

# Minority Empowerment and Environmental Justice

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In Hartford, Connecticut, environmental health problems disproportionately affect poor and minority residents of the city. Minority group activists in Hartford have created a multiracial organization composed of urban and suburban residents to fight for environmental justice. The organization has achieved a measure of success in terms of governmental responsiveness to their concerns. This article highlights the strategies used by the organization to advance its interests. These strategies are framed within the minority empowerment and environmental justice literature to develop a theoretical explanation for the organization's success. Additionally, this article provides a model for other communities fighting for environmental justice.

**Keywords:** *environmental justice; minority empowerment; public health*

The Hartford Environmental Justice Network (HEJN) is an organization comprised largely of minorities from impoverished neighborhoods in Hartford, Connecticut. The initial formation of HEJN stemmed from community concerns about the negative effects of industrial facilities sited near residential areas. An additional catalyst and a continuing focus for the organization is the perception that racial minorities and low-income residents of Hartford are disproportionately burdened by the negative environmental and health consequences of industrial facilities. Today, the organization includes approximately 1,800 individual grassroots members as well as approximately 30 member organizations. HEJN is now a powerful and active organization that has attracted the attention and respect of other stakeholders including local, state, and federal government officials.

Through an examination of HEJN's organizational structure and strategies, this article presents a case study of a successful minority-led, yet multiracial environmental organization. Success is operationalized in this study as the organization's ability to achieve a response by public officials to the issues on HEJN's agenda. A key determinant of success is the ability of the

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group to maintain an ongoing organizational structure that continuously pushes for environmental policies that benefit the community. To accomplish this, the group utilizes a combination of strategies including maintaining a racially and ethnically diverse membership, providing members with technical training, building coalitions with existing community organizations in the Greater Hartford area, fostering leadership skills among members, and moving toward institutionalized forms of political participation now that they are viewed as legitimate actors in the policy arena. These tactics have not only made HEJN effective, but have also mobilized members in unique ways and led to considerable minority empowerment. By examining the organizational structure and strategies of a multiracial environmental justice group, this case study builds upon the minority empowerment and environmental justice literature by providing a model of a stable multiracial coalition that achieves policy responsiveness.

In the sections that follow, I first present an overview of the relevant environmental justice and minority empowerment literature. The next section provides an overview of Hartford demographics and the environmental challenges faced by the greater Hartford region. I then discuss the creation of HEJN and their policy focus, followed by a section on the policy responsiveness achieved by the organization. Next, I outline the organizational strategy used by the organization to maintain sustained mobilization. The final section reconnects the environmental justice and minority empowerment literature to the HEJN model: a sustained multiracial coalition in the environmental justice policy arena.

## **Literature Review: Environmental Justice and Minority Empowerment**

Scholars of minority empowerment examine the ways in which minority political participation can become more effective and institutionalized (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984, 2003; Eisinger 1982; Fung 2004). However, most of the minority empowerment literature focuses on protest and electoral strategies that contribute to the political incorporation of minorities into the political structures of their communities. Environmental justice groups, by contrast, are concerned with electoral outcomes as a strategy for affecting environmental policy. Although they frequently participate in protest activities to advance their short-term agenda, their larger goals are more comprehensive: They seek to influence the policy process long-term and overcome their own marginalization in the political system. This study explores the nonelectoral strategies

and organizational structure of a multiracial environmental justice organization to gain insight into how such organizations can maintain coalitional stability and achieve long-term policy goals. Neither the minority empowerment nor the environmental justice literature indicates how these things could occur. Examining HEJN in this light provides instructive findings for similar organizations and makes an important contribution to these two bodies of scholarship.

The environmental justice literature offers many examples of successful struggles for environmental justice by poor people and minorities (Bullard 1993, 1994, 2000; Bullard and Johnson 2000; Capek 1993; Checker 2001; Mohai and Bryant 1992; Taylor 1995). Survey research documents the fact that Blacks (and other minority groups) share with Whites a deep concern about the environment (Bullard, Warren, and Johnson 2001; Jones 1998; Taylor 1989; Mohai 2003). The only difference is that Blacks express greater concern with pollution in neighborhoods and other aspects of local environmental quality. It is this difference that makes Blacks more likely to engage in the environmental justice movement.

Although the environmental justice scholarship is best known for providing case studies of specific mobilization by coalitions that rise and fall with a given issue, there are also theoretical models for ongoing environmental justice activism within this research. One case study, by anthropologist Melissa Checker (2001), examines how a multiethnic group in Brooklyn, New York, mobilized around environmental justice in their city by creating a shared identity focused primarily on discrimination while retaining rich ethnic diversity among group members. In another theoretical model, Dorchetta Taylor (1989, 1999) argues that to increase Black environmental activism, several prerequisites must be met including group solidarity, resources (money, knowledge, morale), and psychological factors (ideology and discontent). Even with these important studies, it is unclear whether long-term environmental activism will occur or whether responsive governmental policies will result from this activism. Nevertheless, in commenting on the environmental justice literature, Robert Bullard (2000, 89) points out, "very little is known about . . . the factors that propel or impede Black mobilization against environmental threats."<sup>11</sup> This article builds upon the existing literature by demonstrating how a multiracial environmental justice organization can maintain institutional stability, particularly by uniting city and suburban residents, to achieve policy objectives.

Within the minority empowerment literature, Rufus P. Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David H. Tabb (BMT) (1984) create a theoretical framework that is useful for examining how multiracial coalitions can

advance minority interests. In fact, their findings with regard to multiracial coalitions are relevant to the experiences of HEJN. The authors identify ways that minorities can become a significant political force and achieve substantive gains from local government. By examining the struggles for political access and responsive policies of minority groups in 10 California cities, they find that mobilization (protest, electoral participation, or a combination of the two) can lead to minority political incorporation in city government (elective or appointed positions), and ultimately policies that are responsive to minority concerns. However, policy responsiveness to the interests of the minority community is the ultimate measure of success because the minority community is affected by policy decisions. The authors also argue that biracial or multiracial coalitions are a way for Blacks and Latinos to gain political power provided that group resources and other conditions are favorable. These group resources and conditions include factors such as group size, concentration, cohesion, and organizational strength.

