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Master's Project: A Journey Toward Energy Justice

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A JOURNEY TOWARD ENERGY JUSTICE

A Project Presented

By

Alayna Howard

To

The Faculty of the Graduate College

Of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science
Specializing in Natural Resources

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INTRODUCTION

The organization that I work for is a nonprofit focused on the design, implementation, and evaluation of sustainable energy solutions. It was founded 32 years ago with a goal to help the environment and better the lives of people, particularly people with low-incomes¹. Over the past three decades, the organization has experienced significant growth and change while always centering the goal of making energy more affordable.

In 2016, a study found that people who were low-income, African American, Latino, or renters, paid up to three times more than the average household on energy costs in America's 48 largest cities (Drehobl, 2016). This inequitable distribution and cost of energy creates direct and indirect impact on the well-being of low-income people and people of Color and demonstrates the great need for justice-centered work in the environmental sector to address these inequities (Harris, 2016). This work must be applied in a holistic way, as is explained by Sierra Club Director Michael Brune, "fundamentally, the Sierra Club's values are rooted in principles of justice, fairness, and equality. To apply those values selectively would be to negate them" (Brune, 2015).

Addressing energy inequity has been incorporated into my organization's current mission statement: "to enhance the economic, environmental, and societal benefits of clean and efficient energy use for all people." The inclusion of "for all people" broadens the scope of the organization's work beyond energy affordability to energy justice.

¹ "A household whose income does not exceed 80 percent of the median income for the area" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2017).

Energy justice² is a relatively new concept that has grown out of the environmental justice movement (Jenkins, McCauley, Heffron, & Stephan, 2014). There are multiple definitions of energy justice. However, the primary definition that is discussed in the Western academic community encompasses three types of justice: distributional, recognition, and procedural. Distributional justice refers to the location of energy impacts (production, use, disposal). Recognition justice refers to the consideration of sections of society that are ignored or misrepresented. Procedural justice refers to decision making processes and engagement with impacted communities (Jenkins et al., 2016). There has been minimal published critique of this framework, however some calls to incorporate non-Western theories of justice and ethics into future energy justice research have been made (Sovacool et al., 2017).

In 2018, my organization named energy justice as one of the key focus areas for its work. The intention has been set, however the path forward is unclear. Energy justice is not currently integral to the organization's operations and decision making, which are necessary steps to operationalize the mission of advancing energy justice.

This Capstone project examines the gap between the mission of the organization and the work happening there. My aspiration is to embrace the complexity of the concept of energy justice and to increase my understanding of it so that I may become an active participant in the integration of energy justice into the organization's actions and decision making.

² Energy justice has been called a “new cross-cutting social science research agenda, which seeks to apply justice principles to energy policy, energy production and systems, and energy consumption” (Jenkins, McCauley, Heffron, Stephan, & Rehner, 2016).

More specifically, my goal for this project focused on participating in ongoing discussions about energy justice while focusing on relationship building through new conversations that provide a broader understanding of perspectives on the topic.

Throughout this project, I aimed to engage in incommensurability, an essential leadership practice that I'm continuing to develop.

METHODS

My theory of change is that through authentic, trusted relationships and shared understanding, the organization will be able to more effectively operationalize its mission of advancing energy justice. In my role as a communications manager, I create and implement strategies for sharing the organization's stories, demonstrating its impacts and representing the voices within. I develop content for internal and external communication channels, and therefore have power and responsibility to share and discuss concepts of energy justice.

I began this project with background research and a literature review to understand energy justice and consider the systems involved. As a large interconnected system, actions and decisions made within the energy sector have global impacts (World Energy Council, 2004). The energy justice framework presented in the introduction of this report has been designed to fit the current structure of the global energy system. The framework addresses the events and patterns of energy injustice but does little to consider the structures and mental models that drive it³.

People employed by the U.S. energy sector are predominately male and white (U.S. Department of Energy, 2017)⁴, a picture also reflected at my organization. These demographics have an impact on the worldviews and mindsets that influence decision-making processes, therefore must be acknowledged.

³ Informed by the "Iceberg Model" of Systems Thinking, which considers global issues at four levels of thinking (Northwest Earth Institute, 2018).

⁴ A 2017 U.S. Energy and Employment report states that women represent between 22 and 34 percent of the energy workforce, 14 percent of energy sector workers are Hispanic or Latino, and 12 percent are African American.

