

Social Justice and the Common Good: Improving the Catholic Social Teaching Framework

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POPE FRANCIS'S ENCYCLICAL LETTER ON THE environment, *Laudato Si'*, is a remarkable intervention into Catholic social teaching (CST). Its vision of environmental justice is groundbreaking. *Laudato Si'* eloquently proclaims the beauty of the natural universe and strikingly redefines humanity's place within it, by insisting that all creatures have intrinsic value and, with humanity, are included in the redeeming grace of Christ. Moreover, this encyclical and its successor, the 2019 Synod on the Amazon, provide more than an environmental ethics. Their implications for the CST framework as a whole are radical.

This chapter briefly recapitulates the modern history of CST, then situates three innovations of Pope Francis's ecological agenda in terms of their significance for the evolving tradition. All three derive from Pope Francis's indictment of powerful elites for obstructing international agreements on climate change and his tacit recognition that moral teaching alone cannot reverse standing injustices. I argue, however, that there is a significant blind spot in CST on the environment and health justice, one that even Pope Francis has still to address: gender equality. The chapter concludes with a case study from the Amazon that draws these themes together.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

CST has been promoting the common good as an indispensable criterion of social justice since at least the end of the nineteenth century, with the publication of the first of the modern papal social encyclicals, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1893). CST has since expanded the concept's sphere of reference from the nation state and its constitutive communities (e.g., families, neighborhoods, towns, cities, provinces, states, and regions), to the "universal common good" of all nations and peoples; and, with Pope Francis, to that of the entire planet: "everything is connected," the recurring refrain of *Laudato Si'*.

One might even say that the common good *is* the definition of social justice in CST. As a definition or standard of justice, the common good entails the equal participation of every member of society in basic material, social, and political goods, both as a contributor and as a beneficiary. In fact, the common good is a form of a dynamic community that is a good in itself.

Additional bedrock concepts of CST are mutual rights and duties; solidarity as an active commitment to justice; good government, the rule of law, and just, participatory political institutions; and the principle of subsidiarity. This principle provides both that higher authorities do not interfere unduly with arrangements at the local level and that they do intervene when local institutions cannot or do not fulfill the requirements of justice. Importantly, responsibility for the common good includes not only civil government but also civil society, private institutions, and religious bodies. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the authors of the modern social encyclicals have often seemed to want or hope that the United Nations or a like body will step in to handle structural injustices, such as war and violence, economic inequality and development, human rights, and now ecological harm. As we will see, recent assessments of contemporary global governance structures have cast serious doubt on the ability of the UN to control the conditions of global justice as well as on the assumption that, if it did so, the results necessarily would be benign.

Most importantly, however, papal thought since the Second Vatican Council (1960–1965) has moved decisively in the direction of liberation theology’s “preferential option for the poor” to define what the common good means concretely. This phrase makes the needs of the most marginal or vulnerable the ethical priority, as inspired by the gospel and Jesus’s care for “the least of these” (Matthew 25). In justice terms, the preferential option for the poor means something like urgent affirmative action to improve the situation of the least well-off. In the name of the preferential option for the poor, Pope John Paul II urged that the gospel and justice both require the transformation of a world in which poverty is assuming “massive proportions” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 57). Pope Francis has applied the preferential option not only to disenfranchised populations most vulnerable to climate change but to the Earth itself and all creatures harmed by selfish interests. In other words, liberal equality, procedural justice, and “equal opportunity” that prescind from the real social, cultural, and economic conditions that limit individual choice and agency are not sufficient conditions of justice for CST. CST defines justice not only in terms of individual freedoms and rights, but also in terms of structural justice that respects the social, political, and material needs of all.