BMT also argue that mobilization of resources alone is not usually enough to propel minority groups into political power, but that to achieve success, minorities need to acquire the support of other minorities and/or liberal Whites. In other words, biracial or multiracial coalitions are a way for Blacks and Latinos to gain political power and policy responsiveness.

At the same time that BMT place emphasis on multiracial coalitions, other scholars argue that these coalitions frequently encounter problems in terms of coalitional stability (DeLeon 2003; Hero and Clarke 2003; Mollenkopf 2003; Orr 2003; Owens and Rich 2003; Perry 2003; Pinderhughes 2003). These coalitions are often short-lived; even in situations where minorities are able to elect minority mayors, the mayors often face fiscal situations that force them to turn their back on minority interests in favor of business interests. Furthermore, even in nonelectoral situations, multiracial coalitions are often limited because racial groups have different overall interests that frequently interfere with overarching and stable coalitions.

Another relevant finding from the BMT framework is the idea that action by the federal government has the potential to enhance the impact of minority political empowerment (1984, 213). Specifically, BMT examined federal social programs from the 1960s aimed at eradicating poverty in urban areas. Minority respondents in their study indicated that these federal programs provided more opportunities for minority mobilization, minority incorporation in the policy process, and policies that reflected the interests of the minority populations.

The notion that federal intervention helps to advance the interests of minority groups is apparent if we look at both federal antipoverty programs and civil rights legislation, as do BMT. Action by the federal government is typically the result of intense pressure by the oppressed group. One need only to think of the civil rights movement and the enforcement of voting rights for an example. This is not to say that the federal government is always sympathetic to the situation of racial and ethnic minorities, but that social movements in the United States have frequently established the objective of changing federal policy to reach the ideals of democratic inclusion. At times, this has meant pushing for the fulfillment of constitutional rights such as the right to vote. At other times, it has meant convincing policy makers to enact laws to guarantee equal treatment of an oppressed group. Executive orders and laws dealing with affirmative action or environmental equality fall under this category.

Archon Fung (2004), another contributor to the minority empowerment literature, argues that democratic participation not only empowers minorities, but also makes public institutions more effective and capable of producing social change. More important, he believes that democracy requires individuals to "have substantial and equal opportunities to participate directly in decisions that affect them" (2004, 4). By examining the ways in which community members in several Chicago neighborhoods united to create more effective schools and to reduce crime, he demonstrates that when previously disempowered groups organize they can become players in the policy process and make municipal agencies more effective. His research also suggests that without the democratic empowerment of under-represented groups, municipal governments are less effective and useful for minorities.

The common themes present in both the environmental justice and minority empowerment literature provide an ideal theoretical backdrop to an analysis of HEJN and the organization's ability to create a sustainable and multiracial organization. Both bodies of scholarship discuss the importance of group resources (such as size, cohesion, solidarity, organizational strength) and racial/ethnic diversity as factors for success. It is also clear that shared experiences, particularly as they relate to group marginalization, help mobilize groups to take action. At the same time that the literature in these fields provides some direction for organizational success, we are left with a dilemma: How can effective minority coalitions be sustained over time? This study presents the organizational strategies used by an environmental justice organization to create a sustained organization that achieves policy responsiveness.<sup>1</sup>

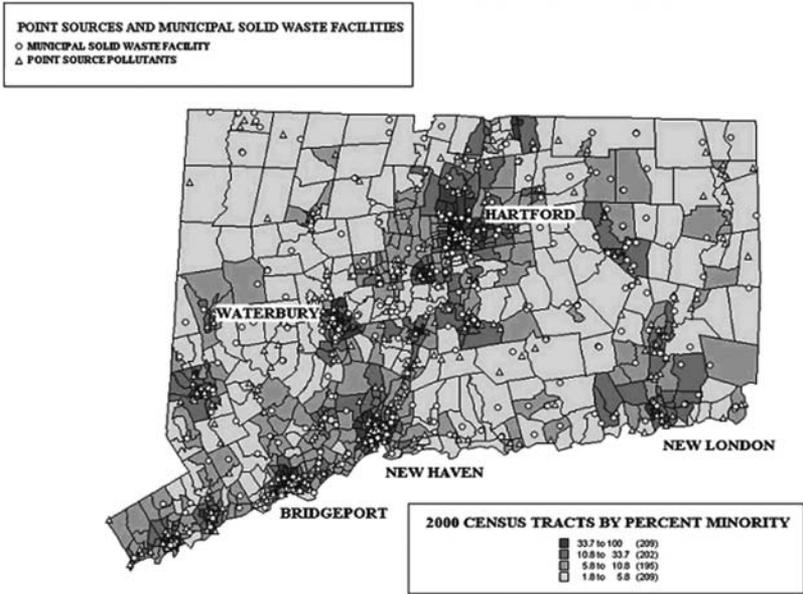
## Hartford: Diversity and Environmental Challenges

Formerly known as the insurance capitol of the world, Hartford is attempting to recast its image as “New England’s Rising Star.” Despite this slogan and some recent high-profile development projects in the core downtown area, the city continues to struggle. In 2002, the *New York Times* characterized Hartford as “the most destitute 17 square miles in the nation’s wealthiest state” because of racial isolation and poverty within Hartford as compared to the city’s suburbs (Zielbauer, 2002, A1). Since the late 1980s, this capitol city has struggled as insurance companies moved to suburbs or outside the state and as the region experienced a decline in defense industry production.

Within the city’s 17.4 square miles there are approximately 121,000 residents. For the past 40 years, the non-Hispanic White population in the city has been steadily decreasing. In the past decade, there has been a 50% decline among these residents. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the largest racial/ethnic groups in the city are Hispanics (40%), followed by Blacks (38%). Interestingly, Hartford’s Hispanics are overwhelmingly Puerto Rican (80%), and among Blacks, one in four is of West Indian descent.

