The Sustainable Communities Initiative

The Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities

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Many Differences **One Destiny**

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Introduction

For the 143 communities and regions engaged in planning for a prosperous future, the Sustainable Communities Initiative is a game-changing opportunity. In the same spirit of the interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities which forged new ways of doing business across HUD, DOT, and EPA, this program is poised to catalyze new networks of relationships, new problem-solving methods, and new, inclusive decision-making tables. By bringing together diverse and disparate interests while developing new leaders, Sustainable Communities is seeding an opportunity for regions and communities to craft an authentic vision for an equitable and prosperous future. As community members set joint tables with advocacy groups, planners, business leaders, policymakers, local development organizations, universities, and foundations to develop a blueprint for future prosperity, a shared vision will only materialize if the residents of historically marginalized communities see themselves as full partners. That entails having a voice and decision-making input to own the change they want to see.

Community engagement is the foundation of the Sustainable Communities Initiative. Community engagement fosters the transformative relationships and increased ownership necessary to build sustainable communities of opportunity. Community engagement deepens the innovative, silo-busting partnerships that are signatures of the program by connecting the concerns of communities to the decisions that allocate local and regional public investment dollars. Engagement brings meaning and relevance to sustainability goals across a broad spectrum of players; and it encourages local innovations in sustainable development through creative problem solving.

Transformative community engagement that leads to equitable outcomes will not be easy. Following many years of disinvestment and neglect, mistrust exists in many communities. Many institutions have not fully realized the benefit of collaboration and community partnerships, furthering the silo mentality. Meaningful engagement, whether at the local or regional level, will require innovative partnerships that are inclusive of voices that have been left behind while focusing on a shared vision for a prosperous future. Understanding that an intentional focus on community engagement can lead to transformative change, HUD has required that a minimum of 10 percent of grant budgets be committed to increase the engagement of historically marginalized communities in the planning process.[1] As communities get ready to meet those measures, public agencies will need help. Local and regional planning organizations in particular may find this guide useful as they work to build new partnerships and relationships to develop a shared vision. This guide is intended to help deepen an understanding of the community engagement process and what it will take to create new ways of planning for a sustainable future.

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[1] Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities. (2011) "Notice of Funding Availability for HUD's Fiscal Year 2011 Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program," 57.

How will engagement differ for regional planning and community challenge grantees?

The Sustainable Communities Initiative provides an opportunity to create a new collaborative framework for both local communities and regions to foster a vision that builds on strengths and reduces harmful disparities. Regional planning grantees' decision-making processes require a cross-jurisdiction and cross sector approach to community engagement—across multiple neighborhoods and communities. The larger social distance between regional representatives and their constituencies, the ambiguous level of accountability, the multijurisdictional politics, and the spectrum of demographic, cultural, and economic diversity found in regions makes regional decision-making processes inherently different from those of local governments. But these regional settings and the resources they allocate can provide leaders of low-income communities and communities of color from across a metropolitan area the opportunity to identify their common issues, interests and needs, and to develop alliances to collectively address regional decisions. **In a regional context, the goal of engagement is to develop an effective voice for equity on the regional stage—a stage traditionally dominated by suburban and exurban interests.**

One way to develop this effective voice at a regional level is through a strong collaborative of community and issue-oriented organizations focused on shared priorities that resonate in marginalized communities. Regional equity networks are growing in many metropolitan areas as a way to ensure that the priorities of low-income communities and communities of color are effectively integrated into regional conversations and decision-making processes. Representation of equity groups on key decision-making bodies will also be critical for regional engagement efforts, as will be the development of public, private, and nonprofit stakeholder coalitions that lead with equity goals. In many regions, equity networks have surfaced around regional transportation planning in particular, since transportation is historically central to the reproduction of racial and social exclusion, transportation funds are often decided upon regionally, and because transportation is critical piece of infrastructure related to greater job and affordable housing access.

For community challenge grantees working locally, the closer proximity between decision makers and their constituencies, the relative accessibility of the planning process and the clearer mechanisms for accountability lends itself to an environment where collaborative methods of problem solving can emerge. **Community engagement, in this context, should focus on developing an inclusive process where community-institution partnerships can identify the creative solutions necessary to solve very distinct local problems of revitalizing a transit corridor, developing new transit stations or business districts, or redeveloping a brownfield, a former industrial area, or a downtown.**

The Benefits of Community Engagement

Community engagement is a process through which community members are empowered to own the change they want to see and involves communication, problem-solving, governance, and decision-making skills and strategies.

