

# Promoting environmental justice worldwide

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The increasing social metabolism of the world economy and the global competition for resources is placing ever-greater pressure on the environment and on vulnerable communities. This trend is set to continue, increasing the potential for more conflicts over scarce resources and environmental protection.

Environmental justice organisations are civil society groups active in

conflicts between [communities](#), states and companies over issues such as resource extraction and waste disposal. They play a crucial role in raising awareness that environmental security is a basic human right.

However, they often lack enough resources to be fully effective. The EU project EJOLT ('Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities and Trade') was launched in 2011 to study environmental conflicts worldwide and support organisations and communities struggling for environmental justice.

Project coordinator Joan Martínez Alier, from the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, says these goals are best achieved by fostering collaboration on environmental health monitoring, legal strategies and evaluation of environmental services.

"Academically, this project is pushing the field of statistical political ecology," explains Alier. "In social terms, it makes environmental conflicts more visible. Environmental justice is a major force in making the [global economy](#) more sustainable."

The researchers hope to empower organisations and the communities they support to better reclaim and defend their rights. Along the entire [global production](#) chain, from extraction, to processing, to disposal, [vulnerable communities](#) often bear an unfair share of the fallout from pollution and [environmental damage](#), Alier says.

Those most heavily affected are marginalised sectors of the population, including poor citizens, women, minorities and indigenous peoples who depend more directly on natural resources for their livelihood.

EJOLT's deputy coordinator Leah Temper adds: "Often, these communities - such as indigenous groups or peasants - use the economy

sustainably. Conflicts arise when industry seeks to appropriate environmental resources from such communities, resulting in dispossession and contamination. Thus, we say that these conflicts take place more and more on the commodity frontiers - places that are remote but that have the remaining pristine eco-systems on the planet."

The project has already made an impact. In the first two years, EJOLT has produced eight major reports on its research, as scheduled. These include reports on fossil fuels, conflicts over mining, and on the impact of industrial tree plantations.

The project also made recommendations on the legal means organisations and communities could use to claim compensation for environmental damages.

Project researchers are preparing an inventory of environmental conflicts worldwide, listing about 2000 locations. The first map to be completed focuses on environmental conflicts in Turkey. After recent demonstrations and protests sparked by a government plan to demolish Istanbul's Gezi Park, the work was featured in a major national newspaper. The second and the third maps are from Ecuador and Colombia.

The project distributes the results of its work online and has produced several documentaries on environmental justice - such as those featuring urban recyclers' rights and resistance by indigenous people to oil extraction and uranium mining.

The aim is to make environmental justice - and related concepts such as ecological debt and ecologically unequal trade- accessible to everyone.

"EJOLT also aims to break through what we call consumer blindness," explains Temper. "When you go to the gas station, you don't know

whether your oil comes from polluted communities in the Niger Delta or from the environmental disaster that are the Canadian tar sands. Thus we aim to make the social metabolism of society more apparent and to make visible the related conflicts that are the other side of consumption."

EJOLT is scheduled to run until 2015, and is made up of 23 academic organisations, think-tanks and activist organisations involved in environmental justice. The project received around EUR 3.7 million in funding from the EU.

**More information:** [www.ejolt.org/](http://www.ejolt.org/)

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