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What Will Change: Ana Baptista on Environmental Justice



The next four years will prove to be unprecedented in the roll-back and dismantling of environmental protections. In our new series, What Will Change, Tishman Center Affiliated Faculty reflect on the environmental and social justice impacts of the election results from

*the perspectives of their research,
practice, and passion.*

Environmental Justice in a Time of Despair

By: Ana Baptista

Environmental Justice means that all communities have the right to clean, healthy, and safe places to live, work and play. This ideal has grown into a national and transnational movement in the decades since the creation of the US EPA back in 1970. Although the USEPA was founded for "*the purpose of protecting human health and the environment*" the emergence of the EJ movement reminds us that this vision is yet to be fully realized. The election of Donald Trump will surely make the fulfillment of this mandate and in particular environmental justice even more challenging. Environmental Justice has never been an easy task to undertake under any political party. The existence of sacrifice zones where people of color and low-income communities live with the disproportionate burden of pollution is a byproduct of an economic and political system that benefits from the disenfranchisement and exploitation of vulnerable people and natural resources. The invisibility of these communities has greased the wheels of development at any cost. But the specter of climate change

impacts around the globe, the images of water protectors on the frontlines of pipeline construction, the families poisoned in Flint, Michigan, the People's Climate March - these events are making the crises of human and environmental exploitation visible and reminds us that the intersectionality of movements is critical to our survival. The [US EPA released their EJ 2020 plan](#) last month in an effort to recommit the agency to environmental justice, reflecting decades of institutionalizing EJ into the agency's policies since the enactment under President Bill Clinton of the EJ Executive Order 12989. Meanwhile, the US EPA promulgated one of the most significant pieces of climate regulations in its history, the Clean Power Plan (CPP), without much mention of EJ. This contrast in environmental policymaking reveals the difficulty of achieving environmental justice. While recognized as an important goal, EJ is still not considered as a central organizing principle for environmental policymaking. The incremental progress and the defeat of bold climate policies over the past 20 years also opened up opportunities. The EJ movement continues to build momentum with allies in big green organizations and allied movements on ways to

prioritize environmental justice in policies like the Clean Power Plan. While EPA policies like the CPP and EJ 2020 will likely be dismantled under a Trump presidency, efforts to align movements and mount stronger more united positions becomes more important than ever. The standard ways of policymaking and incremental reform will not serve us under an administration that is diametrically opposed to environmental protection. Now is the time when we should examine more systemic, structural solutions to the environmental crises of our time and align progressive movements across various issues. EJ communities have long been pushing the mainstream environmental movement to be bolder, to prioritize social justice, and to think outside the box in terms of environmental policies. We have an opportunity in the next four years to not just better align on policy but to build more genuine alliances built on the shared struggle to protect our most vulnerable communities from destruction. EJ communities have always resisted, struggled and fought under oppressive conditions. These communities live under constant threats, from environmental, economic and social injustice and their very survival is on the line. EJ communities were resilient before resiliency became the

new buzzword in climate circles. EJ communities were sustainable before sustainability was popularized and then canonized by environmentalists. So EJ communities have much to teach us about what it means to be resourceful, resilient and take risks in these trying times. The will to not just to survive -- but to thrive and flourish -- will not be diminished. *[Ana Baptista](#) is an Assistant Professor of Environmental Policy and Sustainability Management at School for Public Engagement at The New School.*



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