Poverty has been a persistent problem in Hartford. In 1999, a staggering 31% of city residents lived in poverty for part of the year (Kuzyk 2003, 69). This figure makes Hartford the poorest city in the state. Another indicator of poverty is the percentage of students eligible for free school lunches. In 2002, 60.4% of Hartford’s public school students were eligible for this program, in comparison to 22% of students statewide.<sup>2</sup> The 2000 U.S. Census reported the median household income in Hartford in 1999 at \$24,829, which was approximately half of the median household income among the city’s inner ring suburbs. Hartford also has the lowest home ownership rate in the nation at 24.6%, compared to the statewide average of 67% (2000 U.S. Census). Hartford is not the only city in Connecticut facing challenges. The 2000 U.S. Census revealed that although the state is one of the wealthiest in the nation, it also includes some of the nation’s poorest cities such as Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and Waterbury. At the same time, these impoverished cities are also home to the state’s most polluted sites. The toxics map in Figure 1 illustrates the strong relationship between minority communities and the location of toxic pollutants and waste in the state. Areas with the highest concentration of toxins happen to be located in Connecticut’s poorest cities where large numbers of minority residents live. These findings are not unusual. Many scholars have identified a correlation between communities of color and the location of hazardous waste facilities (Bullard and Wright 1987; Myers 2004; Walker,

**Figure 1**  
**Toxics Map**



Source: Department of Environmental Protection and 2000 U.S. Census

Mays, and Warren 2004; Wright 1998).<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 also reflects the research by Timothy Black and John A. Stewart (2001) on the concentration of regional waste disposal incinerators and landfills in the state of Connecticut. Black and Stewart found that these facilities tend to be near neighborhoods with higher concentrations of poor and minority residents. In fact, when they controlled for other factors, race and ethnicity remained the single best predictor of siting decisions in the state.

Although there has not been a comprehensive study of Hartford regarding whether minorities bear a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards, given the large number of minorities in the city and the numerous toxic industrial facilities located near predominately minority neighborhoods, it is quite likely that Hartford mirrors the findings of Black and Stewart. Indeed, the areas of Hartford with the greatest concentration of environmentally hazardous facilities are located within minority neighborhoods. These facilities

include a trash to energy plant and a regional landfill that serve the trash disposal needs of approximately 70 neighboring towns—most of which have far lower percentages of minority residents than does Hartford.

## HEJN: Origins and Policy Focus

Mobilization of Hartford's minority community around environmental justice began in the early 1990s when ONE CHANE, one of Hartford's north end neighborhood organizations, initiated protests against a local landfill.<sup>4</sup> This landfill is located in the north end of Hartford in a predominantly Black and impoverished neighborhood. It was not the fact that it was located in this community per se that convinced people to fight the landfill. Rather, it was the rising rate of health problems of local residents, who became convinced that there was a relationship between their declining health and the odors from the landfill. As one resident commented,

The smell was awful. Birds were dropping from the sky and dogs were dying. People were getting sick. We knew it was from the landfill (activist interview, February 18, 2002).

Concerned community members reported the situation to the city health department. The health commissioner at the time, an African-American public health physician named Mark Mitchell, became convinced that the gasses emitted from the landfill were related to the complaints of local residents. Dr. Mitchell explained:

I started getting involved due to the complaints about the odors at the landfill. The landfill operator, Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority (CRRA), and the DEP (Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection) were unresponsive. I knew that a well run landfill should not have odors and I knew that DEP and the city had enforcement power over the landfill (president of HEJN, interview, March 14, 2002).

Dr. Mitchell merged his scientific training and his concern for the health of north Hartford residents with his understanding of the legal oversight of the landfill. Since 1987, the landfill has been operated by the CRRA, a quasi-governmental organization. The city's contract with CRRA for trash disposal includes no date for the closure of the landfill, no requirements for negotiating trash disposal agreements with other cities and states, and vague language on the health and safety regulations for the landfill. As one

community activist explained, these made it impossible for local residents to influence a policy with enormous health ramifications, and prompted Dr. Mitchell to begin to address the problem (activist interview, March 14, 2002). Dr. Mitchell began to work closely with the minority community to pressure CRRA and the city of Hartford to hold CRRA more accountable for their practices; as a result, he was forced to resign in 1995 as the city's health commissioner (activist interview, March 14, 2002; Hartford's Environmental Public Health Educator, interview, April 22, 2002).

Dr. Mitchell subsequently established Mitchell Health Consultants, an organization that wrote grants to fund local environmental justice efforts. ONE CHANE began working with Mitchell Health Consultants in 1995 to close the landfill. In 1995, ONE CHANE filed a federal lawsuit, claiming that the current landfill arrangements violated Title VI of the Civil Rights Act by virtue of the burden it placed on the minority community. That same year, ONE CHANE formed a coalition with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense Fund, the NRDC (Natural Resource Defense Council), and the Connecticut Fund for the Environment; the coalition accused CRRA of environmental racism as evidenced by the siting of environmentally risky facilities in predominately African-American communities (activist interview, February 22, 2002). As a result of mounting pressure, CRRA initiated a major cleanup effort of the landfill to eliminate odors and resolve the disputes that were beginning to tarnish its reputation. By the end of 1995 the organization had spent roughly \$13 million to clean up the landfill (activist interview, February 20, 2002, b). In 1996, ONE CHANE and CRRA negotiated an agreement whereby ONE CHANE would stop protesting the landfill in exchange for the cleanup of the landfill.<sup>5</sup>

Members of ONE CHANE used traditional strategies and practices to protest the landfill. During 1995, members staged protests outside of CRRA's headquarters, held marches that attracted media attention, and conducted door-to-door recruitment of neighborhood residents. Interestingly, the strategy adopted by ONE CHANE, with the help of Dr. Mitchell, was to emphasize the odors of the landfill as the primary focus of their protests. Many residents were concerned with increases in cancer and other health ailments. Because these health problems would have been difficult to link directly to the landfill, the odor issue was emphasized. This was a wise choice given that the odor issue was ultimately resolved.<sup>6</sup> This choice also reflects the "symbolic framing" that Stella Capek (1993) identifies in her work as a key to environmental justice organizing among people who do not possess scientific knowledge.

