





A Community Based Outreach Strategy for Environmental Justice: The COELT Program in Florida

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This paper discusses and evaluates the Community Outreach Environmental Leadership Training (COELT) program in southeast Florida. The program provides environmental and leadership training to residents in low-income and minority neighborhoods in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. The goal of the program is to train a cadre of environmental leaders who will develop environmental consciousness and a greater sense of environmental stewardship and accountability in their neighborhoods. The program has been effective in raising awareness of environmental issues among minority and low-income residents, as well as increasing participation in environmental decision-making. This paper explores the reasons for the program's success and shows how other programs can benefit.

Introduction

After research in the mid-1980s and early 1990s showed that environmental regulation has disproportionate effects on minority and low-income communities, environmental justice has become an important aspect of environmental policy. However, most of the research on environmental justice issues has focused on past environmental injustices, while there is little or no literature on how to prevent the occurrence of new environmental injustices.¹ This paper attempts to address this void in the environmental justice literature by discussing the Community Outreach Environmental Leadership Training (COELT) program instigated by the Center for Urban Redevelopment and Empowerment at Florida Atlantic University (FAU-CURE).²

COELT is an environmental outreach program specifically targeting low-income and minority residents. The goal of the program is to establish a cadre of environmental leadership in southeast Florida that is informed about environmental issues and is able to get involved in environmental decision-making before environmental injustices occur. The basic premise of the COELT program is that the occurrence of environmental injustices can only be prevented by informing people about the consequences of environmental decision-making for their communities and providing them with the skills that they need to successfully participate in environmental decision-making. The program is different from most other environmental outreach programs in that it is not organized to receive input from minority and low-income residents on one particular environmental topic. Instead, COELT discusses a wide array of environmental issues as well as leadership skills that can help residents to organize themselves.

This paper starts with an overview of the emergence of environmental justice as an important policy issue, to show that the environmental justice literature has focused on the occurrence of past environmental injustices rather than the prevention of future injustices. It then briefly explains the need for minority and low-income residents to become involved in environmental decision-making in southeast Florida. After this, the paper explains the institutional organization of the COELT program, its contents and the results of COELT so far. This part of the paper draws on the personal experience of the author with the program, both as a coordinator and as one of the trainers. The paper concludes with lessons learned from the program and recommendations for similar environmental outreach programs elsewhere.

Environmental Justice

There is a substantial body of literature on the disproportionate impact of environmentally hazardous activities and the negative side effects of environmental regulation on communities with a high percentage of racial minorities. Although articles about environmental injustice date back to the late 1960s and early 1970s (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968; US EPA 1995), environmental justice did not become a major issue until 1982. In that year, more than five hundred people were arrested while blocking trucks loaded with PCBs in Warren County, a rural and predominantly Black county in North Carolina. Residents had been protesting the proposed siting of the PCB landfill for four years and finally resorted to civil disobedience. Although the landfill, in the end, continued to oper-

ate, the national media coverage of the events in Warren County focused the attention of both researchers and government agencies on the relationship between pollution and race (Lee 1993).

One result of the protest in Warren County was a study by the US General Accounting Office (GAO) concerning the racial and socio-economic makeup of four communities surrounding hazardous waste landfills in the southeastern part of the United States. The GAO found that three out of the four landfills were located in predominantly poor and black communities (US GAO 1983). Although the results were clear, the regional geographic scope was an important shortcoming of the GAO study, which made it impossible to generalize the findings to other parts of the United States.

The first comprehensive study about the occurrence of environmental justice was done four years later in 1987, when the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice published the results of a comprehensive national study of the demographic patterns associated with the sites of hazardous waste facilities. The study found that race was the single best predictor for the presence of a commercial hazardous waste facility in a community (United Church of Christ 1987). The study also found that it was difficult for minority communities to obtain information about environmental hazards. Finally, the study pointed out that although race is the single best predictor for the occurrence or non-occurrence of a commercial waste facility, there was a link between the economic situation in a community and environmental problems in general. The study con-

cluded that eliminating hazardous wastes in minority communities should be a priority at all levels of government.

