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Grassroots Voices in the Second Garbage War:

Social Equity and NYC's Latest Solid Waste Management Plan

Talia Groom

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There needs to be equality; we all need to share the burden. It's not by chance these things are in areas of color –City Councilwoman Melissa Mark-Viverito

There are only so many places in the city where you can site this type of thing because of zoning. These places are low-income communities that were overburdened then and are overburdened now- Gavin Kearney, director of Environmental Justice at New York Lawyers for Public Interest

In 2001, New York City closed its last landfill at Fresh Kills on Staten Island. Fresh Kills, the largest landfill in the world, received approximately 13,000 tons of primarily residential trash each day at the height of its operation.² While its closure marked the first time that the city would not be burying or burning trash within its boundaries, concerns and discussion over the management of municipal solid waste reemerged in the wake of Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki's decision over Fresh Kills. The closing of the city's final landfill follows a long history of conflict over garbage policy in the city, distinguished by political, economic and geographic implications. Land use decisions and demographic patterns in New York City shed light on the many voices and influences that merge to tell a story of uneven environmental costs and benefits.

¹ Kimberly Devi Milner, "Incinerators Will Foul the Air, Activists Warn," *Hunts Point Express*, June 22, 2012. (Both quotes were taken from this article).

² Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007), 112-113.

An account of solid waste management in New York City illustrates a contested debate over how and where to get rid of the city's growing trash volume. This conflict demonstrates urban land use politics and NIMBYism ('not-in-my-backyard') as it converges with voiced concerns from communities that have borne the greatest burden of changing garbage policies. As this narrative of post-Fresh Kills garbage politics will indicate, garbage handling has affected neighborhoods and groups unequally. The landfill's closure unleashed a new set of fears that old patterns of land use policy would result in the decisions on where to bring the waste that would have ended up at Fresh Kills.

Similar to the proposal and debate over the Brooklyn Navy Yard incinerator in the early 1990s—coined the “first garbage war”—the public discourse that emerged after the Fresh Kills decision illuminates the equity issues that were raised by communities in New York City that were tired of housing unwanted and pernicious land-use activities. In what we can term the “second garbage war” surrounding Fresh Kills, the grassroots actors have played an ever-expanding and active role in shaping policy discussions.

This paper intends to explore the social equity dimension of sustainability through the case study of solid waste policy in New York City. At the 2005 World Summit on Social Development, it was noted that sustainability must address environmental, social equity, and economic demands.³ These “3 E's” constitute the central pillars of sustainability. Both as a principle and in practice, social equity has often been neglected in favor of environmental and economic concerns. Julian Agyeman, an environmental social scientist, criticizes a range of theories that promote an “environmental stewardship

³ United Nations General Assembly, 60th session. *2005 World Summit Outcome (A/60/1)*. 15 September 2005: http://data.unaids.org/Topics/UniversalAccess/worldsummitoutcome_resolution_24oct2005_en.pdf

and sustainability agenda that currently influences the work of most environmental and sustainability organizations but has little to say about equity or justice.”⁴ In light of this exclusion of social equity, my study investigates how we can plan for and produce more equitable cities.

When considering social equity, I am referring to two ways in which this pillar of sustainability comes into play. First, I am interested in how we can mitigate environmental burdens that certain sectors of the population experience more acutely and simultaneously enhance the distribution of environmental benefits. In other words, I am interested in exploring social equity through an environmental justice framework. In addition to looking at how environmental costs and benefits are allocated in a city, social equity considers *who* is involved in the decision-making process of sustainability initiatives and *how* they participate. In this way, I examine changes in garbage policy in New York by analyzing equity in *process* and equity in *outcome*.

In order to study whether the planning process behind waste management in New York City is in accordance with this view of social equity, I evaluate the grassroots movement in the South Bronx that has emerged in response to Fresh Kills and the city’s longer history of environmental inequality. While there are numerous areas of NYC that have experienced growing grassroots approaches to waste management—such as Williamsburg/Greenpoint, Sunset Park and Southeast Queens— my focus on the South Bronx will provide a more detailed analysis of the actors and activities involved that can then be applied to the broader public discourse on urban land use policy and sustainability planning in the city. This analysis is driven by two essential questions: in

⁴ Julian Agyeman, *Sustainable Communities and The Challenge of Environmental Justice*. (New York: New York University Press, 2005): 4.

what ways does a grassroots approach to environmental justice concerns contribute to more equitable land use policies? How do community groups embed social equity in their organizing conduct?

To get to a response to these questions, I will employ two theories—the environmental justice framework and urban regime theory—that shed light on the broader issues of equitable planning addressed by my case study. These two concepts will guide my analysis of the social, political and economic dynamics at play in the debate over solid waste management in New York City. They will contribute to my discussion of the social equity dimension of sustainability as it unfolds in calculated efforts to address the distribution of environmental costs and benefits. In addition to these two theories, I employ the just sustainability paradigm (JSP) as a tool for analyzing the grassroots organizations based in the South Bronx.

In 2006, New York City presented a new Solid Waste Management Plan (SWMP). This plan is part of a larger sustainability agenda, outlined in PlaNYC 2030, to make a “greener, greater New York.”⁵ While the implications of this project’s new solid waste policy are yet to be fully realized, the role of community groups was integral to the planning process that produced the citywide agenda. Through an analysis of the grassroots mobilization behind these efforts, I argue that a bottom-up approach can establish social equity as a measured centerpiece of sustainability planning. In order to examine how a grassroots approach can shape more equitable policies, an exploration of how community organizations operate individually and together in coalitions is necessary.

⁵ City of New York. “About PlaNYC,” last modified in January 2012, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/planyc2030/html/about/about.shtml>

By situating solid waste management within a framework of “borough equity,” community organizations based in the South Bronx were able to shift decisions over waste management toward a consideration of environmental justice. Through engaging residents in conversations and plans regarding community needs, grassroots organizations and strong citywide coalitions, such as the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods (OWN), worked towards equity in process and equity in outcome. Their call for a more just and equitable distribution of garbage facilities simultaneously addressed environmental impact through concerns about the amount of waste that the city produces. These features of the grassroots approach to waste policy in New York serve as invaluable lessons for other cities and community groups that face challenges with incorporating equity in planning. Before delving into my analysis of the grassroots response to solid waste management, I will turn to a review of the theories and concepts that pertain to my case study.

