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ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

An assessment of the
needs of communities
and campaigners

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**Manual of
Environmental
Justice**



**Community
Law & Mediation**



1. Introduction

In both NI and the ROI there are significant barriers to the ability of citizens to access environmental justice. Problems surround public participation in environmental decision-making, access to environmental information and effective means of holding to account those who engage in environmentally harmful activity or who fail to prevent it.¹ These barriers are set against a backdrop of problematic environmental governance, erratic compliance with international environmental legal obligations, a lack of all-island cooperation on environmental challenges despite emerging trans-boundary issues & limited progress towards a transition to sustainability.² Both CLM and EJNI are organisations which have been established in direct response to the need for strategic civil society intervention to ensure environmental and social justice are achieved across the island of Ireland. Our work has indicated that there is a lack of detailed knowledge about current support mechanisms and initiatives which have been designed to enable communities to assert their environmental justice rights across the island. The same research indicates significant gaps in the support and information currently available to communities facing environmental injustice on both sides of the border, and in particular where environmental justice issues transcend the border.

In 2021, CLM and EJNI were granted via Community Foundation Ireland/Community Foundation Northern Ireland's all-island fund to collaborate on the creation of an 'All-island Manual of Environmental Justice'. The project has been designed in direct response to research undertaken in 2020³ which found that provision of support to individuals and communities working in the environmental justice arena on the island of Ireland should be mapped in significantly more detail to inform the focus of emerging initiatives. This needs assessment report has informed the development of an all-island '[Manual of Environmental Justice](#)'. This digital toolkit will evolve over time and will continue to evolve after the lifespan of the proposed project as new needs emerge and new resources become available. The goal is to create the foundation of a resource which can provide sophisticated yet accessible signposting to users, including direction to (i) a directory of experts who may be able to assist communities; (ii) a library of resources; and (iii) a map of community campaigns and NGOs engaged in social and environmental justice on the island of Ireland.

2. Research approach

As part of the project EJNI and CLM undertook a desk-based analysis and consultation exercise via questionnaires to develop ideas about existing gaps, what resources are needed and to gain insights from both sides of the border about the nature of environmental and social injustice on the island irrespective of constitutional arrangements. Given the relatively short duration of the preparatory phase of the project, this analysis was not designed to be comprehensive but rather to gain some preliminary insights to help design our digital toolkit. Two key groups were surveyed – groups and individuals involved explicitly in 'environmental justice' campaigning and groups involved in social justice initiatives whose work has or has begun to intersect with environmental justice concerns.

In recognition of the potentially different needs of organisations with a focus on what would typically be considered 'social' (rather than environmental) justice, a questionnaire was designed specifically for outreach to social justice organisations.⁴ These organisations represent a wide variety of actors working in key sectors in the area of social justice such as housing; immigration; women's rights; education; travellers rights and youth work. The goal of engaging with these actors was to gain insights on how many of these organisations work on environmental and climate-related issues and if so, what barriers exist when carrying out this work. For example, 88% of respondents indicated that their organisation faced barriers in undertaking environmental or climate related work, citing barriers such as under-resourcing, lack of expertise, lack of consideration of intersectionality of issues at policy-making level, absence of clarity in terms of how issues are connected and absence of reliable, accessible information. The questionnaire acted as a useful consultation exercise for identifying the needs of social justice groups working on climate related issues and equally for classifying the reasons why many of these groups aren't involved in environmental or climate-related work despite. It also acted as a useful guide for the development stages of the online digital toolkit by identifying the kinds of environmental issues which are experienced by the communities these

¹ These issues have been the subject of significant academic research, see e.g., a recent research project led by Alison Hough on Aarhus Convention implementation on the island of Ireland, 'Finding Common Ground' <https://www.findingcommonground.ie/>

² See e.g., Ciara Brennan, Ray Purdy and Peter Hjerp, 'Political, Economic and Environmental Crisis in Northern Ireland: The True Cost of Environmental Governance Failures and Opportunities for Reform' (2017) Northern Ireland Legal Quarterly 68(2) 123-157. A peer-reviewed academic article documenting in detail the history of environmental governance in Northern Ireland: available [here](#).

³ Ciara Brennan, Alison Hough and Peter Doran, 'Aarhus Centres on the island of Ireland: A briefing for civil society' (2020) EJNI Briefing Paper Series, No.3. available [here](#).

