

Not Good at Partnering?
Community Fragmentation and Environmental Activism in Southeast Chicago

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Our research is focused on Southeast Chicago and the Calumet Region bordering the southern tip of Lake Michigan, at the request of the Region 5 EPA Chicago Team who had been doing work in that area and continue to be involved in discussions about its many cluster sites and brownfields. In the 1990s, the Calumet Region has been the focus of a lot of environmental activism involving participation from residents of local communities as well as outside groups. The region has been marked by two main economic activities: waste dumping and landfills, and heavy industry – it was the home of the steel industry for decades.

For all of the profound pollution that exists in the Calumet Region, however, it is still one of the most ecologically unique and significant sites in the Chicago area. It was attractive as a location for waste dumping and even for industry because of the rivers and wetlands. This makes it significant for migratory birds and other waterfowl. Unlike so many other parts of Chicago, it is also a beautiful, open area. Industries were usually separated by large swaths of land, so the area is very open. So from both the point of view of cleanup of pollution, a daunting task, and from the point of view of rehabilitation of wetlands, it's very important to a lot of different types of environmentalists including local residents active in cleanup and rehabilitation.

In the 1980s, the economic picture in Southeast Chicago changed profoundly when many of the main industries closed or cut back. As a result, it's been an economically depressed area for 20 years. Nevertheless, socially, it has a rich tradition of union activism and organization. It is also an area that is divided into separate neighborhoods and social networks, by both manmade and geographical features (railroad tracks, expressways, waste dumps, the Calumet River and Lake Calumet) and by divisions of ethnicity and class.

The EPA Region 5 Chicago Team, following the EPA policy of Community Based Environmental Protection, has been coordinating their regulatory and remediation work in the Calumet area across media — air, water, soil, etc. — and also conduct community outreach activities, linking with locally-based groups. Our project was to take our own look as anthropologists at community organization and existing resident-based environmental concerns in the area: specifically, to assess the diversity of local social/political organization in Southeast Chicago and its current links to participation in environmental planning and problem solving processes as well as opportunities for expanding those links. We had the advantage of being able to build on the work of anthropologist Elizabeth Babcock and other consultants who had already identified groups and interviewed key actors involved in local environmental activism. We proposed to base our analysis on data collected through attending meetings of local community organizations and groups, in order to 1) get a picture of the range of groups that are involved or potentially involved in shaping local stakes in the Calumet environment and their relation to local residents' social networks; 2) understand how issues or concerns relevant to environmental action are

framed in these local discussions, which may be different than the way EPA professionals or outside activists frame the issues; and 3) examine the flow of information related to environmental awareness and action, where people get information from and where it goes (which is connected, of course, to both how issues are framed and to people's social networks). We attended, between the two of us, 24 meetings and conducted supplementary open-ended interviews and conversations with participants, both to identify relevant meetings and to understand what went on at them. We also examined newsletters, flyers, local newspapers, and educational brochures put out by the EPA and other government agencies.

Why meetings? Because, at the local level in Chicago and other urban American communities, going back to the time of De Tocqueville, meetings are a primary venue for enacting community, for forming and implementing collective agendas. Chicago has a formal political organization that extends down to the level of the aldermanic ward, but aldermen are mainly involved in coordinating existing city services within the ward and providing a base for local party politics. They don't provide a conduit for federal and state agencies or funding, nor do they usually facilitate face-to-face interaction among neighbors — it's more the other way around, that neighbors who organize themselves can help support or undercut an alderman's career. Chicago, as an urban society in which work and home are separated, presents opportunities for creating community and assuming local leadership through mobilization around perceived problems — a pattern long ago observed by De Tocqueville. There is no *a priori* mandated organization for face-to-face coordination of collective action, unlike the Southeast Asian or Pacific villages in which we did our earlier fieldwork. Effective local community action also has to involve broader levels of community and associated institutions — city, state, and federal agencies, outside interest groups — because first, that's where the resources are and second, the agendas of these agencies and groups affect local development, e.g. through land use regulation and development plans. From the perspective of state or federal agencies looking to involve local community residents in planning and implementation of programs, the fluidity of local socio-political organization means that a straightforward “take me to your leader” approach to community outreach does not work, particularly given the existence within a given set of neighborhoods of multiple social networks with limited interconnections reflecting divisions of ethnicity and class.