An Environmental Justice Framework

In order to understand the significance and larger conversation that solid waste policy in New York City contributes to, an environmental justice framework is key to situating the grassroots efforts that surfaced in response to the closure of Fresh Kills. A growing collection of evidence reveals that people of color and low-income persons have borne greater environmental and health risks than the society at large.⁶ With this realization, questions of environmental equality and environmental racism emerged in the minds and vocabulary of communities fighting the location of polluting industries in their neighborhoods. In October 1991, the First People of Color Environmental Leadership

⁶ Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson, “Environmental Justice: Grassroots Activism and Its Impact on Public Policy Decision Making,” *Journal of Social Issues* 56 (2000): 555.

Summit met in Washington.⁷ At this convention, delegates gathered to discuss the role that race and class played in the siting of hazardous activities and environmental threats. Through the conversations they initiated, I would argue that the leaders called for an alternative political economy of place that brings attention to the distribution of environmental costs and benefits. This conference was significant for its recognition of the relationship between race and environmental inequalities. Furthermore, the leaders presented a different vision of land use and public policy that is more equitable. In the conference's 17 "Principles of Environmental Justice,"⁸ the delegates outlined demands related to the safeguarding of cultures as well as investments in the political and economic empowerment of marginalized groups. A call for the right to participate in decision-making was central to the conference's adoption of the seventeen principles.

Sociologist David Pellow discusses four dimensions of the environmental justice framework that will enlighten the case study of waste policy in New York. First is the importance of recognizing environmental inequality as a sociohistorical process rather than a single event. This allows us to identify the processes by which hazards are created and distributed. Second is a study of the complex roles of various actors and institutions that are involved. Contradictory and interchanging allegiances form in response to environmental inequality. The state, workers, environmentalists, residents, private capital, and neighborhood organizations all participate in struggles over access to valuable resources. Third are the consequences of social inequality on stakeholders. Inequities feed into the imbalances found in the distribution of environmental costs and benefits. Lastly, Pellow points to agency and the power of populations confronting environmental

⁷ Dolores Greenberg, "Reconstructing Race and Protest: Environmental Justice in New York City," *Environmental History* 5 (2000): 223.

⁸ "The Principles of Environmental Justice" <http://www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html>

inequalities to create openings in the political process in order to mitigate the unfair distribution of hazardous activities.⁹

In addition to outlining these four features of an environmental justice framework, Pellow examines the primary causes of environmental inequalities in various states in the U.S. He sheds light on the alliance between businesses, the state, and other “growth machine” interests to promote economic development.¹⁰ An implication of this coalition is the favorability of private profits over public and environmental health. With this alliance in mind, Pellow and other sociologists, such as Bullard, have articulated how these interests have influenced zoning and urban planning practices.

In connection with urban planning practices, Pellow argues that factors such as voting behavior, home ownership rates, and income levels further determine concentrations of polluting facilities.¹¹ These features are highly indicative of the location of noxious industrial activities. In light of these factors, an environmental justice framework allows us to examine the relationship between local growth machine politics, discriminatory zoning and urban planning, residential and occupational segregation, and environmental inequality. While an environmental justice framework contributes to an understanding of the forces and implications of racialized land use policies, urban regime theory is useful for analyzing the political landscapes that form in cities.

Urban Regime Theory

⁹ David Pellow. "The Politics of Illegal Dumping: An Environmental Justice Framework". *Qualitative Sociology* 27 (2004): 514.

¹⁰ According to John Logan and Harvey Molotch, local growth machines consist of a realm of actors (politicians, local media, utilities players, universities, etc.) that participate in the organization, lobbying, manipulating, and structuring of urban land use.

¹¹ Pellow, 513.

Urban regime theory complements the environmental justice framework by also examining the actors involved in the decision-making process. In a political economy approach to governing capacity, Clarence Stone applies urban regime theory to demonstrate that “effectiveness of local government depends greatly on the cooperation of nongovernmental actors and on the combination of state capacity with nongovernmental resources.”¹² In this assessment, Stone sheds light on the limited effect that elected officials have individually to implement decisions. Instead, governing capacity relies on bringing together coalition partners with appropriate resources. The mobilization of resources is an important feature of the governing process and relies on the cooperation between nongovernmental and governmental actors. Stone affirms that economic wellbeing, for instance, is contingent on private investment. In this way, urban regime theory illuminates the assemblage of interests that emerge and shape governing capacity.

In Stone’s analysis of urban regime theory, he examines the social production model of power. In this framework, he examines how voices in the decision-making process vary in capacity and reflect the unequal distribution of economic, organizational, and cultural resources.¹³ Based on this unequal distribution of resources, share of influence and representation is allocated through how much an actor, or group of actors, contributes. The social production model of power illustrates how certain concerns gain attention and others do not. In terms of shaping policy around urban land use, this model demonstrates how governing capacity relies on the aggregation of resources and interests. Together with an environmental justice framework, the urban regime theory provides a

¹² Clarence N Stone. "Urban Regimes and the Capacity to Govern: A Political Economy Approach." *Journal of Urban Affairs*. 15 (1993): 6.

¹³ Stone, 9.

more comprehensive understanding of the context in which grassroots mobilization operates in the case of contesting solid waste policy in New York City. In view of these two concepts, I now turn to the data and methods that I used to analyze my case study.

Data and Methods

I have so far outlined two frameworks, environmental justice and urban regime theory, that are essential for the analysis of my case study. While these concepts frame the larger conversation that my study of the grassroots solutions to New York City waste policy contributes to, a third concept is necessary for concretely examining my unit of analysis. In order to examine how the bottom-up approach successfully integrated social equity into the planning of solid waste management, I will employ Julian Agyeman's concept of just sustainability.

