for the Lockleaze area to drive this process, to include residents, statutory agencies, voluntary agencies, businesses and other local stakeholders. In 2005, I was employed part-time to organise the Lockleaze community market and I joined this Steering Group at that time. I then discovered that there were only two other Lockleaze residents on this group (NR, 2005 – 2007). In the course of attending the group meetings, I became aware that major changes were happening in Lockleaze, seemingly without the knowledge or consent of the people living there. After passing this information on to other residents, we decided to set up the Lockleaze Environment Group to protect and improve the green spaces in Lockleaze; ensure appropriate environmental services and secure equal access to environmental
resources. The following examples from my participant observation experience illustrate how environmental injustice occurred in Lockleaze at this time, in the sense of ‘procedural justice’ i.e. the lack of ‘access to environmental information, participation, and decision-making’ (Adebowale, 2003). Though there are numerous examples that are discussed in my original study, I will focus on just two here: Lockleaze Community Market and Trees for Lockleaze.

**Lockleaze Community Market**

Members of the Lockleaze Environment Group (LEG) and other local residents were key to setting up and running this market (LCM, 2005 - 2007). The original aims were to meet the local demand for more accessible healthy food and other goods; to stimulate the local economy; to create a more positive and vibrant area; to build the community and increase social contacts; to encourage people to use local shops, walk and use the car less; and to build self esteem and confidence (LNT, 2006). Neighbourhood Renewal agreed to fund the initial markets and a business plan was drawn up to identify how the market would run for the following years. A market management group was formed to steer the project, consisting of myself, as market development worker; volunteer residents and traders; and four paid professional workers: the Neighbourhood Renewal facilitator, the community development worker for Lockleaze, the development worker for Lockleaze Neighbourhood Trust and the health promotion worker for North Bristol Primary Care Trust⁵.

The markets ran successfully with good attendance (LCM, 2005 - 2007). Around half the stalls were run by local people and included fresh, organic, locally produced food (ibid.).

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⁵ These are referred to as ‘professionals’ since their occupations could be considered to be highly skilled careers.
The market had also begun to be used by local residents to spread information and to help build several environmental campaigns. However, the professionals on the market management group suddenly decided to ‘review’ the market and took a number of decisions that residents and traders on the group opposed. We all felt these decisions would be detrimental to the market and would almost certainly lead to its failure (Bell, 2007a). The most problematic of these was the decision to move the market indoors, into a small building, and to stop applying for grants. These decisions were made without carrying out any financial projections or referring to the business plan that had been drawn up or the frequent market consultations that had been carried out. None of these changes were necessary as the market was completely within budget and fulfilling all its aims (LCM, 2006 – 2007).

These changes immediately led to a decline in the market attendance and number of stalls, yet the professionals on the management group persisted with this route, despite the protests of all the residents and traders in the group (LCM, 2007). Eventually, the last market was held on 19th May 2007 and the market was closed without any explanation for the decisions taken.

**Trees for Lockleaze**

Residents in Lockleaze had been campaigning for more trees in the area for a number of years and had collected several hundred signatures in a petition for ‘trees for Lockleaze’. Then, Lockleaze Environment Group (LEG) found out, by chance, that a private company (Grounds for Change - G4C) had been funded by Neighbourhood Renewal to carry out environmental work in Lockleaze (Smith, 2006). As they had not seen any outcomes from this, LEG asked if G4C would plant some trees in the communal areas. An agreement was made whereby G4C would plant and look after 200 trees if LEG found the money to
LEG did not know at this stage that G4C had received a substantial sum (£100,000) for the Lockleaze area so they applied for funding for trees and were eventually awarded £1,000 from Neighbourhood Renewal. However, G4C then backed out of the agreement (2007b). LEG asked the Council to resolve the matter who responded by saying there could only be 26 trees and stipulated that they all be planted in one place (Bell, 2007c). Most of these trees would replace trees that were dieing anyway. Lockleaze Environment Group was forced to agree to this as they were told the grant would be withdrawn if they did not go along with the Council’s proposal (ibid.). Then, five days before the planting was to happen, the Council said there would be no tree planting at all (Mond, 2007). LEG did not see any results from the £100,000 given to Grounds4Change and the City Council refused to investigate the spending.

