

Concept paper: Environmental Justice and the JHU Sustainability Leadership Council

The Johns Hopkins University
Sustainability Leadership Council
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Introduction and Mission

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DLC – JHU Diversity Leadership Council
EDC – Ecological Design Collective
JHFRE – Johns Hopkins Division of Facilities and Real Estate
JHSPH – JH Bloomberg School of Public Health
KSAS – JH Krieger School of Arts & Sciences
OoS – JH Office of Sustainability

SLC – JHU Sustainability Leadership Council
SNF Agora – Stavros Niarchos Institute SNF Agora Institute
SoE – JH School of Education
WSE – JH Whiting School of Engineering
21CC – 21st Century Cities Initiative

This paper seeks to provide a background on environmental inequities and introduce guidance on four areas of environmental justice efforts that the JHU SLC can support in Baltimore and beyond in order to coordinate the currently fragmented efforts of JHU affiliates and outline a long-term vision for bringing about coordinated change. The report was drafted primarily by Peter Winch and Lizzie Grabowski of the SLC. Significant input and preliminary edits were provided by SLC members Naadiya Hutchinson, Genee Smith, and Lanise Stevenson. The report was then circulated internally to additional SLC members and Office of Sustainability staff as well as fellow affiliates directly involved in work on diversity and equity across the institution. The following report is a result of these collective edits and input of these faculty, students, staff, and alumni.

The scope of environmental inequities

Environmental justice efforts seek to address the disproportionate burden of adverse environmental exposure and environmental conditions faced by racial and ethnic minorities and low-income populations. These inequities occur at different scales:

- Within counties, cities, and states in the United States, racial and ethnic minority and low-income communities are far more likely to be the sites, or located close to the sites, for incinerators and hazardous waste facilities, and to have less tree canopy, fewer parks, and inadequate housing conditions characterized by lead exposure, trash accumulation, and poor municipal services. Residents of these communities are also more likely to have higher occupational toxic exposures associated with higher risk, lower wage jobs. At the same time, many residents of higher-income and more advantaged neighborhoods may not understand the historical and structural processes that have produced the current environmental conditions, including environmental racism, housing segregation, educational segregation, limited education opportunities, redlining, mass incarceration, and disinvestment in minority and low-income communities. Instead, these individuals may view their less-privileged neighbors as authors of their own misfortune – “why don’t they care about their communities?”
- Within the United States, Native American, African-American, and other minority populations have repeatedly been displaced from prime farmland and desirable urban locations to semi-arid, flood-prone, and otherwise adverse environments that are more susceptible to climate change and the impacts of extreme weather.
- The burdensome impacts of climate change fall disproportionately on low- and middle-income countries (LMIC), and low-income and ethnic minority populations within LMIC. One reason is that such populations are more likely to live in vulnerable environments including semi-arid areas (Sahel region of Africa), river deltas (Nile, Ganges, Mekong) and small island states. Another is the reliance of low-income populations in LMIC on biomass fuels and trash burning for energy, both of which contribute to individual and community-level risk of hazardous emissions.

We recognize that Johns Hopkins University works in many sites in LMIC and throughout USA where environmental inequities demand urgent attention. These include communities in Peru, India, Nepal, and the US with high exposure to household air pollution, Native American communities confronting drought, air pollution and toxic waste, and numerous domestic and global sites lacking access to clean water and sanitation. This concept paper, however, focuses on the City of Baltimore, and how the SLC might raise the profile of environmental justice disparities, and work with partners to bring about impactful change. This includes reducing exposures to toxins in air, water and in the home, and improving environmental conditions including increasing tree canopy, and reducing waste accumulation.

JHU and environmental justice in Baltimore

In circulating this document for feedback to students, faculty, staff, and alumni, many individuals underscored the importance of addressing issues of environmental justice in Baltimore and committing time and resources to working in our own city. To date, these efforts have included:

- Documenting exposures to lead, especially from paint, and advocating for steps to reduce lead exposure.
- Measuring tree canopy in high- and low-income neighborhoods as well as levels of stress and adverse health effects associated with living in an environment with less foliage and vegetation.

- Mapping food environments and food access in Baltimore, identifying food apartheid, and piloting approaches to increase access to healthy food including establishing community gardens and increasing availability of healthy foods in corner stores.
- Documenting inferior air quality in many low-income neighborhoods, most notably in relation to the incinerator in South Baltimore and advocating for alternatives to incineration including adoption of zero-waste policies.

