

REJOICE: Collaborative Environmental Justice Policymaking in Vermont

Bindu Panikkar (ENVS/RSEN, UVM), Ingrid L. Nelson (Geography, CAS, UVM),
External Collaborators: Shaina Kasper (Toxics Action Center), Kesha Ram (Center for Whole
Communities), and Marianne Engelman-Lado (Vermont Law School)

Objectives: This research examined the distribution of environmental and health disparities in Vermont stemming from differential access to energy, food, transportation, housing, employment opportunities, and adequate health services. It asked, how are ethnoculturally diverse and low-income communities impacted by environmental risks, differential access to environmental and health resources, and by environmental and health emergencies? How do both environmental and health emergencies exacerbate these disparities? What are the challenges to access, inclusion, and participation in state-based policies? Our objective for the project (FY 2020-21), was to develop an interactive, index-based spatial screening tool that combines social vulnerability factors and environmental justice variables to assess cumulative burdens, gather surveys in the remaining four Vermont counties in our prior survey work, conduct four community forums, finish interviews, and hold an interagency forum on EJ to bring to light environmental health disparities in the state to further the development of community informed-EJ policy.

Outcomes: The funding allowed us to examine the environmental and health disparities in Vermont. The project was done in collaboration with the REJOICE, which is a coalition of non-profit organizations, and academic institutions including the Center for Whole Communities, Community Action Works, CVEO Mobile Home Project, UVM, and the Environmental Justice Clinic at Vermont Law School. We further partnered with the Association of Africans Living in Vermont, the Brain Injury Association of Vermont, Migrant Justice, NeighborWorks of Western Vermont, Newport Wireless Mesh, the Rutland Area NAACP, and Vermont Center for Independent Living to conduct this study. Together, these groups are leading Vermont networks engaging with and representing communities facing environmental and health justice issues. We have also gathered 570 surveys, and conducted over 50 interviews and 17 focus groups since the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus groups were done by via Zoom and by phone. All partners and participants were compensated and given \$50 for participating in the focus groups. The funding supported two graduate students to complete a Master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation while they supported the project and REJOICE coalition work. In addition, it supported the completion of two undergraduate theses.

Publications: We have one article published, three articles under review and four additional publications under preparation out of this project. We collaborated with Migrant Justice (an NGO) and authored an article examining the occupational health experiences among immigrant dairy farmworkers, in Vermont (*IJERPH* 2021). One of the three articles under review examines the inequities in access to household-level transition benefits such as solar net metering and thermal efficiency upgrades in Vermont (it has just been accepted with minor revisions in *Energy Policy*). The second article under review with the journal *Environmental Justice*, details the development of a Vermont Environmental Disparity Index to measure the cumulative impact of environmental exposure, social vulnerability, and health risk in Vermont. The third article under review with the *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* reports the results of our surveys conducted throughout the state concerning key environmental and health disparities.

Four additional papers will be submitted for review in fall semester of 2021. Two of these papers will be completed by graduate student Qing Ren, who is exploring food justice and transportation justice issues in Vermont based on a mixed methods approach. One of the papers utilizes the theoretical framework of a Capabilities Approach to critically evaluate the benefits, challenges and ongoing issues with the recognition of indigenous peoples in the state since 2011 and how this has limited or enhanced

indigenous land stewardship practices. Another article examines the characterization of environmental justice in Vermont based on this four year study. We have been awarded 3 intra-institutional grants and five foundation grants to carry out this research.

Broader Outcomes: Most significantly we have been working with former Center for Whole Communities Fellow and current Vermont State Senator, Keshia Ram, to frame the first EJ policy in the state, which was introduced in the Vermont State Legislature in April, 2021.¹ We expect this to be passed next year. The definition of environmental justice was collaboratively developed after workshopping it at BIPOC networks and other community groups. A language access plan was developed and submitted to the Department of Environmental Conservation by our project partners. REJOICE coalition partners were invited to speak at the Vermont Just Transitions Subcommittee, The Vermont Climate Coalition, Upper Valley Climate Change Leadership Academy, and at the State Legislature Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife Committee.

¹ The draft *Vermont Senate Bill S.148 An Act Relating to Environmental Justice in Vermont*, was first introduced with seven sponsors on April 30th, 2021 and was referred to the Committee on Natural Resources and Energy for further review: <https://legislature.vermont.gov/bill/status/2020/S.148>