Just sustainability departs from the environmental justice paradigm and formal understandings of sustainability in a few key ways. Environmental justice, while a local "bottom-up" movement, is identified as limited in its approach because it is more reactive than proactive. The movement tends to focus on stopping environmental hazards *as* they threaten a community. Sustainability, on the other hand, takes a more active approach in envisioning the kind of communities they should be aiming for. At the same time, however, sustainability often entails a top-down process with international actors and governmental structures playing key roles. Environmental justice actors also critique sustainable development as focusing on environmental sustainability rather than a more holistic vision that considers justice and equity.

Just sustainability accounts for these limitations and integrates the two concepts into a cohesive paradigm shift. Viewed as the "egalitarian conception of sustainable

development,” just sustainability recognizes inequalities in power allocation and requires sustainability to incorporate a redistributive function.¹⁴ Moreover, the just sustainability paradigm (JSP) makes a shift from reactive to proactive objectives and practices. By incorporating JSP into my examination of the grassroots coalition in opposition to waste policy, I can better analyze how their efforts stimulate both equity in process and equity in outcome.

In pursuit of an answer to how we can plan for equitable cities, I have collected data that pertains to the social equity dimension of sustainability as well as information about New York City’s municipal solid waste management. This includes changes in waste policy in addition to information regarding both the actors involved in proposals to locate waste facilities in the South Bronx and those who have formed the opposition to these plans. My data on the opposition to former waste policies centers on the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods (OWN), a coalition of community-based groups, which has been active in the decision-making process concerning waste handling in New York City. The New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) and the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI) co-founded and brought together the member organizations of OWN in 1996.¹⁵ While OWN is a citywide network that consists of over 20 community organizations, my research focuses only on the member groups that are based in the South Bronx.

Using the just sustainability paradigm as an analytical framework, I have gathered data on the individual organizations in the South Bronx that participate in OWN.

Influenced by Agyeman’s case study of an organization that shows signs of shifting to the

¹⁴ Julian Agyeman. 5-6.

¹⁵ Julie Sze, 115.

just sustainability model, I collected information about the member organizations that demonstrates their focus on equity and justice. For instance, I looked for the presence of programs, such as green job training, that follow the just sustainability principle of developing individual and group competencies. The data came from the organizations' websites as well as local news sources that reported on their involvement in mobilizing people and resources in the public discourse on waste handling in New York City. Given my focus on New York City's newest Solid Waste Management Plan (SWMP), the news articles I have gathered were all published in the last ten years, with some being very recent. In addition to these sources, I used the actual SWMP document and press releases from Mayor Bloomberg's office that present sustainability planning and proposals for PlaNYC 2030.

In view of the research and data collected about my case study, I now turn to my analysis of solid waste policy in New York and the grassroots voices that play an active role in shifting the conversation on municipal waste handling. The environmental justice paradigm and urban regime theory are central to my initial examination of urban land use policy in the South Bronx. Similar case studies by sociologists David Pellow and Robert Bullard have guided my analysis of the distribution of environmental costs and benefits in NYC. After establishing important background information for my case study, I will employ the just sustainability paradigm to direct my investigation of the member organizations that make up OWN. Exactly how they contributed to greater equity concerns in the city's solid waste management plans is essential to understanding the significance of the case study as a model of bottom-up approaches to social sustainability.

A Tale of Environmental Burden: The South Bronx

Studies with a similar focus on environmental justice have demonstrated the intersection between ecological hazards and social inequality that confirm that environmental inequality and environmental racism are prevalent in communities across the United States. The socioeconomic context of the South Bronx sheds light on growth machine forces that dictate urban land use policies, particularly the location of hazardous facilities. According to Logan and Molotch, the present growth machine has transformed into a “multifaceted matrix of important social institutions pressing along complementary lines.”¹⁶ Through this expansion of actors, the new political structure of pro-growth policies has led to the continued intensification of land uses for private gain. This shift has had great implications for the further exclusion of equity from sustainability planning.

While environmental sustainability has been incorporated into new development, equity concerns are sidestepped as growth goals to attract capital has redistributed goods and services unevenly within cities. Lewis Mumford criticizes the pro-growth mentality that has taken root in cities: “That a city had any other purpose than to attract trade, to increase land values, and to grow is something... never exercised any hold on the minds of our countrymen.”¹⁷ In this observation, Mumford indicates that cities manipulate space and redistribute land uses in order to draw in business. The location of waste facilities throughout New York City is one manifestation of this dynamic. Growth machine forces shed light on the challenges that community leaders face with respect to promoting social equity in sustainability planning. In the South Bronx land use policies are a product of

¹⁶ John R. Logan, and Harvey Lusk Molotch. 1987. *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: 58.

¹⁷ Quoted in Logan and Molotch, 1987: 57.

growth machine politics that are intricately tied to demographic shifts and fluctuations in property values.

The South Bronx is part of New York's 16th Congressional District, which is one of the poorest Congressional districts in the United States. Just like many other industrial cities, New York also experienced a demographic shift after World War II that saw the replacement of a Non-Hispanic white population with ethnic and racial minorities. By the 1960s, two-thirds of the population in the South Bronx was black or Puerto Rican.¹⁸ Plummeting property values followed the demographic shift and a stagnant economy, coupled with high unemployment rates, produced criminal activities, such as street gangs and large-scale drug dealing, in this area. While the South Bronx has indicated some signs of revitalization since the late 1980s, almost 50% of the population still lives below the poverty line and high crime rates are prevalent.¹⁹

In view of the socioeconomic circumstances of the South Bronx, an environmental justice framework helps to explain this area's particular position in the city's solid waste removal policies. Out of the fifty-four private waste transfer stations in New York City (there are sixty-six stations in total), more than half are located in just two areas, the South Bronx being one of them.²⁰ In 2004, the South Bronx and Williamsburg/Greenpoint handled 73% of the city's putrescible, construction, and debris waste.²¹ The Hunts Point neighborhood, in particular, has been targeted by municipal

¹⁸ Denton Tarver. "The New Bronx; A Quick History of the Iconic Borough." *The Cooperator*. 1 (April 2007).