Interviews with Lockleaze Environment Group Members

This section provides a brief summary of the research findings from semi-structured interviews with members of the Lockleaze Environment Group. As might be expected from members of an environment group, all the respondents felt very strongly about the environment, both locally and globally, and most of the participants were very well informed. Although the people interviewed did feel responsible for improving the environmental situation locally, some felt that that the government should be doing more. For example, one interviewee said ‘It is important that we do our bit but what we do locally is really just a drop in the ocean…The Council could provide solar panels to everyone but spending money on wars abroad and Trident missiles means you can’t do that’ (Respondent A).
Motivation and Activism

Everyone had been active in some way to help the environment. This activism ranged from talking to other people about local issues, to starting petitions, campaigning in the local elections, attending meetings, making funding applications for Lockleaze, and distributing leaflets. There were costs to the individuals, particularly loss of time that could have been spent on hobbies, family and home. Some people also found that their involvement had caused them emotional strain and expressed feelings of anger, anxiety and despair as a result of the frequent disappointments, frustrations or disrespectful treatment they had encountered in the course of these activities. One resident who had been involved in some of the consultation meetings with the Council said: ‘Local people are just disillusioned. They’ve been promised so much...Disappointment is the main reason I don’t go [to the meetings] any more. I can’t get anything done. I feel very frustrated. My voice doesn’t seem to carry any weight’ (Respondent E).

Environmental Policies

There were many complaints about the environmental policy and practice in the area regarding all the issues that were described earlier. However, the strongest complaints were about the new recycling scheme (although everyone wanted there to be recycling they weren’t happy about the way it was being done); the building programmes and threatened loss of green space; and the closure of the market.

Consultation

All of the participants felt that there was generally a lack of consultation and that, when consultation did occur, it was usually rather tokenistic. Those interviewed were often
confused as to why decisions were made, and felt that the real agenda was never
discussed openly. They sometimes felt manipulated or forced to comply because of an
imbalance in power, an indicated by the following comment: ‘There’s a lot of muddying the
waters that goes on so you can’t really follow what’s happening. They don’t follow the
processes they are supposed to or reply to things. You just end up getting confused and
give up’ (Respondent P).

Lack of information

One of the main difficulties in the community being able to put forward a strong voice
seems to be the lack of information. People are largely unaware of what is happening
because the local newsletter (‘Unlocked’) does not inform people of important issues.
There was a lot of reliance on LEG to pass on information. However, this group has no
resources and so everything has to be done voluntarily.

Professional Attitudes

Participants seem to have generally had a positive view of the professional workers to
begin with, which sometimes soured with experience. A lot of anger was expressed with
regard to the unfairness of a situation whereby the professional workers made the
decisions which affect the community and yet they don’t live here. A number of people
also complained about the high turnover of workers and the lack of quality professionals
working in the area:

Communication

Apart from the point repeatedly being made that people felt they were not listened to, they
also felt there were few, and increasingly less, mechanisms for communication. There
were also complaints about Council departments not talking to each other and not receiving replies to letters or complaints. As one interviewee said, ‘There’s no mechanism for getting your voice heard about the problems that we are experiencing in this area. There’s nothing at the moment, except for vague promises that there’s going to be some way of participating in the future’ (Respondent G).

**Successes**

Despite all the difficulties of struggling for environmental justice in the area, most participants could identify some successes. In the process of trying to make the changes, they had got to know more people and felt more involved in the area. There was a feeling that the community were becoming stronger and starting to be respected a bit more. People seemed determined to continue to get noticed and were not ready to give up, even though they were tired: ‘It’s hard work and tiring but I am impelled to do it. I couldn’t just sit back and let things happen that are so damaging. I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night. Now I can sleep but it’s an exhausted sleep’ (Respondent J).

