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Study

The Elephant in the Room – Environmental Racism in Germany

Studies, knowledge gaps, and their relevance to environmental and climate justice

BY IMEH ITUEN AND LISA TATU HEY

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«He [the mayor of Darmstadt], however, banished the now homeless families to tents on the outskirts of the city, next to a garbage dump, a sewage works, rat holes, and highway feeder roads. Sinti and Roma were stunned by this racism.»

Romani Rose, Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, «Wir wollen Bürgerrechte und keinen Rassismus,» 1985

«For us, this event is not called Fridays for Future. With the Global North stealing the past, present, and future from us and our families, we see it as Fridays for Past, Present, and Future.»

Abena Kennedy-Asante at Global Climate Strike in Berlin, 2019



The Elephant in the Room – Environmental Racism in Germany

The term «environmental racism» was first used in the North American environmental justice movement of the 1980s to initiate a debate on the racism inherent in the unfair distribution of environmental goods and risks. In Germany, the issue was first raised in 1985, when, in a publication of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, Romani Rose wrote about the environmental racism Sinti and Roma in the country experience. Almost four decades later, and now facing a climate crisis, a new generation of people who encounter racism is asking whether, and if so how, the impacts of climate change are amplifying the potency of environmental racism. Then, as now, people affected by racism must contend with the fact that environmental racism in Germany has not been the subject of any significant research. Based on the studies that are available, what are the conclusions that can be drawn about environmental racism in Germany? Where are there gaps in research on the issue? And what does this all mean for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) in Germany today?

Warren County – the start of the environmental justice movement

What do you do with soil so contaminated with hazardous chemicals that no one wants it?

In 1982, the US state of North Carolina decided to dispose of soil polluted with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the small town of Afton. Afton is located in Warren County, at the time one of the poorest counties in North Carolina, with African-Americans comprising 65 percent of the population. A citizens' initiative in the white part of the town was able to avert construction of the hazardous waste landfill in their area, but Afton's Black population fought against the placement of the landfill in their neighborhood for more than three years – first through the legal system, then with sit-ins and demonstrations.^[1] During the longest, six-week protest, more than 500 people were arrested. In the end, neither legal action nor activism could prevent construction of the waste landfill, but these efforts were not entirely in vain: The incident served as a model for future protests in Black neighborhoods throughout the US and is therefore considered the start of the environmental justice movement.

1 Pulido 2017. See also <https://timeline.com/warren-county-dumping-race-4d8fe8de06cb>.

From NIMBY to NIABY

It was ultimately the «not in my backyard» (NIMBY) attitude adopted by the town's white population that resulted in waste landfill being placed in a majority-Black neighborhood, despite its residents' protests.

Even in the early days of the environmental justice movement, activists realized that NIMBYism would inevitably lead to toxic waste being dumped in Black, deprived, and/or otherwise disadvantaged neighborhoods. Calling it «environmental racism,» they classified this phenomenon a racist issue. Recognizing that only the principle of «not in anyone's backyard» (NIABY) could protect marginalized groups from environmental risks, they did not demand the relocation of polluting industries, but a halt to production altogether.

In 1994, the sociologist and activist Robert Bullard defined environmental racism as «any policy, practice, or directive that intentionally or unintentionally, differentially impacts or disadvantages individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color.»^[2] Environmental racism was understood as a global phenomenon early on, which is also expressed in the export of toxic waste and risky technologies to countries of the Global South.

US studies reveal clear evidence of environmental racism and health implications

Prompted by the protests in Warren County, a study conducted by the United Church of Christ in 1987 investigated the links between racism and the locations chosen to host toxic waste facilities.^[3] The results of this study revealed a nationwide pattern, with racialized communities five times more likely than white communities to live near toxic waste.^[4] Present-day studies also attest to the persistence of environmental racism in the US. These disparities cannot be explained solely on the basis of income inequality: An in-depth study in 2008 found that Black people in the US with an annual household income of 50,000 to 60,000 US dollars live in neighborhoods subject to greater pollution than the average white neighborhood with household incomes under 10,000 dollars.^[5]

Hazel Johnson was one of the first people to study the connection between environmental racism and chronic illness. After her husband died from lung cancer and her children began

2 Bullard 1994, 1037. Bullard's work on environmental racism was central to the environmental justice movement. See also <https://www.flickr.com/photos/snre/8057541429>.