Following my systems and literature review, I explored historic and current efforts to integrate energy justice at our organization. I connected with the Human Resources (HR) staff person most engaged in energy justice work. This individual became a crucial partner in my project. I learned of small projects highlighting energy justice at the organization, including the production of quarterly “success stories”; the posting of justice-related signage throughout the office; and the offering of optional trainings for staff. I also learned about an energy justice metric currently being developed to measure the organization’s impact, as well as plans to convene an energy justice committee.

Upon completing this initial research, I decided to engage directly with my colleagues to further develop and strengthen relationships and become aware of perspectives across the organization. I developed a purpose, outcome, and process (POP) document (appendix A) to focus my intentions, acknowledge my own opinions, define my desired outcomes, and lay out my process for conversations. This exercise was informed by Rick Ross’ Ladder of Inference, which emphasizes the balance of advocacy and inquiry (Senge et al., 1994). I spoke with seven people across the organization, each with different backgrounds, working in a range of departments, with varying years of experience. I reflected on my key learnings after each discussion.

Simultaneously, I partnered with my HR contact to conceptualize a justice-focused resource for the organization’s intranet – an internal blog to cover topics of inclusion, diversity, and energy justice. We drafted an introductory post (appendix C) and touchstones and principles to support staff as they engaged with the content (appendix

D). We also generated a set of writing prompts for staff interested in authoring a post (appendix E).

My methods shifted throughout this project. The flow of each conversation changed depending on depth of relationship. I also adjusted the timeline for the internal blog launch. It was originally scheduled for May 2018, however other projects developed that shifted the date. One such project is a new strategic plan to set priorities for future work and inform key messages for the organization. To ensure that staff receive consistent information about the organization's plans for energy justice work, the release of the internal blog will now follow the release of this plan in October 2018.

RESULTS

My desired outcomes for this project were threefold: 1) develop trusted relationships and have authentic conversations; 2) learn about the breadth of perspectives on energy justice across the organization; and 3) determine my role in integrating energy justice into the organization's work. I've made progress toward these outcomes and have more work to do. Three key ideas surfaced throughout this learning process related to definitions, measurement, and culture, which inform my work going forward.

There is no single shared definition of energy justice. My background research revealed varying definitions of energy justice in the Western academic community, with the most prevalent lacking important considerations of structures of domination and oppression driving injustices. When I asked colleagues to define energy justice, the responses were varied⁵ and none mentioned the systems that perpetuate racial and economic inequities.

Furthermore, measuring energy justice work is complex. As an organization that focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, quantitative measures are a critical component of assessing impact. However, my research failed to discern clear protocols for measuring energy justice. Members of my organization's data team developed a metric using the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI)⁶, which considers the number of projects completed and the amount of money spent in "vulnerable communities." Each person I discussed the Energy Justice Metric with agreed that it is flawed. Among these

⁵ Some people I spoke with considered energy justice to be synonymous with energy burden, others aligned it exclusively with serving "all people", and a few cited the need to balance the benefits and burdens of energy use.

⁶ Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) is a nationally recognized measure developed using census data. SVI considers how vulnerable a region is based on 14 social factors including poverty, transportation access, and housing density (U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit, 2018).

flaws is the fact that the data is sourced from systems that marginalize people (Shapiro, 2017), particularly those most susceptible to energy injustices. The metric also only considers quantitative impacts in vulnerable communities, not qualitative information such as relationships with people impacted. The metric has helped to bring energy justice into conversations about the operations and performance of the organization. However, relying on a flawed metric to drive these discussions poses a risk of oversimplifying justice in a space where decisions are made.

Another significant insight that came from this project was the sense of uncertainty in the organization about the role that culture plays in operationalizing the mission. Through my conversations with long-time employees I learned that in its early years, the organization was small and built upon shared personal values and political beliefs. As the company has grown, the beliefs, values, and backgrounds of employees have become more diverse, creating cultural differences across the organization. Some individuals reported that the organization cannot successfully operationalize its mission with this level of difference. This perspective raises questions about whether the organization is ready to engage with energy justice externally when it is struggling to accept diversity within its own community.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Throughout this project, I relied on self-assessment and external feedback to evaluate my work. My self-assessment has consisted of personal reflections on my methods, theory of change, and goals. I sought feedback from numerous individuals including my project advisor, the HR contact at my organization, my supervisor, and my project peer group. Their feedback informed my background research, improved my approach to conversations with colleagues, and guided my aspirations.

