Converging political ecology and environmental justice disciplines for more effective civil society actions against macro-economic risks: the case of South Africa

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Abstract: This paper explores the potential to converge the theory of political ecology with the environmental justice discipline as means to promote more effective civil society actions against macro-economic risks, whilst analysing the case of South Africa. Such a convergence could result in mutual benefit for both arenas that already share a commitment towards justice. Whilst political ecology has focused on theoretical perspectives, which are mostly applied in rural areas, and examined justice in a larger macro-economic framework, environmental justice has been confined to an empirical focus at a local urban level, which is unable to link local struggles to larger political economic frameworks. Additionally, both arenas generally view civil society as coherent entities that act against the state and industry. Both disciplines should re-evaluate geographic scales and reconfigure romanticised understandings of civil society actions in order to attain justice.

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1   Introduction

It is becoming increasingly evident that in countries that have strongly engaged with and implemented free market economies with limited regulations and controls on inflows of capital (Ostry et al., 2016), citizens have generally become dissatisfied with emerging macro-economic risks (i.e., social and environmental risks)[1], which impact their environments and health (Temper et al., 2015; Bell, 2014; Leonard, 2014). Even the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its 2016 World Economic Outlook report, notes that neoliberalism (i.e., a model that transfers control of economic factors to the private sector and promotes deregulation of the economic sector) has not necessarily been successful. Neoliberalism has actually increased inequality and has not achieved the necessary economic gains, with low-income developing countries witnessing a sharp economic downturn, especially in 2015 (IMF, 2016). Dagkas and Tsoukala (2011) note that under neoliberalism, in Africa as in Latin America, the welfare state has generally become debilitated and has left the social security of its citizens to the free market, which focuses on securing profits whilst proliferating macroeconomic risks. However, Ferguson (2009) does note that the term 'neoliberalism' can be used in a variety of partly overlapping and contradictory ways. For example, dominant groups can use neoliberal arguments to carry out class projects to enrich holders of capital, leading to inequality. Thus, usage of the term neoliberalism can be applied to diverse political projects and social norms with close attention being paid to particular techniques. However, in spite of these debates, this paper focuses on macro-economic risks that are caused by neoliberal frameworks, and how combining the disciplines of political ecology and environmental justice may be used (especially by local civil society)[2] to better address such risks. For South Africa, specifically, the country remains an unequal nation, especially if we take into account its GDP.[3] This is largely owing to the African National Congress (ANC) elected government, which, after a first period of socially-oriented economic policy, began to engage in neoliberal ideology. This has increased macroeconomic risks for citizens (Ballard et al., 2005; Bond, 2005; Barchiesi, 2004), whilst continuing industrial revolution and Apartheid legacy environmental and social risks (Leonard, 2011). Many poor households still have unsatisfactory access to education, healthcare, energy, clean water and waste services (Gelb, 2003; Hoogeveen and Ozler, 2005), while they are also exposed to polluting industrial sites (Leonard and Pelling, 2010a; Leonard, 2014). The country has failed, since 1990, to achieve its millennium development goals (MDGs) (i.e., primary education, reduced child mortality, improvements in maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases) (Gelb, 2003). Due to inequality, Hoogeveen and Ozler (2005) note that approximately 1.8% (2.3 million) more South Africans lived on less than 1 US$/day in 2000, than in 1995.

These inequalities suggest that an increasing vulnerable poor are exposed to macro-economic risks. Neoliberalism comes with social and ecological costs such as higher pollution, resource exploitation, increasing inequality between the rich and the poor and less protection for workers. Low-income communities generally bear the external social and environmental costs of industrial production processes (Agyeman et al., 2003; Rhodes, 2003). For example, Naicker et al. (2003) note that environmental injustices that surround mining pollution continues post-1994 to impact negatively on people and the environment, especially in areas, which are situated next to mining operations. According to Patel (2000), environmental justice in South Africa demands

that poor communities do not bear the external costs of industrial production processes and over-consumption by the rich.