3 United Church of Christ (UCCRJ) 1987.

4 Ibid., 16.

5 Downey and Hawkins 2008.



A sign points to a distribution point for bottled water in Flint, Michigan. The majority-Black city's tap water is contaminated with lead.

to develop skin and respiratory problems, Johnson started documenting the health of people in her majority-Black Chicago neighborhood. Hazel Johnson's neighborhood not only had a disproportionate number of landfills, factories, and sewage plants, it also had the highest cancer rate in the city.^[6] The range of diseases in which environmental factors can be implicated includes psychosocial and physical conditions such as infertility, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Higher levels of environmental pollution in work and home environments remain a factor in the difference in average life expectancy between white and Black people in the US.^[7]

The growth and spread of environmental justice

The environmental justice movement and its ideas did not remain limited to the US. In 1991 the «First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit,», an international conference, brought together BIPoC perspectives on environmental justice from the Global North and the Global South, concluding in the 17 environmental justice principles drafted and adopted by the delegates. One of these principles demands reparations for 500 years of colonization and oppression.^[8]

In contrast to these developments, mainly led by civil society, the environmental justice discourse in Europe is primarily taking place in academia. A thematic shift in the European discourse can clearly be observed. European research on environmental justice focuses almost exclusively on the issue of income inequality. Race, the dimension of oppression that shaped the environmental justice movement in its early days, is largely absent from European studies. One reason may be that unlike in the US, sociodemographic data that provides information on whether a person experiences racism is not generally collected in Europe.^[9]

In this context, «Pushed to the Wastelands – Environmental Racism against Roma Communities in Central and Eastern Europe» is a landmark publication. The report, released by the European Environmental Bureau, brings together the findings from several studies and shows that environmental racism against Sinti*zza and Rom*nja is a structural, widespread issue in the countries it examines. Rom*nja and Sinti*zza are frequently displaced to areas with high levels of environmental pollution, and deprived of access to environmental goods (e.g. drinking water supplies, waste disposal).^[10]

6 Pellow 2004.

7 Riddell et al. 2018.

8 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 1991.

9 Generally speaking, only country of birth and/or current citizenship offer the closest insights available from the standard data collected.

10 European Environmental Bureau 2020.

Environmental racism in Germany

In Germany, existing studies on environmental justice have tended to neglect the issue of racism, this despite the fact that – as mentioned above – Romani Rose drew attention to how housing policy in Darmstadt was displacing Sinti*zza and Rom*nja to the outskirts of the city, «next to a garbage dump, a sewage works, rat holes, and highway feeder roads,»^[11] as far back as 1985. Even today, there is evidence that environmental racism against Rom*nja and Sinti*zza persists:

- Heidelberg: In 2004, Sinti*zza in Heidelberg were given a plot of land on which the soil and groundwater had been heavily contaminated by the production processes of a large detergent manufacturer.^[12]
- Hamburg: In 2004, the city of Hamburg gave Sinti*zza and Rom*nja a plot of land as partial reparations for crimes committed against them, but did not tell them that it was a former landfill. The soil and groundwater were also contaminated by toxic substances.^[13]

As in studies conducted in the Netherlands,^[14] the UK,^[15] and France,^[16] a number of German studies reveal that polluting industries are more frequently located in cities and neighborhoods with higher proportions of migrants:

- Kassel: The results of two studies (2005, 2008) indicate that households in Kassel with a lower socio-economic status and a migrant background are disproportionately affected by increased air pollution^[17] and tend to be located in neighborhoods with a lower environmental quality.^[18]
- Hamburg: A study found a significant correlation between the proportion of non-German citizens and environmental risk factors, with the proportion of non-German citizens being the variable with the greatest predictive power for proximity to toxic substances.^[19]

These national and European studies show that the correlation between a migration