Later studies showed that racial minorities were not only disproportionately impacted by landfills and hazardous waste facilities, but were in general exposed to higher levels of pollutants. In a national study of lead poisoning in children, the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (1988) found that, independent of social class factors, African American children were two to three times more likely than white children to suffer from lead poisoning. Other researchers found a relationship between air pollution and race, independent of social class variables such as income, education and occupational status. Gianessi, Peskin and Wolff (1979) performed a national analysis of the distribution of air pollution by income and race. Using data from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to calculate an estimated dollar amount suffered from exposure to air pollution, they found that racial minorities were much more likely to suffer greater damage from air pollution than whites at all income levels. In another national study, Gelobter (1992) used pollution exposure indices and found that over a period of almost fifteen years (1970-1984) racial minorities were consistently exposed to significantly more air pollution than whites.

Bullard (1992) and Taylor (1993), among others, have pointed out that it is impossible to achieve lasting solutions for environmental problems as long as environmental injustices persist. They argue that as long as it is possible to pass on the costs of environ-

mental pollution to a powerless group, most environmental legislation follows an "effects-oriented approach," in which harmful environmental effects are shunted from affluent areas to poor or disenfranchised areas. According to these authors, we need a source-oriented approach, in which it is not possible to pass the costs of pollution to others (Bullard 1992: 22; Taylor 1993: 54).

Although there is agreement about the occurrence of environmental injustices in most of the literature, there is little consensus about the reason. Some authors argue that minorities tend to be passive about environmental issues and do not typically get involved in environmental decision-making, which in turn makes it more likely that they will become the recipients of environmentally undesirable facilities (Hershey and Hill 1978; Kreeger 1973; Mohai 1985). Others argue that minorities are deliberately marginalized or altogether excluded from serious deliberations of environmental issues (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Bullard 1990; Vos, Sapat and Thai, 2001). Lazarus (1993: 820) found that policy makers seldom solicit the involvement of racial minorities on environmental planning and decision-making boards. Similarly, Vos, Sapat and Thai (2001) found in a study about solid waste management in northern Illinois that minorities were not involved in decision-making because they were simply never asked, nor informed, about the opportunity to get involved. Other researchers have found that white domination of environmental planning and decision-making bodies forms an invisible race and class barrier for racial minority involvement in environ-

mental decision-making (Bryant and Mohai 1992: 64; Bullard 1993: 19).

Even where attempts are made to involve minorities in decision-making, the timing, location and format of such deliberations or outreach can make the motives appear suspicious and untrustworthy to minorities. Checkoway (1981) demonstrated that notices in the legal section of newspapers, meetings held in locations distant from public transportation and during daytime/weekday hours, technical language in documents, and procedural rules for public hearings and meetings that constrain two-way communication worked against adequate representation of minorities in public participation activities. Some authors argue that the suspicion of “mainstream” environmental groups is grounded in historical precedence, particularly experience of “environmental racism” against minority communities (Bullard 1990, 1994; US GAO 1983; US EPA 1992). This sentiment was captured in a blunt statement by Gary Bledsoe, head of the Texas State Conference of the NAACP, who stated: “Find the smokestacks and you find the black community, pure and simple” (Rose 1998: 14).

Although there is disagreement about the reasons for the occurrence of environmental injustice, there is general agreement among researchers that there is a difference in participation levels between whites and racial minorities in environmental issues. In light of the marginalization of minorities from environmental policy processes, recent initiatives by governments at the federal, state and local levels have made citizen participation the launch pad of environmental decision-making, planning and remediation. For ex-

ample, the EPA in its 1997 strategic plan states: “Citizens are also taking a more active role in environmental decision-making—demanding a seat at the table as local, state and national issues are debated. Recognizing the value and potential of a well-informed and committed citizenry for affecting positive change, the Agency supports meaningful public involvement in environmental issues” (US EPA 1997b: 15). In its 2000 strategic plan, the EPA takes public participation a step further by not only explicitly acknowledging that certain people have traditionally been excluded from environmental protection efforts, but also stating that the EPA will increasingly have to rely on local initiatives. “We are committed to encouraging environmental action and stewardship more broadly throughout society and are working to make information widely available so others can understand and help solve environmental problems. Our efforts involve businesses and industry, but they also include individuals and organizations that have often been on the fringes of environmental protection efforts in the past” (US EPA 2000: 14).

