


# Intersection #4

## Data-driven monitoring to understand current and future environments



In recent years, tech developments have enabled communities to use technologies like **low-cost sensors and drones** to fight back against harms like polluting, deforestation, and land-grabs by fossil fuel companies, bringing hyper-local knowledge of harms – augmented with digital data – to arenas where they can hold companies to account. But these benefits need to be carefully weighed against **data privacy and surveillance risks**.

**“For communities that have experienced historical injustices and live the realities of continued injustices, the unrestricted opening of data can foster particularly significant harm.”**

**- Open Environmental Data Project<sup>01</sup>**

Environmental monitoring is also a key part of the development of so-called **‘smart cities’**. Proponents of smart cities argue that the collection of more data can lead to deeper citizen engagement and can further sustainability goals. However, this data is often collected through **opaque public-private partnerships**, and digital rights advocates raise concerns around how this data may be used to profile populations.

A number of actors are also currently proposing to use **AI** to foster sustainable land-use and water efficiency, control pollution and predict climate events – but here it’s important that AI itself become sustainable (rather than just be a tool for sustainability), and that AI be used in a ‘just’ way.

**“Artificial intelligence developed in the name of benefiting the environments is not the same thing as establishing environmentally and socially conscious AI systems.”**

**- Theodora Dryer of the AI Now Institute<sup>02</sup>**

<sup>01</sup> Open Environmental Data Project (December 2021). *Opportunity Brief: Environmental Data as a Public Good*

<sup>02</sup> Dryer, T. (April 2021). *A Digital and Green Transition Series: Will Artificial Intelligence Foster or Hamper the Green New Deal?* AI Now Institute.



## Opportunities for the digital rights space to promote just and responsible approaches to working with environmental data

There are a number of areas where important work happening across DR and EJ-CJ spaces would benefit from further support and expansion. This could include, among other things:

- Working to understand how collected data might be **shared and stewarded** in the most responsible and just way, and also leveraged most effectively for environmental and climate governance efforts
- Strengthening connections between Digital Rights and environmental **data governance** efforts
- Challenging the **data practices** of commercially driven ‘**smart**’ **environments** like smart cities and ‘living labs’
- Bringing **responsible data** considerations into ‘**AI for good**’/ ‘**AI for planet**’ and data-driven environmental, climate, and sustainability initiatives.



## Find more intersections, opportunities and recommendations in our report:

At the confluence of digital rights and climate & environmental justice – a landscape review

[engn.it/climatejusticedigitalrights](https://engn.it/climatejusticedigitalrights)



About this info sheet: In 2022 The Engine Room, in collaboration with Ford Foundation, Ariadne and Mozilla Foundation, conducted research designed to support funders in advancing work at the intersection between Digital Rights (DR) and Environmental & Climate Justice (EJ-CJ). Our findings identified six cross-cutting themes, five key intersections, and a substantial set of recommendations for those interested in supporting work in this area.



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