In addition to the production of macroeconomic risks, Agyeman et al. (2002) note that, generally, neoliberalism and market forces also erode civil society formations and movements for social and environmental justice, globally. According to Aime (2008), referring to Africa, neoliberalism has not resulted in greater social, political or economic well-being, nor has it promoted the formation of strong social movements. Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014) argue that neo-liberalisation is widening environmental injustices, making it difficult for minority groups to have equal access to good quality environmental resources, and for procedural quality in decision making. Dagkas and Tsoukala (2011) further note that neoliberalism discourages the participation of civil society in development processes, with Ferguson (2011) highlighting that the usual left position identifies neoliberalism as the enemy of the state. However, although civil society does have the potential to act against macroeconomic risks, civil society actions can also be uncoordinated and fragmented, thus limiting the potential to achieve justice for marginalised groups (Leonard and Pelling, 2010a, 2010b; Leonard, 2012). For example, according to Madlingozi (2007), in South Africa in particular, most revolts against social injustices such as those regarding housing, land and water, have been acts of mobilisation by community organisations, while some have been uncoordinated violent revolts by poor communities against macroeconomic risks. This has not effectively assisted in civil society better engaging to challenge such risks. Sikor and Newell (2014) also note that neoliberal frameworks reconfigure the geographies of environmental justice. Bond (2015) highlights that failing to offer critical perspectives on civil society against neoliberal forces, is an intellectual flaw. Thus, there is a need to reflect within civil society to explore internal contradictions (as opposed to solely neoliberalism as the enemy) and to address these (Leonard, 2014).

2 Methodology and structure of the article

Within the above context, this paper seeks to firstly explore the potential to converge the theory of political ecology with that of the environmental justice discipline as means to better understand, aid and encourage more effective civil society actions against macro-economic risks (i.e., social and environmental injustices). The value of such a convergence could result in common benefits for both arenas (more so for environmental justice), which already share a commitment towards justice. This paper suggests that both disciplines should re-evaluate geographic scales and be inclusive of developing country settings, including romanticised notions of civil society coherence. While political ecology has generally focused on theoretical perspectives and examined justice in a larger macro-economic framework, environmental justice has generally been confined to an urban empirical focus at a local level (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Chitewere, 2010) and has been unable to link local struggles to larger political economic frameworks (Elvers et al., 2008). According to Temper et al. (2015), there is a need for environmental justice studies to, therefore, move beyond isolated case approaches and to move towards a wider enquiry into political, power relations and socio-metabolic processes, which surround injustices (that political ecology can assist with). But would this be possible in divergent geographic settings and for an upper-middle income country such as

South Africa? This paper advocates that a merger between political ecology and environmental justice would allow for the latter discipline to widen its enquiry beyond localities. Secondly, this article also seeks to further promote the value of political ecology and environmental justice via a reconfiguration of understandings of civil society's coherent actions, especially in the South.

In the proceeding sections, the paper briefly explores the theories of political ecology and environmental justice, before examining the importance of a convergence between political ecology and environmental justice, and the need for both disciplines to re-evaluate geographic scales. The paper then contests the conception in both disciplines of civil society as a coherent entity and the need to re-orientate romanticised notions of civil society coherence. For the latter, this paper explores empirical evidence and draws on interviews and correspondence, which the author conducted with a range of influential representatives in order to explore macro-economic risks and how civil society has organised to challenge the state and industry against environmental injustices. These include informants that were interviewed in Johannesburg and Dakar, Senegal in 2011, in Dullstroom, Mpumalanga in 2014 and in St. Lucia, KwaZulu-Natal in 2016. The Johannesburg 2011 informants were interviewed as part of a larger study, which examined the potential for bridging social and environmental risks in South Africa. The author also travelled to Dakar, Senegal in 2011 for the World Social Forum (WSF) and conducted fieldwork with civil society organisations to understand how they projected grassroots concerns about macroeconomic risks within communities, as well as at the WSF. In Dullstroom, the author interviewed various social actors (i.e., land-owners, farmers, local youth organisations, community leaders/representatives, external environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public legal institutions, the mining industry and local/provincial government departments) to understand governance issues and civil society opposition to mining for environmental justice. Similarly, for the St. Lucia interviews, the author also interviewed various social actors (i.e., local residents, local leaders, external environmental NGOs and a public legal institution) to understand civil society opposition to mining development and its impacts on the Ocilwane community members that reside next to the world famous Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Game Reserve. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from all informants. This method allowed flexibility in terms of how interviewees answered questions. A purposive sampling design entailed personal judgement as to who was likely to provide the best information for the research. A snowballing technique was also used, as interviewees referred the author to other informants. However, many informants from various sectors (civil society, government and industry) could not be secured for interviews (too numerous to mention here) in spite of several attempts to contact them. Selected informants were used for this paper.

The cases that were explored focused on the mining sector in South Africa, and are mainly from rural areas. Thus, this paper aims to link environmental justice with political ecology by focusing on mainly rural empirical evidence and with the latter assisting in exploring the cause of injustices.