There are strong environmental activists in both the African-American and the White communities, however, the linkages between them are weak, reflecting the social divisions, differing perceptions, and segregated residence patterns in the area. Altgeld Gardens is the home of Hazel Johnson, founder of people for Community Recovery, known in the media as the “Black Mother of the Environment.” Johnson and People for Community Recovery (PCR) have campaigned publically and in the courts to have the toxic wastes surrounding Altgeld Gardens — what they call the “toxic donut” — recognized and redressed as an environmental justice and civil rights issue. Though Altgeld Gardens, like the East Side, Hegewisch, and South Deering, is close to Lake Calumet and surrounding old industrial development, PCR has closer ties to community health activists in the Greater Roseland area than it does to the environmental activist groups in East Side and Hegewisch. Pullman and the Good Neighbor Dialogue groups that have begun meeting with local industrial companies is one venue where there has been some overlap and networking between African-American and White activists.

The complexity of the relationships that make up community has been acknowledged by the EPA: “any ‘community’ includes a variety of differing values, perceptions, priorities and complex inter-relationships around environmental protection as well as other community-based issues.” (Draft April 1998, EPA’s Framework for Community-Based Environmental Protection, p. 5) In an effort to get a handle on these complex inter-relationships, we’ve developed the accompanying diagram and typology to describe the range of organizations and groups relevant to environmental action that we’ve found in Southeast Chicago and their position in regard to various geographic and governmental levels of community: neighborhood, Southeast Chicago as a city region, the city, and the state. (See handouts).

The diagram can be used as a tool to envisage the intersections (or lack thereof) that various community organizations or groups have with the informal social networks of friends and family that are the backbone of community as gemeinschaft (i.e., representing “diffuse and enduring solidarity”). Social service agencies, including government agencies such as the EPA, can connect with informal social networks by working through more formally constituted community-based organizations or groups. We do not assume here that working directly with families or households is a goal of environment professionals; however, evaluating the legitimacy of particular leaders or organizations’ claims to represent community residents is an important step in planning programs that will effectively impact the quality of life in communities and engage citizen participation. To that end, it is important to collect information profiling how particular organizations or groups connect with the social networks of community residents and stakeholders.

In Southeast Chicago, we’ve found that some specifically environmentally-action oriented organizations connect with resident social networks through civic organizations (see typology). Some of these groups function as umbrella organizations whose scope of operations goes beyond specific neighborhoods, using representatives of civic organizations to connect with neighborhood residents and the broad range of neighborhood issues and concerns that the civic organizations represent. The seven types of groups and organizations we’ve outlined can connect to each other and to informal social networks in multiple ways, as indicated by the intersections on the diagram. The diagram indicates the possibilities for the differences in interconnections, but doesn’t reflect the differences in the interconnections and their density that we’ve found in the Greater Roseland neighborhoods versus the eastern neighborhoods. We’re still figuring out ways of representing these differences, but basically, we’ve found that the White environmental activists have closer connections to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the City of Chicago Department of the Environment, the National Park Service and outside environmental interest groups, while the Greater Roseland activists have or are developing closer connections to health agencies such as the Greater Roseland Health Council, and have not been as involved in area-wide environmental planning and land use efforts.

This is partly due to the differences in the way environmental concerns have been framed and expressed in the different networks, as well as to perceptions of where there are available resources for solutions to problems; perceptions of available resources influence how concerns are framed, as well as vice versa. Differences in framing result in differences in what’s perceived as relevant information and how it is acted upon (or not). To briefly summarize overall general

patterns (of course there are individual differences): The Greater Roseland activists emphasize the physical health effects of environmental toxins on area residents, environmental justice and its relation to civil rights, equitable economic development, and cleaning up the environment to make it safe and healthy for people. Cleaning up the environment to make it safe does not preclude developing commercial activity and jobs: Looking out from high in the Pullman Bank Building, from where you can see landfill, a chemical factory, railroad tracks, and Lake Calumet, the director of the South Side Health Consortium, one of the local African-American activist leaders, said, “Look! We’ve got everything — waterfront, industry, transportation — this could be a center for economic development, we could develop this area like other places have developed their waterfront areas.”