Although there is a growing awareness that environmental agencies need to reach out to low-income and minority communities, they often lack experience in how to successfully do this. Interestingly enough, there is also not much literature on the topic.

Environmental Decision-Making in Southeast Florida

Environmental issues play a very important role in decision-making in southeast Florida. The area is extremely vulnerable to environmental degradation

because of its subtropical climate, its sandy soils and its shallow aquifer. Located on the eastern edge of the Everglades, the area is confronted with a fast-growing population and the negative effects of urban sprawl. Over the past decade, these circumstances have brought environmental issues to the top of the agenda of local, state and federal officials.

The most important current environmental initiative in southeast Florida is the \$7.8 billion Everglades Restoration Plan that has been submitted to Congress by the US Army Corps of Engineers. The plan encompasses an area of approximately 18,000 square miles, stretches from Orlando to the southern tip of Florida, includes sixteen counties and is home to 6.3 million people (US Army Corps of Engineers 1999: E15-18). The plan will not only have tremendous impacts on south Florida's ecosystem, but also on its communities, especially since it deals with the distribution of water among different stakeholders. Although the Everglades restoration plan is the most visible of the environmental issues in south Florida, there are other equally pressing issues:

1. Broward County alone has eight Superfund sites;
2. There are a total of two thousand brownfields in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties;
3. Biscayne Bay, southeast of Miami, is seriously endangered because of overuse and pollution;
4. Beach erosion requires continuous and expensive renourishment programs;

5. The coral reef of the Florida Keys is declining because of nutrient enrichment, boat anchoring and sewage problems; and

6. Exotic species are threatening the continued existence of all ecosystems in southeast Florida.

With the exception of the cleanup of one particular Superfund site, the participation of minorities in decision-making related to these environmental issues has been minimal. However, that does not mean that minorities are unwilling to participate in environmental decision-making. Although many minority residents are not aware of the issues nor the consequences the decisions regarding these issues might have for them, the lack of participation by minorities is at least partly because local officials have not actively reached out to minority residents. For instance, public hearings for the Everglades Restoration Plan were held in predominantly white neighborhoods lacking public transportation, and the two-day public meetings of the Governor's Commission for a Sustainable South Florida were held at expensive hotels. More subtle, but just as important, is the lack of positive images of minority residents in informational materials and the general focus of these materials towards a white audience.

The Center for Urban Redevelopment and Empowerment

The Community Outreach Environmental Leadership Training (COELT) program was developed by Florida Atlantic University's Center for Urban Redevelopment and Empowerment (FAU-CURE). FAU-CURE was established in 1992, following the receipt

of special funds from the Florida Legislature for Florida Atlantic University (FAU) to undertake community research and training activities. The Florida Board of Regents then formally established FAU-CURE as a type II research center. The center is responsible for such activities as applied research, community outreach, program design and evaluation, policy analysis and non-credit educational activities relevant for enhancing redevelopment and the quality of life in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods in the university's service area.

FAU-CURE's programs are based on the premise that minority and low-income residents must acquire the capacity to improve their situation themselves. Instead of giving residents ready-made solutions for the problems in their neighborhoods, FAU-CURE tries to empower residents by providing them with hands-on training programs tailored to their strengths and needs. FAU-CURE does not provide solutions, but offers training, workshops, facilities and computers to enable residents to make a positive change.