Furthermore, many current and former students worked on service-learning projects, completed internships, and conducted thesis research related to environmental justice. Despite these efforts, JHU's overall support for environmental justice in Baltimore is fragmented and lacks a long-term vision for bringing about coordinated change. Below we propose four initial areas of work within the SLC to provide a university-wide, solutions-oriented approach to promoting environmental equity in Baltimore focusing on: 1) Service-learning and community-level projects; 2) Dissemination of information via an EJ dashboard; 3) Research, and 4) Policy. As these efforts evolve, the SLC will continue to work with its members, the broader campus community, and city partners to refine these and identify additional areas for action.

Environmental justice for One University

The breadth of feedback collected in response to the concept outline in this paper exemplifies the variety of possible ways to engage the Johns Hopkins community in collective work and discussion around topics of environmental justice. These recommendations included:

Feedback from colleagues at 21st Century Cities identified faculty and staff members in data and library sciences who have the expertise to assist with the creation of an EJ dashboard (area of work #2) as well as additional lenses through which to examine EJ, namely flood risks across urban communities. Similarly, feedback from SNF Agora highlighted the potential for overlap with its efforts to establish communities of practice that bring academics and practitioners together to solve public problems (areas of work #1 and #4). Feedback within the SLC Steering Committee raised the potential for this effort to ultimately be coupled with a fellowship or guest professorship for a Baltimore City community member who has first-hand experience with issues of environmental justice in the city. While contributions from HopkinsLocal/BLocal suggested a targeted look at their target neighborhoods and businesses to identify areas of difficulty where climate justice is involved as well as to identify partner organizations and businesses for service-learning and community-level projects.

Area of work #1: Service-learning and community-level projects

In alignment with the co-curricular aspirations of the Hopkins undergraduate and graduate experience, the SLC supports student involvement in real-world, service-learning projects paired with environmental NGOs, businesses, and/or governmental organizations that can enhance the curricular experience and provide exposure to topics of environmental justice locally, nationally, and globally. As submitted in the SLC's formal response to the Second Commission on Undergraduate Education report, the SLC encourages the creation of an initiative whereby interested Hopkins students can be paired with select environmental organizations for professional internship experiences that can contribute to solving local, national, and/or international environmental justice challenges. These experiences have the potential to be foundational opportunities giving students exposure to applied curricular concepts, while developing synergistic knowledge within a variety of environmental fields connected to the Hopkins undergraduate and graduate curricula. These applied learning and professional opportunities can provide a bedrock for future career pathways and impactful real-world exposure that have the potential to uniquely impact the lives of Hopkins students and members of the Baltimore community.

Area of work #2: Dissemination of information via an EJ dashboard

In partnership with City partners, the SLC should support the establishment of an environmental justice dashboard. This online tool would serve as a resource, data, and research library for efforts and information related to environmental justice within the City of Baltimore. Similar tools have been developed by other municipalities, including Broward County, Florida,¹ and provide a diverse audience (residents, representatives, researchers, etc.) with information on environmental justice impacts and progress within the community.

Information on current environmental justice projects, such as the Fair Development Plan for Zero Waste, and data on key environmental justice metrics, such as food apartheid, air quality, and green space, would be tracked and updated on the dashboard. As equity is a defining lens for the Baltimore City Sustainability Plan², this dashboard would serve as a valuable tool for research and academics at Johns Hopkins, as well as our City partners. Data will be contributed by offices across JHU and the City that are already collecting and analyzing this information but missing a single, curated, and accessible location to store and share it. Over time, these indicators will track progress on key environmental justice issues and document regulations passed and actions taken..

Area of work #3: Research

In addition to Academics, Operations, and Engagement, Research is a foundational subcommittee of the SLC. The faculty, staff, and student members of the subcommittee seek to promote coordination and communication between different research groups working on projects related to environmental sustainability and to identify opportunities for new funding and projects involving multiple JHU divisions that strengthen sustainability research. Additionally, members of the Research Subcommittee are directly involved in the planning and execution of the SLC Annual Symposium on sustainability research and practice.