Community engagement is not just a set of activities and methods confined to a particular project, policy, or process. Rather, it is a way of communication, decision making, and governance that gives community members the power to own the change they want to see, leading to equitable outcomes. Public agencies have plenty of tools for basic public participation and protocols for using them, but many of these are ineffective because they do not address the legacy challenges in low-income communities and communities of color, nor do they tap into their expertise and organizing capacity.

Community engagement encompasses a more comprehensive approach, creating practices and institutionalized mechanisms that share power and vest decision-making control in marginalized communities. When utilized for the purpose of increasing community power and agency for problem solving, community engagement is guided by a few key principles:[2]

1) **Honor the wisdom, voice, and experience of residents.**
2) **Treat participants with integrity and respect.**
3) **Be transparent about motives and power dynamics.**
4) **Share decision making and initiative leadership.**
5) **Engage in continuous reflection and willingness to change course.**

Transformative engagement can be the difference between a successful initiative and one that falls well short of its potential. It enables highly technical or routine projects and processes to produce real, tangible, and lasting benefits for communities. Summarized below are some of the most salient benefits of engagement:

- *Legitimacy and increased support for plans and projects*. With the substantive engagement of affected communities, developed plans will reflect legitimacy, community support, and incorporate equity outcomes. Legitimacy builds trust, political will, and ownership for effective implementation.

- *Improved community/government relations*. Community engagement can build trust between diverse stakeholders and help improve the quality of difficult discussions about racial disparities, economic conditions, and community development needs. By creating a multifaceted process built upon relationship building, trust, respect, and affirmation of community knowledge and power, more effective ways of dealing with difference will emerge.

- *Deeper understanding of the issues*. Regional housing plans will be stronger with the input of the people who are facing and addressing housing challenges. Regional economic opportunity plans will

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[2] These principles emerge from an understanding of how low-income communities and communities of color became marginalized and disinvested in the first place. When planners and project leaders are aware of these histories in their city or region, they can acknowledge these events in the planning process, and work with community members to shape a space in which residents and organizations can share their stories and play a significant role in identifying opportunities to reverse disparities.

benefit by significant engagement of residents and organizations that have knowledge of the barriers to job access and experience in creating solutions to these challenges.

- *Increase in community capacity*. A meaningful engagement strategy will improve capacity for problem solving. Engagement builds stronger networks across racial, ethnic, generational, gender, and socio-economic divides, an essential component to achieving equitable outcomes and leveraging additional resources, outside of public processes.

- *Reduced long-term costs*. Plans and development projects often end up in litigation when lack of or poor community engagement has not effectively crafted consensus. While conflicts may arise during planning (especially when there is a history of failed projects or unrealized promises), the community engagement process creates an environment of positive communication where creative and inclusive solutions can be found to resolve conflicts.

- *Democracy in action.* Community engagement is, in many ways, a microcosm of our American democratic system of government. It is one of the best ways that community residents can connect to and shape local and regional decision-making processes.

The next section of the guide discusses the nine general guidelines one should consider in engagement and specific strategies that will be helpful to implement these guidelines. The last section answers several frequently asked questions from grantees.

Recognizing the Legacy Effects of Exclusion in Marginalized Communities

The Sustainable Communities Initiative presents an incredible opportunity for communities and regions to forge partnerships in visioning a better future together. Engaging traditionally marginalized communities in decision-making processes is key in realizing the full and authentic potential of this vision for sustainability and prosperity. Engaging these communities will require an understanding of how the fates for a sustainable and equitable future are intertwined. The post– WWII patterns of land use, sprawling growth, and development that have proved unsustainable were institutionally sanctioned and driven by practices of segregation, racial exclusion, and disinvestment. White flight that followed school desegregation, racial covenants excluding people of color from suburban homes, the redlining of historic neighborhoods by the federal government and financial institutions that stripped their value, and the destruction of communities of color through interstate highway and other redevelopment projects—all of these laid the blueprint for the local and regional challenges communities face today. These legacies, along with many hostilities facing immigrant communities, leave a sense of mistrust of government-led initiatives.

