

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# ***Advancing Environmental Justice and Environmental Human Rights at Stanford: A plan for achieving Stanford's Long-Range Plan and presidential initiatives***

## **Introduction**

The recently announced presidential initiatives provide an inspiring vision for Stanford's future as a purposeful university, producing scholarship for the benefit of humanity, in our region and around the world. Here we propose a path of action that will enable our university to make bold strides toward achieving its ambitions by advancing environmental justice and environmental human rights at Stanford. This plan involves hiring a cohort of environmental justice scholars skilled in applying methodologies and intellectual approaches across a range of disciplines. This plan envisions integrating environmental justice as a necessary dimension of social-environmental scholarship and policy solutions, an interdisciplinary domain in which Stanford has substantive, but as of yet, incomplete expertise. It also presents a pathway for bridging the gap between local and global approaches to environmental human rights.

Here we present a plan for advancing environmental human rights and environmental justice at Stanford — a promising pathway for increasing diversity and equity (initiative #1), building ethical leadership at the intersection of society and technology (initiative #2), and achieving sustainability for our region and world (initiative #3). This plan is centered around a proposal for an EJ faculty cluster hire of five new tenure-track faculty members across multiple departments at Stanford. The proposed EJ faculty cohort will bring knowledge, approaches, methods and tools that address disparities in human and environmental well-being as a core value for achieving social-environmental sustainability, thus providing a critical scholarly complement to Stanford's existing strengths in the natural sciences, economics, business, law, and other fields.

## **Definitions**

Environmental justice (EJ) provides a strategic approach to research and social-ecological problem solving that seeks to achieve social equity along with environmental sustainability. EJ follows fundamental tenets of human rights, which emphasizes the importance of environmental protection for achieving the well-being for all people.

To provide a a working definition, environmental justice specifically advances a positive vision for policies and actions that ensures equitable access to environmental benefits, and prevents or mitigates the disproportionate impacts of environmental harms for all communities — regardless of gender, class, race, ethnicity, or other social positions. An EJ approach also centers the voices, knowledge, and leadership of marginalized communities: conducting research *with*, as opposed to research *for* communities. Four key elements of our definition include:

- 1) ***Environment***. EJ focuses on policies and actions determining the location of environmental harms and benefits (e.g. physical, built, and social environments) that impact specific marginalized communities.
- 2) ***Justice***. EJ scholars are particularly concerned with equity, and often apply legal frameworks of distributive justice and procedural justice that can help address unfair distribution of environmental benefits and harms.
- 3) ***Community***. EJ research questions are born out of the knowledge and lived experience of particular marginalized communities, and are concerned with community self-representation and agency in determining solutions to environmental and social problems.
- 4) ***Intersectionality***. EJ frameworks often emphasize intersectionality, or the idea that various forms of social stratification, e.g. class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability, and gender, are interwoven, and do not exist separately from one other.

## **Theories of Change**

Broadening the interests and representation of our faculty in environmental justice will help Stanford become a more effective problem-solver in the sustainability space, and to address the growing polarization in our society. By more explicitly connecting social equity with Stanford's research and environmental protection efforts, we will achieve more resilient

help Stanford become a more effective problem-solver in the sustainability space, and to address the growing polarization in our society. By more explicitly connecting social equity with Stanford's research and environmental protection efforts, we will achieve more resilient sustainability solutions and greater environmental health for all. Part of this work involves diversifying our faculty, establishing community research partnerships, and intentionally learning from the perspectives of marginalized communities. EJ approaches are also important for building trust with large segments of society that are currently excluded from most environmental decision-making and academic knowledge production. Our theories of change include:

(1) ***Inclusivity for better science:*** A more **inclusive** community partnership approach to research based on EJ frameworks will generate novel research teams within and beyond the academy. By working alongside marginalized communities and **learning** from their experiences, interdisciplinary scientists will be better positioned to look past the highly limiting set of blinders that result from working primarily with privileged groups. Such partnerships will lead us to the next level of **innovation** in interdisciplinary research and help us to produce better science.