The White local environmental activists, on the other hand, focus more on aesthetics, heritage, and the quality of life and the kind of economic development that can result from these kinds of resources, as well as commercial or industrial development that will not further pollute the environment; neighborhood control and the protection of the natural environment are commonly invoked themes. Non-neighborhood based environmental activists, on the other hand, generally don’t emphasize local control but do speak of the importance of conservancy and the preservation of natural resources — as a resource for all. There are concerns and themes common to all these groups: making industry responsible to local communities, health and the quality of life (e.g., no bad odors in the air) as a concern of both Black and White neighborhood residents, and the creation of sustainable communities. But class and racial barriers come up in discussions specifically involving who these communities are for and who has access to the resources within them: see the accompanying article on the complaints provoked by the clearing of brush involved in opening a bikeway, a removal of a physical barrier between a middle-class community and a lower-income community, in this case, both African-American (see handout).

Tracing information flow is not separate from the issue of defining community boundaries, but rather is integrally connected to it — where information flows and does not flow indicates and shapes the existence of community networks and their boundaries. The impetus for focusing on information flow was our perception that local neighborhood people might well have environment-related concerns that are not communicated as environmental concerns — for instance, such health concerns as asthma, miscarriage, fetal deformities, rashes, and high rates of cancer that are thought to be associated with the presence of environmental toxins. Another example is playground space and its safety, an issue that has come up in civic and church-based community meetings but is not necessarily framed there as an issue that should be connected to broader environmental planning. The difficulty that organizations such as the EPA and conservation-oriented groups have in getting people involved who foreground health or other aspects of environmentally-related issues may well be a problem of communication rather than of lack of interest in environmental issues. The different parties speak about these things differently. Local people speak from their own perceptions and experience, a practical knowledge, but it is not the kind of vocabulary and categories that more scientifically or technically oriented specialists use. These two sides, therefore, sometimes speak past each other. Their perceptions of environmental problems do not always coincide.

More particularly, we can look at local perceptions and at community by looking at where people

get their environmental information from. At the most basic level, this help us to understand the beliefs, categories, concepts, and vocabulary that Calumet residents use to discuss environmental problems. Naturally, the environmental organizations, who have done a great deal of research over the past 25 years on ecology and environment, would prefer that that knowledge come from them. But the fact is that, and this is a problem across all of the sciences, we don't always communicate effectively to the public. EPA professionals have a lot of technical expertise, and see educating people as part of their mission. From what we've seen of the materials, there has been a lot of effort put into the problem of how to communicate this technical knowledge to the public in recent years. Perhaps the perfect educational document hasn't been written yet, but that's not the problem we're addressing here. Rather, we're addressing how that information gets spread around, the mechanisms of distribution. Distribution could, perhaps, be better, but many of the meetings we've gone to have had a strong EPA presence, and we've seen EPA folks lugging plenty of outreach materials, including brochures, flyers, and refrigerator magnets with call-in phone numbers.

But once that information is out there, in documents or presented at public meetings, what happens to it? That's more of an issue of social relations and community. Once information gets from the top, from downtown-based offices out to community meetings and neighborhood groups, how does it disseminate out to local resident-based informal social networks(or not)?

In the eastern neighborhoods of Southeast Chicago, there's a long tradition of union organization that supported the development of structures for community organization, some of which are still in place. Many of the people we've met in these areas are very politically and organizationally involved. Two men, friends from high school and now in middle age, told Gillogly that each of them attends about 250 meetings a year, and of them all, the only one they both attend is the one she met them at – an informal beer-drinking meeting on weekend afternoons. So, between the two of them, they attend 475 community meetings a year. Of course, not all of these are environmentally-oriented meetings. But it's difficult, for us — and for residents — to separate out environmental concerns from more general community concerns such as politics, housing, crime, and business. At the explicitly environmentally-focused meetings we've been to, many other topics have come up as well.

