

## Bridging the Communications Gap: An Alternative Approach to Achieving Environmental Justice

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**E**nvironmental justice is a very important issue for the reproductive health of women of color. There are many legitimate concerns that need to be addressed regarding the impact various industries and operations have for women of color. The relationship between industry and the community has, at times, been very contentious over the years, creating a spirit of distrust on both sides of the issue. This distrust has impeded much needed progress on environmental justice issues. If there is to be any increased success in the future, it is imperative that the impacted community and industry find a way to bridge this trust gap and begin working together toward a solution and improved conditions.

Communities have a right to demand environmental justice from industry and to hold those companies accountable that do damage. Many companies in industry have made improvements and instituted environmental justice programs and initiatives. Others have a long way to go. If industry wants to avoid or minimize negative interactions with community, they would do well to engage with the community and work with them in a co-operative manner.

But the same is true for the community. There are more ways to accomplish environmental justice besides the use of antagonistic tactics. There is an old saying that one can catch more bees with honey than with vinegar. While communities that have been damaged often have a right to be angry and distrustful, it is still important to channel that energy into constructive action. Part of that action can and should include partnership opportunities with industry on scientific research, on impact of operations on community, technological advancements, and mitigation measures.

It may seem counterintuitive for communities who have been discriminated against, harmed or put at risk of harm from industries to form partnerships with them. But it may prove just as effective, or more so than protests, boycotts, and litigation. Likewise, if industry wishes to see a reduction in antagonistic tactics from the community, then industry should be more open and transparent in their operations and be willing to work with the community. These actions must also be self-initiated. If negativity is the only thing that motivates industry to institute environmental justice measures, then negative tactics are the only actions the community will utilize. Trust must be earned and that does not happen with secrecy, avoidance, or dismissive attitudes toward impacted communities. Industry must demonstrate its sincerity with tangible activities that represent real and substantive change.

On the other hand, communities may be suspicious of company attempts to reach out to them and work cooperatively. While there is nothing wrong with healthy skepticism, when industries attempt to reach out to and work with the community, it is in the community's interest to keep an open mind and find a way to make the situation work. Nobody wins when each side stands at extremes and refuses to come together and talk. Both sides need to educate each other about their side of the issues. Obviously, some environmental justice problems between industry and the community are irreconcilable and may never be resolved. But for those problems that can be resolved, both sides should make an effort to try. While talking may not convert the opposition, talking can result in incremental relationship improvements that increase trust, thus potentially allowing both sides to achieve their environmental justice goals.



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