- 11** Rose 1985, 32f.
- 12** EJAtlas 2021.
- 13** Ibid.
- 14** Fecht et al. 2015.
- 15** Ibid.
- 16** Laurian 2008.
- 17** Köckler et al. 2005.
- 18** Köckler et al. 2008.
- 19** Raddatz and Mennis 2013.

background or non-German citizenship and environmental pollution is more significant than the correlation between socio-economic status or income and environmental pollution. In other words, a person's migration background is a more likely determinant than their income of whether they live near industrial environmental hazards. This is not to say that the impacts of racism and classism (see the glossary) are mutually exclusive or compete with each other (see intersectionality in the glossary); on the contrary, forms of oppression such as racism and classism often intersect, thus reinforcing the unequal distribution of environmental risks and goods to the detriment of consistently marginalized communities.

Discrimination in the housing market and in housing policy

Housing and employment segregation among marginalized groups is a precondition for the unequal distribution of environmental risks and goods.^[20] Segregation is essentially a consequence of social, economic, political, cultural, and spatial exclusion. People in Germany with a migration background are particularly affected by housing and employment segregation. In a representative survey conducted by the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency in 2020, some 15 percent of respondents stated that they had experienced discrimination on racist grounds – because they belonged to an ethnic group or came from another country. 41 percent of those questioned in the same survey said that they would have concerns about renting an apartment they owned to a migrant.^[21]

Housing segregation, however, is only partly attributable to racism among private landlords. More significant are the historically established consequences of racist housing policies. In Berlin and many other cities, migrants who came to Germany to study or work in the 1960s were usually not free to choose where they lived.^[22] Places of work and education frequently had to provide lodgings or other accommodation. Even after these rules were dropped, many migrantized people in urban areas were only able to find apartments in rundown buildings, which were many times destined for demolition, in working-class neighborhoods.^[23] Living conditions in these buildings were frequently so appalling that these buildings had largely been abandoned by white Germans.^[24]

20 Morello-Frosch and Jesdale 2006.

21 Ibid.

22 Kotti & Co. 2012.

23 Heckmann 1999.

24 This form of residential mobility does not intentionally imply a form of segregation, but it does illustrate the advantages that access to resources confer.

In addition to discrimination in the housing market, unequal access to education and the job market also contributed to lower educational attainment and household income among migrantized and racialized groups. This is a further barrier to residential mobility. Households with a low income frequently cannot afford to leave cheaper neighborhoods with high pollution levels or even avoid living there in the first place.

The climate crisis reinforces existing inequalities

Climate change is often termed a «threat multiplier». As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) notes, people «who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally, or otherwise marginalized are especially vulnerable to climate change and also to some adaptation and mitigation responses.»^[25]

The «imperial way of life»^[26] assures many people in the Global North – as well as, increasingly, elites in the Global South – comfortable consumption patterns, with the costs largely outsourced to «sacrifice zones».^{[27][28]} Even though it is the countries of the Global South that are predominantly affected by the impacts of this type of exploitation due to colonial and neo-colonial histories, the costs and benefits of the imperial way of life are also distributed unequally in the Global North.

A study by Oxfam and the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) published in September 2020 notes extreme income-related inequality in carbon emissions;^[29] in other words, as income increases, so do carbon emissions. Income-related inequality, however, cannot be separated from other power structures (racism, sexism, ableism, etc.). In many countries, white men dominate in the highest income groups, while racialized people – especially women – are overrepresented in the lowest income groups.