In 1997, Dr. Mitchell founded the HEJN which adopted a broader agenda than that originally pursued by ONE CHANE.<sup>7</sup> From its inception, this organization has been devoted to

protecting urban environments in Connecticut through educating our community, through promoting changes in state policy, and through promoting individual, corporate, and governmental responsibility towards our environment (HEJN mission statement).

Although one of the organization's primary goals is improving air quality in the city, it is also concerned with all siting decisions that place an undue burden on communities of color. The organization is composed of about 30 member organizations, has approximately 1,800 individual members, and is roughly 80% minority (president of HEJN, interview, March 14, 2002).<sup>8</sup> Building coalitions between groups is common among environmental justice groups. HEJN followed this strategy by creating an initial organization and then tapping into existing organizations to recruit representatives from other groups. This method was used so that the original organization would possess the capacity to exist independently as it brought in new groups with a similar interest in environmental justice. HEJN relies on financial support from local and national foundations and small contributions from members.

One noteworthy difference between HEJN and other multiracial environmental justice organizations is that the organization is not ad hoc. HEJN has been a sustained force in Hartford's environmental justice activism since 1997. Other studies of multiracial environmental justice coalitions show that these organizations typically rise and fall around a particular issue (Capek 1993). Environmental justice scholars have documented the success of a multiracial environmental justice group in Alabama, which succeeded in closing down a hazardous waste landfill (Bailey and Faupel 1992). Mark Moberg (2001) also found that a different multiracial environmental justice organization in Mobile, Alabama, was able to prevent the construction of a hazardous phenol plant in the area. In that case, upper class Whites began working with African-Americans when their attempts to prevent the building of the plant failed. As a secondary strategy, they decided to reach out to African-Americans so they could file an environmental racism claim. Again, the key to these and other studies of multiracial environmental justice organizations is that they are frequently ad hoc groups in the sense that once the issue at hand is resolved, they dissolve. This is especially the case when the organization begins as a White-dominated organization, as seen

in the Mobile case. HEJN does not suffer from this weakness. On the contrary, it has been able to maintain a solid minority base.

## Achieving Policy Responsiveness

Like ONE CHANE, HEJN initially engaged in protest tactics to advance its interests. The use of slogans such as “Hartford is the region’s dumping ground” and “We have the highest rates of asthma” were utilized to raise awareness and interest in HEJN’s mission (activist interview, February 15, 2002). Protests have been staged outside of city council meetings to push for recognition of issues such as what has been called the “asthma emergency.” HEJN has also protested at landfills and at the headquarters of companies that are engaged in environmentally hazardous activities. Their use of semantics is similar to the original use of the term *environmental racism* by Dr. Ben Chavis of the United Church of Christ in 1987 (CRJ 1987). In both situations, the terminology resonated with the public, who were then moved to action. However, HEJN quickly moved from traditional protest strategies to more institutionalized forms of political participation, including lobbying the city council and the Connecticut state legislature on issues dealing with Connecticut’s landfills, closing the coal-burning power plants in the state, and reducing diesel school bus emissions in the state.

### Electoral Strategy

During interviews, HEJN members elaborated on the organization’s primary accomplishments. One of the group’s earliest electoral accomplishments was its role in the 1999 election of Elizabeth Horton Sheff to the Hartford City Council. Horton Sheff, an African-American woman, was a Green Party representative with a strong commitment to environmental justice.<sup>9</sup> Members of HEJN reported that they actively participated in her campaign and ultimate election. Horton Sheff has been extraordinarily responsive to the interests of HEJN.

### Lobbying for Policy Change

Another accomplishment was the “asthma emergency” declared by the city council in 2000. Members of HEJN lobbied members of the city council for roughly three years prior to this declaration. The asthma emergency

has raised awareness of the problem and contributed to the commitment on the part of the city's health department to improve environmental quality and public health with regard to respiratory illness (activist interview, February 15, 2002). The election of Horton Sheff solidified the passage of the asthma emergency because she cosponsored the resolution on the city council (Hall 2000).

In addition to lobbying for the asthma emergency, HEJN lobbied the city health department to hire an environmental health educator. In response, according to activist interviews, the city did so in 2000. The creation of this position was a milestone because it was the first time that the city had designated a specific individual to deal with the issue of environmental justice for the people of Hartford (Hartford's Environmental Public Health Educator, interview, April 22, 2002). In interviews, all members of HEJN reported a good working relationship with this city employee. The environmental health educator has been very responsive to the community and worked with community members to gain more political power in the city (activist interview, February 21, 2002).

In 2000, the organization also succeeded in convincing the city council to reject a proposal that would have allowed a medical waste facility to locate in the city. Had the facility opened, the company would have shredded medical waste and sterilized the remaining waste, something that would have been hazardous to the health of city residents (Mason 2000). The success in preventing this facility from opening was the result of protests at the offices of the company that wanted to open the waste facility and lobbying efforts with the city council (activist interview, February 15, 2002). Interestingly, Horton Sheff, the newly elected city council member, played a key role in this decision. Members of HEJN provided her with the necessary research to persuade a majority on the city council to change their minds and vote against permitting the medical waste facility to locate in Hartford (president of HEJN, interview, June 27, 2006).

Finally, one of the most recent accomplishments according to members and nonmembers of HEJN, was the city's 2002 agreement to renegotiate their contract with CRRA. HEJN members lobbied since the inception of the group to amend the contract with the landfill operator. Ultimately, in 2002, they pressured the city council to renegotiate their 1982 contract with CRRA, a contract that previously included no expiration date, as well as a gag rule on city employees (elected and appointed), which prevented them from opposing CRRA facilities and services (activist interview, March 14, 2002; activist interview, March 18, 2002).

## Statewide Focus

The stability of the organization has allowed for it to expand its focus statewide. Efforts are now under way to improve environmental health in the state. The organization works effectively with the Connecticut legislature and with bureaucratic agencies at the state and federal level, particularly the DEP and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These activities are evidence that HEJN is an active and institutionalized player in the political and policy-making process.

