Environmental Case Study
Community Group Cleans Up Chicago Industrial District: People for Community Recovery

The Lake Calumet Industrial District on Chicago's far South Side is an environmental disaster area. A heavily industrialized center of steel mills, oil refineries, railroad yards, coke ovens, factories, and waste disposal facilities, much of the site is now a marshy wasteland of landfills, toxic waste lagoons, and slag dumps, around a system of artificial ship channels.

At the southwest corner of this degraded district sits Altgeld Gardens, a low-income public housing project built in the late 1940s by the Chicago Housing Authority. The 2000 units of "The Gardens" or "The Projects," as they are called by the largely minority residents, are low-rise rowhouses, many of which are vacant or in poor repair. But residents of Altgeld Gardens are doing something about their neighborhood. People for Community Recovery (PCR) is a grassroots citizen's group organized to work for a clean environment, better schools, decent housing, and job opportunities for the Lake Calumet neighborhood.

PCR was founded in 1982 by Mrs. Hazel Johnson, an Altgeld Gardens resident whose husband died from cancer that may have been pollution-related. PCR has worked to clean up more than two dozen waste sites and contaminated properties in their immediate vicinity. Often this means challenging authorities to follow established rules and enforce existing statutes. Public protests, leafleting, and community meetings have been effective in public education about the dangers of toxic wastes and have helped gain public support for cleanup projects.

PCR's efforts successfully blocked construction of new garbage and hazardous waste landfills, transfer stations, and incinerators in the Lake Calumet district. Pollution prevention programs have been established at plants still in operation. And PCR helped set up a community monitoring program to stop illegal dumping and to review toxic inventory data from local companies.

Education is an important priority for PCR. An environmental education center administered by community members organizes workshops, seminars, fact sheets, and outreach for citizens and local businesses. A public health education and screening program has been set up to improve community health. Partnerships have been established with nearby Chicago State University to provide technical assistance and training in environmental issues.

PCR also works on economic development. Environmentally responsible products and services are now available to residents. Jobs that are being created as "green" businesses are brought into the community. Wherever possible local people and minority contractors from the area are hired to clean up waste sites and restore abandoned buildings. Job training for youth and adults as well as retraining for displaced workers is a high priority. Funding for these projects has come from fines levied on companies for illegal dumping.

PCR and Mrs. Johnson have received many awards for their fight against environmental racism and despair. In 1992, PCR was the recipient of the President's Environmental and Conservation Challenge Award. PCR is the only African-American grassroots organization in the country to receive this prestigious award.

Although Altgeld Gardens is far from clean, much progress has been made. Perhaps the most important accomplishment is community education and empowerment. Residents have learned how and why they need to work together to improve their living conditions. Could these same lessons be useful in your city or community? What could you do to help improve urban environments where you live?
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Ethical Considerations

Is the proximity of low-income housing and industrial waste dumps evidence for environmental injustice or merely a question of economics? Most residents of Altgeld Gardens are racial minorities; does that make this an example of environmental racism? What evidence would you need to decide these questions? Is a clean, safe environment a basic human right or something that needs to be earned?