¹⁹ Sarah Burd-Sharps, Kristen Lewis, and Eduardo Borges Martins. *The Measure of America: American Human Development Report, 2008-2009*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): xiii.

²⁰ According to the Department of Conservation, a transfer station is a solid waste facility where solid waste is received for the purpose of subsequent transfer to another solid waste management facility for further processing, treating, transfer or disposal.

²¹ Julie Sze, 113-114.

waste policy as the city's dumping ground (See Figure 1 for a map of transfer stations). The neighborhood receives 60,000 diesel truck trips per week and processes 40% of New York City's waste, including all the waste produced by the 1.3 million people who live in the Bronx.²² The overwhelming presence of toxic facilities in the South Bronx sheds light on the respiratory health problems, including high rates of asthma, that are found among its residents. The industrial area of Hunts Point-Mott Haven has one of the nation's highest rates of childhood asthma hospitalization—nearly 150% higher than that of New York City overall, and 1000% higher than the rest of New York State.²³

This context of the South Bronx is important for understanding the effect that social inequality has on the location of noxious facilities. According to Bullard and Johnson, the current environment protection paradigm “institutionalizes unequal enforcement; trades human health for profit; places the burden of proof on the ‘victims’ and not the polluting industry; legitimates human exposure to harmful chemicals...”²⁴ The environmental justice framework shifts this dominant environmental protection model towards concerns of who gets what, when, why, and how much. It also serves to disentangle the complex participation of multiple stakeholders in the garbage politics of the city. This is where the insights of urban regime theory also come into play.

Urban regime theory and the social production model of power relates directly to municipal solid waste management in New York City and the coalition building that has surfaced in opposition. In an analysis of the evolution of municipal solid waste

²² Bread for the World Institute. “On the Margins in Urban America: The South Bronx, New York City,” *The 2010 Hunger Report*, accessed October 28, 2012. <http://www.hungerreport.org/2010/stories/report/on-the-margins-in-urban-america>

²³ Juliana Maantay. “Public Health Matters: Zoning, Equity, and Public Health.” *American Journal of Public Health*. 7 (2001): 1035.

²⁴ Bullard and Johnson, 558.

management in the United States, Garrick Louis describes the operation as a system comprised of “regulatory, administrative, market, technology and social subcomponents.”²⁵ In view of the many elements that influence solid waste management, the case of NYC garbage policy sheds light on the governing capacity’s dependence on the assemblage of interests and resources. These interests and resources are indicative of conventional growth machine forces. When examining garbage politics, it is important to recognize the commodification of local urban waste. The perception of garbage as a valuable product—by private actors and multi-national corporations—has dictated much of the politics and land use policy surrounding waste management.

As Louis proceeds to explain, in more recent years private companies have assumed an expanded role in municipal solid waste management through regional facilities that require the transportation of solid waste across state lines. Julie Sze echoes the privatization forces at play in garbage politics and indicates shifting views of public services and private contractors. Today, private corporations are more commonly seen as “efficient,” which has led to direct transfers of municipal service operations of residential waste to private transnational waste companies.²⁶

Municipal solid waste management is now largely managed by municipalities and operated by a relatively small number of private companies. The recognition of the role that private corporations play in solid waste management is evidence of the local government’s reliance on the cooperation of nongovernmental actors. Elected officials depend on private companies’ ability to mobilize resources for public services. In

²⁵ GE Louis. "A Historical Context of Municipal Solid Waste Management in the United States". *Waste Management & Research: The Journal of the International Solid Wastes and Public Cleansing Association, ISWA*. 22 (2004): 306.

²⁶ Julie Sze, 120.

addition to the collection of resources, Sze voices concerns that have arisen in relation to the problem of the “revolving door” for corporations, politicians, and regulators. The movement of actors between roles as legislators and regulators is indicative of Stone’s social production model of power, illuminating the worrisome relationships that develop between the private sector and the government.

In the post-Fresh Kills landscape of garbage politics in New York City, a slew of community organizations and new alliances have emerged in contestation to standard land use policies. Confronting proposals that would continue to overburden certain populations and areas of the city, these coalitions and new voices serve as a force to be reckoned with. The following section details the actions and participation of numerous community leaders and organizations that have united to transform the public discourse on waste management in the city. Through the just sustainability paradigm, I argue that these coalitions are integral to promoting social equity in decisions over urban land use.

OWNership of the City: Transforming Public Discourse

As I have stressed so far, environmental justice and urban regime theory are essential frameworks for situating my case study into a larger conversation of the role that equity can play in urban land development and sustainability planning. How we analyze and measure this equity—both in the decision-making process and its end results—requires a deeper examination of the grassroots voices that have contributed to shaping the city’s waste policy. Attention to terminology and deliberate actions are important for understanding how different actors have engaged in concerns for social equity in waste management.

The Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods (OWN) is a central actor in the discussion of garbage handling in New York City. Since the coalition's founding in 1996, OWN has made equity a dominant interest and guiding principle for its engagement in waste politics. The organization's framing of waste management as an equity issue is critical to its concern for environmental justice. In 2000, OWN, together with the Consumer Policy Institute (CPI), produced the first citywide community-based plan for solid waste management.²⁷ This plan was significant particularly because of the equity principles incorporated into the proposal. In the final report, "Taking Out the Trash," OWN/CPI outlined five central components, one being the achievement of "environmentally sound and equitable handling of commercial waste."²⁸ Commercial waste is of special interest to OWN/CPI because the city disposes of far more commercial waste than residential waste—more than 11,000 tons per day.