**Summary and Conclusion**

Since this research was carried out, Lockleaze residents continued to press for an independent investigation into the community market and the organisation, Grounds4Change, but without success. Lockleaze Environment Groups campaign for justice included lobbying the Neighbourhood Renewal Steering Group, the liberal-democrat local Councillors, the Neighbourhood Renewal Manager and, eventually, the Leader of the City Council. The response to these efforts included ignoring our letters,
denying us information and suppressing debate (Bell, 2006). The local press ran some stories but eventually came down on the side of the City Council who argued that the tree planting was merely being delayed and the market had not been viable. In the midst of this, it was revealed that the Council were planning to turn the Lockleaze allotments and other green spaces into large scale housing developments. LEG then turned their attention to these issues and did not have the capacity to continue with their campaigns around the market and the trees. When the City Council leadership changed hands from liberal-democrat to labour, LEG received a message to say our complaints would be investigated and taken seriously. We subsequently received a short and unhelpful report attempting to justify the actions of the Council employees (McKay, 2007). However, the Council decided to scrap the Neighbourhood Renewal scheme in March this year, throughout Bristol, and eventually agreed to plant the 26 trees. Grounds4Change lost their City Council funding but continue to work as a private company.

This research showed that, though the UK government now recognises the need for environmental justice and has initiated a number of relevant programmes and strategies, there are substantial problems in delivering these programmes. It does not seem to be the case that people living in this deprived community are uninterested in the environment and unable or unwilling to effectively engage in the decision-making process. My own experience as a participant observer strongly suggests that residents have been keen to engage but the participation processes that they encounter are rarely meaningful, relevant, accountable or empowering.

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6 For example, when LEG requested that there should be a discussion about the funding for G4C at a Neighbourhood Renewal Steering meeting, we were told by the Neighbourhood Facilitator that we would not be allowed to do this (Bell, 2006).
One interpretation of the environmental injustice shown here, drawing on Duncan and Thomas’s work mentioned earlier (1999), is that it reflects an asymmetry of power in environmental decision-making between residents and agencies. The Lockleaze case study seems to indicate little willingness on the part of local agencies to shed or share power. The Lockleaze Neighbourhood Renewal ‘partnership’, for example, could arguably be seen as being less about enabling the community to press for better services and more about legitimising Council decisions and managing the community. This clearly works against the achievement of environmental justice and there is an evident need for a more democratic environmental decision-making process.

A useful policy response to this situation might be to guarantee that local state agencies act in accordance with the expressed needs of people in deprived and disadvantaged communities. This would ensure that appropriate environmental policies were developed for these areas. In terms of practice, there needs to be greater recognition of the need to work with communities on their own terms, starting with issues of concern to local people. There is also a need for a shift in the institutional cultures of partnership organisations so that deprived communities do not have to fit in with agendas and processes that are alien to them. This links to a need to educate professionals working in partnership organisations so they develop more constructive, respectful and co-operative attitudes to deprived communities to enable them to respond more positively to the demands of local people. There is also a need for effective community development in the area and more support from other environmental activists and environmental organisations.

It is also important that the mainstream environmental movement becomes more socially inclusive and represent the environmental concerns of all sectors of society. Activists
working on environmental justice are now hoping that the new environmental legislation, originating in Europe and now applying in the UK, will enable successful challenges to environmental injustice (Capacity Global, 2007). The Aarhus Convention 7 and the UK Human Rights Act 1998 8 are the two main pieces of legislation that could be used. According to the Aarhus Convention (1998), public authorities are now obliged to proactively disseminate environmental information and to enable citizens to influence programmes, plans or projects relating to the environment (Aarhus Convention 1998). It is important that local Government workers are aware of this new legislation and actively work on enforcing it.

Environmental justice will become a more and more prominent issue as resources become scarcer and waste products more problematic. The UK is currently a ‘pariah state’ in terms of global consumption of raw environmental resources and production of waste. Significant change is undoubtedly necessary. UK environmental policy and practice must be rooted in a sound democratic ethos in order to achieve environmental justice within and beyond the UK.

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7 The Aarhus Convention is a Treaty of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). It is now enforceable binding law in most member states of the EU, including the UK. With effect from June 2007 all institutions, bodies, offices or agencies of the EU will have to comply with the provisions of the Convention (Capacity Global, 2007).

8 There are three particularly relevant articles in the UK Human Rights Act: the Right to Life (article 2); the Right to respect for private and family life (article 8) and the Prohibition of Discrimination (article 14).
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