

Title: Perspectives on Disrupting Institutional & Structural Racism in Water Policy

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Speakers/Presenters:

- Moderator: Lois DeBacker, Kresge
- **Alexis Smith**, Project Intern, Freshwater Future
- **Katherine Antos**, Branch Chief, District Department of Energy and Environment
- **Katherine Eglund**, Program Director, Education, Economics, Environmental, Climate and Health Organization
- **Drew Curtis**, Senior Equitable Development Manager, Ironbound Community Corporation
- **Jessica Loya**, National Policy Director, Green Latinos
- **Lisa Sasso**, Project Manager, MMSD

Lois welcomes all to share stories.

Stories:

Alexis: Works with Freshwater Future through a nonprofit called Junction Coalition after Toledo experienced toxic algal blooms, didn't have proper access to info or resources and had to help ourselves. Got information from city around 7am and went door to door of residents telling them to not drink water, a lot of times it's "**not a poverty of dollars but a poverty of information.**" Formed the coalition to restore ourselves.

Toledo is about to enter into Regional Waters Agreement to help pay for the gray infrastructure revamping with a bunch of lead pipes getting replaced, water rates going up – doubled! – do you know why? Making monthly payments instead of quarterly, hurts elderly and multi-generational families, commissioner comes to meeting and tells residents they can apply to programs for help, often residents don't even qualify for those programs. Lack of education and information is part of institutional racism, "we don't wait for superman, we help ourselves."

We make it work the best way we can, especially with partners like Freshwater Future, education through exposure to build generation that is empathetic, connect water to workforce development.

Jessica: Broadly, policy in general. First director of policy for Green Latinos, born and raised in East LA to single mom, went to UC Santa Cruz, grew up with asthma near highway junction. One mile from LA River, no access to parks, have to continue to fight for my space in this work.

Opportunities of getting youth into green spaces and the impact that is has. I got a paid internship program for Latino youth to go visit national parks in college (5 spots for 300 applicants), went and got the chance to see the headwaters of Colorado River, a trickle of water that started in the Rockies that grew and grows and provides water for over half our nation and Mexico if it gets there. Saw impacts of oil and gas drilling on national parks, using advocacy as a space to elevate my community's voice on these issues.

Got the chance to go to DC to lobby at CEQ, went on to intern at CEQ and it was unpaid, not very many people of color. Sat across from 5 mothers who traveled from Flint with water bottles and put in front of me and my bosses and asking us to drink them, my colleagues wouldn't touch the bottle. This was

environmental racism that was happening to them, but my bosses deleted those words from my memo and didn't want them as talking points. I can tell you how important those briefing notes are for national policy, that day I realized that I have a mission and I have a voice and I need to use that every single day.

The talking points are environmental racism, anything less than that is wrong"

Katherine A: Three things struck me when asked to be on this panel, but I cannot pretend to be prejudiced against based on the color of my skin. One of the core principles is being able to admit what you don't know and what you can't know and humility to admit when you are wrong. Build capacity to genuinely listen.

Works for DC on partnership between 6 states in watershed and the EPA, both DOEE and the Chesapeake Bay program have explicit goals for DEI but been interesting to see them struggle on how to get there. What are legitimate first steps to get to the long-term goal? Thinking about **how to give voice**, making a place at the table but also a role in setting a table and a place at the podium.

Two examples of place at table/podium: clean up strategy for districts and waterways, ask what you are doing well and what you can be doing better, coming from a place of privilege is that you don't know barriers due to blinders that you have on. Here is how we have to rethink our program so that more people can apply for grants, **if you pay engineer for expertise then you have to pay community member for expertise.**

Authentic meaningful engagement is just as important as amount of stormwater retained, in terms of place at a podium: many of the leaders I work with have goals related to DEI but you look at leaders of program or who shows up to those meetings, there is none.

Lisa: Being authentic. There is an equity task force that Milwaukee is part of, trust in relationships is so important or else really hard to move forward. Local needs assessment to look at pathways and entrance. My experience is **that in the water industry, if you know someone then you are in it**, our team is working on that.

State those things in order to address them, had some community meetings where pay people to attend, information is valuable.