Alarming, however, over a century and a quarter of papal, episcopal, and theological teaching on these priorities—the common good, justice, and the priority of the poor in morality and politics—have done little to roll back injustice. Poverty, violence, prejudice, and exploitation are still around and still perpetrating their devastating effects on the world’s least powerful peoples and their habitats. According to the United Nations,

In 2015, more than 736 million people lived below the international poverty line. Around 10 per cent of the world population is living in extreme poverty and struggling to fulfil the most basic needs like health, education, and access to water and sanitation, to name a few. There are 122 women aged 25 to 34 living in poverty for every 100 men of the same age group, and more than 160 million children are at risk of continuing to live in extreme poverty by 2030.¹

Social justice and the common good have obvious relevance to the problem of public health ethics, as does the reality of world poverty. From the standpoint of public health, “social justice” requires equity in access to health resources and to the social determinants of good health. The concept of the “common good” captures the *public and social* nature of health and health justice. Relatedly, the natural environment, now undermined by climate change, is a public good, one which demands not only a social but a cross-cultural and intergenerational understanding of justice. This is essential in order to address the effects of climate change and other environmental damage on health, especially for the planet’s most vulnerable people. Particularly to be accented in defining and applying the concepts of social justice and the common good in a global public health environment is the participation of affected populations themselves, especially women.

In the twenty-first century, CST has major challenges to meet if it is to realize its ideals concretely. The top-down teaching approach and the social model based on the modern Western nation-state (i.e., rights, duties, democratic government, and rule of law) will no longer do. Both the theology and the politics of CST must be refocused if they are to have any prospect of transforming conditions of injustice more successfully than in the past; the voices and sources on which it draws must be much more local, bottom-up, and diverse.

Three main challenges the common good tradition now faces are the absence of real *political will* to make justice-favoring changes in society, the economy, or politics; the need to go beyond reason and exhortation to *conversion* of imaginations and worldviews; and the *decentralized* nature of global socioeconomic and political agency,

¹ United Nations, “Ending Poverty,” www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/poverty/.

bringing with it popular mobilization as a prerequisite of accomplishing the environmental goals the Pope sets out. Moreover, special attention must go to the secondary status of women in virtually every society historically and today, contrasted to the reality of women's environmental activism. After elaborating on these challenges, I turn to a case from the Peruvian Amazon to illustrate the changed and evolving environment of CST.

THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL WILL

Now to challenge number one. *Laudato Si'*—unlike its predecessors—specifically recognizes that efforts to institutionalize justice internationally will always be opposed, usually effectively so, by powerful interests that are vested in the status quo. Civil society organizations have made some progress in creating an ecological movement. However, UN summits on the environment have not lived up to expectations because even when they succeed in producing agreements, they fail to be effective. As Pope Francis incisively puts it, this failure is due simply to a “lack of political will” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 166). Indeed, “It is remarkable how weak international political responses have been There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good....” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 54).

In 2019, four years after the Paris Climate Accord, US President Donald J. Trump initiated a process of withdrawal—now reversed by President Joseph Biden—many countries are failing to meet their pledges, and target goals are being reduced, while the window of opportunity for meaningful action is becoming narrower, the urgency of reform more acute, and the effects of delay on the global poor ever more dire. An example related to pollution and health is the extraction of natural resources in the Global South, especially mineral ore. A 2017 report of the UN Environment Programme called for mining corporations globally to take a “safety first” approach to the disposal of toxic waste. Yet, two years later, the UN Sustainable Development Report 2019 asserted that environmental decline and social inequities are worsening, due in no small part to consumption patterns that result in toxic effects from mining and other pollution sources. The report itself insists that transformations can come about only through “coordinated action by governments, business, communities, civil society and individuals.”²

² “Scientists call for urgent, targeted action to avoid reversing the development gains of recent decades.” UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Global Sustainable Development Report 2019,” www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/sustainable/global-sustainable-development-report-2019.html. See also UN Environment Program, “New Report Urges Global Action on Mining Pollution,”

The reality is that reasonable arguments, moral appeals, and even authoritative religious teaching will not be enough to penetrate the recalcitrant coalition of the threatened and the apathetic. A key ingredient of real change has to be mobilization from below, gathering enough momentum to successfully pressure the beneficiaries and guardians of major social institutions so that they go beyond the hypocrisy of unenforced accords and achieve some meaningful compliance with the common good (*Laudato Si'*, nos. 169, 180–181).