In many disadvantaged communities, decades of neglect have led to poverty, crime, family instability, and underachieving schools, all of which hamper the ability of residents to play an active and vital role in their community decision-making process. The drain of resources and attention often lead to community fragmentation and segregation that tends to hinder authentic engagement by exacerbating cultural and socioeconomic differences. The conflicts that accompany these challenges tend to create a power vacuum within the community and rob the area of opportunities for effective community leadership, particularly within the larger region.

It is not just through explicitly discriminatory policies that low-income communities and communities of color have been marginalized. Traditional public participation processes are often artificial and do not include spaces to share stories, lift up community assets and knowledge, or include community members and organizations in shaping the agenda, the process, and the ultimate decisions. If elected officials do not share the concerns of these communities, even the best-intentioned and executed participation processes may fail to translate community priorities into policy. And finally, if the policies and issues raised in more superficial processes have no relevance for local residents, it can further alienate communities from public officials and planners.

The more influence communities have in decision making, the greater the capacity and leadership among residents, and the better positioned they will be to reverse past legacies and produce effective solutions to community challenges. The meaningful partnerships and new engagement processes that are emerging through the Sustainable Communities Initiative offer one clear path toward this possibility.

Sustainable Communities Are the Key to America's Future

Sustainable communities are communities of opportunity. They are places where all residents have access to the essential ingredients for economic and social success: living wage jobs with health coverage, good schools, affordable homes, transportation choices, strong social networks, thriving businesses, safe and walkable streets, parks and playgrounds, and healthy food. They aren't just great places to live; they're more energy efficient and economically competitive as well. Economists are increasingly recognizing that regions and nations that are more equitable also perform better economically.

Sustainable communities are the key to America's future. By the end of this decade, the majority of youth will be people of color. And by 2042 or earlier the majority of the overall population will be of color. This tremendous diversity can be a major asset to regions as they compete in the global economy, but planning efforts must reflect this new majority as well as prioritize investments that will ensure they have opportunities afforded to generations before them. Many of the communities where this growing majority lives face crumbling infrastructure, poor educational attainment, and chronic health issues related to the environments in which they live. This is far from just a central city problem: those who have moved to inner-ring suburbs often find those communities to be seriously fiscally challenged, lacking quality services and public transit, and home to an epidemic of foreclosures. This means planning for sustainable communities must occur in cross sector partnerships with communities to transform these current conditions into strong futures and more equitable regions.

In terms of sustainability and resource conservation, low-income communities and communities of color are already on the right track: residents own fewer cars, rely on public transit at higher rates, and live in greater density and smaller homes—the practices that Sustainable Communities seeks to expand. Implicit in advancing sustainability, then, means ensuring residents of low-income communities and communities of color can improve their access to opportunities while ensuring they can stay in their improving neighborhoods. By tackling the racial and economic disparities that persist in our regions, planning for sustainable communities can build resilience and prosperity for regions' shared economic futures.

Guidelines for Meaningful Community Engagement

There is no shortage of information on research and best practices in conducting successful participation and engagement processes. Tools and methods designed to increase participation in planning and policy decision-making are becoming ubiquitous, especially with the rise in popularity of participatory governance, open government, and interactive web 2.0 platforms. While the methods and techniques used to increase *participation* of traditionally marginalized groups may differ depending on the context, the guidelines listed below will help you think about the context in which the engagement processes will be successful in increasing community *agency* to make decisions that will increase access to opportunity. The methods for engagement will vary depending on local context—what is important is that they be implemented in the spirit of these guidelines.

Be proactive and targeted in engagement strategies. In order to increase both participation and agency of residents and organizations from communities that have been traditionally marginalized, every decision and action must be intentional towards that purpose. Being intentional first requires developing relationships with these communities to develop a mutual purpose for meeting and shared understanding of the conditions challenging the community. Low-income communities and communities of color are incredibly diverse and do not necessarily have a shared history. Each has its own mix of cultures, power dynamics, social and economic networks. It is critical to disregard preconceptions, rumors, or hearsay concerning the neighborhood and to enter the process with a willingness to learn about the community.

Engagement strategies should reflect this diversity of communities. Many residents have been exposed to more traditional engagement techniques such as public meetings, charrettes, visioning sessions, and voting, and those experiences may not all be positive. While the techniques *per se* may not have been the problem, they can only work effectively when they are embedded in an environment of sufficient trust and knowledge about the community.