The COELT Program

The COELT program is based on increasing the understanding of environmental issues and the effects of environmental decision-making on everyday life in South Florida. It is designed to train a cadre of community residents to serve as spokespersons in their immediate and neighboring communities on environmental issues in southeast Florida, such as the Eastward Ho! initiative, brownfield redevelopment, the Everglades Restoration Project and other related environmental concerns. The reasoning is that

residents, rather than "unknown" and "not-to-be-trusted" technocrats/experts from public agencies, are more effective transmitters of environmental information in their communities. COELT is intended to ensure "quality control" in the information disseminated to communities and provide ongoing technical, research and other back-up support for the residents.

The COELT program is an intensive twenty-hour leadership training program that consists of an organizational session, a series of four four-hour-long training sessions and a field trip. Sessions are typically held on Saturday mornings or Friday nights. Table 1 gives a brief overview of the topics that are typically addressed in each session. For each group, the organizational session and the sessions about environmental justice and the state of the environment are similar in structure and content. The other two sessions and the field trip vary depending on the interests of the group.

The first COELT group was particularly interested in Superfund and brownfield sites and focused most of its attention on a local Superfund site. Additional readings on brownfield redevelopment, risk assessment and soil cleanup were distributed and a field trip was organized to the Superfund site. The second group was more interested in how they could contribute to a cleaner environment by making changes in their own daily activities. When the trainers found out that most of the group members had extravagant electricity and water bills, a considerable amount of time was spent on learning how to reduce these bills. Participants also did a home energy survey to

Table 1. Structure of COELT sessions

Session	Readings	Activities
Organizational	-COELT flyer	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Determine dates and location of sessions 2. Explain program 3. Determine knowledge level 4. Discuss topics and interests of participants 5. Decide on field trip
Environmental leadership and environmental justice	<p>Environmental justice: -Bullard, 1993 -US EPA, 1995</p> <p>Leadership: -Rosen, 1996 -Bryson and Crosby, 1992</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss history of environmental justice 2. Relate environmental justice to participants' personal experiences 3. Discuss general leadership issues 4. Show participants how they can organize their community 5. Discuss the role of different organizations and groups in leadership 6. Determine leadership roles in participants' communities
State of the environment	-World Resources Institute, 1998 -US EPA, 1997b	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give overview of state of environment 2. Discuss state of environment in participants' communities 3. Discuss basic environmental terminology 4. Use computers to look at local environmental conditions
Overview of federal, state and regional initiatives	-Kraft and Vig 1997 -Restudy overview -Eastward Ho! Overview -Governor's Commission on a Sustainable South Florida	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discuss historical Everglades 2. Discuss Everglades restoration 3. Visit websites about Everglades restoration 4. Explore local opportunities and threats
Environmental issues in urban areas	-US EPA, 1997b -Beatley and Manning, 1997	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Show video about Times Beach, MO 2. Discuss Love Canal 3. Do exercises about risk assessment 4. Discuss brownfields in tri-county area 5. Talk about sustainability
Field trip	Background material	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Invite speakers 2. Write paper about impressions for newsletter 3. Decide upon follow-up activities

identify specific sources of energy loss. Finally, the third group was most interested in Everglades restoration and land use. This group read additional materials about the Everglades Restoration Plan and participated in a day-long field trip to Everglades National Park.

The flexibility of the program requires the trainers to be well informed about a large variety of environmental and social issues in south Florida. The program has therefore relied heavily on faculty of FAU's Department of Urban and Regional Planning to perform the training. Faculty involvement not only brings additional knowledge to the program but also gives it credibility and stability. Furthermore, the faculty's willingness to participate in sessions during the weekends and at night emphasizes to participants the trainers' commitment to the program.

The COELT program is not just a free environmental outreach and education program. It requires a commitment from the participants to engage in follow-up activities such as the organization of conferences and contribution of articles for the COELT newsletter. People who are interested in the program need to apply and show that they are either active in their communities or willing to become active. At the same time, the COELT program makes it easy for participants to put their knowledge to use by supplying possible avenues of action. Besides the activities organized by the program itself, such as the newsletter and conferences, representatives of environmental organizations and government agencies are invited to give short presentations about opportunities for involvement.

