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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVISTS AND MAHALLA COMMITTEES: FROM HASHAR TO PARTICIPATORY ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN TASHKENT

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Abstract
The article proposes an applied framework for shifting Tashkent's environmental activism from the hashar model toward practices of participatory environmental justice. Drawing on four case studies — winter smog, the degradation of green spaces, waste landfills, and the urban heat island — the author distinguishes mobilization from participation and shows that hashar, while remaining on the lower rungs of S. Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation," depoliticizes the environmental problem by reducing it to a matter of cleanliness. Building on the right to a favorable environment enshrined in the Constitution and on state strategies for sustainable development, the article formulates realistic recommendations — separately for mahalla committees and for activists — implementable through already existing institutions (the "Initiative Budget," the mahalla budget, the tree registry, complaint channels), and it outlines the role of engaged environmental anthropology as a practice of knowledge co-production.

Keywords: Environmental justice, participation, mahalla, hashar, urban ecology, Tashkent, winter smog, heat island, engaged anthropology, risk perception.

Introduction

The winter of 2025 became the moment when environmental risk ceased to be an abstraction for Tashkent. In late November the air quality index (AQI) consistently exceeded 200 — the "very unhealthy" category — and the capital regularly ranked among the world's most polluted megacities; the average annual

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concentration of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) for 2024 (around 31.5 µg/m³) exceeded the World Health Organization's annual guideline more than sixfold [15]. The authorities acknowledged the prolonged smog as a "serious wake-up call" and announced a package of measures — from environmental stickers for vehicles to a trade-in program for old cars and the purchase of new buses [16; 17]. Against this backdrop, the gap between norm and lived experience became especially pronounced: Article 49 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, in its new edition, guarantees every person the right to a favorable environment and to reliable information about its condition, and obliges the state, in accordance with the principle of sustainable development, to take measures to improve, restore, and protect the environment [1]. The creation of favorable environmental conditions for the population is likewise declared in the "Uzbekistan – 2030" Strategy, the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy, and the Concept for Environmental Protection until 2030 [3; 2; 4]. The subject of this article lies precisely in the gap between the declared right and the experienced risk.

Main part

It is telling that hashar surfaced almost immediately in the public response to the smog: watering streets and trees, cleaning up, calls to "restore order." Hashar is a deeply rooted form of collective action, and herein lies its strength: it mobilizes quickly, relies on neighborly solidarity, and requires neither significant resources nor permits. As an instrument of environmental policy, however, it carries a built-in limitation. In terms of S. Arnstein's classic "ladder of citizen participation," hashar occupies its lower rungs: it is not "citizen power," nor even partnership, but mobilization to carry out a decision that has already been made [12]. Hashar translates the environmental problem into the register of cleanliness and behavior: the dirt gets removed, responsibility falls on the resident who "made the mess," while the structural causes — the burning of coal and fuel oil in heating systems, which accounts for roughly 28% of winter PM2.5, dense construction, disregard for environmental norms, an overflowing landfill — remain outside the frame [15]. In other words, hashar is mobilization, not participation.

What, then, does participatory environmental justice mean, and why is it not simply "a bigger hashar"? Within the environmental justice framework developed in the work of R. Bullard, D. Schlosberg, and J. Agyeman, three dimensions are

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conventionally distinguished, and the shift away from hashar touches each of them [9; 10; 11; 14]. The distributive dimension concerns the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. In Tashkent it is plainly visible: the city's household waste (roughly 4,000 tons per day) has for decades been hauled to the Akhangaran landfill, on average 45 km from the capital, operating since 1966 and nearly full by the late 2010s [23; 24]. The burden of the dump falls on the residents of the Akhangaran district, not on the well-off central neighborhoods. Likewise, the urban heat island strikes harder at densely built mahallas with little greenery, and the loss of shade from a felled chinar (plane tree) is felt more acutely where people have neither air conditioners nor a country house. The procedural dimension concerns who participates in decisions — and it is precisely here that the boundary between mobilization and participation runs: hashar calls on residents to execute, whereas justice requires a mechanism in which they decide. The dimension of recognition concerns whose knowledge is regarded as legitimate: residents possess embodied, local knowledge of where the courtyard floods, where scorching asphalt makes a walk with a child impossible, which enterprise emits fumes at night — and recognizing this knowledge means making the resident not an object of enlightenment but a co-author of the diagnosis.