OWN/CPI's solid waste management plan implements the principle of fair share, which indicates that no neighborhood should have to take on a disproportionate amount of the city's garbage. Counter to NIMBY politics, the plan presented proposals to distribute the city's transfer stations more evenly around the city, use barges instead of trucks to get the waste out of the city, and promote recycling and waste prevention.²⁹ In addition to encouraging municipal waste management to consider social equity an important planning measure, OWN's proposal demonstrates a deep interest in and proactive steps toward addressing environmental impact. This is clear in their proposals for barge transportation. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Transportation,

²⁷ Tom Angotti and Peter Marcuse. *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate*. MIT Pr (2011): 144.

²⁸ Barbara Warren. "Taking Out the Trash: A New Direction for New York City's Waste." *Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods and Consumer Policy Institute/Consumers Union*. (2000).

²⁹ Angotti and Marcuse, 147.

barge transportation provides advantages for both social and environmental concerns. In addition to limiting noise impact and the overwhelming presence of trucks in certain communities, barge transportation is recognized as more energy efficient and decreases air pollution.³⁰ While equity is a principle interest for the community groups that compose OWN, environmental degradation related to waste management has proved to be a central issue for the grassroots approach to environmental justice.

The fundamental strategy of the Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods was to address the individual neighborhood's conflicts through a just plan for the entire citywide waste stream. Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who entered office in 2002, announced that the city would adopt the basic principles of OWN's solid waste management plan. OWN participated in an inter-agency task force that influenced the newest Solid Waste Management Plan that was released in 2006. The task force included the Department of Sanitation, the Economic Development Corporation, the Office of Management and Budget, representatives from the Mayor's office, as well as the Environmental Defense Fund.³¹ Drawing from Stone's urban regime theory, the inter-agency task force demonstrates the important function that complex coalitions can serve in effecting policies. The grassroots coalition's ability to collaborate with a variety of actors, both governmental and nongovernmental, is necessary for incorporating equity into the planning process for solid waste management. The influence of OWN's previous proposal is evident in a press release from the Mayor's office:

³⁰ U.S. Department of Transportation, *Environmental Advantages of Inland Barge Transportation* (1994), Final Report, http://www.uppermon.org/visions/DOT_environ_barge.htm

³¹ John Casey and Apurva Mehrotra. Baruch College School of Public Affairs, "Solid Waste Management and Environmental Justice: Building and Sustaining Coalitions." Last modified 2011. Accessed December 12, 2012: 7. <http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/spa/researchcenters/nonprofitstrategy/documents/SolidWaste-full.pdf>.

The final Solid Waste Management Plan will fundamentally change the way the City transports waste and achieve our goals of environmental responsibility, economic soundness, and equitability across all five boroughs.³²

The press release outlines plans that echo OWN's emphasis on "borough equity." A major element of this plan is to make each borough accountable for handling the waste that it generates. Instead of transporting waste to other areas of the city, the plan details procedures that would haul the trash to waste transfer stations in the same borough. The new SWMP demonstrates the pivotal role that the OWN coalition played in forming citywide waste policy. In order to understand how equity was promoted more locally, in both senses of the term, I now turn to a discussion of OWN's member organizations based in the South Bronx.

Local Issues, Local Involvement: Working Toward Just Sustainability

While the leadership of OWN was drafting its own solid waste proposal, its member groups were active in their individual communities. The objectives and work of these community groups should not be overlooked. Using the just sustainability paradigm (JSP) to frame my analysis, I argue that these actors worked toward the realization of equity in process and equity in outcome at the neighborhood level. Recognizing the importance of engaging the residents' voices, the community groups relied on various strategies to enhance participation in the public discourse on solid waste management. While some organizations recruited residents to attend marches and flood council meetings, other groups provided green job training and encouraged locals to express their concerns over truck traffic and polluting facilities at environmental hearings.

³² City of New York. "Mayor Bloomberg Signs Legislation to Establish Solid Waste Management Plan," City of New York, Press Release 276-06, 2006a. Available from: http://www.nyc.gov/portal/site/nycgov/menuitem.c0935b9a57bb4ef3daf2f1c701c789a0/index.jsp?pageID=mayor_press_release&catID=1194&doc_name=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nyc.gov%2Fhtml%2Fom%2Fhtml%2F2006b%2Fpr267-06.html&cc=unused1978&rc=1194&ndi=1

Out of the 26 neighborhood groups that comprise OWN, six are based in the South Bronx. This section looks closely at the work of these groups to show how they have approached both dimensions of equity. As I have mentioned, the data that I use in my analysis is primarily from the organizations' websites and from local news coverage of their involvement in communities. At this time it is important to recognize the limitations of these sources. Due to numerous constraints—time being a fundamental one—I was unable to carry out interviews or observe the daily proceedings of the organizations for myself. While these sources would have enhanced my discussion of the organizations' position in their communities, the literature I draw on provides reasonable insight into the groups' promotion and embodiment of social equity. Using just sustainability as a model and analytical tool, I indicate five recurring features of the organizations that demonstrate their work towards social justice and sustainable community development.

1. Proactive Programs and Community Involvement

One of the fundamental differences between the just sustainability paradigm and the environmental justice paradigm is that organizations representative of the JSP show more *proactivity* than *reactivity* in their programs and work toward developing sustainable communities.³³ Through a variety of sources—such as organizational programs, planning documents, and local news articles—I recognized that this attribute of the JSP was a functioning component of numerous member organizations in OWN. This finding is important for my assertion that a bottom-up approach can contribute to more equitable planning. By intentionally developing visions of the community, with the

³³ Julian Agyeman, 137.

support and involvement of neighborhood residents, the organizations are generating equity in process and in outcome.

The Point CDC, founded in 1994, incorporates this element through its theory of change: “People in the community create the community they want to live in.”³⁴ This guiding principle, which the organization affirmed in 2008, is closely tied to the JSP’s emphasis on proactive objectives and programs. The Point CDC played an active role in developing the Hunts Point neighborhood of the South Bronx. Principles of equity, illustrated in the organization’s mission and programs, are central to the operation of the organization. By engaging the neighborhood residents in visions for their community, The Point diverges from the environmental justice model of primarily responding to the existence of environmental inequalities.