One of my coworkers wrote the resilience plan for our region and something the district piloted is a fresh coast ambassador (young ppl 14-14) in areas that are flooded and industry has left, educational for personal/professional/environmental development, actually go to Lake Michigan – a lot of people in Milwaukee don't know or go to Lake Michigan.

Drew: Worked hand-in-hand with residents on identifying neighborhood issues and coming up with solutions. This work is so critical to everything in our society, great to see it centered here.

Our work on EJ: we see it manifested in many ways in our community: place, decision making, economic benefits.

Place: Ironbound neighborhood of Newark makes up most of the east ward, victim to racist land use policies, POC and low-income folks can't get mortgages, have to deal with being overburdened with polluting facilities. How to tackle land use challenges? Organize and build power, as a white man is to put myself out of a job (or another white man)

Second issues is decision making: all too often POC are excluded from decisions that affect them, **no decision about us without us**, combined sewer overflow and river being a superfund site – so even if you clean up the bacteria our river is still contaminated, also stopping nuisance flooding from sewer backups, created a project in partnership with the city for meaningful community engagement, started with education and engagement with feedback from residents who are the experts, regional resilience project funded by HUD on resilience plan to tackle sea level rise too, providing stipends for community members

Economic benefits; who is getting paid, who sees that money – mostly white people from suburbs who come into work, same with construction unions, in process of working with city to change procurement policy for GSI and maintenance, you need to hire someone who has been trained and certified through the national certification program

Katherine E: water is talking about basic human dignity, have to talk about more than just the physical aspects of water, take your earrings off moment, two of my dearest friends drowned in the death of Katrina, we had so much flooding and saw and lived the injustices of HK, and one of the things I can tell you is that we had a generator but I never want to be without water 10-12 days ever again, BP oil spill another moment, flooding and algal blooms in Mississippi, under guise of restoring the creek the mayor and his team destroyed the banks – turkey creek (come hell or high water), it has not ended, still faced with development and going from generation to generation, Gulfport organization with DSCEJ organized students out of the class into nature, people were feeling so forgotten and deserted, so desperate for help and assistance and don't think anyone cared, Anthropocene Alliance reached out to bring in experts from HBCU consortium, going to take us all coming together, we have to be uncomfortable and call it exactly what it is, trying to educate community, reminder that carbon mitigation cannot lead to water contamination especially in the SE region of the USA

Discussions:

Reflections - What moved you about these stories?

- Struck by the deeply personal nature of the stories but also how common the stories are across the US
- Re: LA river story - the importance of having representation of community in water utility decision making to address the over emphasis on water delivery
- Good interventions don't necessarily result in good outcomes → make sure you understand what the community wants and needs
- Residents are the experts - pay them for their time like you would a technical consultant
- Actions to take back: don't measure engagement by the number of people in the room - look at what you're doing before/after the "engagement event" to automatically engage

Katherine A. + Lisa

- Similarities in awkwardness of being a white woman trying to address racial injustice (awkwardness in language intent)
- Waterways include people

Alexis + Jessica

- It hits home
- Real stories, real people
- policy - makers control the narrative
- Courage and anger in the mothers
- Political propaganda for raising fees
- One mother can bring about change because of her connectivity

Jessica + Alexis S.

- Powerful stories because personal
- You need to fully place story in structured framework
- Fighting in own family for right / respect to do environmental work
- Representation - not as present
- Time to make connections for “impactfulness”
- Spoken more publically with first hand experience
- Emotional connection
- Why: need to connect to reality, share reality - talk about it openly
- Stories are powerful
- Stories are factual
- Shake things up!
- Emotional level connects to intellectual level
- Knows language to connect

Vancouver:

- Helpful; in Vancouver just starting
- Inspirational
- In office: discussion on what are we offering - no quick solutions, access to information
- Opening pathways to resources
- Helpful to hear
- “Lack of information is a form of poverty”
- Pathways = workforce development maybe the “easy” pathway
- Need to go beyond workforce development
- What does “access to information” mean? ← GAPS
- The above communicates VALUE
- Both base on your organizational capacity

What info do we need for the layperson / people need to fight for environmental and racial equity?