3   Examining political ecology and environmental justice frameworks

Before exploring arguments for the convergence of political ecology and environmental justice, and the need for both disciplines to also re-evaluate geographic settings to

varying degrees, as well as their stance on civil society coherence against injustices, it is important to briefly discuss these concepts. There are diverse understandings of both political ecology and environmental justice, and this article does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of these positions. Rather, it presents brief accounts of both concepts as a means to shed light on the disciplines. According to Lee (2009) and Bryant and Baily (1997), political ecology is the study of conflicting social groups (i.e., civil society, the state and industry) with different political powers projected onto a specific environment. Paulson et al. (2003) argue that associations between nature and society are the focal themes in political ecology, and hence, assume an interdisciplinary approach. Political ecology seeks to understand the difficult relations between nature and society through a cautious investigation of systems of access and control over resources and their consequences for environmental health and sustainable livelihoods. However, Lee (2009) suggests a broader understanding of political ecology as a study of nature/environment relations and, which criticises capitalist power over marginalised regions, peoples, and environments. Political ecology thus explores power relations between social actors and attempts to investigate the cause of injustices, which this paper addresses, in particular using the lens of political ecology.

Similar to political ecology, environmental justice is variously understood by its subject of study, political orientation and mode of analysis (Agyeman and Evans, 2004). Bell (2014) contends that environmental justice is about exposing the injustice that occurs when the distribution of goods is uneven for different socioeconomic groups. Dobson (1998) states that environmental justice poses questions to determine why poor people live in poor environments. Chitewere (2010) notes that environmental justice is about creating healthy communities for low income communities and communities of colour. Bullard (1994) describes environmental justice as not being anchored in scientific argument, but rather rests on the ethical investigation of environmental decision-making. McDonald (2002) understands environmental justice as incorporating environmental issues into the wider intellectual and institutional framework of human rights and democratic accountability. For Rhodes (2003), environmental justice means non-racial discrimination in environmental policymaking and enforcement, and non-deliberate targeting of specific ethnic communities for the location of environmental risks. However, Melosi (2000) suggests that environmental justice is broader in scope than environmental equity, emphasising the right to a safe and healthy environment for all people. Camacho (1998) postulates that environmental justice is all-encompassing since environmental concerns are not separate from housing, employment, health and education issues. However, these various definitions of environmental justice are complementary. As Agyeman et al. (2003) note, sustainability is not simply an environmental concern, but one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, as well as economic opportunity are integrally connected to environmental concerns. Social dimensions are important, since an unjust society is unlikely to be sustainable in environmental or economic terms (Agyeman et al., 2002). Thus, for the purpose of this research paper, the concept of environmental justice is an inclusive and flexible approach towards attaining justice, especially at a local, and to some extent, national level.

As mentioned above, environmental justice has mainly been confined to an urban focus, with rural dimensions of environmental justice generally confined to the background. Although many of the early environmental justice movement battlegrounds in the US took place in rural communities (i.e., Warren County, North Carolina and

Kettleman City, California), rural areas have not been at the centre of environmental justice studies, with the discipline shifting its attention away from rural spaces towards urban centres (Pellow, 2016). As a United Nations (2014) report notes, 54% of the world's population lives in urban areas, a proportion that is expected to increase to 66% by 2050. It is not surprising then that environmental justice struggles have mainly been confined to urban settings, hence, Wilson (2015) notes that rapid urbanisation brings about risks of profound social instability, risks to critical infrastructure, potential water crises and potential for the devastating spread of disease.

Although both political ecology and environmental justice address issues of justice, can the disciplines work jointly to more robustly address macroeconomic risks? Where are there specific commonalities and areas of divergence, and can these dissimilarities be reinforced for mutual cohesion, if any? These issues are addressed below.