⁴ Participants included: Threshold; Culture Migrants Centre; National Women's Council of Ireland; Crosscare; Transition Kerry; Age Action; GAAW; Kerry Sustainable Energy Coop; NYCI (National Youth Council of Ireland); Irish Traveller Movement.

social justice focused organisations work with.⁵ Most questions provided a list of example answers to help recipients fully understand the question, it was also designed to allow recipients to share answers that were not included and make suggestions for potential support mechanisms (open and closed questions). The second questionnaire was aimed at a wide range of actors across Ireland (activists, NGOs, academics, lawyers etc) working in the field of environmental justice.⁶ The participants in this part of the project were heavily involved in a variety of areas of environmental justice across the island and the questionnaires generated very detailed responses from respondents working across a wide range of issues.⁷

3. Key findings

1. Information deficits

One of the key findings that repeatedly showed up in the analysis was a real **lack of accessibility to information and/or expertise – 78% cited it as a main obstacle to carrying out their work**. For example, activist groups who tend to lack capacity and are under resourced often have to finance expert advice because access to information is 1) difficult to access or 2) difficult to understand. Regarding the former, one example of the difficulty of locating information is that a lot of the research addressing environmental issues that would prove helpful to communities and groups, are hidden behind a ‘paywall’. Regarding the latter, participants stated that government bodies who develop guidance and policy documents don’t provide enough “*summary guidance for lay people*”. As a result, these organisations seek out informal groups and people who have real-life knowledge of the innerworkings of, for e.g., the planning system.

For social justice organisations, the responses signalled a **gap in knowledge and awareness of environmental issues in the social justice sector and civil society in general**, with organisations indicating that they do not actively consider environmental justice issues despite an awareness that these issues disproportionately affect the vulnerable i.e., housing and high energy costs. Other participants acknowledged the intersectionality of climate action and social justice issues however lacked the funds to make it a dedicated workstream.

2. Difficulty engaging in public participation opportunities

Issues with the current planning system and ineffective public participation in planning processes are systemic issue across the island, e.g. “*There is a severe lack of transparency, balance and opportunity to participate in the planning process.*”. The gap needs to be addressed through assisting and guiding people through the complex planning system. Furthermore, criticism of the response of governments dominated the responses, highlighting the **need for far greater efficiency and performance from state bodies to help support organisations pursue environmental justice**. Better communication and involvement between state bodies and communities would encourage more effective policy implementation. One participant detailed the culture of secrecy around government bodies, ultimately **greater access to decision makers is needed to improve support mechanisms**, e.g., “*Communities are viewed as a hindrance to be placated rather than a fully involved partner*”.

3. Fragmented knowledge and support networks

The analysis also indicated that there exists a **fragmentation of resources and knowledge across the island**. Some participants stated that they solely rely on in-house expertise or outsourcing (financial requests for information). A common thread among the responses was that **environmental organisations and bodies tend to be very self-reliant with quarter relying on the knowledge of their membership/ networks**. It was also raised that **volunteer time and commitment is relied on to mitigate the lack of resources**. Responses highlight the independent nature of organisations and people pursuing environmental justice, and indicate that to increase the likelihood of that justice

⁵ Issues raised were extensive, and included: Air pollution; Water pollution; Sanitation; Chemical pollution; Energy/fuel poverty; Access to affordable healthy food; Safe infrastructure to support mobility, such as wheelchair-friendly footpaths/walk/cycle lanes; Affordable and reliable public transport; How local authorities and government engage with communities on environmental decision-making; Affordable, warm and culturally appropriate homes; Access to nature and green space; Flooding; Jobs threatened as a result of environmental/climate policy; Waste/recycling; Climate change (emissions/temperature increase).

⁶ Many of the participants were individuals (activists, lawyers, academics). Organisations included TASC, NIEL, Zero Waste Northwest and The Gathering.

⁷ Research e.g., translating analysis into action; policy work; enforcement, monitoring and compliance; promotion and implementation of international environmental principles/policies in Ireland; raising awareness and promotion of the environmental rights of citizens; education; networking – connecting environmental orgs in the shared pursuit of environmental protection; academia (research into improving the effectiveness of environmental law/governance); wildlife/habitats protection; campaigning; human health; anti-mining; waste; conservation; community support; law reform; community led climate action.

being attained, more resourcing is needed to help these organisations increase their capacity. The evidence revealed a common pattern that the organisations that are initially set up to provide support to those pursuing environmental justice currently lack capacity and often spend their time signposting other organisations/ resources instead of providing support then and there. *“Lack of current capacity means we signpost to others who may be able to help.”*

There is a wealth of knowledge among the organisations and individuals working on environmental issues but there is no ‘hub’ for sharing their information and/or experiences in the pursuit of environmental justice. Participants agreed that **more shared information is necessary in order to collaborate properly**. 64% of organisations stated they provide support mechanisms themselves to communities/ individuals but the variety in how they do so was also evident. Support ranged from online reporting and emails, climate solutions for local communities, giving out information on an individual basis, challenging local planning decisions, seminars and more. This demonstrates the interdependence of the environmental community as the majority of environmental organisations provide aid in some capacity to those seeking environmental justice, but this cannot be done without **more resourcing and better access to information and/or expertise**. The disparate support mechanisms at the disposal of environmental groups show the various ways in which the environment is facing threats and the **need for different and varied tools to attain environmental justice**.