Similar to Point CDC, Mothers On the Move (MOM) incorporates community participation and proactive practices into the organization’s efforts. MOM formed its vision and work through the understanding of disparities that existed between their communities and other communities in New York City. Equity, as a discourse and a model, is evidently a driving force behind the organization’s work. In order to mitigate the unequal distribution of resources in the city, MOM relies heavily on community involvement. Lisa Ortega, a former staff member of MOM, explains, “Our issues come from the needs of the people... If someone complains about the need for a stoplight at the corner, MOM goes out and investigates if this is indeed a community concern. That is

³⁴ The Point, “Mission,” The Point Community Development Corporation website, <http://thepoint.org/mission.php>

how the campaigns come about.”³⁵ In this statement, Ortega sheds light on the value of community input for informing the work of their organization.

MOM held a three-part Community Visioning Process in 2009 to develop an alternative to gentrification and ultimately decide on the organization’s current campaigns.³⁶ Each step of the process included goals, curricula and a facilitation agenda. In the first part, a team of MOM leaders collectively analyzed the issues facing residents. This step was followed by a community visioning session that almost 100 community members attended. While teams of MOM leaders facilitated the discussion, the vision came from the community members who developed concrete goals for their neighborhoods and identified potential barriers to accomplishing these objectives. The last part of the process consisted of a community-led presentation of their vision to the public and elected officials at MOM’s annual People’s Assembly. This extensive community visioning process demonstrates the integral role that community input plays in the organization’s work. Furthermore, it shows that MOM is proactive in its imagination of a more equitable society.

Nos Quedamos, an organization based in Melrose-Commons, also put forth a vision for the community in the Urban Renewal Plan. Similar to MOM’s Community Visioning Process, this plan captures the organization’s emphasis on the active and important function of community members in determining the process of redevelopment that takes place in Melrose Commons. A document presented at a conference organized

³⁵ Mothers On the Move, “Who We Are,” Mothers On the Move website, <http://mothersonthefmove.org/who.html>

³⁶ Mothers On the Move. Urban Justice, "Change Starts with Us: A Grassroots Vision for the Development of the South Bronx ." Last modified 2010. Accessed November 14, 2012. http://www.urbanjustice.org/pdf/publications/ChangStartswithUs_03mar10.pdf.

by the Planners Network highlighted that the planning process drew its strength from a shared vision: “one that respects, supports and involves the existing community of Melrose in the formulation of plans and policies that address the issues of housing, open space, community renewal and sustainability.”³⁷ The organization’s efforts to incorporate the voices of their community indicate a shift to the JSP because it intentionally addresses the need for sustainability to take on a redistributive function, including a reallocation of power.³⁸ The plan itself demonstrates the attempt by Nos Quedamos to design its own blueprint for the community. While these plans for the community do not deal directly with waste management, they illustrate the groups’ implementation of equity principles in their organizational conduct.

2. *Youth Empowerment*

In addition to proactive programs, a few of the member organizations of OWN signal a movement to the JSP by incorporating specific programs that nurture youth development. This is significant for equity planning because youth are often excluded from the decision-making process. Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice (YMPJ), founded in 1994, sees young residents as important agents for creating sustainable community development. The mission of YMPJ is to “transform both the people and the physical infrastructure of blighted South Bronx neighborhoods and change the systems that negatively impact them.”³⁹

³⁷ Petr Stand, Eddie Bautista, and Yolanda Garcia. Planners Network, "Melrose Commons: A Case Study for Sustainable Community Design." Last modified 2012. Accessed November 8, 2012.

<http://www.plannersnetwork.org/publications/melrose.htm>

³⁸ Julian Agyeman, 6.

³⁹ Youth Ministries for Peace, “Overview: Mission and Vision,” YMPJ website,

<http://www.ympj.org/about.html>

In view of the organizational objective, YMPJ values and prioritizes youth community involvement in the process of community revitalization. Through a range of programs, YMPJ fosters youth empowerment and encourages this group to see themselves as leaders. One of their programs, Education for Liberation, uses Freirian methodology that encourages youth to engage in work for social change. Paulo Freire, the inspiration behind this methodology, was a Brazilian educator and philosopher most renowned for his influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this work, he uses and defines praxis as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”⁴⁰ Freire believed that, through praxis, oppressed people could gain critical awareness of their own condition and, out of this insight, struggle for their liberation. Many educators and activists, such as YMPJ, utilize Freirian methodology to guide their work with disadvantaged communities. Through the Education for Liberation program, young residents direct campaigns for environmental justice, police reform, tenant rights, and youth employment to name a few.

In line with the JSP and focus on community involvement, The Point CDC nurtures local youth through programs that engage them in justice-based arts and service learning activities. Through the attention on youth development, The Point has encouraged further participation of this age group in public discourse on waste policy. The attention given to youth is instrumental to the grassroots approach to establishing equity in sustainability planning. As a *Mott Haven Herald* article points out, elected officials and environmental advocacy groups who helped design the city’s SWMP in 2006 joined local residents at The Point to discuss ways to relieve South Bronx

⁴⁰ Paulo Freire and Myra Bergman Ramos. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press (1970): 36.

communities of their large share of garbage-handling facilities. Some of these residents were youth, such as Alexis Davila, 17, who works at The Point's outdoor campus.⁴¹ This involvement of community members, particularly young residents, is critical to addressing equity in process. Through the organization's mission and programs, The Point makes environmental justice a key concern that unites community members and policymakers in debates over urban land use.

3. Expansion of Programs and Scope of Work

One of the principle aspects of the JSP is the shift away from single-focus programs to more systemic projects. Mothers On the Move demonstrates this change through the evolution of its programs. Based first on the divided resources in the city's public schools, MOM has expanded its work to address other equity issues, including housing, job access, and environmental justice. The expanded repertoire of action indicates an awareness of the intersection of equity concerns. Furthermore, the larger range of programs sheds light on the need to address these issues simultaneously in order to advance social justice.