COELT Participants and Funding

The first three training groups were funded directly by FAU-CURE. The first group of residents began the program in November 1998. Trainees for this group were recruited through a grassroots personal-contact strategy, in which informational material was sent to individuals in the community who had constituencies or networks to which they could spread the word about the program. Phone, mail and face-to-face contacts were made with individuals and groups to explain the program, its goals, process and expected outcomes. Since the aim was to start small with a handful of trainees, a response from eleven community residents who signed up for the program (nine from Broward County and two from Miami-Dade County) was a surprising but impressive number to inaugurate the program. Local media were used to publicize the program at the end of the first cycle of training, when it was clear that the program was off to a good start.

One of the members of the first group was affiliated with the Environmental Justice Committee of the Fort Lauderdale branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This led to a second training group that was put together by the NAACP Environmental Justice Committee. The second group began in May 1999 and consisted of eight participants: seven Broward County residents and one Miami-Dade County resident. Some participants in the first group also attended the second cycle, as occasionally did members of local chapters of national environmental organizations and local government.

Collaboration with the NAACP and a local minority-owned environmental consulting organization, Earthwise Productions, led to the formation of a third group of thirteen residents: two from Palm Beach County, two from Miami-Dade County and nine from Broward County. This group consisted of a wide variety of people, including both those with community activist experience and those who had never been active in decision-making. The fourth group began in February 2001, this time funded by the South Florida Community Urban Resource Partnership through a grant secured by one of the participants in the third group. A fifth group is expected to start in the summer of 2001 and will be funded by Weed and Seed in Miami. This group will be recruited by one of the first COELT participants who found funding to run the program in Miami-Dade County at the Weed and Seed facility.

Observations and Results So Far

The success of the COELT program has far exceeded the expectations of its founders. Graduates have become active in local organizations and committees such as the Sierra Club, the NAACP Environmental Justice Committee and the Everglades Ecosystem Task Force. Graduates have also successfully raised environmental issues in their neighborhood organizations and churches. The activities and commitment of the COELT graduates have increased the credibility of the program in the community, which in turn has led to outside funding for the fourth and fifth groups of the COELT program. The fact that the outside funding for both groups was initiated and

secured by COELT graduates of the first and third group is even more remarkable.

Graduates of the first and third COELT groups organized regional conferences on environmental justice and environmental issues in south Florida. Each of the conferences attracted over fifty people from local government agencies, neighborhood organizations, environmental groups and economic development groups. Since both groups strongly believed that youth should play an important role in environmental decision-making, high school students attended and gave presentations at both conferences. The presence of high school students resulted in a partnership with the Kids Ecology Corps, which not only secured partial funding from the South Florida Community Urban Resource Partnership for the fourth COELT group, but is now also working with planning students at FAU to write an environmental curriculum for students at Norland Senior High, an inner city high school in the City of North Miami.

In order to maintain momentum and help each other, the groups have taken on several initiatives. First, all COELT graduates are included on a mailing list that receives frequent updates about environmental issues in south Florida. Graduates not only receive reliable and up-to-date information about environmental problems but also about opportunities such as grants, conferences and tree planting programs. Graduates also frequently call each other for help with particular issues and inform each other of opportunities. The second initiative is a newsletter that is sent to all COELT graduates, local and regional government agencies, neighborhood organi-

zations and local papers. The newsletter is written and put together by COELT graduates and mailed out by FAU-CURE. Finally, the last COELT group organized a picnic for all COELT graduates and invited potential future participants.