As a global leader in public health and medicine, Johns Hopkins' research efforts fall largely into policy and the hard sciences. However, faculty have expressed a strong desire to learn about and exchange information on sustainability research efforts across JHU. The SLC must elevate the work being done in environmental sustainability by faculty and students in the humanities and soft sciences as well as the overlap of public health, medicine, and the issues of environmental justice. Highlighting and educating students, faculty, and staff on the variety of sustainability-focused research taking place at Hopkins should include projects that examine the social, economic, and ethical components of sustainability including environmental justice.

Not only will this increase the environmental literacy of Johns Hopkins affiliates, but it will result in further cross-disciplinary collaborations on research projects and grant proposals, leading to stronger, more diverse publications. The SLC must encourage faculty members to consider environmental justice themes as they design research projects, draft scope papers, and submit publications, etc. Through repeated exposure, the SLC can normalize environmental justice as a consideration in and justification for new and continued research and practice.

Furthermore, environmental justice must be intentionally incorporated into the content of SLC-hosted events, such as the Annual Symposium. This particular event—which in its first year was composed of a keynote speech, address from the Provost, lightning talks delivered by faculty and students, and a student poster session—provides multiple platforms to engage SLC members as well as the broader Hopkins community interested in issues of sustainability and environmental justice.

¹ <https://dashboards.mysidewalk.com/broward-county-environmental-justice-dashboard/dashboardpage-1520349627220-8930243696-70591>

² <https://www.baltimoresustainability.org/plans/sustainability-plan/>

Area of work #4: Policy

As a leader in higher education and research, Johns Hopkins has the opportunity to establish its reputation as a preferred advisory body for policy makers on matters of environmental justice. The largest private employer in the state of Maryland, Johns Hopkins is a highly influential voice throughout the state, spanning Baltimore, Annapolis, and beyond. Additionally, the anticipated acquisition of the property at 555 Pennsylvania Ave. in Washington, D.C. will situate Johns Hopkins strategically and geographically to influence national policy.

Many faculty members, staff, students, and alumni are residents of Baltimore City and there are, therefore, numerous affiliates with a pulse on the environmental concerns of Baltimore's communities and the shortfalls of current policy to address them -- inadequacies that may extend well beyond the city limits. The SLC is hopeful for the opportunity to amplify these lived experiences and related research and academics through regular engagements with our City partners. Other U.S. cities have established similar initiatives that can be used as models (see Boston Green Ribbon Commission)³. We see the JHU's role not as a host or convener for these conversations (which would more naturally be the responsibility of a Baltimore City or Maryland State agency), but rather as a stakeholder, lending our expertise and support to influence change. The SLC is hopeful that conversations will expand to include stakeholders beyond JHU; local businesses, NGOs, and community organizations require a seat at the table as we strive to create as inclusive a dialogue as possible. The SLC looks forward to this opportunity and a vision for a more environmentally-just Baltimore.

SLC Coordination

The efforts introduced in this concept paper are intended to be contributed to by all SLC members, but will be led by the Environmental Justice Working Group.

The Environmental Justice (EJ) Working Group will not follow the structure of the other SLC working groups. Rather than report to one of the four existing SLC Subcommittees, the EJ Working Group will report directly to the SLC Steering Committee. As this working group is intended to be representative of the entire SLC, it will draw membership from all four Subcommittees. Ideally, each Subcommittee will contribute one student and one faculty or staff member to the EJ Working Group. SLC members can self-nominate to serve on this working group, or they may be invited to serve on the Working Group if the Steering Committee believes they would be a notable asset. In consultation with the Working Group members, the Steering Committee will select two co-leads who will serve as meeting facilitators and rapporteurs to the larger Steering Committee as requested.

Additionally, this Working Group will play a primary role in coordinating events that directly address themes of environmental justice. For example, on Tuesday September 29th from 10:30 AM – 12 PM, the SLC will host its fall event, a virtual Environmental Justice Panel Discussion. This event seeks to bring together practitioner and community voices from the Baltimore City to discuss the intersection of social justice and climate/environmental concerns. Professor Genee Smith will moderate and discussion will build from the personal and professional experiences of four panelists that are active in Baltimore City environmental justice efforts. Moving forward, the planning and production of regular events such as this one will fall to the Environmental Justice Working Group. Outlining a formal structure for the EJ Working Group ensures that the work of the group is holistically incorporated into the SLC's core priority areas and ensures longevity efforts such as this one.

³ <https://www.greenribboncommission.org/>