Strategies for proactive and targeted engagement:

- ✓ **Work through existing networks of community-based organizations** that serve and organize in diverse cultural communities to identify the leaders to work with.
- ✓ **Attend community meetings and cultural events as a participant**. Listen to what issues they discuss and how they talk about them. Enter with a sense of humility and awareness of potential power dynamics due to race, ethnic, citizenship, class, or gender differences.
- ✓ **Develop awareness of the racial and economic disparities in your city or region** and why those disparities exist (informed by experienced community leaders and organizations).
- ✓ **Seek out relationships with leaders from non-English speaking communities**. Work with them to identify the barriers to engagement and ways to bridge the divide into their community.
- ✓ **Translate materials and provide interpretation at community meetings**. When working with non-native English speakers, these are critical elements to a successful engagement strategy that will both increase participation and help these communities feel more welcome into the planning process. Additionally, work with local leaders to identify trusted facilitators with experience working in the community.
- ✓ **Engage faith-based organizations** in the community to help bring hard-to-reach residents on board—helping to reach beyond the "usual" voices.

- ✓ **Host a "meet and greet" with community organizations and advocacy groups to build connections across sectors and develop partnerships**. Get to know many groups: avoid working with citizens' groups that aren't actually representative of the community the program is designed for; and don't rely solely on the easily identifiable groups that although may be doing good work, are not the only advocates in the area.
- ✓ **Build incentives for engagement for each strategy that reduce barriers to participate**. Many residents in low-income communities and communities of color are from working families with busy schedules and childcare constraints. Meetings should be held in evenings and on weekends; and, whenever possible, provide childcare, meals, and transit passes.

Build clear opportunities for decision making and partnerships among community organizations.
One of the outcomes of transformative community engagement is community agency over the resources and decisions that will increase access to opportunity. This component is critical for communities to empower themselves to take ownership over community and regional change.

Strategies for building in decision-making opportunities:

- ✓ **Structure your consortium to include substantive representation of people of color** or organizations that represent low-income communities in various decision-making capacities (consortia leadership, committees, subcommittees, stakeholder meetings). It is not enough to have one or two representatives; have enough people represented that their voices will not be marginalized during difficult conversations.
- ✓ **Communicate all key decision points in planning process**: committee membership opportunities, grant deadlines, plan draft dates, hearings and votes by legislative bodies, zoning changes, etc.
- ✓ **Fund equity-focused organizations to train participating residents** from low-income communities and communities of color in the content and skills they will need to exercise informed leadership.
- ✓ **Establish a social equity caucus or working group with decision-making authority and oversight** over key areas of the grant, including the community engagement strategy and the fair housing and equity assessment. Provide opportunities in other working groups and decision-making bodies for substantive equity caucus representation. Ensure that equity caucus members have opportunities to shape agendas, collect information, and direct content.
- ✓ **Set aside resources to be shaped and decided on by community members**. This could include grants for community engagement, hiring of consultants, selection of demonstration projects, land acquisition funds, or participatory budgeting.
- ✓ **Articulate expectations for equity inclusion and partnership with other stakeholders in the consortium**. Work to proactively identify barriers to meeting those expectations, and dedicate resources to address those needs.
- ✓ **Proactively cultivate new community leaders.** Activities targeted at youth engagement can be very successful in identifying promising leaders, engaging their parents, and increasing participation in communities of color.

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Creating an Inclusive and Diverse Governance Structure: Lessons from St. Louis

In St. Louis, an 11-member consortium consisting of local and regional governments, nonprofits, and institutional partners, was awarded $4.6 million to support the creation of a regional plan that encourages economic competitiveness through the connection of housing, high-quality jobs, schools, and transportation. The consortium has identified two pillars to underscore their work: 1) objective research and data; and, 2) public involvement and community engagement.

Recognizing the importance of diversity in a decision-making capacity, consortia partners in St. Louis went through an application process to form a Steering Committee for the grant—at the center of the consortium—to ensure that a racial, ethnic, income, and geographic diversity was represented to guide the planning process. Potential members were nominated by representatives of the original consortia partners; those nominated were given an opportunity to apply for a position on the Steering Committee. MPO staff strongly encouraged that nominees represent low-income communities and communities of color to the extent possible. As a result, nearly a third of the Steering Committee members are people of color, some who work for organizations that represent communities of color, others that bring professional contributions to planning for equity.

