Program Summary: Identifying Environmental Injustice in Maryland

One of the Association's key roles is to support members interested in topics related to community greening, sustainability, and environmental protection. Our programs with the Green Funders affinity group are cross-sectoral and examine the impact of environmental issues on community development, human health, or economic welfare.

On Wednesday, November 15, 2017, we discussed what happens when population vulnerability coincides with a pattern of pollution exposure and how such cases can be objectively identified. Without the ability to identify cases with objectivity, decision-makers shy away from allocating resources and investing in remedies, often perpetuating environmental injustice. To address this issue, the National Center for Smart Growth (NCSG) has developed a Maryland Environmental Justice scoring system tool.

To learn about the tool and how it can influence legislative policies, we were joined by **Dr. Sacoby Wilson,** an expert on community engagement and environmental justice at the University of Maryland School of Public Health, **Rebecca Rehr** of the Maryland Environmental Health Network (MdEHN), who is also a member of the Maryland Commission on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities; and **Dan Engelberg** of NCSG.

> A key outcome of these programs is to illuminate opportunities and action items that funders can take to signal their awareness of an issue and to take immediate steps towards having a deep and meaningful impact on its resolution.
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> As a result of the conversation, we make the following funder recommendations:
> - Join the Green Funders member affinity group.
> - Attend the Green Funders Planning and Sharing Session, January 25, 2018.

Program Resources:
- Prince George's EJ Screen Mapping Tool (page loads slowly)
- Baltimore's EJ Screen Mapping Tool (page loads slowly)
- MD Environmental Tool Presentation
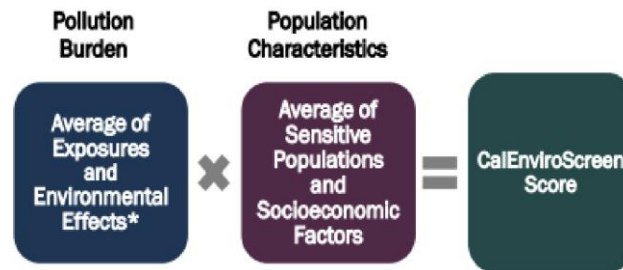
Remarks from Rebecca Rehr:
- We must clearly define how we measure environmental justice and identify vulnerable populations and communities in order to address environmental injustice. Lack of ability to provide objective assessments continues to allow legislators to avoid taking action.
- We need to consider what the indicators for progress should be and how we are going to measure them.

- Health Enterprise Zones (HEZ) are tracked by zip codes rather than census tract, which leads to data management challenges. Additionally, HEZ do not take environmental indicators into account.
- Zip code and county level data are not adequate for analyzing data. In Baltimore City, there is a difference of 20 years in life expectancy between neighborhoods. Though Maryland has the highest median income in the US, the use of data (median average used here) masks tremendous disparity throughout the state.
- There is no state in the US that can provide a roadmap for creating a state level mapping tool to measure this data. However, CalEnviroScreen was a significant resource in the making of the NCSG mapping tool.
- Putting more pressure on states is necessary. Mapping is a critical tool that can demonstrate disproportionate impact and help community members and legislators alike understand the landscape.
- We have to move away from proving causation before taking action. This is hugely flawed: it puts onus on victims of environmental injustice and not perpetrators. Correlation, rather than causation, should be used in making determinations to take action.

Remarks from Dan Engelberg:
- The tool's origins are in the state's Climate Commission. State law requires Greenhouse Gas Plans to account for equity impacts of climate action strategies.
- Environmental Justice and Health are central concerns tied to mitigation strategies.
- The Town Creek Foundation provided funds via the Climate Commission to support health work.
- Center for Smart Growth teamed up with MdEHN to develop the Maryland Environmental Justice Screen tool.
- The screening tool was initially launched in Prince George's County and in the Bladensburg community.
- NCSG presented the tool to Bladensburg and received feedback. Supported by the University of MD Partnership for Action Learning in Sustainability program, students of Dr. Wilson are creating a tutorial video for using the tool.
- We did not use the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) environmental justice screening tool because we needed to be able to use local data in order to customize the tool for local concerns (e.g. pesticide use and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs)) and make it adaptable for state policymaking, but it and the CalEnviroScreen were helpful resources as we created this tool.
- Layers can be added or removed in the mapping tool as communities in Maryland define their environmental justice needs.

- The methodology for the scoring system is borrowed from CalEnviroScreen:

Questions/Discussion:

Comment: The term environmental justice is focused on climate, air quality, pollution, public health, but not access to opportunity.

    Response: Environmental justice is not just about "stopping stuff," but realizing a vision.

Comment: We often see people from different places in the same situations (in terms of environmental injustice) on opposite sides of the political spectrum. We need to take the jargon out of the environmental space so people can connect with one another.

Question: *The Fairfield neighborhood in Baltimore has toxins off the charts, but doesn't show up as particularly problematic on the map. Why is that?*

    Response: The population of Fairfield is fairly low. We need to consider how to include places that have pollution burdens without having population data. We must also think about locations where many people work but not necessarily live.

Question: *What drives the score in Baltimore?*

    Response: In Baltimore, there's a distinct matching overlay of environmental and socioeconomic factors.

Comment: The difference between census and zip code data could massively overstate or understate the concentration of pollution burden.

Remarks from Dr. Sacoby Wilson:

- We are providing quality assurance and quality control trainings and providing equipment to residents in burdened communities to report on environmental factors as part of an initiative called Citizen Science.
- Citizen Science educates, engages, and empowers members of the public to contribute their talents to advancements in science and technology through open collaboration.
- Citizen science approaches and mapping tools help deepen understanding and provide means for addressing environmental justice issues in overburdened and underserved communities.
- Environmental justice is all about resilience and community building.
- We should adopt the "precautionary principle," which implies that there is a social responsibility to protect the public from exposure to harm, when scientific investigation has found a plausible risk.