Reaction to first speakers

- Similar experiences shared
- Need to see yourself in field
- "Us" vs "them" rural and urban
- Ability to promote more environmental education (natural park internships)
- Access to parks and nature
- Workforce development and training

What moved me - Part 1

- People in power don't validate or aren't listening
- All issues are interconnected and we tend to focus on environment only
- Literally erasing "environmental racism" from notes
- Why - officials don't want to

What moved me - Part 2

- People don't want access to advocacy (need resources)
- A sense that people really listened to that
- Availability of internships in national policy, paid internships
- "Privilege pipeline"

What are 1-2 concrete things you'll do today to move the needle?

And what do you need to be effective in that work?

- Self-care and take care of myself
- Think about who holds the power
- Comfort is privilege
- No decision about us without us: when we accept event invitations, use our seat to ask to bring a colleague who doesn't get invited to those events
- Providing mentorships in this space
- Pay interns in the environmental space!!!
- Talk about racism in the places where it is happening and spending money in the communities instead of fancy hotels
- Learn to be comfortable being uncomfortable

Workforce development needs pipeline green stormwater infrastructure certifications:

1. Is there a job?
 2. Does training fit the job?
 3. Is training accessible?
 4. On job learning vs. need resume
- In reality...people develop education programs for GSI instead of developing career pipeline

- This results in “a lot of African American men with a desk full of certifications, but no job”

1-2 concrete things to move the needle

- Pay residents to participate
- A diverse council of leadership

What do we need in order to be effective?

- Relationship building
- Joint events
- Request series of field hearings where frontline NGOs can show up for congressional committees
- Make sure of congressional recess for visits

- Accommodating in federal proposal for local beneficiaries
- Remove barriers for equitable adaptation experiences by locals in federal policy proposals
- Land and water construction funds - beneficiaries come to DC to discuss how to address equity issues

- Training in equity offered to Kresge grantees has been helpful along with access to their advisors to review materials and consult

Connect federal resources to frontline communities

- Constrained by Trump administration
- Congress more receptive
- Federal requirements for public engagement
- Engage senators to cut through red tape to advance ?
- Elections - voting - have to ?

What is needed?

- Be willing to be vulnerable...it's okay to go out and listen early at the neighborhood level
- BE the bridge!
- Build community power and go to electeds
- Critical need for civic engagement
- Election years → just keep coming back
- Be hard on issue, not on the person
- How To deal with electeds when get stiff-armed “that’s not a priority”
- Atlanta re. 311 logs → help people report so issue is addressed

Shape federal policy and resources for community

- Milwaukee - “federal area of concern” re: AOC Mil River
- How to get community input?

- Bust open ways of doing business
- Lack of room for earmarks
- Utilities on hill talk to lawmakers but also need community voices on water issues
- Meetings in Great Lakes → let people know happening, get them there
- Hearing in middle of day → white middle class input
- Build better ways for input

Info needed for CC driver water issues:

- Unfair to ask what do you need? CC is complicated
- Work with community - here's what we know, build community knowledge, make accessible
- Emergency management and prioritize projects with most impact
 - Map with if manage this water....flood lines

"No decisions about us without us"

How to continue dismantling racism in environmental work?

- Follow up, follow through
- Require accountability of public utilities, public servants, and policy makers
- "The power people is stronger than the people in power"

What actions will you take to move the needle on disrupting racism?

1. Keep naming racism and take lead in naming
2. Get comfortable with making room, as a white male
3. Don't go away / get out of the way BUT use privilege to get equal
4. Create space at table → when organization / person invited to a meeting or speaking engagement "yes and can I bring a colleague"
5. Choice points - identify what can control / agenda, etc. to center racial justice
6. Build money to pay for community expertise
7. Diversity = how do we look? - move to look at system structure that perpetuates racism
8. Hire interns from different colleagues and areas, not just HBC's AND PAY INTERNS!
9. Hold convenings in community centers so money flows there instead of white hotels

Institutional Racism

- Only when people are sickened or die do the issues come into focus, get attention that's deserved. And even then you face denial and barriers.
- When you aren't a person of color, can you convey the story as effectively when you haven't lived through it?
- How can we put urban flooding "in a bottle" to show that to decision-makers?

- Are our discussions of real solutions having disproportionate adverse impact on certain populations? Need to bring community our solutions as they are developed.
- Government planning effort - toward a climate solution - problem = flooding
- Do a whole first phase of gathering community input and expertise (paying for it) for a year and then in the following year start in on technical solution development?