While people affected by racist discrimination tend to be in lower-income groups and have smaller carbon footprints, US studies have for some years been showing that the impacts of climate change are distributed unequally and clearly reveal racist effects:

- Wildfires: A US study shows that parts of the US with majority-Black, Latinx, and/or Indigenous populations are 50 percent more likely than people in majority-white areas to be affected by wildfires. Indigenous people, in fact, are six times more likely

25 IPCC 2014.

26 Brand and Wissen 2017.

27 Okereke and Dooley 2010.

28 Sealey-Huggins 2017.

29 Oxfam 2020.



Romani Rose

Wir wollen Bürgerrechte und keinen Rassismus

than other groups to live in areas that are particularly vulnerable to wildfires.^[30] Consequently, Black and Indigenous people over the age of 55 are at a significantly higher risk of dying in connection with wildfires.^[31]

- Heat waves: US studies examining mortality during heat waves note similar results. In major cities such as New York and Chicago, Black people are twice as likely to die during heat waves as white people.^[32] This is due to temperature differences between Black and white neighborhoods in these cities, which can be as much as 1.7 degrees Celsius.^[33]

The list of examples that show racist effects is long. In addition to heat waves and wildfires, it includes greater vulnerability to cold snaps,^[34] tornadoes,^[35] and floods.^[36]

Coronavirus: what the pandemic can tell us about environmental racism

Statistics from the Chicago health authorities show that Black people represent 50 percent of all coronavirus cases and 70 percent of deaths, despite the fact that they make up just 30 percent of Chicago's population.^[37] Similarly, statistics from the UK reveal that BIPoC have a higher mortality rate from coronavirus, with Black people almost twice as likely as white people to die from Covid-19.^[38] This is due to living and working conditions that often prevent proper social distancing, and pre-existing health conditions, some which are related to higher exposure to pollution.

Interaction of climate change impacts and environmental racism in Germany

The US studies clearly show that the impacts of climate change tend to reinforce the impacts of environmental racism, including those felt by BIPoC in the Global North. Of particular relevance in Germany are heat waves – according to the 2020 Lancet Countdown on health and climate change, the country is the third most likely, after China and India, to be affected by heat-related mortality in people aged 65 and above.^[39]

- 30** Davies et al. 2018.
- 31** Bishai and Summin 2010.
- 32** Madrigano et al. 2015.
- 33** Hsu et al. 2021.
- 34** Ura and Garnham 2021.
- 35** Allen 2017.
- 36** Frank 2020.
- 37** BBC 2020.
- 38** UK Office for National Statistics 2020.
- 39** Watts et al. 2021.

Based on available statistics and surveys, there are initial signs to indicate that the racist effects of environmental racism are also being amplified in Germany by the impact of climate change.

- Berlin: The Berlin Senate’s Environmental Justice Atlas reveals that heat pollution is particularly worrying in dense inner-city areas such as Nord-Neukölln, Wedding/ Gesundbrunnen, Moabit, and Kreuzberg Nord.^[40] People with a migration background are overrepresented in the boroughs of Neukölln (47 percent) and Wedding/ Gesundbrunnen (54 percent) and thus disproportionately impacted by heat, which in the event of heat waves may represent a very serious health hazard.^[41]
- Hamburg: Rising temperatures can accelerate biochemical processes and lead to the increased emission of substances hazardous to health on the former landfill site provided to Sinti and Roma as «reparations».^[42]

It can be assumed that the impacts of environmental racism in connection with the climate crisis – in a similar way to the US – will also intensify in Germany.

Environmental racism violates fundamental freedoms and human rights

Environmental racism is often associated with violations of fundamental freedoms and human rights. Article 72(2) of the German Basic Law guarantees the «establishment of equivalent living conditions»^[43] for all citizens. Accordingly, the distributional injustices associated with environmental racism should be of particular relevance to decision-makers in politics and civil society. Given that there has been almost no research into environmental racism in Germany, civil society and both urban and regional planners lack access to data that could allow them to properly address environmental racism and its consequences.

With a view to this lack of data and research, the 1998 Aarhus Convention is of major importance to the issue of environmental racism. This international treaty, ratified in Germany in 2007, ensures public participation in environmental protection and access to justice in environmental matters, as well as the participation rights of civil society through access to environmental information (e.g. through the establishment of public databases).

40 Senate Department for the Environment, Transport, and Climate Protection 2019.

41 Official Website of Berlin 2020.

42 EJAtlas 2021.

43 German Bundestag 2020.

A Roma settlement without running water and right next to Romania's largest garbage dump in Pata-Rat.



