



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé

LEARNING FROM PRACTICE: ADVOCACY FOR HEALTH EQUITY – ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM



BACKGROUND

Advocacy is a vital role for public health practitioners in Canada. Engaging in advocacy helps us to build and capitalize on collective action to support systemic change, and offers significant potential to foster the conditions that support greater health equity in our communities.¹

There is no single way to design and implement advocacy to address health inequities. Selecting an approach depends on the local or broader context, practitioners' own philosophies or preferences for practice, and the dominant ideology within the organization.

Despite the wide variety of approaches that can be used in advocacy, there are some essential elements which include:²

- Clear, specific policy goals;
- Solid research and science base;
- Values linked to fairness, equity, and social justice;
- Broad-based support through coalitions;
- Mass media used to set public agenda and frame issues; and
- Use of political and legislative processes for change.

This practice example was created by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health with the director of the Environmental Noxiousness, Racial Inequities & Community Health (ENRICH) Project to demonstrate the application of advocacy in Canadian public health practice. Visit www.nccdh.ca for other documents on advocacy in the Learning from Practice series.

While advocacy is an important part of public health practice, many public health practitioners are hesitant to engage in challenging, complex, and wicked issues³ associated with health equity. Practitioners need support to fully embrace advocacy as a legitimate public health strategy, and to work in conjunction with other sectors and organizations that might have a complementary vision. Sharing ideas and successes by providing examples from communities across Canada is an important way for public health practitioners to learn about this vital component of their professional role.^{4,5}

This document highlights the health equity advocacy experience of the Environmental Noxiousness, Racial Inequities and Community Health (ENRICH) Project, which is a community-focused project on environmental racism in African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities.⁶ This project demonstrates the use of collaborative research and media tactics to build a broader base of support, address environmental inequalities in these communities, and educate the public about environmental racism. Public health practitioners and organizations can apply these approaches to health equity advocacy efforts.

Mi'kmaw Communities and African Nova Scotians

Mi'kmaw are Indigenous peoples who originally inhabited part of southern Newfoundland, coastal parts of Gaspé and the Maritime Provinces east of the Saint John River. Today, a large majority of Mi'kmaw communities reside in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Québec, Newfoundland, Maine, and Boston are also areas in which Mi'kmaw people live. In 2015, it was reported that approximately 60,000 Mi'kmaw reside in Canada alone. Many Mi'kmaw communities live off-reserve in Canada.⁷

African Nova Scotians have been living in Nova Scotia for nearly 300 years. African Nova Scotians include people whose ancestors settled in Nova Scotia in the 1700s, mostly as part of the Black Loyalists (often called Indigenous African Nova Scotians), as well as those who immigrated later from African, Caribbean and other countries. In 2011, there were approximately 20,790 African Nova Scotians. About 80 per cent of Black people were born in the province, close to 7 per cent were born in another part of Canada, and 10 per cent were born outside of Canada. They are the largest racialized group within the Nova Scotian population. Many Indigenous African Nova Scotians live in rural and remote areas of Nova Scotia, which is the result of institutionalized racism throughout Nova Scotia's early settlement.⁸

Environmental Racism

Environmental racism involves environmental policies and practices that create disadvantages for individuals, groups, or communities based on race, culture, or ethnicity. Moreover, it is racial discrimination in environmental policymaking that allows toxic activities and industries such as landfills, trash incinerators, coal plants, and waste dumps to be disproportionately located in and around Indigenous and racialized^a communities. These communities are constantly exposed to toxic waste disposal, pollution, and life-threatening poisons, which places them at higher risk of contracting health problems. Environmental racism directed towards Indigenous and racialized communities also involves many of the following aspects.⁸

- Exclusion from environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and governing bodies.
- Lack of organization and power to help stop pollutants.
- Environmental policies that limit the removal of harmful contaminants.
- Limited access to garbage removal and transportation services.

^a Racialization is the process of assigning ethnic or racial meaning to a relationship, social practice, or group designed to structure differential and unequal treatment.

In Nova Scotia, hazardous facilities and harmful activities are more likely to be located nearby African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities.⁸ The chemicals and toxins from these facilities and activities contaminate the air, water, and land surrounding these communities, exposing them to various health risks and potential life-threatening illnesses. The ENRICH Project was launched because of African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities expressing their concerns about the negative health impacts of these toxic facilities and pollutants.