In partnership with activists from other Connecticut cities, HEJN is participating in the fight to shut down five power plants, known as the “filthy five,” located primarily in Connecticut’s poorest cities. During the time of this study, members of HEJN were lobbying state legislators around this issue and testifying at hearings about these power plants and the public health problems they cause. Another statewide issue, the campaign to reduce diesel emissions from school buses, is finally gaining momentum throughout Connecticut largely as a result of minority activists fighting for environmental justice in Hartford. The New England regional office of the EPA, the state Department of Health, and the Hartford Health Department are all persuaded that this is a pressing issue, at least in part because of HEJN’s lobbying and outreach (Connecticut’s Urban Program Manager, interview, April 22, 2002; Hartford Environmental Health Educator, interview, April 22, 2002).

## Organizational Strategy: A Formula for Effective and Sustained Mobilization

Although HEJN has achieved some remarkable successes in the policy arena, perhaps its most important achievement to date has been the implementation of an organizational strategy to overcome the substantial difficulties inherent in minority mobilization. The minority empowerment literature demonstrates that marginalized groups such as racial and ethnic minorities often experience numerous hurdles when trying to organize to influence the policy process (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Browning, Marshall, and Tabb 1984, 2003; Eisinger 1982; Fung 2004). In the environmental context, Bullard (2000, 94) has observed that “the task of mobilizing local citizens on an environmental issue is enhanced when the community has the leadership, knowledge, tactical skills, and communication networks to challenge the system of domination, including giant corporations”. HEJN

demonstrates that effective organizational strategies can overcome a community's obstacles to facilitate mobilization. The following discussion identifies and examines HEJN's key organizational strategies for mobilizing a poor and undereducated minority constituency. Not only have these strategies led to mobilization of HEJN members, they have transformed the organization into a key stakeholder that has enjoyed significant successes in the policy-making arena.

### **Racial/Ethnic Composition**

As noted in the minority empowerment and environmental justice literature, racial/ethnic diversity is important for organizational success. HEJN was founded by minorities and continues to be minority led. Unlike many other multiethnic organizations, it has withstood changing organizational goals, and it attracts members from the greater Hartford area. The organization has succeeded in creating a multiracial and diverse membership base. For example, HEJN's steering committee is 60% Black, 20% Latino, and 20% White. Seventy five percent of the steering committee members are also low-income individuals. Of the 50 people who regularly attend the organization's monthly meetings, approximately 50% are White, 40% are Black, and 10% are Latino (president of HEJN, interview, December 10, 2004). Another important characteristic is the involvement of Whites in HEJN's mostly minority coalition. Whites became involved for several reasons. First, traditional environmentalists are typically middle-class Whites who are broadly concerned with preservation of ecosystems and individual species, reduction of environmental harm caused by industrialization, and the protection of human health and aesthetic values. In contrast, environmental justice activists are concerned with discriminatory siting decisions that place an undue environmental burden on specific communities based on race, class, or some other distinguishing characteristic (Bullard 2000, 7).<sup>10</sup> For some Whites who joined HEJN, the messages about environmental problems that disproportionately affected poor minorities in Hartford resonated; thus they broadened their environmental activism beyond the traditional sphere of the environmentalists. Other White members (reportedly the majority) are members of White suburban churches concerned about social justice (activist interview, February 15, 2002). HEJN's goals and mission allow them to work locally on important issues related to social justice. For others, it is the fact that air quality is relevant to urban and suburban residents. According to the work of Bullard, Rueben, and Johnson (2001), asthma and air quality are issues that make multiracial coalitions feasible

because the impact extends beyond poor and minority residential areas that are typically closer to pollution sources. Therefore, beyond broad environmental concerns and a commitment to social justice, White members have self-interest because pollution extends outside the city limits of Hartford.

The guiding philosophy for HEJN is that as long as minorities remain the majority of the organization, minority members will have a sense of ownership and will help the organization flourish. Whereas firsthand experiences with environmental and health problems motivate many individuals to join HEJN, the organization strives to ensure that their participation will continue over the long term. As Dr. Mitchell explains:

There is a formula that we use. One of the keys is that it [the organization] has to be minority led. It has to start off with a good minority base. And also, it has to have the staff resources. Low-income people generally need a lot more assistance with transportation, child care, with food. We opened a food bank here and we also have nice dinners at our monthly meetings. Some of the members tell me that the meal at the monthly meeting is the best meal their family has. We also arrange for child care during the meetings and for transportation. This is how we help to keep the organization minority based. (president of HEJN, interview, March 14, 2002).

In contrast to HEJN's strategies, a sister organization in New Haven, Connecticut emerged in 2001 as an attempt to spread the message about environmental justice statewide. A key difference is that the New Haven Branch was an existing organization that sought an affiliation with HEJN because of HEJN's reputation as the leading environmental justice organization in the state (president of HEJN, interview, June 27, 2006). Whereas the Hartford branch is minority founded and led, the New Haven organization was primarily middle class, White environmentalists; thus it has experienced some noteworthy challenges. As Dr. Mitchell pointed out,

The problem we're having in New Haven is getting people of color to participate. It's much easier to talk to people who already know about the issues. So, our base in New Haven is mainly middle-class Whites who belonged to other environmental organizations. When we started to point out urban issues, it was very easy for them to catch on and do the moving and shaking that needed to be done. We tried to form a minority-based group affiliated with the New Haven branch called "Concerned Parents for Environmental Justice." We were only able to meet once a month and they needed a lot more education, support, practice, and guidance between meetings. We don't have that kind of staff in New Haven and so that portion of the organization didn't move forward (president of HEJN, interview, December 10, 2004).

Overall, Mitchell characterizes the New Haven branch as “not as friendly” to less educated, low-income people of color with limited access to technical information. Mitchell claims that because New Haven Branch members have constant access to technology (Internet), that they are far less patient regarding time-intensive training sessions. Many of the New Haven members conduct their own research and work independently (president of HEJN, interview, June 27, 2006).