4. Disjointed access to experts

The research gave a strong indication that **communication between the different actors pursuing environmental justice remains disjointed**, e.g., academics/experts have found it difficult when engaging in research to get information from those “working on the ground” and similarly, NGOs and activists believe that access to expertise remains restricted and highlight that more pro-bono legal and ecological experts are necessary for pursuing environmental justice. This demonstrates a clear need for transparent information on ‘who does what and where’.

5. Challenges of cross-border cooperation on environmental issues

Responses demonstrated the inherent cross-boundary nature of environmental threats and that problems in the natural world transcend political structures. 64% of respondents indicated that they are involved in cross-border environmental work. This demonstrates that collaboration is needed on an all-island basis, as it is clear that environmental organisations help and utilise each other across the border.

4. Recommendations

This consultation exercise provided many useful suggestions for the type of resources that need to be created in order to close significant gaps of environmental justice on the island of Ireland, at the same time giving clear indicators for the direction of future research. Suggestions from the respondents included:

- **Further research into how we can help and guide individuals and organisations through the planning system.** Some participants stated that they use the planning authority websites to access information on planning developments in their area, however, further research is required into how we can make this information more accessible. As previously mentioned, our analysis demonstrated that activists and organisations find that there are serious issues of transparency and opportunity to participate in the planning process. Public participation in planning processes is imperative in ensuring effective protection of our habitats and biodiversity. We would recommend for future development of the Manual of Environmental Justice – the creation of “how to” videos to demonstrate effective navigation of law databases to access planning cases.
- It was noted by some participants that greater awareness of specific environmental issues is required, one activist noted for example that there is a real lack of awareness in civil society of the impact of oil/mineral exploration and extraction in Ireland. **This would also entail the production of better quality resources in priority areas identified by respondents to help push for environmental justice.**
- **Clearer pathways within local authorities & state agencies and departments** that would be responsive and deal with issues effectively in the first instance. **Transparent live dashboards that track reporting and responses.**
- **The creation of an all-island reporting system for illegal waste**, effective reporting for small and large communities.

- **Development of a whistle-blower service.**
- Our research found that 50% of our participants indicated lack of accessibility to financial support i.e., for litigation, resources as a key point of resistance to doing their work effectively. This could be overcome by the **creation of an online publicly accessible 'visual board' to highlight upcoming funding calls, job openings and calls for volunteer support.**
- **Guidance on how to fill out AIE's (Access to Information on the Environment).** The manual could create 'how to' resources, including how to make an AIE. Evidence also cited that some of our beneficiaries require access to subscription databases to access specific subject matter (e.g., expert journals).
- **Cross-border hub** to share knowledge and experiences of common environmental issues.
- **Readily accessible and easily digestible information on the links between social justice and environmental issues,** in addition it would need to be appropriate for people living in Ireland from other cultures.
- **Further research into gender and climate action**
- **Tools for having discussion moving beyond individual action and responsibility**
- **Resources to engage groups who have not been involved in climate discussions** – e.g. working class communities, travellers, disabled people etc.
- **Information on how to leverage the legal rights framework at national and regional level** to address challenges identified as a result of environmental and climate impacts and actions, including exercising peoples' right to access information and participate in policy decisions.
- **Advice on accessing funding for development of green areas.**
- **Information that shows the definitions and linkages between 'climate' and 'environmental' justice.**
- **Clear information and support on relevant upcoming consultations on environmental issues.**
- **Case studies** highlighting how and where using an environmental justice approach has led to an improvement for a community or individual in their living conditions.
- **A guide** to very simple non-labour-intensive actions that social justice organisations can take to encourage participation in addressing environmental issues.
- **Work on strengthening our shared sense of 'how' we govern our the environmental/climate justice movement.**
- **Funding calls need to be longer** - enabling time to develop more suitable proposals.

5. Conclusions

Throughout the duration of this short research project, environmental injustices have continued to escalate across the island of Ireland – from mining, to fossil fuel development, to the pollution of water and air. The impacts of the climate and biodiversity crisis are increasingly visible, yet emissions across the island continue to rise, making Ireland an outlier in the EU. Low-income and marginalised communities are often most impacted and less equipped to deal with environmental injustices. While many communities are already engaged and organising, they must be effectively resourced and connected to drive action at a scale and pace commensurate with the scale of action required. Furthermore, others need to be effectively mobilised and connected with the environmental justice movement. The 'Manual for Environmental Justice' digital toolkit should aim to equip communities with resources, enable contact with environmental experts, and provide networking opportunities within and between communities across the island to respond to these needs.