Movement to Action

- Within organization - review learning and pathways to increase diversity. Part of developing policy and intention and equality audit
- Externally - set standards for our community engagement, reporting back on the effectiveness of engagement, giving voice, envisioning meaningful info into projects and policy

Challenge:

Disconnection from lack of information or misinformation or edited information

Personal goal for addressing equity: Provide national resources to front line partners, helping elevate local ambassadors to the city, state, and national level.

Why only 5 of 300?

- There are people who can walk away from the “polluted” water on the table
- How can our public servants delete or eliminate testimony?
- Privilege to pass the buck - is inadequate
- Listen to the community and don't assume we add value or know how to help.
- Access to policy matters - how can we elevate the voices of CBOs and frontline communities? How do we re-create their access to policymakers?
- The power of language / naming environmental racism
- Sharing this information my board of directors
- Building capacity for people to amplify their voice
- Getting people engage and look for funding
- Example: residents at table with power. City on outside. Shifted power.
- What barriers to racism did I remove today?
- Was it enough?

To disrupt racism

a) *What am I doing?*

- Unveiling and communicating the inequalities that exist and plan regarding access to ecological benefits and exposure to environmental risk with the benefits?
- Who suffers? Based on whose decisions?

b) *What we need*

- Prefer to guide us in the ? of familiarity - the questions that really matter.

Combatting racism: Avoiding overpromising

- Be authentic in evaluating whether our promises are deliverable
- How can we be more humble and authentic about our impact? How can we admit failures?
- Organizations seeking grant money “talk the talk” of WFD - perpetuates the myth

Concrete Things to Address Racism - What do you need to be effective?

- Get people on these boards, get people in these jobs
- Change ? rates to be more fair
- Engage counties in more helping city residents, get the work out on assistance
- Connect residents to more public officials
- Advocate for stipends for people on regional stakeholder meetings

New Jersey - engage in PUSC board meetings

Workforce

- If we talk about workforce, we should be talking about stable, good paying jobs with benefits
- GSI maintenance jobs are minimum wage and seasonal - should we be talking about it?

Policymakers/Electeds Fear

- Acknowledgment leading to blame or responsibility?
- Fear of doing something “wrong”
- Fear of words “racist” or “racism”
- Opportunity to ask ourselves what would I have done in the bosses shoes? What are their motives, what are they trying to achieve or avoid?

Setting a place at the table

Movement to action →

- Deliberate focus on changing organizational culture
- So many stories when communities do not have resources people take for granted
- With privilege you neglect to see barriers to access and information
- How you treat people
- Give credit to people and reflect trauma and stories of racism and injustice
- Listen and build multiracial partnerships for racial equity - not homogenous partnerships
- Use data, storytelling, communications to center communities of color in the narrative
- Evaluate underlying causes of problems. Is it...
 - 1) Institutionalized practices vs.
 - 2) Racist decision-makingDepending on the answer, need a different solution

- Let NGOs have DBE status to help nonprofits run by DOC's / toward DBE goals
 - Think about how you help less experienced organization - make it easier to compete on grants
 - Taking care of neighbors
 - Resonate with community feedback - improving projects materials
 - Changing privilege and power we have that many communities deserve
 - Familial support / conflict with worthiness of environmental justice work
 - Putting concrete things into plans to address structural racism
 - Always remind of the fear that politicians have around admitting they were wrong
 - Constant recognition that we aren't the beneficiaries of our work.
- KRESGE has a weekly newsletter - to promote stories!
 - Lack of information / access to info is a form of poverty
 - Outcomes from grants not just gallons refined, its authentic community engagement
 - Can't take action if we don't define it.

Challenges influencing decision makers:

- Complexity of government (depending on the department)
- Political barriers (government needs to seem in charge)
- Lack of capacity

Moving the Needle

- Organizing = community organizing
 - Shift in power
 - These CREWS conversations need to be happening at a local level
 - Local government needs to show "strong"
 - What needs to be moved?
 - Need community capacity to affect decision-making
 - ALL needs to come together
- Asking coworkers - are we communicating how to use information?
 - Continue to have uncomfortable discussion
 - Intentionally connect
 - Vancouver: trying to reach out to other departments - but not giving much in return, disconnect
 - Vancouver: city of reconciliation
 - Acknowledging culture of indigenous population