Any recommendation is meaningless without an honest assessment of the institutional landscape. Its first feature is the dual nature of the mahalla. Following recent reforms, the mahalla is embedded in the state vertical as its lowest link: under the law on citizens' self-governance bodies and the established practice of the "mahalla seven," the committee functions simultaneously as a body of self-governance and as an instrument of social administration [8]. The conclusion that follows is that one should not expect autonomous civic activism from the mahalla — its strength lies in access to resources and legitimacy within the system, not in opposing it. The second feature is the narrowness of civic space, which is highly dependent on framing: an environmental initiative is tolerated, and sometimes successful, when it remains local and technical (defending a specific park, reporting a specific illegal felling), and becomes risky when it names systemic actors. Tellingly, the suspension of illegal construction and tree felling in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district in 2026 came only after the matter was publicized on social media — that is, thanks to the concreteness of the occasion [22]. The third, decisive feature is the existence of real levers. The Law on the Protection of Atmospheric Air explicitly provides for the participation of citizens'

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self-governance bodies and non-governmental non-profit organizations in ensuring air protection — this is a legal foothold, not merely a pious wish [5]. Existing instruments also include the "Initiative Budget" on the "Open Budget" portal (openbudget.uz), which has collected millions of votes and provides for roughly 6 trillion soums in 2026, including a share for co-financed projects involving the population [26; 27; 28]; the mahalla's own budget; the tree registry [20]; the moratorium on construction in green zones [21]; and complaint channels. All of these levers have pathologies — formalism, vote-buying, rotation of winners — but they are precisely what constitutes the real field of action.

On this basis it is possible to formulate recommendations for mahalla committees, whose underlying logic is to make use of the mahalla's institutional position by expanding the procedural content of the instruments already available to it. First, it would be worthwhile to institutionalize the environmental function by establishing within the committee a standing role (provisionally, an environmental officer) instead of one-off hashars; its task is not cleanup but maintaining a local environmental dossier: a map of green plantings cross-checked against the tree registry, points of flooding and overheating, problematic sources of odor and smoke, the waste-collection schedule. Second, the "Initiative Budget" should be turned from a lottery into an instrument of justice by formulating applications on a distributive principle: priority for areas with the least greenery and the greatest overheating, shaded planting along pedestrian routes to schools and clinics rather than decorative flowerbeds, with the choice of projects passing through open discussion among residents. Third, greening should be treated as infrastructure rather than decoration: large-canopy shade species (chinar, elm, mulberry) along scorching streets to counter the heat island, with mandatory watering in the first years, since it is precisely the lack of maintenance that kills young plantings and devalues such campaigns. This directly answers the goals of the Concept for Environmental Protection and the commitments to limiting greenhouse gas emissions [4; 6].

Fourth, local infrastructure for separate waste collection is a targeted response to the landfill crisis: by joining sorting pilots (free bags, collection points), a mahalla can build logistics that residents understand better than a centralized service can, linking everyday action to the distributive frame — less is hauled to Akhangaran, less burden falls on the residents there [25; 7]. Fifth, during the season of temperature inversions (November–February), a simple winter air protocol is

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useful: notifying residents when AQI values are high, checking on vulnerable neighbors (the elderly, children, people with respiratory illnesses), and, at critical values, coordinating with schools. These measures are low-cost and shift the mahalla from a mode of cleaning up consequences to one of reducing risk.