4   Political ecology, environmental justice commonality and divergence – a need to re-evaluate geographic settings

Swyngedouw and Heynen (2003) and Chitewere (2010) note that, as opposed to the broad theoretical perspective employed by political ecologists, environmental justice has lacked strong theoretical frameworks owing to its empirical emphasis. Hence, the latter has been confined to a local level and has not firmly examined justice issues in a larger political economic framework. It thus misses the links that make environmental injustices integral to the functioning of a capitalist political-economic system (Temper et al., 2015; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003). For example, the US has been the pioneers of an environmental justice movement. However, the movement has missed the opportunity to convincingly anchor its claims within an overarching framework of social discrimination as opposed to its distinct feature of racial discrimination. This has reflected a narrow understanding of justice, restricted to ethnic minorities, which has seldom been recognised as a pivotal problem in (post-apartheid South Africa and) most European societies (Elvers et al., 2008), where the determination is largely owing to socio-economics and inequality (Geibler and Kleinschmit, 2010). In addition, struggles and actions in the US have always been addressed in relation to environmental quality within local neighbourhoods, failing to link isolated struggles (Elvers et al., 2008). Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014) note that environmental justice is generally symptomatically silent about ways in which political forms of power intertwine with the particular modalities by which nature is implicated in processes of capital circulation and accumulation. For South Africa, specifically, there is a lack of a coherent ideological framework to bring together the diversity of environmental struggles (Cock, 2004), since there are too many underlying methodological and ideological differences in environmental thought to allow for any neat conceptualisation of environmental justice (McDonald, 2002).

So how can political ecology assist local communities, which are fighting environmental injustices, to move beyond local arenas and link struggles and tackle risks in a broader context? According to Temper et al. (2015), local political ecologies are becoming increasingly transnational and interlinked across space. Lee (2009) and Chitewere (2010) similarly note that the value of political ecology is that it includes geographical scales and multi-spatial scales of analysis that are simultaneously local, regional, and global, with a social scale that ranges from individuals to larger social

groups, thus making connections beyond mere localities. Mutz et al. (2002) argue that since the environmental justice movement has been driven largely by pragmatic activism, especially at a local level, there has not been a need to theorise struggles. However, with an increasing global environment and decisions at a macro-level impacting on local environments (as discussed above), there is a need for environmental justice to move beyond localities. For example, as noted above, the post-apartheid South African Government, which engages in neoliberalism (i.e., market forces) and resultant industrial expansion, has continued to see the sustained unequal and geographical distribution of social and environmental risks. Peter Ardene (personal interview, Director at Dullstroom Trout Farm, 3 October 2013) noted the following in respect of government pushing mining development for economic development (even at the expense of the environment):

> "The ANC government is desperate for the taxation on the mines and the income from mining to develop the country to pay for social welfare, which is a huge burden on South Africa… one just only has to look around and see what mining has done to Mpumalanga, particularly an opencast coal mine."

By civil society and social movements focusing on the root cause of local injustices (i.e., macro-economic frameworks) and holding national government to account, this may be a useful way for environmental justice struggles to move beyond localities via political ecology. However, although it may be useful for environmental justice to address the root cause of social and environmental risks, this may not be so easy (especially in the global South), and may depend on geographic settings (discussed below for South Africa). Walker (2006) contends that there is a need to explore the varied geographies of environmental justice by examining the evolution and application of the concept outside of the narrow confines of the western liberal notions of environment and justice. Overcoming the dichotomy between theoretical political ecology and the pragmatic environmental justice arena is a way that the two disciplines can reconcile, with environmental justice borrowing its theoretical framework from political ecology (Lee, 2009). The environmental justice discipline should also learn from political ecology and ask important questions of who benefits and who loses, how multiple power relations are constructed, and how environmental unjust conditions are produced and maintained (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003). Continuing environmental injustice in the new South African democracy is emphasised by Mariette Lieferlink (personal interview, Chief Executive Officer, Federation for a Sustainable Environment, 18 May 2011) for mining development. However, Lieferlink also adds that corruption and uneven power relations in government have also contributed to increased risks owing to poor enforcement:

> "Mining commenced in 1886 and it had the support of the apartheid government, regrettably this has not changed. With our new democracy we find that politicians are now eager to also exploit prospecting mining resources or rights. We find for example in Mpumalanga there are former ministers husbands [who own mines and] who are mining without water use licences in wetlands and in rivers. So the practice of the collusion between mines and government it appears is perpetuated."

The above suggests that the production of risks is also owing to ineffective governance structures and corruption in government, as well as neoliberalism as a contributory factor. Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014) state that the urbanisation of nature is extensively

multi-scalar and spatially networked with multi-level governance arrangements, with each expressing particular power relations and geometries and where struggles for the control of ecological goods are fought over. Nevertheless, Chitewere (2010) notes that linking environmental justice with political ecology will result in the interconnectedness of inequality and its origins, which both disciplines explore. Although environmental justice can benefit from a theoretical political ecology model to contextualise environmental injustice within broader neoliberal economic policies that privilege certain groups over others, environmental justice adds to political ecology a wealth of empirical-based studies on political and economic marginalisation, which produce and reinforce environmental inequality, including the idea that race and class should be scrutinised in environmental discussions. This is discussed further below for the case of Dullstroom.

