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“You Need to Move Beyond Surviving to Thriving”: A Conversation with Mustafa Ali

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Before he resigned in March as assistant associate administrator for environmental justice at the Environmental Protection Agency, Mustafa Ali was not a household name. He received virtually no national press during his 24 years of holding the White House and 17

federal agencies accountable for embedding environmental justice into policy making. Under a 1994 executive order issued by President Clinton, every agency was supposed to identify and address “disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs on people of color and low-income communities.

Ali did that work under both the Republican administrations of George H.W Bush and George W. Bush and the Democratic administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In fact, the success he has most quickly raised in interviews after his resignation is among the most bipartisan.

Investing in community transformation

After residents in some neighborhoods in Spartanburg, South Carolina organized around cancers and other deadly and debilitating diseases that seemed connected to Superfund and Brownfield sites, the EPA gave a community group \$20,000 in 1997 as seed money to plan a healthy future.

Named ReGenesis, the organization ultimately parlayed that grant into development strategies that netted more than \$270 million for health centers, a community center, affordable housing, job training, transportation improvements and further environmental cleanups. A project that began under Clinton received a particularly big endorsement in 2004 by South Carolina’s Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. In announcing \$100,000 in fresh

EPA funding to clean up pollution from a defunct textile mill, Graham said, “Revitalizing these sites and converting them to commercially viable properties is a great investment in future economic development. In addition, it provides for a cleaner environment and eliminates public health risks.”

Spartanburg was one of more than 1,400 community-based projects that received more than \$24 million of seed funding during Ali’s tenure. From watershed pollution to resiliency to sea level rise, from toxic dumps and dust to urban gardens, from the impacts of concentrated animal feeding operations to chemical exposure in nail salons, Ali said his mission was to make sure that the predominant and final voice in solutions came from within communities.

Success stories across the nation

In a recent interview at the Hip Hop Caucus in Washington D.C., where he is now a senior vice president of climate, environmental justice and community revitalization, Ali ticked off many places where small and large EPA investments made a difference.

- There is Bayview, Virginia, where impoverished residents, most of whom had no indoor plumbing into the 1990s, rejected a prison in favor of housing and retail development.
- There is Turkey Creek, Mississippi, a town founded by emancipated slaves, which is reviving its watershed from pollution and development.

- There is a neighborhood in Kansas City, Missouri, where residents lowered crime as they turned a brownfield into affordable housing and organized children to care about their neighborhood by picking up litter.
- There is the Environmental Health Coalition in San Diego, which is trying to reduce diesel emissions from waterfront shipping operations to adjoining low-income communities.
- There are the efforts on Chicago's West Side by the Bethel New Life development corporation to assure adequate transportation and commercial development, affordable housing and community services around its train station.
- And there are the efforts by the Green Door Initiative in Detroit to promote environmental literacy among the young, environmental restoration, community health and green job training.

Speaking specifically of Green Door Initiative's president, but in a sense for all the projects across the nation, Ali said, "Donele Wilkins has one of the most successful worker training programs in the country, working with returning vets and people returning to society (from incarceration). They're finding traction with green jobs and hazardous abatement in housing. It's a powerful thing to see, by putting pieces together in a holistic strategy."

Devastating cuts

Ali resigned because his holistic vision for EPA is being ripped apart by the Trump administration and EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt. To be sure, there was less overall support for the EPA under prior Republican administrations, but Ali said “There was always a glimmer of hope to keep you moving. Even if there were less resources, there was always an opportunity to build.”

But now, the White House wants to completely eliminate the office of environmental justice as part of rolling back regulations for big businesses that want minimal, if any, pollution controls. Parallel to that, Ali said the massive proposed cuts to basic science in many federal agencies, from toxics to climate change, will have “a devastating effect” on the very populations who need science the most.

“For our most vulnerable communities, having authentic science is extremely important because for years folks had been trying to relay the impacts that were happening inside of their communities,” Ali said. “Folks would say, ‘Well we got to have the science to prove it,’ even though Ms Johnson says, ‘I’ve been living here for 60 years, and these health impacts were not happening before. We’ve been eating the same food for the last 60 years, but all of a sudden when this plant incinerator came in we have these new incidents of these rare diseases.’

“So science is important, but it has to be authentic science in that sense that it is listening to what folks are sharing and then helping to validate whether that is or is not true.”

Ali said that if science cuts occur as proposed, it will be easy

for cynical politicians to manipulate policy “because you don’t have the science to back it up . . . It’s a very dangerous thing to try to delegitimize science or to eliminate science. It will have impacts on our minority academic institutions, where our next scientific minds are coming from. As you eliminate those opportunities for those young scientists and engineers to do fellowships and internships in the various agencies and departments, you are limiting their opportunities to a brighter future.”

Disempowering communities

That is such a dire scenario, I asked Ali why he thought the White House might be so threatened by the concept of environmental justice. He answered:

“When areas start to become revitalized, expectations are raised and people begin to have hope again. And with that hope they begin to demand certain things. Better lives mean more access to cleaner jobs. When those kinds of changes happen, people can no longer control folks in those communities.

“They’re no longer focusing on just surviving, they’re focusing on a brighter future. Certain dynamics no longer are allowed to play out. They do not have liquor stores on every corner. They do not allow certain behaviors from law enforcement. In other certain neighborhoods you don’t see pay day loans or lack of access to supermarkets. There is a dynamic that expectation demands investment in their communities. They are more engaged in the political system.

“If you want to keep people down, don’t clean up their communities. Don’t allow them to engage in the process. So I want a question to be asked. Do you want these communities to be empowered?”

The short answer would appear to be no. But Ali, who grew up in coal country in West Virginia, said that with America’s growing disparities assumptions that environmental justice is an entitlement for low-income people of color are rapidly falling apart. “The interesting dynamic,” he said, “is that this assault is happening on vulnerable communities regardless of color. It is happening in low-income white communities in the Rust Belt, out West, Gulf Coast, Appalachia.

“I was just back home and talking to folks who are saying, “I’m not sure I made the right decision based on what I’m seeing being rolled out.”

“A cultural shift” at the grassroots level

Saying that just about everything the Trump administration is rolling out appears to be “deconstructing the safety nets,” Ali said, “Everything could be undone. It would be a mistake. When you talk about Making America Great Again, you need to move beyond surviving to thriving. If that’s one of your goals, you should be focused on environmental justice. If you want more people to get sick or die, if you want to place a greater burden on our health care system, then you will not give serious considerations to the lessons learned by environmental justice.”

With the current EPA seeming uninterested in those lessons, Ali has taken his efforts to the Hip Hop Caucus where he hopes to continue his grassroots work. “We should be in the barbershops and beauty shops talking about these economic opportunities (from green jobs and revitalizing communities), and when it becomes part of community conversation then it becomes part of political conversation. If influencers like Drake, Jay Z, Beyonce, Nicki Minaj and Rhianna start to have a conversation about these issues then people say, ‘Let me check this out.’

“What we’re talking about is a cultural shift. People are looking for a better way to invest their energy. From Katrina to BP to Flint to Standing Rock, those issues have drawn attention to the negative impacts (of environmental injustice) and when we don’t address them these are the consequences. There is now beginning to be a refocusing on the positive aspects of our communities, revitalizing communities. We want to move vulnerable communities from surviving to thriving and leverage real change. Because of the new administration and its lack of focus supporting communities, there is no better time than now for that to happen.”

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