Recommendations for activists follow a different logic: activists possess what the mahalla, embedded in the vertical, lacks — independence of agenda — but they pay for it with vulnerability, so realism here consists of a survival strategy for the initiative. First: moving from episodic protest to ongoing monitoring in the logic of citizen science — inexpensive PM2.5 sensors across mahallas yield a local pollution map that the authorities lack, while photographic documentation of fellings cross-referenced with the tree registry creates an evidentiary base; data constitute a legitimacy that is harder to ignore than emotion. Second: speaking a technocratically legible language — in a narrow civic space, initiatives survive when they translate the demand for justice into the language of norms and measurable indicators, drawing on the waste law, the law on the protection of atmospheric air, and the moratorium [7; 5; 21]; this is not capitulation but a risk-reduction tactic. Third: building coalitions across individual cases, linking local campaigns into a network (shared complaint templates, a shared problem map, exchange of legal experience) while retaining concreteness. Fourth: using the "Initiative Budget" while being aware of its pathologies and not building an entire strategy on it [28]. Fifth: working with allies inside the system — relevant agencies, deputies, journalists, and bloggers, through whom a local problem has more than once received a response. Sixth and overarching: deliberately shifting the emphasis from the resident's behavior to structure, bringing back into public conversation questions of what is being burned for heat in winter, who approved construction on a green zone, and in whose district the single landfill is located — herein lies the safe, concrete re-politicization.

A particular role in this transition belongs to engaged environmental anthropology, understood not as "helping activists" but as a research practice with specific functions [13]. Knowledge co-production makes it possible to connect technocratic metrics (PM2.5, temperature, the share of greenery) with residents' embodied knowledge; methods such as participatory mapping, transect walks, and community air monitoring turn the dimension of recognition from a slogan into a procedure. The function of translation helps a resident's demand acquire a technocratically legitimate form that increases its chances within a narrow civic

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space. The ethnography of risk perception — how Tashkent residents experience smog, the loss of a chinar tree, an overheated courtyard — is valuable in its own right, capturing how readiness to act is formed or extinguished. Finally, engagement within a semi-open civic environment imposes an ethical obligation: not to expose interlocutors to risk for the sake of a striking result, not to promise uncontrollable political outcomes, and to openly acknowledge that "engaged" here means modest co-participation rather than a lever of power.

Realism requires naming what will not work as well. Existing mechanisms are capable of simulating participation without changing the distribution of power: "discussion" after the fact, voting for pre-selected projects, hashar renamed "participation" — the telltale sign of substitution is a situation in which residents are invited in at the implementation stage rather than the decision-making stage. Any initiative in this environment experiences a gravitational pull back toward "cleanliness" and "behavior," and holding on to the structural question requires conscious effort. Translating a demand into the language of norms reduces risk but cuts away part of its content: some questions of justice — who benefits from a development project, why the burden of the dump falls on a single district — cannot, in principle, be reduced to regulation, and the technical frame remains a tactic of entry, not a ceiling on ambition. Finally, campaigns that rest on the enthusiasm of a few people fade away; only the embedding of a function — in the mahalla's active staff, in a monitoring network, in a recurring budget cycle — provides durability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that the distance from hashar to participatory environmental justice is not a distance of scale but a distance of meaning: from mobilization to participation, from cleanliness to distribution, from execution to decision-making, from the resident as an object of enlightenment to the resident as co-author of the diagnosis. Under Tashkent's conditions, this distance cannot be covered by head-on confrontation, nor by importing a ready-made model of grassroots democracy. The realistic path is the strategic filling of already existing institutions with procedural and distributive content, with a division of roles: the mahalla acts from within the vertical, activists retain independence of agenda and an evidentiary base, and the engaged anthropologist co-produces and translates knowledge. At the same time, the right to a favorable environment enshrined in

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the Constitution, and the course toward favorable environmental conditions proclaimed by state strategies, give this transition not only moral but also normative legitimacy [1; 3]. The winter smog of 2025 showed that risk has become shared; the question for the coming years is whether the solution will become shared as well — that is, whether the residents of Tashkent will have not only the duty to clean up the consequences but also the right to participate in choosing the causes the city decides to fight.

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