In the same way that MOM expanded its scope of work following its initial focus on a single issue, the nonprofit Nos Quedamos has developed its programs to be more systemic. The organization began in Melrose Commons as a response to a city redevelopment plan that would have displaced much of the neighborhood's population. Residents and business owners formed an alliance to present the Melrose Commons Urban Renewal Plan that was previously mentioned. While the organization started with a focus on housing, its work now encompasses initiatives centered on community and

⁴¹ Kimberly Milner.

health, environment and sustainability, and economic development.⁴² This expansion of programs represents a more holistic approach to equity concerns.

4. Development of Individual and Group Competencies

While increasing the scope of an organization's work illustrates a more encompassing approach to equity issues, the development of individual and group competencies is a sign of the JSP process of building community power to better address environmental justice concerns. Initiatives centered on the creation of green jobs are an example of this component. Sustainable South Bronx (SSBx), a community organization dedicated to supporting and implementing sustainable development projects, has made green jobs one of its central pillars of work. The organization views environmental, economic, and social concerns as interrelated and incorporates green job training in order to meet all three problems in a "collaborative model."⁴³

The organization's inclusion of an environmental stewardship training program sheds light on work that confronts environmental justice and environmental impact simultaneously. This is an important element of the just sustainability paradigm. A local news article highlights this link found in SSBx's work: "The mandate from the beginning of the organization was to be proactive in the community and offering counter solutions to standard practice of development."⁴⁴ In this statement, Sustainable South Bronx's alternative solutions to concerns about jobs and a healthy environment are viewed in opposition to economic development models that do not take environmental impact into account. The organization's dual approach to economic development and environmental

⁴² Nos Quedamos, "About Us," Nos Quedamos website, <http://www.nosquedamos.org/index.html>

⁴³ Sustainable South Bronx, "About Us," SSBx website, <http://www.ssbx.org/about-us/>

⁴⁴ Keith Loria. "Sustainable South Bronx: Reimagining a Neighborhood." *The Cooperator*, April 2009. <http://www.cooperator.com/articles/1916/1/Sustainable-South-Bronx/Page1.html> (accessed November 15, 2012).

sustainability is an indicator of the JSP. Rosan argues that just sustainability “connects sustainability and environmental justice (EJ) by recreating the economic opportunity structure of EJ communities.”⁴⁵ This is a central component of the JSP and illuminates the multiple problems that plague EJ communities.

With a similar interest in combating the numerous concerns of its community members—namely unemployment, urban health, and environmental impact—Mothers On the Move has incorporated a green job initiative in recent years. The green job campaign provides residents with skills that can empower them to better engage in decisions concerning their communities. The organization departs from traditional approaches to EJ that are primarily concerned with distributional equity in the siting of toxic facilities. By investing in jobs that can in turn address the environmental ills found in their communities, MOM works toward both dimensions of social equity. The organization’s green job initiative thus signals a shift to JSP.

5. Coalition Building

This feature relates back to Stone’s urban regime theory and gives us new insight on the significance of the OWN coalition. Agyeman suggests that JSP organizations are more likely to build coalitions with other organizations representative of the JSP than those representing an environmental sustainability orientation.⁴⁶ In view of the other components of JSP that are evident in the missions and work of member organizations of OWN, this argument holds true. I have so far demonstrated that the South Bronx-based organizations show signs of shifting to the JSP. This is notable when considering that they work together in the OWN coalition. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the

⁴⁵ C.D. Rosan. "Can PlaNYC Make New York City "Greener and Greater" for Everyone?: Sustainability Planning and the Promise of Environmental Justice". *Local Environment*. 17 (2012): 962.

⁴⁶ Julian Agyeman, 137.

organizations are aware that they can accomplish more in coalitions that consolidate their resources and interests.

Returning to Nos Quedamos, the organization's Urban Renewal Plan sheds light on the value of coalition building. Here urban regime theory and just sustainability come together. Due to the unequal distribution of resources, coalitions are important for mobilizing assets and the collective interests of various actors. Participants in the coalition that drafted the Urban Renewal Plan included the affected community as represented by Nos Quedamos, the Departments of City Planning, Housing Preservation and Development, Transportation and Environmental Protection, the Bronx Borough President's Office, the Mayor's Office, and the office of Congressman Jose Serrano.⁴⁷ This diverse alliance was strategic and provided Nos Quedamos with the resources and voices that were necessary for pushing the plan forward. While the plan faced opposition at first, continued pressure led to the City Council's approval.⁴⁸

The Hunts Point Awareness Committee has also exemplified the importance of coalition building. Besides OWN, the Committee is a member of various other coalitions. One of these coalitions is the New York City Environmental Justice Association (NYC-EJA). NYC-EJA is a citywide network that links grassroots organizations in EJ communities. Other member organizations in this coalition include Nos Quedamos, The Point CDC, and Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice. Since these are community groups that I have already identified as shifting to the JSP, the Committee's participation in the network is noteworthy. The organization is very active in local community issues

⁴⁷ Petr Stand, Eddie Bautista, and Yolanda Garcia.

⁴⁸ Mervyn Rothstein. "A Renewal Plan in the Bronx Advances." *New York Times*, sec. Archives, July 10, 1994. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/10/realestate/a-renewal-plan-in-the-bronx-advances.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed November 15, 2012).

that relate to environmental justice. The Committee spearheaded community resistance to a sewage processing plant in Hunts Point. The NYOFCo plant was closed after years of protests, lawsuits and “toxic tours.”⁴⁹ While this work does not necessarily demonstrate a shift from traditional EJ tactics to the JSP, the Hunts Point Awareness Committee’s engagement in coalitions, such as OWN, shows an investment in more long-term partnerships that prioritize equity in their communities.