In addition, there are grassroots environmental activists from Southeast Chicago, in both the Black and the White communities. These are the advocates, people who are deeply committed to environmental issues. Some people have mixed feelings about them. There's a sense that, as environmental activists, they are too single issue, or too extreme in their views. We've heard these comments from both other community residents and from people working with governmental bodies. They worry that the advocates are pushing the discussions into a too anti-development stance, for instance. Yet they are well-known and usually respected for their commitment; and they are considered very useful.

These people are the brokers. They mediate and translate between multiple organizations and constituencies, creating the intersections between organizations represented on our diagram. As such, they attend higher level, larger meetings convened by agencies and agency-supported planning groups (we'll refer to these as first tier meetings), and then convey this information to others in the information transmission line. There's a number of features of their structural

position that facilitate this role. First of all, they are deeply committed to environmentalism to the extent that they may have a reputation of being fanatical. When they get information, they **convey** it. A number of people I've spoken to, professionals who are enthusiastic about activities such as the Cluster Sites, say straight out that it's not the sort of thing that they talk to their friends and family about. So, even if agencies are getting information out effectively, it's hitting a stone wall and not going any further than the immediate second tier of the people who directly heard the presentation or read the brochure. As one businessman activist said to me, the advocates can be annoying and irritating, but they're important in this role because they are so devoted. They don't forget about it when they get back home, they go around the neighborhood and make sure people know what's going on, they go to still more meetings and make reports there, and so on.

Furthermore, because of their commitment, advocates study the issues and are generally more conversant in the science language of the first tier agencies. As such, they have a good base of knowledge and are rarely intimidated by the plethora of data presented at some of the more formal meetings held by governmental, environmental, or research institutions. They are also in a good position to ask questions in ways that will elicit appropriate answers from the presenters. Most important, it makes them more capable of transmitting information further through the structure. **They can serve as translators.** Let me emphasize that capability. Gillogly sat in on a community Cluster Site meeting designed to let the community know what progress had been made and what the future plans were for a cluster of heavily polluted sites in the community; this was a project that had been initiated by community activism. The meeting was fascinating, informative, and the team is doing astounding work. It's an innovative approach to remediating pollution and rehabilitating wetlands. Nevertheless, we would be hard-pressed to convey much of those details to other people; it requires an in-depth knowledge that we haven't yet acquired. Advocates are more capable of this necessary process of translation. Some do this informally at meetings and talking to the people they know; some put out newsletters; and one organization we've seen specializes in 'translating' or explaining technical reports to community groups.

So the advocates are extremely important in information flow because of their role as translators, mediators, and brokers. What we're talking about here, of course, is the flow of information down from first tier agencies to the second tier, individual environmental activists and advocates who may also be representatives of second tier neighborhood and/or local umbrella environmental interest groups, but who certainly transmit this information out to the third tier, the informal social networks within neighborhoods which intersect with civic organizations and other non-specific issue based groups. There are several mechanisms for this kind of information transmission that we've seen or seen evidence of: conversations with other community residents, as mentioned above; specific columns in community newsletters or newspapers devoted to environmental issues; flyers giving substantive information and information about upcoming events (the latter also communicated through phone trees and at public library community kiosks); and reports on environmental news given in the meetings of broader-issue civic organizations.

We have specific recommendations stemming from our research that we haven't yet discussed with the Region 5 EPA Chicago team, so we won't detail them here. However, in general, our research points to the importance of brokers in information flow and in creating connections

among organizations and social networks as well as in leading environmental interest groups, and to the importance of supporting brokers who can reach out into the multiple social networks that exist in Southeast Chicago. Awareness of the differences in the way issues are framed, and the possibilities for common concerns as well as divergent ones, can help to bring some of the existing barriers between community networks. Existing civic organizations can provide channels to disseminate information to those not necessarily focused on 'environment' as an issue. There is more of a potential than has so far been realized for agency-supported environmental planning to be representative of the ethnic and racial diversity of this region, so that we truly have "shared places," including sharing the responsibilities and benefits of maintaining sustainable environmental resources with all local area residents.