The most significant measure of progress in this project has been my ability to recognize and learn from the moments when I've failed to prioritize relationship building and engage in incommensurability. The need to "succeed" and deliver measurable results is strongly engrained in me from more than 20 years of Western academic teachings, however these forms of evaluation conflict with the relational approach that is central to this project. When I felt pressure to strictly adhere to an established deadline or deliverable, this interfered with my aspiration to build authentic and trusting relationships. For instance, early in the project, I attempted to increase the number of conversations I conducted by connecting with a colleague located in a different office that I had never met. They were unwilling to meet and participate in the conversation. This served as a reminder that relationship building takes time, and the quantity of conversations is less important than their quality and depth. By turning back to my theory of change in this and other moments like it, I have regained my footing to move forward.

Another challenge of engaging incommensurability has arisen related to the pace of my organization. My learning journey does not match the speed at which the organization is moving to set a path for advancing energy justice. I have felt a strong pull

to reach conclusions quickly and to bend my theory of change to fit the “needs” of the organization. With the support of my feedback partners I have been reminded that tackling issues of injustice is not simple or fast, and that relational work requires time and trust.

KEY LEARNINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, NEXT STEPS

This project revealed a deep-seated debate about cultural difference in the organization. Through my studies I have learned that a business with a diverse culture focused on interpersonal relationships and shared vision is more innovative and resilient (Page, 2008). Companies that value difference, employing people with varied backgrounds and perspectives, are more productive and successful at achieving their goals (Page, 2018). This is also a principle echoed in natural ecosystems: monocultures are susceptible to collapse because they are not equipped to adapt to change (Meadows, 2008). Adopting a new perspective on difference is crucial to the future of the organization. I recommend that the organization focus on its internal conditions by considering each identity represented and addressing the power and privilege dynamics at play. I recommend starting by building interpersonal relationships and deepening practices to work with and across difference.

The complexity of measuring energy justice work revealed that not all things can or should be numerically measured. Using a flawed metric to inform decision-making can perpetuate systemic domination and oppression and create a false sense of progress. Evaluating impact is important. However, using limited quantitative data that overlooks the qualitative nature of systems, people, and communities does not reflect justice-centered work. Future evaluations should increase understanding of the systems that the organization operates in. I also recommend that the organization seek external support from others who have experience evaluating justice work in ways that include the perspectives of people impacted by their programs or initiatives.

At the conclusion of this project I believe the organization still has much work to do in order to operationalize its mission to advance energy justice. I recommend that key

questions be considered, and important dialogues take place in the organization before a definition of energy justice and a vision for advancing it is established. These questions include: what structures of domination and oppression are causing energy injustice? How can we dismantle these structures through our work? Whose voices are not included in conversations about energy justice? What do these voices reveal and how can we amplify them? How can we ensure that our actions are in solidarity with people burdened by energy injustice?

My next steps are to integrate my key learnings into my personal leadership practice and my professional work. I plan to raise these questions in conversations with colleagues across the organization. I aim to highlight the importance of considering the underlying causes of injustice that are not currently addressed. I will continue to research frameworks for justice-centered work, to consider alternative models and practices for advancing energy justice. I will seek out stories of energy justice to share and amplify, highlighting voices of people outside of Western academia and of individuals experiencing the burdens of the energy system. I will leverage the channels that I manage at the organization to amplify these stories and foster conversations.

I look forward to building relationships with justice advocates and practitioners to continue my learning. I also must continue to examine my identity at the organization and within the energy sector as a White, socioeconomically privileged person.

Acknowledging my own power and privilege as I move through this work is crucial to understanding my role and impact and to avoiding the perpetuation of dominance and

oppression. I intend to begin steps forward in this work through awareness practice⁷ and feedback from people who can reflect my mistakes and blind spots in a constructive way.

Each of these next steps will require further engagement with incommensurability. I will need to remain grounded in my intentions of centering relationship building, working at a pace that fosters transformational change, while keeping justice at the core. I am energized to move forward on my leadership learning journey in pursuit of this challenging and important work.

⁷ I consider awareness practice to be a practice of attuning to my internal condition and recognizing my impact on the environments and systems I exist in.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Purpose, Outcome, and Process (POP)

Intention of conversations: Relationship, assessment, understanding (in order of priority)

I aim to connect with staff to talk about Energy Justice work at the organization in order to build and strengthen relationships and broaden my understanding of the perspectives across the company. I will use these conversations to assess where the organization has been historically in this work, what our current state is (including barriers and opportunities), and where we are headed or "should" be headed. I will consider the question of how we move forward in pursuit of our mission to advance Energy Justice.

