



# Environmental Justice as a Policy Objective

**Title: Environmental Justice as a Policy Objective**

**Project Code: UKCC07**

**Who this research is intended for:  
policy-makers, SEA practitioners, social  
scientists, planners**

## Objectives of the project

The overall aim of the project was to evaluate the outcomes and implications of adopting environmental justice as a broad policy objective. Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) was identified as an appropriate tool to focus this study. The objectives of the project were:

- To review how environmental justice had been promoted (particularly in Scotland)
- To establish how it was claimed environmental justice and SEA are linked
- To evaluate how SEA could contribute to environmental justice as a result of:
  - Evidence generated within the SEA process;
  - The outcomes of SEA procedures, in particular, public participation in light of a recent legal challenge in Northern Ireland
- To analyse how the term environmental justice was interpreted within SEA

## Background

Environmental justice was the subject of a Presidential Executive Order in the United States (US) in 1994 and since then has been promoted for integration into sustainable development policy in the European Union (EU). As a concept environmental justice links social factors such as ethnicity or levels of income to distribution of environmental quality, to recognition and to participation in environmental decision-making. This project examined the outcomes and implications of adopting environmental justice as a broad policy objective

– by analysing the commitment made by the Scottish Executive from 2003-2007.

A range of tools were claimed to assist with the delivery of the policy objective environmental justice. This project examined one such tool in detail, namely SEA. SEA provides evidence for decision makers about environmental impacts of a potentially diverse range of public sector policies, plans and programmes. SEA requires public participation. More generally, SEA must be applied to certain plans and programmes within all EU Member States. Therefore, this project appraised how environmental justice was interpreted by and put into operation by Scotland's public sector within their application of SEA.

The promotion of environmental justice policy was charted by gathering details from environmental justice and SEA events. This project analysed the 16 plans and programmes that had gone through the full SEA process July 2004 to November 2007. The analysis was employed to discuss the generation of evidence of environmental justice within SEA together with the outcomes from SEA procedures. How environmental justice was interpreted by Scotland's public sector was evaluated by reviewing the 2,377 SEA documents produced in the same time period.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

This project found that SEA is not an appropriate tool to take account of environmental justice. This finding leads to questions about the efficacy of promoting and maintaining environmental justice as a broad policy objective. Distributional analysis is the dominant approach of generating evidence of environmental injustice used to inform policy decisions and suggested for inclusion in SEA. Distributional analysis leads to contestable outcomes. Local level environmental problems may be labelled as 'unjust', but environmental justice (or injustice) at broader policy scales cannot be objectively identified.

Experience from the US and UK suggests that more widespread use of the policy objective, environmental justice, would be accompanied by greater application of distributional analysis. However, including distributional analysis in public documents can potentially exclude people. To appropriately interpret the analysis, people must understand a technical assessment together with the theoretical perspectives underpinning different conceptions of justice.

Groups of people within UK distributional analysis were defined using indices of deprivation. The analysis of SEA also showed environmental justice was linked with indices of deprivation. Therefore, although the concept of environmental justice can encompass a broad range of groups, including non-human nature, when it was put into effect a comparatively narrow perspective was taken.

Environmental justice, together with sustainable development, was a desired outcome of the entire Scottish Executive programme for government 2003-2007. In an official review of progress on environmental justice, only activities thought to contribute to environmental justice as a policy objective were identified, not those that could potentially counteract it. Arguably, the outcomes of all activities in the programme for government should have been considered in relation to their potential to contribute to environmental justice.

This project focused on one tool claimed to contribute to environmental justice, namely SEA. It found that SEA procedures clashed with aspects of other legislative and advisory procedures that the Scottish Executive identified as also contributing to environmental justice. Therefore this project recommends that greater consideration be given to the compatibility of different initiatives intending to work towards overarching policy goals. The detailed analysis of SEA guidance, found the Scottish Executive provided no direction about how SEA could be used to contribute to environmental justice. However, rather than

providing such direction, whether environmental justice is appropriate policy objective to promote should be considered.

### Key words:

Environmental justice, strategic environmental assessment, environmental decision-making, policy uptake, policy objective, distributional analysis

### Next Steps

This project applies to the Scottish Executive's commitment to environmental justice 2003-2007. However, environmental justice is still being promoted as a policy objective for use in the UK and EU, thus the outcomes of this study are of continued relevance. The main recommendation for uptake concerns the, perhaps inadvertent, promotion of overarching policy goals. Environmental justice as a policy objective should be treated with caution. There is need for awareness of when it is being promoted and the uncertainty of the outcomes that will result.

### Further Information

A digital copy of the PhD thesis related to this project will be available online from the University of Strathclyde in due course.

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