However, if political ecology should effectively assist environmental justice to move beyond localities, it would also be required to expand its geographic scale from the rural to more robustly, and hence include urban environments. This is also owing to environmental justice struggles that are located mostly in urban environments. Although political ecology has recently progressed outside of the concentration on rural settings in the global South to involve the study of society – environment interactions in urban contexts (the subfield of political ecology), research has mostly involved natural resources, with limited applicability to illuminate urban industrial risks (Veron, 2006; Schubert, 2005). Since the 1980s, literature has devoted attention mostly to the rural farming region (Bryant and Jarosz, 2004; Neumann, 2005), and has concentrated on populace progression (Bryant, 1997), poverty and poor peasants (Peet and Watts, 2004), as well as biodiversity and indigenous knowledge (Escobar, 1999). This is nevertheless an evolving political ecology, which explores the interconnected processes within the urbanisation progression as one of the forces behind environmental issues and a place where socio-environmental problems are experienced more acutely (see Heynen et al., 2006). Swyngedouw and Kaika (2014), in reference to the discourse of urban environments, mention that new research must ask what issues and whose voices are being marginalised, and how these discourses are competing with, altering and being altered by alternative discourses. Thus, political ecology itself requires increased consideration of urban environments (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). As noted above by Lee (2009), the importance of political ecology is that it explores geographical scales that are simultaneously local, regional, and global, with a social scale that ranges from individuals to larger social groups, thus making connections beyond mere localities. Thus, whilst environmental justice should expand beyond localities within communities, political ecology should expand to more robustly include urban environments as part of its analysis. This enhancement of political ecology and convergence between political ecology and environmental justice can then assist environmental justice to better address its difficulty of moving beyond localities, whilst also uncovering power relations between various social actors.

5   Political ecology and environmental justice reimaging coherent civil society political agendas

Both political ecology and environmental justice have viewed neo-liberalism as the common enemy, proliferating injustice in society, especially against marginalised groups. The author's point of view is that such a focus has thus blinded both disciplines to

critically reflect on civil society's internal mechanisms to re-orientate and, therefore, more effectively advance civil society actions against injustices (including expanding beyond localities).

5.1 Environmental justice and civil society

Environmental justice literature has limitedly explored the contestation between civil society actors that may hinder advancement to attain justice, although some examples of empirical literature on civil society contestation within South Africa have emerged in recent years (see for example, Leonard and Pelling, 2010a, 2010b; Leonard, 2011, 2013; Sinwell, 2011, 2010). Chance (2015) notes that different political conditions during and after Apartheid in South Africa influenced cohesion within and between groups in historically race-based communities. Many citizens have been dissatisfied with the slow pace of socio-economic transformation, and have expressed frustration through urban unrest actions, which ranged from street protests to labour strikes to xenophobic attacks. Thus, owing to the high unemployment rate in South Africa, people especially in marginalised areas, have focused on securing basic needs and have not necessarily engaged in broader environmental justice struggles. This has also made it difficult for marginalised local communities to expand environmental justice issues beyond localities to broader macro-economic processes. Tristen Taylor (personal interview, former project coordinator of the Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Project, Earthlife Africa Johannesburg, 29 May 2011), referring to the general fragmentation of South African civil society, had the following to say:

> "…there's been no move to impose a monolithic environmental justice movement [as] South African civil society is very fractured or fragmented and often spends a lot of time fighting with itself…[also] people are struggling for basic needs."

5.2 Civil society's incoherent actions and environmental justice in Dullstroom

A local level example of civil society incoherence against environmental justice owing to poverty can be found in Dullstroom, which is a popular natural tourism destination that is located about 288 kilometres outside of the city of Johannesburg. The area is a popular fly-fishing tourist destination, and is well known for its natural environment, which includes important fauna and flora, as well as protected areas. The area has become under threat from an increased number of small scale coal mining applications. Despite mining opposition from some local community members, the national government is approving mining development in the area (Legal Brief Africa, 2009). Regarding unemployment and poverty in the Dullstroom Township, Frans Krige (Interview, 5 October 2013), Environmental Scientist at the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Authority (MTPA), which is a public entity that was established to provide for the sustainable management and promotion of tourism and nature conservation, and to ensure the sustainable utilisation of natural resources, noted:

> "Currently, with the economics in South Africa…a lot of people are unemployed…they don't think about things like aesthetical values and sense of place, they think about survival, so for those guys if you offer them jobs now and mining here in the middle of Dullstroom they will take it…some of them

> have got families that are starving, so we can understand that but unfortunately the mining companies abuse that situation for their own [agenda]…"

This suggests that owing to poverty, local community members may be forced to indirectly support the neoliberal system via mining. The lack of civil society coherence, also across class and race against environmental justice, has been observed in the Mpumalanga area against mining development. For example, on the 26 March 2013, Msobo Coal held a public meeting to discuss its intention to mine inside the Chrissiesmeer biodiversity site. The Chrissiesmeer biodiversity site is located on the Mpumalanga Highveld, which is currently a hotspot for opencast mining activities that are characterised by encroachment on wetlands. Local farmers, businesspersons and various NGOs strongly objected to the planned mine, claiming massive job losses in farming and the growing tourism industry. Some threatened with litigation and criminal proceedings if Msobo proceeded with mining. Conversely, African township residents in the Chrissiesmeer area disrupted the meeting and complained that their concerns were not considered and that mining should proceed to ensure employment generation, even at the expense of environmental destruction (Fuls, 2013). Threats to livelihood might also elicit mobilisation, motivated as a result of losses that might arise when livelihoods are disarticulated, as livelihoods begin a function of assets and structures, and is a source of subsistence and income (Bebbington et al., 2008) (being more the case for non-African residents in Dullstroom). Environmental conflicts are based on the overlap of different geographies that imply different notions of the relationship between humans and their environment, which result in different spatial practices. Joshua Mungi (Interview, 4th October 2013), Leader of the Dullstroom Sakhelwe Youth Unemployment organisation, alluded to the divergent perceptions of tourism employment in Dullstroom and the township's need to support mining development in spite of potential risks and destruction to the Dullstroom environment:

> "…even though tourism is uplifting…the people [White employers] don't pay…well. It is not enough for the house…There is no standard [for tourism wages]…[also] they just pay you cash … and when you die…there are no benefits…[the Black township needs] housing and medical aid and the skills…The owner himself must uplift his own workers…you cannot earn nowadays 50 bucks…for a whole day, [pushing] a wheelbarrow…"

Due to the perceived lack of tourism jobs and associated benefits, the township organised a march against those White residents who oppose mining development, further limiting collective actions across class and race lines. According to Peter Claire (Interview, 7 October 2013, Chairperson of the Dullstroom Ratepayers Association), the formation of the Sakhelwe Youth Unemployment organisation led to "…almost having riots in town because they were saying, we don't care about [fly] fishing and all the rest of it we want jobs…". The above empirical evidence also alludes to the complexity of engaging in coherent local community struggles, especially across class and race lines in a post-Apartheid South African democracy. Thus, it is not simply a matter of local opposition against environmental injustices or local communities engaging with the state and industry to address inadequate macro-economic policies and power structures, which have implications at local level (i.e., also political ecology discussed below).

5.3   Political ecology and civil society

Political ecology theory has generally viewed civil society as a coherent entity, which acts against the state and industry with united political agendas, and is driven by coherent populist political agendas (Paulson et al., 2003) while ignoring links with livelihood struggles and class conflict (Forsyth, 2004). According to Leonard (2012), political ecology has limitedly explored the divergent perceptions of environmental risks for different civil society groupings (as in the case of Dullstroom above). The void obstructs enhanced understanding of Southern civil society, in which differentiated perceptions and discourses influence the in/coherence of civil society actions, and contextualise other geographic urban localities. Brown and Purcell (2005), therefore, highlight the 'local trap' in political ecology's thin assumption that action at a local level will yield the required outcomes.

5.3.1   Political ecology and community micro politics in Ocilwane

Although Lee (2009) notes the value of political ecology in considering geographical scales that are simultaneously local, regional, and global, thus making connections beyond just localities, Neumann (2005) highlights that the field has also marginally explored the micro politics within communities and everyday forms of resistance, which shape the political ecology of localities. The traditional focus has been on social movements and struggles of poor people against alliances of industry and state capitalist developments (Forsyth, 2004; Bryant and Jarosz, 2004). Thus, environmental justice can add a wealth of empirical investigation to political ecology at a local level, with political ecology assisting with exploring multi-scalar power relationships.

