Dr. King died in 1968, and the Civil Rights Movement had already been a powerful national presence for well over a decade. Yet it was fourteen more years until environmental justice entered the national spotlight.

Environmental justice issues first received widespread attention in 1982 when protests erupted over the construction of a new waste disposal facility in a black community in North Carolina. In 1997, the United Church of Christ Racial Justice Commission published a report showing that hazardous waste sites were disproportionately located in black communities. In the interim, the term environmental racism was coined by the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Chavis while he was preparing to present a report to the national press. In trying to decide how to communicate the findings, he said, “it came to me – environmental racism. To me, that’s what it is.” A more systematic study came in a 1990 book by Robert Bullard, which made two key claims: that race is the predominant factor in the unequal distribution of environmental harm, and that people of color had been frozen out of the relevant decision-making.

Why the delay in the emergence of environmental justice as a cause, at a time when civil rights had long been a national issue? We can only speculate, but perhaps the reasons lay in rapidly escalating levels of frustration. Almost two decades after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, too little seemed to have changed on the ground. Within the Civil Rights movement itself, there could well have been a search for new strategies.

There may also have been frustration that the environmental laws passed in the prior decade had not translated into tangible environmental improvements for the disadvantaged. And all this frustration could only have been heightened by the timing. In 1982, the Reagan Administration was in full swing, and it was clearly no friend to either civil rights or environmental protection.

Whatever the trigger for its emergence into the limelight, environmental justice quickly developed momentum. Although President George H.W. Bush had taken some earlier steps, the foundational executive action on environmental justice was a 1994 executive order by President Clinton. The order directs each agency to address “disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations.” It’s unclear, however, whether Clinton’s order had much practical effect.

There is obvious truth to Dr. Bullard's more recent observation that "the Environmental Justice Movement is much stronger in 2021 because of new and invigorated rallying calls for racial justice with the rise of Black Lives Matter, after the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless other Black people, and the intergenerational protests during the Summer of 2020." Even before then, lead contamination in the water supply of Flint, Michigan, had brought headlines to official disregard for the welfare of black communities.

As Bullard went on to say, and as we can see in President Biden's actions since taking office, "environmental justice has been given a new sense of urgency and visibility at the highest level of government." It remains to be seen, however, to what the Biden Administration's aspirations for environmental justice will be translated into tangible results.