Acknowledging my position: I am interested in these conversations because I believe in the organization's mission to advance Energy Justice and because I feel that the perspectives and "buy-in" to this goal vary widely across the organization. I want to check my assumptions and gain more awareness of the organization's position.

Purpose: To establish relationships and identify key stakeholders in this work, to gain perspective and understanding, to inform next steps and identify barriers.

Outcome: Relationships with staff, a broader awareness of the history, current state, and potential future state of Energy Justice work at the organization.

Process: Discuss with colleagues, include stakeholders from different areas of the organization, share perspectives in an open and honest way, be respectful of others' opinions, listen carefully.

Invitation and introduction to each conversation: State my intention, explain my purpose, including an overview of Capstone Project, all responses will remain anonymous in my notes and report, any answers can be omitted after the fact. I plan to reflect upon my personal learning and role as a leader, I am happy to share my final report with anyone interested.

Appendix B

Conversation Questions

- How long have you worked at the organization and what is your role?
- What brought you to the organization and what excites you most about your work?
- What challenges you most in your work?
- How would you define “Energy Justice” in your own words?
- What experience do you have with energy justice work at the organization?
- The organization has a mission to advance Energy Justice, do you feel that our work has done this in the past? Do you feel that we are doing this today?
- What opportunities to do you see to us pursuing this mission?
- What barriers do you perceive to us pursuing this mission?
- Do you see a role for yourself in pursuing this mission?

Appendix C

Thriving People: A blog about energy justice, inclusion, and diversity

Welcome to the Thriving People blog. This blog has been created to help us as an organization share and consider the ways that we are living our mission through our commitments to energy justice, diversity, and inclusion. The intent of this blog is to make our commitments more visible to staff, celebrating both our successes and our ability to recognize areas where we have room to learn, grow, and improve. The hope is that the monthly posts that appear here will position our mission as a unifying and energizing force during times of considerable change for our organization and the communities we serve.

The Thriving People blog is managed by (name omitted for confidentiality) and Alayna Howard. It has no one author and is open to all staff who are passionate about sharing a story, question, or observation that relates to the organization's work in the context of energy justice, inclusion, and diversity. Authors will rotate and we anticipate that the content will evolve over time in concert with our learning.

The Thriving People blog also has a set of touchstones or principles that are intended to provide guidance to authors and readers alike as they engage with these topics, resources, and discussions. Each touchstone is posted on the intranet.

Those who are interested in authoring a post for the Thriving People blog should reach out to (name omitted for confidentiality) and Alayna – they will be provided a set of questions and prompts to help clarify their topic and develop their post. The questions and prompts can be found on the intranet. All staff are encouraged to subscribe to alerts for the blog and to comment with questions and feedback on each post.

Appendix D

Blog Touchstones/Principles

No one is an expert at this work. As we continue to learn more about ourselves and each other, our understanding of issues related to energy justice, inclusion, and diversity will naturally evolve. We're all on a personal journey in our understanding of these topics, and all are welcome to participate from wherever they're at.

Lead with curiosity... Making space for people to engage in these conversations from wherever they are starting from is critical to creating thoughtful and productive dialogue. When there is misalignment in our understanding of certain topics, an instinctual reaction might be to respond with defensiveness, judgement, condescension, or to disengage entirely. If someone contributes something you don't understand or agree with at first glance, the encouragement is to lead from a place of curiosity. Ask a clarifying question or pose an alternative perspective for others to consider – this is how rich, layered, and innovative conversations are born.

...End with accountability. Each of us deserves to be able to engage in these conversations in a way that supports our personal learning and growth. Yet sometimes we might be engaging with challenging, nuanced, and emotional content. In these conversations, generating a sense of shared accountability to the “ouch” and “oops” moments that come up can help us to give others the grace of assuming good intent while holding each other (and ourselves) accountable in moments where we unknowingly trigger pain points.

Appendix E

Blog Questions and Writing Prompts for Post Authors

- What is a recent moment in which you felt particularly connected to the mission of the organization? What were you doing? Who were you working with? What made the moment special?
- Share a question or consideration that you hope our community can engage with related to diversity and inclusion or energy justice work. If posing a question, share your initial thoughts for others to reflect on or respond to.
- How have you witnessed (either in your own work or someone else's) an intentional commitment or innovative approach to working with underserved or overburdened populations? Note: this can be an example of what another organization is doing.