

Strategizing for the Future: Exploring Community-Rooted Action in Developing a Just Transition for a Healthier Richmond

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Objective

To explore how Richmond, California is creating a pathway toward a just transition and what it looks like.

- How are grassroots groups and other stakeholders strategizing to develop resilient and thriving local clean energy and a healthy community?
- How are these strategies being implemented? What voices are heard and included in the development of a new green economy and which ones are left out?

Introduction

What is a “Just Transition?”- A shift from an extractive and exploitative economy to a local living economy that supports the well-being of families, empowers people, cleans the environment and creates safe and healthy neighborhoods.

Communities of color have been historically overburdened by pollution and its health consequences. Richmond, a city in the San Francisco Bay Area, is an example of such a community. It has faced a legacy of environmental racism and economic disinvestment for decades. The city is home to a Chevron oil refinery, the largest polluter in the area and emitter of greenhouse gases in the state of California. The refinery processes 240,000 barrels of oil per day. According to the 2010 Census, 82.9 percent of the city’s residents are people of color. The city also has the most economic segregation and concentrated poverty in the Bay Area. Poverty has generally been associated with poorer health status and shorter life expectancy. Children in Richmond are twice as likely to have asthma as compared to children in the rest of the state, and there are higher rates of low birth weight babies, cancer, and respiratory illnesses. Extreme levels of pollution have led to severe consequences in air quality, public health, and safety.



Materials and Methods

My methods for conducting this research focused on (1) Participant-Observation-I volunteered with *Communities for a Better Environment*, one of the two environmental justice anchor groups and attended meetings, public hearings, events, and conferences connected to the development of a just transition (2) conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews focusing on the role community members, grassroots organizers, and local government officials play (or do not play) in the development of a sustainable economy—what, why, when, and how (3) Analyzed secondary resources to gather background information from “grey literature” including pieces written by think-thanks (4) Looked at media and public press in order to stay aware of current news and observe the ways in which the just transition narrative was being told.

Results

Community leaders who are on the frontlines of pollution themselves are the ones developing innovative solutions to environmental injustice by considering the intersection of labor, health, business, housing, and community in order to build a just transition. Community members are seeking to build a people-powered cooperative economy that puts residents back to work with sustainable, living wage economies. They are creating new models of development and resource allocation to bring fundamental changes to economic and social institutions to promote a healthy, green, just community. Some example of these initiatives include:

Energy Equity-

The transformation of the low-income, community of color into a priority investment area for green buildings, green technology and green energy installations. The goal is to have renewable energy and energy efficient buildings so that communities will be able to produce and distribute their own power. Currently all Richmond residents are automatically enrolled in the Marin Clean Energy Community Choice Aggregation program. MCE is a public, non-profit electricity provider that gives customers the choice of having 50% to 100% of their electricity supplied from clean, renewable sources such as solar, wind, bioenergy, and hydroelectric.

Urban Farming-

Urban Tilth, a Richmond-based non-profit organization that focuses on food justice, has taken on the challenge of attempting to build capacity to produce 5% of Richmond’s own food supply. The organization hires and trains residents to work with schools, community-based organizations, government agencies, businesses, and individuals. Their model creates jobs and opportunities for collective learning. By developing “home grown experts” they are able to teach local residents about the relationships among food, health, poverty, and justice.



Participatory Budgeting-

PB is a different way to manage public money through a democratic process in which community members decide how to spend a part of a public budget. This provides local communities the opportunity to make budget decisions through an annual cycle of meetings and voting. The process would include (1) residents brainstorming spending ideas (2) budget delegates developing proposals based in these ideas (3) residents voting on proposals (4) the government funding the top projects. After funding the process starts again and PB ultimately becomes part of the way the government works. This system would result in stronger relationships between government, organizations, and residents.

Green Jobs-

It is vital to support workforce development programs that offer coursework and training for emerging green industries. Richmond BUILD in particular provides job skills training to support growth of green industries. Its Pre-apprenticeship Construction Skills and Green Jobs Training Academy allows Richmond residents to obtain skills like solar installation and carpentry in a 16-week program, and afterwards helps place graduates in the local green industry.

Government for the People-

Until recently, Richmond was considered a company town. Chevron held seats at the city council while not hiring locally, being the number one polluter, not paying its fair share of taxes and running its refinery with thousands of corroded pipes ready to explode, like what happened in August of 2012 when a large-scale fire sent 15,000 people to local hospitals. A progressive movement was organized to challenge leadership. Progressive candidates allied and pledged not to take a penny from corporations for campaigns. These candidates won are working to make sure the people’s priorities are taken seriously. This is a significant display of people fighting corporate money in politics in order to take back their city and strengthen political power for the community’s needs.

Bike Culture-

Rich City Rides is heading the bike movement in Richmond. The non-profit organization aims to create opportunities for the most vulnerable members of society to use cycling to improve health, economic stability and individual and collective capacity, while at the same time increasing the use of cycling for all community members as a sustainable social green mode of transportation.



Conclusion

Environmental injustice and climate change are some of the most urgent issues facing humanity today, and particularly low-income communities of color, in California, and across the globe. The “just transition” framework encourages solutions to be built from the ground-up. Richmond is building “just transition projects” that will revitalize the city by investing in community innovation and governance, while fostering local resiliency.

“We need to feel confident that we have the answers within ourselves and that we don’t need anyone telling us. We’re on the frontlines. We have a vision so we also have the solution”
—CBE Member

Envisioning what *can be* is vital to achieving a pathway toward a just transition. Richmond residents know their community the best and are in their right to dream and demand a healthier future. Community organizing is fundamental in bringing about change. It can also build the overall profile of environmental justice in statewide policy by educating decision-makers on environmental justice, cultivating champions on issues that matter, and finding ways to hold decision-makers accountable for the passage of more equitable environmental policy overall. California’s current regulatory system to address climate change—cap and trade—will not lead to the drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions that are needed to fight pollution and climate change. The system will not lead to air quality, public health, or local economic improvements in Richmond or other communities facing similar problems. While Richmond can contribute to making state and national government accountable, it has demonstrated that it cannot wait for change and is continuing to demonstrate ways in which it is creating its own alternatives.

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