THE CHALLENGE OF MORAL AND POLITICAL CONVERSION

This brings us to challenge number two: conversion and empowerment. First and most obviously, let us return to *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis invokes the social virtue of solidarity to prioritize consequences of environmental damage for the poor. “Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 14). Yet, the strongest asset of the Pope’s message, in my mind, is that he neither leaves solidarity at the ideal level nor assumes that moral appeals and reason will bring the necessary response. In addition and more profoundly, there must be a conversion of worldviews, imaginations, and spiritualities. For this, aesthetic and affective appeals are required, along with formation in new sorts of moral and social relationships, and a renewal of Christian narratives, symbols, and liturgies. This is the first encyclical that I know of to be released with a Vatican YouTube video that stirs the imagination with the wonders of the natural world, the horrors of drought and pollution, and their effects on creation’s human inhabitants.³ The encyclical stirringly depicts for us the beauty and suffering of “sister earth” and that of our fellow creatures, while proclaiming the presence of the divine in and through creation. It concludes with two prayers, one for Christians, another for all who believe in a Creator God.

Conversion of imaginations and worldviews becomes more specific in its sources and appeals with the preparatory and final documents of the Amazon Synod and in the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*. The preparatory document for the Amazon Synod leads the way by emphasizing even more strongly than *Laudato Si'* that the peoples most affected by climate change are also the most competent to diagnose the damage and to propose solutions. The peoples of the Amazon, including indigenous peoples and religions, have a cosmological and spiritual vision that must be shared

www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/new-report-urges-global-action-mining-pollution.

³ See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Vatican Releases Video on Pope’s Encyclical,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXA5_juFgDg.

if those in the Global North, responsible for most of the Amazon's ecological woes, are to imagine a different way of acting on the idea that we are all connected. In *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis very personally shares his four "dreams" for the Amazon, including the rights, dignity, and voices of the original peoples; the preservation of the region's "cultural riches" that reveal the varied "beauty of our humanity"; the preservation of the Amazon's "overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests"; and of a Church with "new faces with Amazonian features."⁴

THE CHALLENGE OF A "NEW WORLD ORDER"

The opening plan for the Amazon asserted that justice for the region "requires structural and personal changes by all human beings, by nations, and by the Church."⁵ A relatively recent political science literature contests CST's traditional top-down framework, showing not only that the United Nations has in reality very little enforcement power but also that some of its more momentous decisions depend on the agreement of its Security Council, which will always be made up of states with their own interests, biases, and disagreements. UN resolutions or treaties—on climate change, mining, or development goals—still have significant moral authority. Yet their real impact depends on implementation back home by member states, where political support may be low and resistance from special interests high.

In regard to global economic and political agency, political scientist Anne Marie Slaughter calls attention to what she calls a twenty-first century "new world order." Slaughter and others maintain that, over the past few decades, global economic and political power has become less and less centralized.⁶ Successful regulatory, legislative, and judicial approaches of individual states can attract by 'soft power', prompting adaptation by other states and creating a *de facto* transnational policy regime upheld by like-minded counterparts, though not structured or enforced by any higher political power. These emerging networks can both obstruct international environmental target plans and provide new axes along which to garner support for their goals.⁷

⁴ Francis, "Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*," www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html, no. 7.

⁵ Synod of Bishops of the Pan-Amazon Region, "Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Pan-Amazon Region," www.sinodoamazonico.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/preparatory-document-for-the-synod-for-the-amazon.html, Preamble.

⁶ See Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Maryann Cusimano Love, *Beyond Sovereignty: Issues for a Global Agenda*, 4th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011).

⁷ For a more cautious reading, see Stewart Patrick, "The Unruled World: The Case for Good Enough Global Governance," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2014): 58–73.