THE ENRICH PROJECT

Launched in 2012, the ENRICH Project advocates for African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities who are exposed to the health risks related to environmental racism. The project looks at methods to address environmental racism in these communities and advises on policies and best practices that involve citizen engagement, environmental impact assessments, and uniform and non-discriminatory policies correlated to the location, management, regulation, and evaluation of environmentally harmful activities. The mission of the ENRICH Project is to use a variety of different methods such as community-based participatory action research and publications, student training, government consultations, and policy analysis and development, to name a few, to support African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities in addressing the health effects caused by environmental racism.

The multi-disciplinary project team consists of community leaders and organizers, academic researchers, research staff, non-profit organizations, and students and volunteers. These members take on both distinct and complementary roles.

Community leaders and organizers represent their community to build relationships, bring African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities together, and take initiatives to



address environmental racism. Academic researchers and research staff, comprised of research co-ordinators and research assistants, study the socio-economic effects and health risks related to the toxic facilities and waste dumps in African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities. The non-profit groups that are part of the project team are involved in research and campaign support to raise awareness about environmental racism and promote social and environmental justice. Students and volunteers are engaged in collaborative, multi-disciplinary community-based research, student training, and organizing community workshops, public events, multimedia and art projects.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

To successfully address environmental racism in Nova Scotia, effective strategies need to be in place. This section describes the strategies employed by ENRICH, organized around roles that public health professionals might consider when developing a health equity advocacy strategy. These strategies include framing the issue, gathering and disseminating data, working in collaboration and developing alliances, and using the legal and regulatory systems.¹

Framing the issue

Framing the issue is vital for identifying a problem, selecting a solution, and developing a communication strategy. The ENRICH Project team uses a framing strategy that creates awareness about environmental racism through educational projects, workshops, and media channels to reach their target audiences.

Time to Clear the Air: Art on Environmental Racism by Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian Communities is an education project that was organized by students and the ENRICH Project to encourage Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian youth to make art symbolizing environmental racism.⁶ The art was showcased online and featured in an art show in Halifax to broaden the reach to the public.

In Whose Backyard? Exploring Toxic Legacies in Mi'kmaq & African Nova Scotian Communities was a workshop series held in Halifax for African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq communities and allies throughout the province to share their stories on environmental injustice. The workshop featured a facilitator and keynote speakers who spoke to participants about their personal experiences with environmental racism. The workshop series, events, and discussions were recorded to produce a workshop report and a 30-minute documentary film called *In Whose Backyard?* The film features African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq community members telling their stories about environmental racism. *In Whose Backyard?* was shown at the Emerging Lens Film Festival in Halifax, the Tatamagouche Summer Free School, and a variety of events hosted by the ENRICH Project.⁶ High schools, universities, and colleges such as the School of Nursing at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the School of Nursing at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and Dawson College in Montréal, Québec use the film as a resource to teach students about environmental racism in Indigenous and racialized communities.⁶ Framing the issue in these ways was effective in reaching and educating members of the public about environmental racism.

The project regularly engages with the media, and since its inception has received print, radio, and TV coverage of its activities.

THE LEARNING FROM PRACTICE SERIES

Learning from Practice is a series started in 2014 as easy-to-read practice examples to demonstrate the integration of health equity into public health practice. This series includes examples on targeting within universalism, influenza, organizational capacity, advocacy and more.

To download the **Learning from Practice** series, visit www.nccdh.ca



BACKGROUND

Universal public health programs—programs that apply to an entire population—are based on the belief that each member of society should have access to the same services to maintain or improve his or her health. Targeted public health interventions apply to prioritized sub-groups within a broader, defined population. Targeted interventions often address specific needs or issues resulting from social, economic or geographic disadvantages. Each approach has its strengths and challenges. A challenge for the universal approach is that it can widen health gaps if some people are not able to or do not access and benefit from the intervention. On the other

hand, targeted approaches may have little effect on leveling the health gradient if the structural causes of disadvantage are not addressed.¹

Targeting within universalism is an approach that blends aspects of universal and targeted interventions in order to close the gap between the most and least healthy, and reduce disparities along the socio-economic gradient.¹ With this approach, public health can modify and orient interventions and services to meet the needs of the entire population, while addressing the additional needs of population groups that experience marginalization.¹

Gathering and disseminating data

Using data in advocacy involves using information to assess needs, bring together potential partners, and identify a strategy for action. The ENRICH Project uses a participatory action research (PAR) approach that engages researchers and communities to collaborate in ways that allow power to be shared among all participants and facilitate action for change. This approach is important because it combines participation, action, and research that builds knowledge and inspires engagement in communities so that they can become advocates.