The Hartford Branch is able to attract members from the city and the surrounding suburbs, most of whom are White. Although there are examples of multiracial groups focused on environmental justice, it is more common to find members living in the same neighborhood and forging multiracial coalitions based on a shared sense of discrimination (Checker 2001). HEJN is unique because the membership base is spread throughout the Greater Hartford area.

Altogether, HEJN has been able to create a viable and stable multiracial organization. A support staff with the responsibility for general organization ensures that members’ needs are met so that they can participate consistently in the organization. These efforts enable HEJN to maintain its minority base and thus its permanence as an organization.

## Technical Training

HEJN places great emphasis on the technical training and education of its members. This ongoing educational training is pursued by members and is critically important to the organization. Members are sophisticated in their understanding of the scientific aspects of environmental justice. This knowledge, along with their firsthand familiarity with environmental disparities, is a key component in their legitimacy among policy makers (Connecticut’s Urban Program Manager, interview, April 22, 2002). Despite the limited level of formal education among members, many members can thoroughly explain issues such as the effects of particulate matter from diesel emissions on respiratory illness, and the health impacts of dioxins and other toxic chemicals. As one member noted,

Our people are very interested in learning very complex things, and they’ve been able to use their knowledge. At first the politicians wouldn’t listen to us at all. And then they’d say, “You’ve got these grandmothers talking this language that we don’t even understand so it must be something really important.” And whenever someone does research to find out if what we’re saying is true, they find out that it is true. And that’s very different from other groups. Members’ legitimacy and comfort are important. The politicians trust

what we say. It's been amazing that people who are not even involved with our organization are getting our message and carrying it forward (activist interview, March 14, 2002).

Knowledge regarding environmental pollutants and public health problems enhances the ability of members to engage in highly organized community outreach. One HEJN member who represents a local parent organization in Hartford is a Jamaican immigrant. She explained:

One of our greatest accomplishments is the level of education we have and our ability to educate the community on environmental issues (activist interview, February 22, 2002).

HEJN members regularly conduct "Hartford Toxics Tours" for people in the community as a way of raising awareness about local sources of pollution. These tours include trips to solid waste incinerators, power plants, and landfills. The HEJN tour guides provide background information about each facility and how it affects the health of the community. The guides also discuss HEJN's efforts to eliminate or clean up the facilities. An interesting characteristic of HEJN's educational strategy is that members are instructed by the group's president, Dr. Mitchell, and then teach others what they have learned. Dr. Mitchell is a public health physician who was trained at Johns Hopkins University. The fact that the group is self-reliant for its scientific education is distinctive. A different approach is followed by a Boston-based environmental justice organization, Alternatives for Community and Environment (ACE); that group, which is primarily focused on asthma prevention, forged a coalition with local universities for its scientific information (Brown et al. 2003). By contrast, HEJN had to develop its own group resources for technical and educational training.

Interviews with HEJN activists indicate that in addition to the sophisticated technical knowledge possessed by many members, another factor in HEJN's ability to accomplish its goals and appear credible to other stakeholders is the fact that several of its members have legal or political expertise. One of the founding members of the organization, Attorney Cynthia Jennings, is among the most active environmental justice attorneys in the state. Attorney Jennings was originally a member of ONE CHANE who decided to pursue a legal education to work for environmental justice (activist interview, February 22, 2002). Several suburban members of the organization have also provided political guidance to the group. According to one member,

We've been really fortunate because some of our White suburban members bring some political knowledge that's very helpful. They've been wonderful about hanging back and letting members from Hartford take the lead (activist interview, February 15, 2002).

According to members interviewed in this study, the scientific, legal, and political knowledge collectively possessed by members are key factors in the organization's successes. In fact, it was reported in multiple interviews that the scientific knowledge that members possess has impressed policy makers, especially when members testify before the city council or the state legislature, and when they contact government agency stakeholders.

The EPA has tagged HEJN as one of the two most active environmental justice organizations in New England (activist interview, March 14, 2002; Connecticut's Urban Program Manager, interview, April 22, 2002). In interviews, policy elites indicate that members are highly informed on public health matters. Their education has empowered them politically and provided the skills to educate additional activists. From the successes at the local level noted earlier, to the move toward working on statewide initiatives, to the recognition HEJN has received from government officials and organizations, there is considerable evidence that the organization is succeeding in achieving substantive policy change and policies that are ultimately responsive to the minority community. In addition, as one HEJN member pointed out,

For the most part, our members don't have the money to make contributions to politicians. They aren't friends with the governor. They don't have the resources to hire lobbyists. But, they've learned how to work within the political system to get results. This is new for many members (activist interview, March 14, 2002).

Given that environmental justice was not a major issue in Hartford prior to the early 1990s, the accomplishments since the inception of HEJN are considerable.

## **Community Networking and Coalition Building**

A strategy HEJN employs is to reach out to preexisting nonenvironmental organizations, which is apparent in their extensive organizational membership list. Broadly centered on environmental justice concerns, HEJN unites approximately 30 grassroots, religious, and community organizations in

the city. To accomplish this, HEJN seeks out members of local organizations with a concern about environmental justice. As one member explained,

We go and do outreach to other groups and instead of trying to snatch their leadership and take them from their organization to ours, we really look for the one person who may not be one of the most active leaders, but for whom asthma is a real touchstone. And we try to energize them at a higher level in their own organization through their action in ours (activist interview, February 15, 2002).

The environmental representatives from the various community organizations regularly attend HEJN events. As Dr. Mitchell explained, "These environmental representatives are a source of direct communication between the member organizations and HEJN" (president of HEJN, interview, December 10, 2004). Interestingly, since the inception of HEJN, many of the member community organizations have created environmental positions on their boards of directors. Although there is no concrete evidence that HEJN is the cause of this trend, it is interesting that many of HEJN's organizations have created these posts after their members became involved with HEJN.

The results of HEJN's outreach efforts are apparent at their monthly meetings. Meetings begin with introductions of all those in attendance. During the time of this research project, meetings consistently included grassroots members of HEJN and representatives from 15 to 20 of its member organizations. The purpose of monthly meetings is to raise awareness of important environmental justice issues, to schedule subcommittee meetings, and to devise strategies to advance group interests.