(2) ***Increasing the relevance of social-environmental problem solving:*** By attending to the concerns and insights of marginalized communities, Stanford researchers and instructors will increase the **social relevance** of our work to real-world sustainability problems, and **build greater trust** in knowledge production occurring within the academy. By ensuring that our research and teaching are informed by the lived experience of a larger cross-section of society, we will increase our ability to solve problems *with* diverse communities. In this way, we will increase the **uptake** of the knowledge we produce by a multi-cultural global society.

(3) ***Appropriate scaling, from local to global:*** Bringing environmental justice scholars to Stanford, we will position our university as a **bridging** institution to address the gap between global commitments to human rights and sustainability, and the meaningful implementation of those commitments with diverse local and regional communities. By engaging with transnational environmental justice movements, Stanford will facilitate emerging forms of **global citizenship** that can ultimately lead to greater democratization of our global society. And by critically examining global initiatives through local community partnerships, we will remain attuned to **appropriate scaling** for socio-environmental problem-solving.

## Opportunities

Our peer institutions are increasingly recognizing that environmental justice expertise is critical to meeting the global sustainability challenge—and that fostering expertise in environmental justice requires integrating race, class, and gender into the ways in which we study and teach about human and environmental systems. Yale, Brown, Tufts, Harvard, Princeton and Duke have all launched faculty, programmatic and student initiatives in recent years as has the University of Michigan, UC Berkeley, UC Davis, and UC Santa Barbara.

At all these institutions, however, resources devoted to environmental justice research and community engagement are still below the “critical mass” necessary to effectively develop and scale up EJ approaches to local and global challenges in human and environmental systems. Thus, while Stanford is currently falling behind in this area, we have an opportunity to provide leadership by taking a bold, purposeful approach through our research, teaching, and outreach.

(1) ***Research.*** Environmental justice provides an opportunity to engage in a wide array of research questions. These questions explore the causes of social and environmental inequity (e.g., economic causes, sociopolitical causes, combinations thereof, racial discrimination), and community response to such problems. Key areas for innovative EJ research include epidemiology and data science; sociology and social movements; humanities and critical theory, ethics and legal theory, public health and participatory research methods, etc.

(2) ***Teaching.*** For some time, Stanford students have voiced a need for an environmental justice lens in Stanford's teaching related to socio-environmental challenges. These students maintain that intersectional approaches that include EJ frameworks are key to solving the challenges of the 21st century. This includes ensuring that students are equipped to address societal and ethical impacts of new technologies. Currently, most students at Stanford engage in environmental justice through activism alone. Lacking exposure to critical environmental justice scholarship, these students are missing key opportunities that experienced faculty can provide.

(3) ***Outreach:*** A new Environmental Justice Clinic will conduct Stanford-based EJ research, education, and outreach together with marginalized communities. The clinic will equip Stanford students and faculty with the thinking and the partnerships they need to and succeed in doing research and outreach together *with* marginalized communities. This effort will enable

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### **Conclusion:**

In many ways the university is already well positioned to engage in this bold mission, given its expertise in the sustainability-relevant fields, along with its commitment to excellence in the humanities, social sciences, medical sciences, and other disciplines. Multiple community and interdisciplinary centers at Stanford also intersect with EJ work. And a select group of postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and faculty is currently engaging with elements of EJ research at Stanford. Still, there is a lack of tenure-track faculty pursuing EJ scholarship, which hampers our progress in relevant research, teaching, and community work.

**To accelerate the current presidential initiatives, Stanford needs an injection of diverse faculty, who by applying the lens of environmental justice, can help transform the university into a center for achieving intergenerational socio-environmental sustainability in our region and in our world. This faculty cohort will possess scholarly expertise and methods—grounded in collaboration with the communities their work aims to benefit—needed to interrogate the social and political processes through which environmental injustices occur and are mitigated. Finally, we view this plan as an initial step strengthening Stanford’s leadership in interdisciplinary sustainability scholarship that addresses social equity along with environmental sustainability, and will engage with [urgent social and environmental problems on a broad scale](#).**