Thus, in addition to incoherent actions within local communities across class and race lines (discussed above), there has also been other instances of fragmentation within local communities in rural areas (i.e., micro politics within communities). Referring to mining development in KwaZulu-Natal, conducted by mining company Ibutho Coal, the proposed anthracite 'Fuleni' coal mine is being targeted for establishment on the south-eastern border of the world famous Hluhluwe-iMfolozi game reserve in Zululand. Although there has been strong local community opposition to the mining, Billy Mzokhona Mnqondo, Ocilwane community activist, and leader of the anti-mining struggle (personal interview, 29 June 2016), noted divisions within the African community between local residents and some traditional leaders over mining development, and stated the following:

> "I said they [traditional leaders] can't just do that [allow coal mining in our area] without our consent…that's where the problem started then I got some threats from our traditional leaders to say who am I to ask those questions because they are the owners of the place …I said no you don't own the place…wherever we build our houses we own it so you can't tell us what to do…we blacks we have cultures and we respect our families and so if you bury someone at a place you must let them rest in peace there and so if someone says they are gonna come and dig them up because they looking for coal … that's something else…and no one can come and tell us what to do in our own

> place…our Chief's son was supporting the Ibutho Coal Mine Company…Some [community members] said it seems like we don't have a chief because he is supposed to be here defending us… [but] the chief himself…said we mustn't trust his son because he could see that he is a snake…"

Divisions between local residents and traditional authorities, therefore, made it more difficult to oppose mining development in the area for environmental justice. Phila Ndimande, Ocilwane resident and community activist (Personal interview, 29 June 2016), mentioned difficulties that they face in fighting mining development owing to internal conflicts within the community among certain traditional authorities.

> "So his [Chief's] son and the board of councils are for the mine to carry on. They are the ones who are making it so difficult for us to fight this battle because the first time we met them they were already moving with the mining company group…and now we had to fight against them and the mining company so they made it so difficult for us…"

5.4   Failure to link up local struggles: a question of leadership

Within the above context, Peet and Watts (2004) question how populist language articulates between the people and those who rule. Although there have been attempts in South Africa to connect local struggles to broader geographic scales and make connections beyond localities, these have largely been unsuccessful. For example, middle-class activists had more hold on the direction of the 2011 WSF, as leaders did not include the presence and concerns of local community members who are exposed to environmental injustices (Leonard, 2011, 2014). The 2011 WSF exhibited class and gender imbalances. Desmond D'Sa (personal communication, February 9, 2011), leader of the urban community-based organisation, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA), noted the urgent need to mobilise local communities:

> "Civil society is fragmented and because of the fragmentation, it leads to individuals taking the lead […] they are accountable to nobody […] people [grassroots] taking the lead […] does not happen […] more women need to be at the forefront."

Generally, leaders did not engage in joint actions to forge collective actions between the diversity of struggles. For example, Bond (2008) highlights fragmentation amongst social and environmental issues for collective action. In mid-2007, Durban exploded with protests, informal traders against municipal restrictions (with more than 500 arrests one day alone), fishermen removed from docks by forces of gentrification, numerous community groups angry about slum conditions or pollution, students against financial exclusions and public sector trade unions in the midst of an extraordinary month-long strike for decent wages. The tragedy of that moment, and so many others, was the failure to link the activists and their causes. However, Luke Sinwell (personal interview, Senior Researcher at the South African Research Chair in Social Change, University of Johannesburg, 24 September 2011), alluded to the importance of local leaders in advancing struggles beyond localities.

> "It's often a few individuals [leaders] that direct where the movement is going and the community will often rely on one or two people to make decisions so the politics of that leader, those few leaders can be critical in determining whether or not the movement actually extends beyond its local boundaries and to something bigger."

5.5 Neo-liberalism and individualism

According to Cock (2006), the main cause of individualised struggles is a crisis in social relations and the privatisation of the public sphere owing to neo-liberal restructuring, which erodes social solidarity. As Naidoo and Veriava (2004) note, the capitalist system dismembers communities and collectives to turn to individual ways of coping under capitalism. According to Clare Ceruti (personal communication, 23 September 2011), of the South African Research Chair in the Social Change, University of Johannesburg, who is an active member of 'Keep Left' (a socialist organisation that campaigns for free basic services and a society based on need not profit), marginalised citizens face hardship and may not understand how the neoliberalism system impacts on their lives. This also has implications for how local struggles connect jointly to address macro-economic risks.