Lack of trust was an issue in the beginning of the program, but when a rapport developed between trainers and trainees, this became less and less of a problem. The fact that COELT was organized by FAU-CURE was an important factor for the initial establishment of at least a basic trust. Over the years FAU-CURE has built a solid reputation in low-income and minority neighborhoods; this was an important advantage for the COELT program. Particularly important is that FAU-CURE is willing to partner, rather than compete, with local groups when applying for grants. Minority groups are distrustful of universities that march into their communities to “help” after receiving a grant. They rightfully believe that either they should have received the grant themselves or that they should at least be equal partners.

After the first group completed the program, both rapport and trust increased quickly, and trainers were invited to become members of the NAACP Environmental Justice Committee. Minority organizations also began to call, asking for information and advice. After three successful groups of COELT graduates, minority organizations have realized that COELT is a program that can help them organize themselves around environmental issues, provide training for their members and volunteers and is

willing to be an equal partner in any environmental activities.

Besides the affiliation with FAU-CURE, another important point in establishing constructive relationships with low-income and minority residents was the willingness of the trainers to participate and support activities organized by other groups. Trainers participated in meetings organized by environmental groups and neighborhood organizations, they became active in the NAACP Environmental Justice Committee and they helped to publicize events organized by other groups.

Conclusions

The COELT program is too young to be able to draw definitive conclusions, but based on the experiences so far, there are several important observations about the ingredients that are needed for effective environmental outreach.

First, outreach requires that a rapport exist between those transmitting and those receiving information. This may have to be cultivated at the start of an outreach program. The effectiveness of outreach is enhanced when based on, or emanating from, mutual trust and dialogue. With the COELT program there was no connection between the trainers and trainees prior to the start of the program, but the trainees had a pre-existing connection with FAU-CURE. During the program a good relationship between trainees and trainers quickly developed. This rapport was further cultivated by extracurricular activities during and after the sessions. The relationship between

trainees and trainers is particularly important for outreach programs to address when the outreach is focused on minorities. Minority residents are, rightfully so, very distrustful of outsiders coming into their communities telling them what to do.

Second, outreach implies that information of a certain or specific nature must be transmitted. The scope, flavor and configuration of the information, along with other elements discussed in this paper, determine the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of outreach. Information must be packaged in a manner that is comprehensible, easy to transmit and absorb, and relevant to the practical reference or value points of the population targeted by the information.

Third, outreach necessarily implies and requires that the dynamics of information exchange (sharing, learning, and application) occur between the transmitter and receiver of information. Outreach is essentially a multi-dimensional communication process where all the parties involved learn and broaden their perspectives by sharing information. The parties gain more, or better, insights into each other's positions on issues and, as a result, reconcile their differences while complementing each other's common viewpoints.

Fourth, outreach requires a systematic course of actions or steps that move the parties in an outreach process from where they are to where they want to be. Outreach cannot and should not happen by chance or accident, or as a desperate reaction to a sudden situation of environmental crisis, conflict or discord in the community. A set of coherent, system-

atic, sequential and synchronized measures must be engineered by some or all of the parties involved in an outreach process or program in order for the program to be effective. A related point is that outreach is most effective when it is ongoing. Continuity, monitoring, evaluation and reinforcement of an outreach process helps to build the relationship between relevant parties in the outreach process. Short-lived outreach is likely to self-destruct, while continuity in the outreach process helps to engender a sustained process of information exchange in a community.

Finally, in order for outreach to be ongoing, it is important to have good institutional support. The COELT program draws heavily on the time and expertise of FAU faculty and the resources and reputation of FAU-CURE. Funding has been a problem from the beginning and the program would never have been able to get off the ground without the financial support of FAU-CURE. Although funding seems to be less of a problem now that COELT graduates themselves are working to secure funding to continue the program, ongoing outreach requires a steady funding source and it seems unlikely that this could completely be secured by outside funding.

Endnotes

¹There are several case studies on citizen activism with regard to flagrant environmental cases such as Love Canal, Times Beach, South Chicago and uranium on Navajo Lands, but they are by definition narratives of events after an injustice has occurred, rather than discussions of methods to avoid the occurrence of new environmental injustices.

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