Many of Hartford's senior citizens are the organization's most active individual members. Many of these seniors are also members of grassroots senior citizen organizations in Hartford. In addition, many other racially and ethnically based grassroots organizations are HEJN members. The Black church, a foundation of the civil rights movement, continues to be an important component of HEJN. However, the religious community in HEJN extends beyond the Black church, including members of several predominantly White suburban churches with highly educated members who have a commitment to environmental equality. Although White membership remains the minority of HEJN's membership, the organization has achieved a level of success as a multiracial and multi-ethnic organization.

## Leadership Development

The importance of minority leadership has been documented in the minority politics literature (Tate 2004); however, the way to develop leaders remains an unanswered question. For communities of color, having representatives or leaders who share demographic experiences can contribute to political knowledge and greater satisfaction with their elected representatives (Tate 2004). As an African-American leader who shares similar passions about social justice and the plight of minorities in Hartford, Mitchell embodies effective leadership. By using his scientific background, Mitchell educates HEJN members who use their newly acquired knowledge to become lay experts in their communities.

One of HEJN's long-standing goals is to empower members so that they may improve their local environment and increase opportunities in their own lives. Leadership training is a means to attain this goal. Monthly meetings serve as the primary place where this early leadership training begins. Members rotate as monthly meeting leaders, timekeepers, and reporters on the activities of member organizations and the government. This rotation of leadership has given members a wide range of leadership experience. Moreover, this has expanded members' involvement in environmental justice outside of the monthly meetings. In addition, the organization holds roughly five leadership development training sessions each year. Finally, the organization presents leadership awards to grassroots members who have shown exceptional leadership and commitment to the cause of environmental justice. Dr. Mitchell explained:

Leadership development is something you really have to do in low-income communities. And it pays off. It's amazing to see what these folks do once they're empowered. They start going back to school, they start getting better jobs, doing things to continue to develop themselves and their children. (president of HEJN, interview, December 10, 2004).

Bullard (2000) indicates that Black environmental justice activists often develop their decision-making skills in indigenous community institutions (94). Interestingly, HEJN is not reliant upon preexisting structures, such as other community organizations, for leadership. Rather, they take it upon themselves to train and cultivate a large and diverse group of members who have not acquired leadership skills elsewhere. Thus the organization uses a blend of leadership and technical training discussed earlier to improve the effectiveness of the organization itself and to expand opportunities for its members. In this way, they empower their own members to become the leaders within HEJN and other organizations.

## Ongoing Challenges

Even with evidence of policy responsiveness on the part of public officials, HEJN faces many of the challenges associated with nonprofit, community organizations. According to Dr. Mitchell, the organization struggles to find resources. Retaining a staff, offering training sessions, writing reports, writing grants, and educating the public are resource intensive. The majority of the organization's funding comes from regional and national foundations. However, many of the available funding sources do not fund controversial organizations such as HEJN, particularly those that challenge the actions of public sector entities. Limited resources pose challenges in the face of a myriad of new and recurring issues that emerge every few months, such as the new negotiation with the trash authority. Finally, Dr. Mitchell also contends that the organization does not do a very good job of publicizing their major accomplishments, which probably limits HEJN's ability to raise funds. Despite these areas of weakness, the organization has managed to achieve a measure of success on the issues they do pursue (president of HEJN, interview, June 27, 2006).

## HEJN's Place in the Minority Empowerment and Environmental Justice Literature

The minority empowerment literature offers some instructive perspectives on the organizational strategies embraced by HEJN. This literature addresses the challenges minorities often face in the political process and possible ways to overcome these hurdles. Emphasis is placed rather narrowly on protest and electoral strategies to increase minority incorporation in policy making. In addition, the scholars in this field have not specifically addressed the prerequisites for sustaining such coalitions. HEJN is multiracial, has remained active over time, and has focused on a number of different environmental justice and health-related issues.

Examining HEJN also demonstrates how an organization can use federal policy to advance its interests. HEJN has capitalized on federal policies enacted by the Clinton Administration to strengthen its case for public health disparities. The organization has also succeeded in increasing democratic participation by bringing previously underrepresented groups to the policy-making table. Beyond the idealistic goal of full participation in a democracy, there is evidence that this involvement reflects a permanent shift in political participation for members of HEJN.

## Multiracial Coalition with Minority Leadership

Much of the previous empirical research finds that multiracial coalitions are difficult to maintain over time (DeLeon 2003; Hero and Clarke 2003; Mollenkopf 2003; Orr 2003; Owens and Rich 2003; Perry 2003; Pinderhughes 2003). However, as Bullard, Warren, and Johnson (2001) have indicated, air quality and other health-related issues that extend beyond poor and minority communities might be the policy area that unites geographically separated and racially diverse communities over the long-term because in many cases pollution knows no boundaries. In many ways, the shared health risks across geographic areas are a key component in HEJN's multiracial coalition. In other policy arenas such as poverty policy, it is more difficult to keep a diverse coalition together because the policy only has an effect on the less empowered members of the coalition. Therefore, long-term multiracial coalitions may be uniquely feasible in the environmental justice arena because the public health consequences are shared widely.

In turn, sustained mobilization of the group contributes to its perceived legitimacy. This is especially evident in news stories from the *Hartford Courant*. Articles in the city's major paper not only cover the issues HEJN supports and their activities, but integrate members' perspectives when covering any issue the organization has adopted. This can be seen as increasing the visibility of the organization and the perception that the organization is a legitimate actor in local politics. HEJN's enduring coalition has also led to the perception among policy makers that the organization and its 30-plus member organizations are a permanent force in the local environmental policy-making process (Connecticut's Urban Program Manager, interview, April 22, 2002; Hartford's Environmental Public Health Educator, interview, April 22, 2002).

The findings of this case study demonstrate that policy responsiveness can occur without significant levels of minority incorporation in the formal political structure. The coalition in this study did not seek to take control of the formal operations of government, but to help create public policy that addresses the concerns of the minority community. Essentially, HEJN has made considerable strides to transcend its status as a second-tier player in the political process despite the fact that it does not follow an electoral strategy.