Pope Francis grasps, in a way revolutionary for CST, that effective political action must be broad-based and multi-layered, gathering energy and strength among affected populations. Good faith efforts by governments, regulatory bodies, and businesses are optimal. But citizen pressure, protests, boycotts, shareholder dissent, and socially responsible entrepreneurial competition all have an important role. In the United States, the Catholic Climate Covenant is a cross-society community organizing effort, joined by eighteen partners, including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association, and congregations of religious men and women.⁸ In *Laudato Si'*, Francis addresses at least seventeen local bishops' conferences, and draws widely on local examples and wisdom. The four dreams of *Querida Amazonia* are addressed to the region itself, to the Amazonian church, and especially to the experiences, worldviews, and power of the peoples that inhabit it.

One of the first public, political Catholic responses to *Laudato Si'* was the mobilization of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, among those nations most vulnerable to climate insecurity. Within a month of the encyclical's publication, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila launched a campaign to collect one million signatures on a petition to be delivered to Paris in December 2015 for the UN climate conference.⁹ In July 2019, the Filipino bishops issued a pastoral letter, in which they urge that financial resources of Catholic institutions be disinvested from "dirty energy" like "coal-fired power plants, mining companies and other destructive extractive projects," and reinvested in clean and renewable energy sources.¹⁰ To bring lasting change, popular momentum must meet up with policy and regulation, as well as conversion or motivation of the plants, companies, and other beneficiaries behind the "destructive" projects responsible for climate change and pollution. In a case study to follow, I show that various forces favoring environmental justice in the Amazon can converge and what sorts of barriers they still face.

⁸ See Catholic Climate Covenant, "Our Story," catholicclimatecovenant.org/about/story.

⁹ See Brian Roewe, "Philippine Church Takes Lead on Pope Francis's Climate Encyclical," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 25, 2015, www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/philippine-church-takes-lead-francis-environmental-encyclical.

¹⁰ Robin Gomes, "Filippine Bishops Issue Pastoral Letter on 'Climate Emergency'," *Vatican News*, July 16, 2019, www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2019-07/philippines-bishops-cbcp-pastoral-letter-climate-emergency.html.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING, GENDER EQUALITY, AND WOMEN'S AGENCY

A key dimension of just local empowerment is *gender equality*. Despite my admiration for *Laudato Si'*, one cannot avoid the conclusion that it, like subsequent Amazon documents, shares a blind spot with CST as a whole and with many other faith-based advocacy efforts, and that is gender equality.¹¹ Just as in situations of civil conflict and war, it is often women who are most active in energizing solutions to climate threats at the grassroots level, perhaps because women are typically most responsible for the daily sustenance and safety of families and homes. In fact, the *Laudato Si'* video captures this with images of women in Africa waiting in lines to carry scarce water back for the domestic daily supply.¹² Yet the encyclical portrays our sister earth as a victim of human exploitation who awaits rescue at human hands, without noticing that the hands cultivating crops or finding water solutions worldwide are likely as not those of women. The gender symbolism of the encyclical places women in a dependent situation of victimization, while suggesting that women can be defined by familial, especially maternal, roles.¹³

Meanwhile, women's actual efforts to combat climate change and advocate for the health of families and communities are key. In fact, despite cultural and ecclesial gender barriers, women are leaders in mining resistance movements.¹⁴ Yet, because Amazonian women must construct active political roles within highly gendered social norms reinforced by religion and culture, they usually meet greater difficulty than men in accommodating activism to their other roles, especially to domestic responsibilities. They also meet greater and more violent resistance when transgressing perceived norms. This includes domestic abuse and physical attacks, extending to rape and murder. When documents of Catholic social teaching continue to

¹¹ On gender in *Laudato Si'*, see Emily Reimer-Barry, "On Naming God: Gendered God-Talk in *Laudato Si'*," *Catholic Moral Theology*, catholicmoraltheology.com/on-naming-god-gendered-god-talk-in-laudato-si/; Nichole M. Flores, "'Our Sister, Mother Earth': Solidarity and Familial Ecology in *Laudato Si'*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 463–478; Meghan Clark, "'Querida Amazonia' Provides Reflection on Ecological Sin," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 14, 2020, www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/querida-amazonia-provides-reflection-ecological-sin.