Whether in politics, urban, or land-use planning, marginalized and otherwise particularly vulnerable groups cannot be accounted for on the basis of universal, homogenizing data. Especially in the light of growing climate change impacts, it is essential that data reflects the lived experience of people that are exposed to particular risk. This is illustrated by the tragic incident in Sinzig, in which 12 of 36 residents on the lowest floor of a home for people with physical and mental disabilities drowned during floods on July 14, 2021.^[44] By committing Germany to the «protection of the right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being,»^[45] the Aarhus Convention could be an effective legal lever to close the existing gaps.

Outlook

When Romani Rose wrote about the environmental racism experienced by Rom*nja and Sinti*zza in Germany in 1985, several environmental and human rights activists who had been forced to flee their homes as a result of their commitment to ending environmental destruction, land theft, and human rights violations and had been inspired by people such as Wangari Maathai, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Berta Cáceres, came to Germany.^[46] By taking a holistic approach to the environmental and climate crisis in the context of colonialism, (environmental) racism, and other aspects of oppression, BIPOC groups such as Klima del Sol, Mavun, Bloque Latinoamericano, and Black Earth build not only on the origins of the environmental justice movement, but also on the struggles of previous generations.

In the face of increasing climate change impacts, it is absolutely essential that environmental organizations and political decision-makers consider the needs of people affected by racism and other marginalized groups in their manifestos, campaigns, narratives, and studies. Focusing on environmental and climate protection issues, while excluding social justice perspectives, risks inadequately representing certain interests and cannot meet current demands. The current state of research shows that environmental racism and other forms of discrimination that result in the unequal distribution of environmental goods and risks need to be given far greater prominence on the political and civil society agenda.

44 Von Seggern 2021.

45 UNECE 1998.

46 Personal knowledge of the authors.

Glossary

Ableism is the othering of and discrimination against people with physical and/or mental disabilities.

BIPoC stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The acronym BIPoC thus represents a political self-identification of people affected by racist oppression. The terms «Black», «People of Color», and «Indigenous» are used by many non-white people as an emancipatory self-designation. The initial letters are deliberately capitalized to indicate socio-political positioning in a white-dominated social order.

Classism is discrimination against people considered to have a low social status.

Intersectionality investigates the intersections and reciprocal impacts of forms of inequality and oppression such as race, gender, class, disability, and sexuality. An intersectional perspective recognizes that axes of identity are always interconnected at the same time and at multiple levels.

Migrantized are individuals or groups with a migrant background. Migrantization is a process of othering, and migrantized people are seen as «others» with a place of origin outside Germany or Europe.

Migration background is a broadly defined sociodemographic term in Germany. It statistically groups people together who are not German citizens themselves or who have at least one parent who was not a German citizen when they were born.

Racialized are individuals and groups who are seen as ethnically «other» and are subjected to various forms of racialization. In Germany, this includes people who use the self-designation Black, Indigenous, or of Color (BIPoC), Sinti*zza and Rom*nja, and people who are racialized on the basis of their membership of Muslim, Jewish, and other religious communities.

Racism is a system that constructs races and creates a hierarchy of these designations. Racism establishes, justifies, and controls the hierarchical classification of racialized people. Racist impacts, whether they are intentional or unintentional, are reflected in factors such as the unequal distribution of economic, material, and social resources.

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The authors

Imeh Ituen is a research associate at the Chair of Global Climate Policy and Climate Governance at the University of Hamburg. As a researcher and environmental justice activist, she focuses on issues of coloniality and racism in the climate crisis.

Lisa Tatu Hey is a German-Kenyan and has been part of the Black Earth Collective since 2020. She critically engages with «developmental» discourses that arise in the context of the climate crisis. Through her work with «FAIR SHARE of women leaders», she is committed to a feminist leadership culture. She has been living in Berlin since 2018.

Both authors are part of Black Earth, an environmental and climate justice collective of predominantly FLINT-positioned BIPoC. Black Earth understands the climate crisis as a historical development, starting with slavery and colonialism. With decolonial, queer feminist and ecological perspectives, Black Earth advocates for an intersectional climate movement.

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