The data is generated through planning and conducting the research, which involves research design, data collection and analysis, knowledge dissemination and mobilization, with Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian scholars and community members. The knowledge is then used to examine and inform the regulatory requirements for environmental justice and the accessibility of clean resources in Mi'kmaw and African Nova Scotian communities. This knowledge also supports the effort to reduce the amount of toxic facilities that are disproportionately located in these communities.

The PAR approach encourages researchers to step outside of their standard research practices and requires communities to share their opinions and experiences with environmental racism. The knowledge derived from these communities using this particular approach is key to finding new, effective solutions for change.⁹

Working in collaboration and developing alliances

To address environmental racism in Nova Scotia, alliances need to be developed between white mainstream

environmental groups and African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities.⁸ They need to work together to become more involved with outreach and environmental proposals and ensure that their voices are heard. It is also vital for African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities to forge an alliance and share their experiences with settler colonialism,^b racism,^c white supremacy,^d heteropatriarchy,^e capitalist exploitation,^f possession and dispossession,^g poverty,^h and class.^{8,i} If these groups and communities form an alliance together, environmental racism can be addressed in a more effective and powerful way.

Even though the ENRICH Project's mission is to address and advocate against environmental racism, there is still a lack of relationships being built between the government and non-profit organizations, which is imperative in creating effective solutions.

The ENRICH Project is working on a project inspired by Seattle's Equity and Environment Agenda¹⁷ in the hopes of creating alliances between environmental groups, organizations, the government, and African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities. Helping to resolve inequities in government-level decisions and in environmental health are the goals of Seattle's Equity and Environment Agenda. The agenda advocates for environmental justice in four ways — designing environmental policies and programs to create safe environments for racialized communities, ensuring that community members' voices are heard during the environmental policy-making process, supporting community stories and environmental practices, and creating career opportunities for racialized communities.¹⁷ The project focuses on encouraging communities and businesses to

b "Settler colonialism is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there."^{10, p12}

In Canada, it speaks to ongoing colonialism, the dispossession of Indigenous lands, and the actual/attempted elimination of Indigenous peoples.¹¹

c Racism refers to "organized systems within societies that cause avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources, capacities and opportunities across racial or ethnic groups."^{12, p2}

d White supremacy: a "system based on the assumptions of the "rightness of Whiteness", in which political, economic and social systems result in White people having more power and privilege than racialized people."^{13, p272}

e Heteropatriarchy: "social systems in which heterosexuality and patriarchy are perceived as normal and natural, and in which other configurations are perceived as abnormal, aberrant, and abhorrent."^{10, p13}

f Capitalism is a social system comprised of the relationship between workers, the means of production and those who own and control the means of production. In this relationship ownership is private and exclusionary forming the basis of social class. Workers sell their time in exchange for wages are often exploited under this system.¹⁴

g Dispossession speaks to the various ways in which Indigenous peoples are deprived of land, position, connections to history, culture, traditional ways of life and economic opportunities.¹⁵ Dispossession has always been actively resisted and challenged by Indigenous peoples.

h Poverty refers to the lack of the resources, means, opportunities, and power necessary to acquire and maintain economic self-sufficiency or to integrate into and participate in society.¹⁶

i Class: "a social distinction and division resulting from the unequal distribution of rewards and resources such as wealth, power and prestige"^{14, p256}



advocate for environmental justice, creating economic and educational opportunities, and ensuring that African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities are actively involved in environmental plans and decisions. Essentially, the project is a call to action for all racialized communities to collaborate and advocate for environmental justice. By using Seattle's Equity and Environment Agenda as a framework to find ways to craft relationships and alliances, the ENRICH Project hopes that it will result in real, meaningful change.

Using the legal and regulatory system

A key accomplishment in any advocacy effort is influencing policy change. Enacting new legislation is a powerful form of policy change. Dr. Ingrid Waldron, the academic researcher of the ENRICH Project team, partnered with Nova Scotia MLA Lenore Zann to develop Bill 111, Environmental Racism Prevention Act, in the Nova Scotia Legislature.