¹² See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Vatican Releases Video on Pope's Encyclical."

¹³ See Tina Beattie, "A 'Frozen' Idea of the Feminine," *The Tablet*, February 20, 2020, www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/17583/a-frozen-idea-of-the-feminine.

¹⁴ See Katy Jenkins, "Unearthing Women's Anti-Mining Activism in the Andes: Pachamama and the 'Mad Old Women'," *Antipode* 47, no. 2 (2015): 442–460; Katy Jenkins, "Women Anti-Mining Activists' Narratives of Everyday Resistance in the Andes: Staying Put and Carrying on in Peru and Ecuador," *Gender Place and Culture* 24, no. 10 (2017): 1441–1459.

reiterate traditional stereotypes of women's nature and roles, while ostensibly aiming to "respect" and "protect" women, they fail to empower women's environmental agency and women's ability to take initiative in respecting and protecting "our common home," as *Laudato Si'* urges. Traditionalist Catholic gender norms, when co-opted by violent political and economic forces within patriarchal cultures (virtually all cultures), can contribute to retaliation against women political activists. Women's work needs and deserves recognition and support from Catholic teaching, Catholic organizations, Catholic leaders, and Catholic co-workers.

The Final Document for the Amazonian Synod promisingly holds up the empowering example of Mary Magdalene, the "apostle to the apostles," as a model for the church in the Amazon and potentially for Amazonian women.¹⁵ But Pope Francis's subsequent Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, despite its powerful testimony to the wisdom of indigenous peoples, worldviews, and spiritualities, seems to undercut women's full participation. Women's positions and service in the Church should be respected, Francis says, but our gifts are "simple and straightforward" (more so than men's, apparently).¹⁶ Women's work is approved when it "reflects their [simple] womanhood."¹⁷ This criterion does not do justice to what women are actually doing to combat environmental destruction, as scientists, theologians, political representatives, NGOs officials, and community activists.

CASE STUDY: MINING IN MADRE DE DIOS, PERU

Let me conclude with a case bringing many of these themes together: the reduction and reform of gold mining in the Madre de Dios region of the Peruvian Amazon, one of the largest gold mining sites in the world. When national governments in the Amazon region grant licenses to international mining companies, they often displace indigenous peoples from ancestral lands, damage forests, and leave toxic waste materials that affect the health of whole populations for generations. Mining in the Amazon is connected to North American (especially Canadian) corporations and consumers, because metals including gold and tin are used to make electronic devices like smartphones.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Synod of Bishops of the Pan-Amazon Region, "Final Document of the Amazon Synod: The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology," www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html, at no. 22.

¹⁶ Francis, "*Querida Amazonia*," no. 102.

¹⁷ Francis, "*Querida Amazonia*," no. 103.

¹⁸ See Kevin Jackson, "How the Amazon Synod Is Connected to North American Corporations," *America*, October 22, 2019, www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/10/22/how-amazon-synod-connected-north-american-corporations.

There are many resulting problems, among which the following five are central.

1. Displacement of farmers. The Peruvian government is making profitable contracts with international mining companies, granting them rights to indigenous lands.
2. Extensive deforestation by the mining operations. Deforestation brings global damage, since the Amazon forests absorb a high amount of the world's carbon dioxide.
3. Toxicity from the mercury used to purify ore. Waste is dumped into the river or left to seep into the land, affecting food and water supplies.
4. Labor trafficking and sex trafficking. The economic profits and atmosphere of legal impunity around mines enables and conceals profitable human rights abuses.
5. Instability of employment and other means of income, especially agriculture. Eventually gold will be exhausted, land and water will have been polluted, and farming land destroyed.