> "when you look at bases of the social movement it is very often [comprised of] unemployed people, shark dwellers and people who are not narrow minded but who's horizons are limited by the sheer stances of their life…[They] don't have much money…[and] it's not immediately obvious the problem in life is from the capitalist system…So I think that one part [is] the atomization and the other part of it is also just that big [capitalist] systems are hard to grasp."

6   Conclusions

The paper explored the potential to converge the theory of political ecology with that of the environmental justice discipline as means to understand and promote more effective civil society actions against social and environmental injustices. It was noted that a convergence would result in mutual benefit for both arenas that already share a commitment towards justice. However, it was suggested that an effective convergence would require both political ecology and environmental justice to reconsider two arenas (i.e., the need to expand geographic scales of analysis and to reconsider romanticised views of civil society coherence). Firstly, to expand geographic scales, whilst political ecology has focused on theoretical perspectives mostly in rural areas and examined justice in a larger macro-economic framework, environmental justice has generally been confined to an empirical focus at a local urban level, unable to link local struggles to larger political economic frameworks. Whilst environmental justice needs to expand beyond localities and the local level, political ecology needs to expand to more robustly include urban environments as part of its analysis. These increased considerations of geographic scales for both political ecology and environmental justice can assist in better convergence between both disciplines, and assist environmental justice to address difficulties in moving beyond localities. The importance of political ecology is that it explores geographical scales that are simultaneously local, regional, and global, involving a social scale that ranges from individuals to larger social groups, thus making connections beyond environmental justice localism, whilst also uncovering power relations between various social actors. The paper showed that government's engagement in macro-economic forces has contributed to environmental injustices at a local level and, therefore, there is a need for environmental justice activists to address the root cause of injustices. Additionally, empirical evidence noted corruption and uneven power relations in government as also contributing to increased risks owing to poor enforcement, as seen with the case of the mining sector. Environmental justice requires a political ecology that

explains the interconnectedness of the (localised) social and environmental risks experienced by marginalised groups and associated power relations, which influence injustices at a local level.

Secondly, both disciplines have generally viewed civil society as being coherent entities, which act against the state and industry with united political agendas (with political ecology extending further towards actions against neoliberal economic models). As shown in the literature, political ecology and environmental justice have been ingenuous to the internal conflicts of civil society actors to act as a homogenising entity and to effectively achieve justice. However, this paper suggests a need for both disciplines to reconfigure understandings of civil society coherent actions. There has been a failure to explore the micro-politics within communities and everyday forms of resistance. Empirical results showed fragmentation and division amongst civil societies that act against injustices. For example, Dullstroom struggles against environmental injustices, as witnessed in the local community divisions across class and race lines, whilst in St Lucia struggles against a proposed mining development saw community divisions within a specific race group. Leaders have also not been effective in assisting with coherent community actions. Thus, a convergence between political ecology and environmental justice would require both disciplines to reconsider the romanticised view on civil society coherence in order to more effectively assist civil society actions against social and environmental risks. Empirical evidence also revealed that owing to poverty, this has also not assisted civil society coherence against injustices at a local level, suggesting the need for political ecology and environmental justice to also be sensitive to Southern geographic scales. Thus, romanticised notions of civil society coherence must be analysed and addressed by political ecology and environmental justice frameworks as means to more effectively understand and assist civil society actions in order to attain justice.

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Notes

1 Risks are interpreted in a broad sense. Due to the state engaging in neoliberalism, this leads to the development of a risk society, where social risks (e.g., lack of employment, housing, water and electricity through privatisation and outsourcing), environmental risks (e.g., exposure to pollution and industries operating near marginalised communities) and political risks are distributed (unequally) to citizens who lack power and who are excluded from decision-making (Ren, 2010).

2 Although the term civil society is highly contested, the term is not examined in this paper in detail. However, in this paper, civil society refers to creating political space for marginalised groups that seek to shape the rules of specific policies and social structures that direct and hinder aspects of their social life (Leonard, 2014). Additionally, the author prefers not to make a distinction between 'organised' and 'unorganised' civil society, since Neocosmos (2009) notes that reference to 'organised' civil society reduces civil society to NGOs and/or community-based organisations (CBO's). For Neocosmos, civil society is a realm of social

and political activity, which includes those excluded by the state, and not necessarily only the organised interests of NGOs/CBOs. However, it is understandable that the marginalised may choose employment over environmental and health and safety concerns owing to poverty; nevertheless, it is up to 'organised' civil society to support them to achieve environmental justice.

3   Number 32 in GDP ranking (http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf), but number 116 in HDI ranking (= medium human development) (http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2015_human_development_report.pdf).