## Federal Policy

The importance of federal involvement in policies of interest to minorities is reflected in the experiences of HEJN. The organization has capitalized on the federal environmental policies implemented under the Clinton

Administration such as Executive Order 12898 and the Urban Environmental Initiative (UEI). This executive order requires all federal agencies to include the achievement of environmental justice as a part of their mission. Essentially, it gave environmental justice activists the legal backing they long desired. In addition to the executive order, in 1995 the Clinton Administration also launched UEI under the EPA in Region 1, New England (Urban Environmental Program<sup>11</sup>). This program is aimed at improving environmental and public health in Hartford, Providence, and Boston by working cooperatively with community organizations. Although these new policies were not often mentioned in interviews for this study, it is evident that they contribute to state and local governmental attention to environmental justice. It also seems that the executive order and UEI have made the government more receptive to environmental justice. This has undoubtedly enhanced the legitimacy of its dealings with the government.

### **Increasing Democratic Participation**

As the organizational umbrella for minority mobilization around environmental justice issues in Hartford, HEJN is the major vehicle for democratic participation in this important policy area. The organizational strategies embraced by HEJN and its resulting policy achievements have brought underrepresented groups to the governmental decision-making table. HEJN has raised the awareness of public health issues in the city, which has clearly made the government more responsive and effective in this policy area. The strategic efforts of HEJN to move from protest to institutionalized participation have successfully advanced its concerns.

In terms of the environmental justice literature, this case study offers a template for how minorities can affect the urban environmental policy process. HEJN's organizational formula of maintaining a multiracial organization, encouraging the policy training of its members, building coalitions with existing community organizations, engaging in leadership training, having a dynamic and scientifically trained leader, and moving from protest activities to institutionalized participation in local politics all contribute to its stability and success. These organizational strategies have led to sustained and effective minority involvement in environmental justice policy.

The template that HEJN presents for creating a sustainable multiracial organization that achieves policy responsiveness is particularly useful for racial and ethnic minorities fighting for environmental equality in urban America. Environmental justice activists would be wise to consider the factors leading to environmental justice success in Hartford as measured by

responsive policy making. Beyond environmental justice, this study presents a new approach to analyzing the potential for multiracial coalitions. Although environmental concerns might be different from other policy areas because the environment can negatively affect people regardless of race, ethnicity, or class, this case study sheds light on the circumstances for sustainable minority coalitions, the importance of developing minority leaders to guarantee that minority interests will be top priority for the coalition, and demonstrates how federal policy can be used to advance coalitional interests. Finally, this study demonstrates how multiracial coalitions like HEJN may increase democratic participation in our political system.

## Notes

1. The research for this paper includes a thorough review of local newspapers and in-depth interviews with 11 community activists with ongoing commitments to environmental justice in Hartford. Most, but not all, are members of HEJN. I selected respondents by identifying some of the most active environmental justice community leaders from newspaper articles on the issue and through participant observation at HEJN monthly meetings. Respondents were asked to identify others who have been active over time and when an individual was mentioned by more than one respondent I tried to interview that person. Participant observation is also incorporated in this study. From November of 2001 through November of 2003, I regularly attended monthly meetings with the Hartford Environmental Justice Network (HEJN), attended state legislative hearings with HEJN members, attended grassroots planning sessions, and participated in tours of toxic sites conducted by members of the organization. I also interviewed a representative from the Hartford Department of Health and a representative from the Environmental Protection Agency in New England in order to include the perspective of elite policy makers.

2. <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/der/ssp/dist0102/dist041.pdf>

3. I created Figure 1 by combining 2000 U.S. Census tract information and the location of municipal solid waste facilities and other point source pollutants.

4. ONE CHANE was created in 1988 when two neighborhood organizations merged into one organization. ONE CHANE members are some of the poorest residents with limited options for political power or mobility (Simmons 1994, 21).

5. CRRRA recently lost \$220 million dollars to Enron when that corporation declared bankruptcy. The contract with Enron stated that Enron would purchase power from CRRRA for 10 years in exchange for \$220 million from CRRRA.

6. Interviews with community activists revealed that some people believe that there might still be some health problems with the landfill despite the fact that the odors are gone.

7. In 1998, Dr. Mitchell also created the Connecticut Coalition of environmental Justice in an effort to unite more organizations in the state with concerns about environmental justice.

8. The list of member organizations: Organizational Members of Hartford Environmental Justice Network, First Baptist Church of West Hartford, Black Men's Society, Inc., Building Parent Power, Capitol Region Conference of Churches, Christian Activities Council, Coalition to Strengthen the Sheldon/Charter Oak Neighborhood (CSS/CON), Connecticut Citizen

Action Group, Connecticut College Holleran Center for Community Action, Connecticut Council on Occupational Safety and Health (ConnectiCOSH), Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (CONNPIRG), Ecological Health Organization (ECHO), Endometriosis Association, Fair Haven Management Team Environmental Subcommittee, The Green Party—Hartford, Hartford Areas Rally Together (HART), Hartford Federation of Teachers, Healthy Homes Program/Lead Safe Houses, Hispanic Health Council, Institute for Community Research, Men's Club of Hartford, North Hartford Seniors in Action, Organized Northeasterners/Clay Hill and North End (ONE-CHANE), First Presbyterian Church of Hartford, South Arsenal Neighborhood Development (SAND), South End Neighborhood Action Project (SNAP), South End NRZ of Hartford, South End Residents and Merchants Inc. of East Hartford, Sierra Club—Hartford, Toxics Action Center, Urban League of Greater Hartford, Vecinos Unidos, Warriors for Real Welfare Reform, and Working Lands Alliance—Hartford Food System.

9. Horton Sheff left the Green Party in 2003 and is now a Democratic member of the city council.

10. Environmental justice is also commonly referred to as environmental discrimination and environmental racism.

11. Urban Environmental Program. <http://www.epa.gov/region1/eco/uep/11> (accessed 1May 2005).

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