Despite clear injustices and harm to the common good, political and economic incentives are on the side of continued exploitation. Local governments may enact some restrictions on mining but enforcement is weak. Meanwhile international accords, such as the 2007 UN International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, lack clear enforcement mechanisms, and the same political will to implement that is absent from agreements on climate change is lacking here as well.

Advocacy efforts and reform initiatives are active and growing, however. Perhaps most relevant and salient in relation to CST is REPAM (Red Eclesial Panamazónica), which organized the Synod on the Amazon. REPAM is a project of the nine Churches of the Amazon region, inspired by Pope Francis and backed by the Latin American Bishops' Conference, CELAM. Caritas Internationalis is a founding member of REPAM, and supporters of REPAM include national Caritas offices in the Amazon countries and Europe, as well as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in North America. Catholic Relief Services' Madre de Dios area project manager is a woman, Tatiana Cottrina. The work of CRS in Peru is supported partly with a grant from the United States Agency for International Development, indicating the reach of Catholic international organizations.

Among other change agents in the Amazon region are the union of indigenous communities (Native Federation of Madre de Dios) and local activists like Nasbat Marleni who is a traditional cacao farmer who helped form an agroforestry organization and Victor Zambano who returned to his home in Madre de Dios after military service and

has spent the last thirty years reforesting 84 acres of land.¹⁹ Also involved are Peruvian scientists and organizations like the Amazon Conservation Association and the Center for Amazonian Scientific Innovation. Scientists have come up with a new technology for mining—a water table to sort gold—which leaves no toxic waste because it does not use mercury.

The Peruvian bishops and regional Amazonian bishops are helping to develop “Plans de Vida” by and for local communities with the support of Catholic organizations like CRS. Projects include fish farming, banana groves, ecotourism, crafts, reforestation, and agroforestry projects. The advice of Joseph Kelly, head of CRS operations in South America, resonates with CST:

Start at the local level. Empower communities to have a voice in their environment, in how their economy develops and constructively build a way forward. Communities shift that paradigm and say, “We have a part to play. We have a voice. We have a role in changing this situation and we’re protagonists in this story.”²⁰

In September 2019, over two dozen indigenous women leaders from across the Madre de Dios region met in the regional capital of Puerto Maldonado to unite against deforestation, extractive industries, and domestic violence and to learn from experts such as human rights lawyers and land rights defenders. One of the leaders, Jackelyn Rengifo, thirty years old, is president of the San Jacinto indigenous community in the Tambopata district of the Peruvian Amazon. Her community has been ravaged by the incursions of illegal and legal miners who have irreversibly damaged traditional lands. The community has a forest recovery project that includes growing fruits like oranges, tangerines, and cocoa. Inside the abandoned and once-toxic mining pits, they are aiming to construct fish farms.²¹

In the Madre de Dios region of the Peruvian Amazon, social justice and the common good are being realized ever more concretely with increasingly equitable participation by the most vulnerable stakeholders. New to the picture—and critically important for the climate and public health challenges to be faced in this century—are the empowerment of the vulnerable by motivated allies; their claiming of their *own* voice, wisdom and agency, especially by women; and the stirrings of local, regional, transnational, and global networks of

¹⁹ See Rebekah Kates Lemske, “The Pull of Peru’s Gold Rush,” *CRS website*, www.crs.org/stories/peru-illegal-gold-mining-climate-change.

²⁰ Lemske, “The Pull of Peru’s Gold Rush.”

²¹ See Andrew J. Wright, “Indigenous Women in the Peruvian Amazon Are Leading the Fight for Rights,” *Sojourners Magazine*, September 18, 2019, sojo.net/articles/indigenous-women-peruvian-amazon-are-leading-fight-rights.

action committed to progress toward greater environmental and public health justice. **M**

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