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The Green Solution for People of Color: How the Advent of Green Business Can Bring Two Movements Together

By Nonya Collier, Academy Fellow

The Current Divide

A deep divide presently characterizes two key progressive movements: environmental groups and civil rights advocates. The rapidly-growing "green industry" – or business that contributes to an equitable and ecologically sustainable economy – could change all this.

Historically, mainstream environmental organizations have ignored the unique issues facing low-income and minority communities. While well-intentioned environmentalists might sometimes try to recruit low-income and minority communities to their cause, rarely do they reciprocate by acknowledging the daily issues faced by minority communities like housing, crime, poverty, and low educational attainment.

Similarly, civil rights leaders have historically ignored critical environmental issues, instead focusing on day-to-day issues of community survival. At the detriment of their constituencies, civil rights leaders sometimes fail to realize that environmental quality impacts not only the whales and the forests, but also the poorest Americans. Low-income and minority communities are more likely to be victims of environmental destruction and are the first to suffer from the impacts of global warming, air pollution, and the disposal of toxic waste.

Today we live in a world where oil companies dominate, and people of color disproportionately suffer from poor living standards. The disconnect between civil rights leaders and environmentalists has done very little to help this situation.

The Promise of Green Industry

Today there is hope for a sea change in this

relationship. The advent of green industry presents the best opportunity to finally bridge this divide. After so many missteps, this emerging industry could once and for all bring together two unlikely allies to work around a common agenda. The end result would be doubly successful: less poverty and a cleaner environment.



(Image taken from mural in Greenlining's conference center. Artist: Ray Patlan)

Green businesses offer products and services that fulfill society's needs while contributing to the well-being of all earth's inhabitants. For example, the business of alternative energy derives power from clean, renewable solar and wind sources rather than dirty oil, while still generating substantial profits. Examples of other green businesses include recycling systems, organic food production, and green construction, including sustainable flooring, insulation, furniture, wallboard, and roofing materials.

The green industry is booming. Currently, the green business market is worth \$227 billion per year. It is projected to reach \$1 trillion by

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2020. If only one step in the right direction was taken – moving the U.S. off oil, which so many other countries across the world have begun to do – over 750,000 new jobs would be created in a multi-billion dollar bio-fuel industry.

The Potential for Partnership

Ironically, the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina created the conditions for potential partnership of civil rights and environmental organizations in green business. Hurricane Katrina splashed both poverty and climate change onto front-page headlines, where they had rarely been seen before. Those heart-wrenching images of human suffering, combined with new questions prompted by record high oil prices and energy security concerns, set the stage for a new public debate.

The outcome: more and more Americans are beginning to demand alternative business practices that can finally cure America’s addiction to oil and at the same time create jobs and alleviate poverty conditions for millions of Americans.

These are not new demands. What is new is that both demands – for environmental as well as racial and economic justice – are coming from communities that used to call for only one or the other, and long considered the two diametrically opposed. The leaders of the civil rights and environmental movements are suddenly hearing new, cross-cutting concerns from their constituencies.

Making a Partnership Work

Both the civil rights and environmental movements will need to view partnership through green industry as beneficial to their interests.

The environmental benefits to this emerging green industry are clear. Old business practices have damaged the environment through smog, deforestation, and water pollution. The power of green business to mitigate these problems is immense. By increasing sales of recycled wood and paper products, for example, we slow the destruction of pristine wilderness areas. Furthermore, green businesses have been very successful in providing alternatives to resources that are near depletion.

Minority communities, now comprising 55% of California’s population, bear the burden of dumping by dirty industries, and will benefit most from cleaner waste management and recycling approaches. Likewise, since minority communities pay the largest percentage of their incomes for energy (both at home and in their automobiles), they will benefit most from the development of alternative energy sources. And minority communities would benefit most from the construction of affordable housing using green building materials and practices.

However, selling green industry to minority communities may be difficult. A relatively small percentage of low-income and minority families drive hybrid vehicles, buy organic, or have solar panels on their homes. They simply cannot afford, or think they can afford to be green consumers. Likewise, few minority businesses have the access that would teach them to develop green industry products, services, and practices. They would need the opportunities to build vocational and business skills central to green business.

There is a danger that this new environmental movement could bypass minority communities just like the high-tech explosion did in the late 1990s. Exclusion would be a double-loss, for minority communities and for a green industry that would be missing out on the nation’s fastest growing market.

Now is the critical time to introduce and include minority communities – both businesses and consumers – to green industry. The lessons of Hurricane Katrina, and the public debate sparked by the disaster, provide an unprecedented opportunity to do so. With real partnership, green industry could be the bridge to a common agenda that both protects the environment and the people who live in it.



ACTION STEPS: HOW GREEN INDUSTRY CAN BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

Outlined below are 7 action steps we can take to ensure that all communities benefit from a new alliance between environmental and civil rights groups through new environmentalism.

1. **Create a task force to address issues of affordability.** We recommend a diverse task force that will examine methods of making green technology more affordable and accessible to low-income and minority communities. The task force would consist of civil rights leaders, environmental leaders, minority business leaders, and government officials.
2. **Learn from the success of the Community Reinvestment Act and hold green companies accountable to diverse communities.** Emerging industries should fully adopt diversity practices early. If these businesses choose to ignore minority consumers, the full potential of green business will never be met.
3. **Engage the minority business sector to encourage growth of green business in minority communities.** There are many minority-owned businesses in construction and related fields. Efforts should be made to educate these entrepreneurs on green business models that make business sense.
4. **Incorporate immigrants into the environmental debate.** Recent demonstrations by millions of immigrants expressed their desire to be part of the American Dream. Instead of viewing immigrants as harmful to the environment, immigrants should be fully welcomed to participate in environmental and social justice agendas.
5. **Create a Green Business Fund.** With the help of community input, major financial institutions should create a Green Community Reinvestment Fund. This fund would make investments in inner cities and rural areas to spur green business development.
6. **Bring together social justice advocates across all issues around cross-cutting agendas.** Too many social justice advocates are still operating in individual silos. We must all make efforts to work with “unlikely allies.”
7. **Increase access to green products and services.** Affordable green business products are often not utilized by diverse communities simply because there is no outreach on the benefits and cost savings. By creating green businesses in ethnic communities and by increasing marketing efforts of these products, minority participation in the green industry as both consumers and entrepreneurs will also grow.

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About the author: Nonya Collier is a Fellow at The Greenlining Institute. She received a bachelor’s degree in Sociology from Spelman College. She was a Regional Research Assistant Trainee at the Regional Research Center for Minority Health at the Morehouse School of Medicine. Nonya is working on holistic health issues, by bridging health with other critical indicators that lead to a better quality of life for minority communities. Her responsibilities include looking at innovative ways of addressing health through housing, economic development, land-use planning, and environmental practices. She also works with Greenlining’s Health program to address issues of access to health care and health care coverage among minority communities.

This is a project of Greenlining’s Fair Growth and Sustainable Development Program that aims to create win-win partnerships between environmental leaders, and equal opportunity activists. For more information contact Orson Aguilar at orsona@greenlining.org.