The bill asks for the creation of a committee to hold public meetings on environmental racism and produce a full report with recommendations within a one-year time frame from the enactment of the bill. Given the ENRICH Project's

understanding of the power relationships and structures behind environmental racism, Bill 111 specifies membership on the committee must include the communities experiencing environmental racism, and that there be significant consultation work with those communities.¹⁸

Between The ENRICH Project's inception in 2012 and the first reading of Bill 111 in the Nova Scotia Legislature on April 29, 2015, the ENRICH Project has worked to create a solid base of support for the bill. From this work, they have learned about key elements involved with introducing a bill, which are the following.

- Build a solid body of evidence to support your position and demonstrate the need for policy change.
- Engage a broad base of community support and identify natural spokespeople who are directly affected by the issue
- Promote events, reports, and issues to build a groundswell of media coverage.
- Follow the work of the elected representatives in the government. Identify those who would be most likely to champion community issues and develop a relationship with them.
- Solicit legal input for a bill before taking it forward to the legislative body.

Bill 111 passed first reading and was put forward for second reading, and debated on the floor of the House on November 25, 2015. The bill has yet to be approved as legislation; however, Lenore Zann re-introduced the bill at the House on October 14, 2016. More information on the current status of the bill still has yet to be established.

SUPPORTS AND CHALLENGES

Advocacy is challenging work, and there are many factors that support this work. The ENRICH Project is involved with many activities and projects that involve students, volunteers, non-profit organizations, and community members. But, this also comes with some challenges.

In addition to the government and environmental groups, more people need to get involved with, and contribute to, decisions associated with the environment and the health of

African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities — a process called participatory democracy. Participatory democracy would allow Nova Scotia Environment to give African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities a chance to participate in the decisions being made about the environment and the issues concerning their communities and people.⁸

It makes sense that those who are directly affected by the decisions made at the municipal and policy level should be involved and their opinions should be heard and valued. In order for this to happen, the government must support these communities and the advocacy of environmental racism. Currently, there is a lack of this kind of support.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are a few things to keep in mind when it comes to advocacy work to address environmental racism. These lessons include the following:

- **Don't be afraid to talk about environmental racism —** Racism is a very political subject. To find solutions for environmental racism, racism must not be shied away from; it must be talked about and acknowledged by everyone, including the government and policy makers.
- **Reach out to health authorities —** Getting health authorities, specifically medical and health officers, more interested in the concept of environmental racism and the advocacy work being accomplished would provide more support for the ENRICH Project and other advocacy activities related to environmental racism.
- **Consider conducting a health (equity) impact assessment —** Environmental racism is a multi-dimensional issue. It is important to address racism alongside other health equity issues in relation to the environment. The health impact assessment process needs to be more equitable for diverse communities.
- **Realize the importance of creating relationships —** To make and see change, the support of communities, groups, organizations, and the government are required. Making connections with others will provide the support that is needed to address environmental racism.
- **Understand that education is essential —** Becoming educated about environmental racism, environmental health, and health equity helps to build knowledge, skills, and the confidence to promote action for change. Educating communities and conducting research are effective methods to promote advocacy.

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Acknowledgements

This case story was researched and written by Teresa Simmons, writer/editor at Alberta Health Services with guidance and feedback from Sume Ndumbe-Eyoh, NCCDH. Review was provided by Lesley Dyck and Connie Clement, NCCDH. Special thanks to Dr. Ingrid Waldron who was interviewed for the development of this case story. The interview was conducted by consultant Victoria Barr. Thank you to Alberta Health Services who supported the collaboration with NCCDH.

Contact Information

National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health
St. Francis Xavier University
Antigonish, NS B2G 2W5
nccdh@stfx.ca
tel: (902) 867-5406
fax: (902) 867-6130
www.nccdh.ca
Twitter: @NCCDH_CCNDS

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Please cite information contained in the document as follows: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. (2017). *Learning from Practice: Advocacy for health equity - Environmental racism*. Antigonish, NS: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, St. Francis Xavier University.

ISBN: 978-1-987901-60-3

Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada through funding for the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

This document is available in its entirety in electronic format (PDF) on the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health website at: www.nccdh.ca.

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