Championing Equity: From the Neighborhood to the City

An analysis of these community organizations based in the South Bronx sheds light on a wide variety of strategies that were implemented in order to engage residents in shaping their neighborhoods. As an EJ community, the South Bronx neighborhoods have been marginalized in terms of environmental burden as well as exclusion from decision-making processes. The community groups that I discussed play an integral role in efforts to reverse these imbalances through a focus on the redistribution of power. Active participation from community members is key to the work of these organizations.

While these organizations address equity issues at the neighborhood level, the power to shape citywide policy on waste management was accomplished through building coalitions of grassroots voices and collaborating with governmental and nongovernmental actors. The Organization of Waterfront Neighborhoods, including but not limited to the organizations I have examined, has been at the forefront of dialogues in New York City centering on solid waste management. The coalition, with the support of numerous organizations, such as New York Lawyers for Public Interest, has advocated for City Council legislation that would place a marine or rail sorting facility in every

⁴⁹ Hirsch, Joe. "City Cuts Ties with NYOFCo Sewage Plant." *Hunts Point Express*, sec. Environment/News, April 30, 2010. <http://brie.hunter.cuny.edu/hpe/?p=3141> (accessed November 15, 2012).

borough rather than a few industrial neighborhoods. This principle of “borough equity” is highlighted in the 2006 Solid Waste Management Plan: “it [the plan] minimizes the impacts of the system on over-burdened neighborhoods by ensuring that City-collected waste from one borough is not sent to another borough for disposal...”⁵⁰ This proclaimed shift in emphasis to equity illustrates the EJ concerns that community organizations brought to the table as the City developed its newest solid waste management plan.

Although the full significance and implications of New York City’s 2006 Solid Waste Management Plan are yet to unfold, the case study demonstrates the many ways that a grassroots approach can promote social equity in sustainability planning. Both the individual work of the South Bronx community groups and the OWN coalition have contributed to broadened civic participation in the decision-making process as well as concrete plans to redistribute the impacts of waste management. In this way, the bottom-up approach achieves equity in process and equity in outcome.

Other cities and community leaders can learn from the tactics of OWN and the grassroots organizations. While the case focuses on how equity can be integrated into sustainability planning for waste management, the strengths of the OWN coalition and the individual community groups can be applied to a broad range of equity issues. Community concerns over housing, transportation, and locally unwanted land uses beyond waste facilities can be addressed in the particular operation of grassroots organizations as well as the coalitions they build.

On the individual level, community groups can begin to shift to practices that are more proactive rather than reactive to unjust policies. This requires community

⁵⁰ City of New York. 2011. *PlaNYC- Solid Waste* [online]. Available from: http://nytelecom.vo.llnwd.net/o15/agencies/planyc2030/pdf/planyc_2011_solid_waste.pdf [Accessed 22 October 2012].

involvement in visioning processes of their neighborhoods. The just sustainability paradigm provides a range of practices that advance an egalitarian form of sustainable development. By being attentive to how equity is embedded in programs and organizational conduct, community groups can then work toward equity at a larger scale. At the city level, grassroots organizations must build strong coalitions that unite interests and resources. The power of their voices along with the capacities of governmental and nongovernmental bodies can create openings in the decision-making process to effect change. In summation, equity does not have to be excluded from sustainability planning. It can be the cornerstone of the cities that we plan for and hope to live in.

Appendix

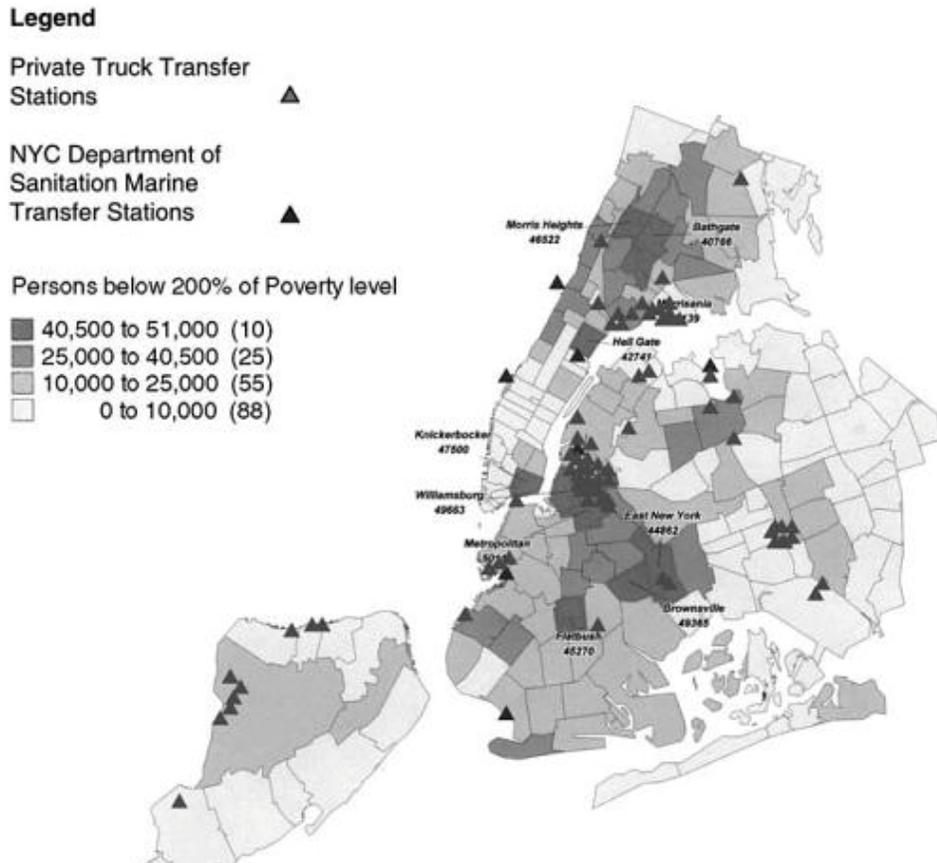


Figure 1: Map showing waste-transfer stations and below-poverty-level neighborhoods in New York City.⁵¹

⁵¹ Angotti and Marcuse, 144.

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