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Grapple with the past failings and current challenges in fragmented and disempowered communities, for they are the starting points to envisioning a sustainable future. There is a very real need, in communities across the country, for trusted conveners to bring together diverse groups of residents to talk openly and safely about racial isolation, class discrimination, painful histories, success stories, community strengths, and points of pride. The question is not if we talk about race, but how we talk about race. This set of conversations must happen at the beginning of the planning process in order to build trust and collectively develop a vision for a sustainable future.

Strategies for conducting community engagement in fragmented and disempowered communities:

- ✓ **Create many entry points for engagement and recognize the relative levels of power, voice, impact and opportunity for knowledge-sharing and relationship-building that they afford**, including appointment to decision-making boards and commissions, advisory groups, task forces, focus groups and town hall meetings.
- ✓ **Stay the course—listening to the community's concerns is central to developing and building trust.** Residents may take advantage of community engagement opportunities to voice their concerns about seemingly unrelated matters. Moreover, a firm understanding of their needs and concerns could yield the points of connection to discussions about sustainability.

Basic Community Conversation Guidelines:

DO	DON'T
☑ **Work with a skilled facilitator who can guide this conversation with respect.**	⊘ **Don't present disparities only and then leave them there.** *(Contextualize them. Draw out—how they occurred and why they are harmful to everyone in the community.) In other words, emphasize the opportunity frame and fairness. Be forthright about acknowledging the forces that led to marginalization of low-income communities and communities of color.*
☑ **Underscore shared, deep values** *(opportunity, connectedness, good health, and a sustainable and productive economic future).*	
☑ **Acknowledge that individualism is important, but that the healthiest individual is nurtured by a community invested in everyone's success.**	⊘ **Don't frame action as robbing Peter to pay Paul.** *(Grow the entire pie, utilize resources more effectively, don't fight over tiny pieces.)*
☑ **Propose policies that are universal *and* targeted. By this we mean, posit a universal goal—i.e. "everyone graduates from high school"—but recognize that individuals and schools will need different types of resources to achieve this.**	⊘ **Don't separate out people in need from "everybody else."** *(Everyone, at some point in time, needs help from other people.)*
☑ **Be aware that word choice matters. Using "minority" to refer to people of color is outdated and tends to carry a subordinate connation.**	⊘ **Don't glide over real fears, shared suffering, or the fact that people are often internally conflicted.**
☑ **Acknowledge cultural assets and contributions.**	⊘ **Don't feel the need to solve all problems or resolve all conflicts, but do hold the space to legitimize and recognize concern or conflict.**
☑ **Be prepared for emotionally charged sentiments from residents, particularly at the beginning of the process.**	⊘ **Don't dismiss the importance of individual efforts.**

Prioritize community knowledge and concerns. Many participation and engagement processes tend to rely on the knowledge of technical experts without fully utilizing the inherent value of local resident knowledge and expertise for solving problems. Such processes most often classify communities as "consultants," or worse, passive recipients of information. This often leads to a withdrawal of local resident support and engagement, particularly in traditionally marginalized communities, many of which have been disappointed by similar engagement experiences in the past.

Legitimate planning efforts, especially at the neighborhood level, should be shaped by the concerns and voices of the community—from project selection to project implementation, and everything in between. Community members and leaders should be the locus of control: They define the agenda or issues; they organize and lead convenings or meetings; and, they determine the direction and goals of the project. This process is an evolution; at the outset, depending on the level of community capacity, the planner may have to be more involved in organizing meetings or providing technical assistance. As the process continues however, this control should be vested in community leaders.

At the regional level, the challenge is somewhat different. Most regional planning agencies are set up as councils of governments or metropolitan planning organizations, so that the "community" interests are usually represented by local elected officials or high-ranking staff, rather than residents or leaders of community-based organizations or anyone else. Therefore, regional community engagement will require committee structures that include equity representatives on technical and decision-making committees.

Substantive equity representation will help to ensure that common community interests are translated regionally into technical processes, such as scenario planning and the identification of performance metrics.

Strategies to prioritize community knowledge and concerns:

✓ **Hold listening sessions or study circles**[3] to surface community concerns. This might include, for instance, public hearings on housing opportunity in each county of a multicounty region.
✓ **Incorporate storytelling activities** into the process to bring liveliness to the conversation.
✓ **Work with community leaders to facilitate walking or bus tours with elected officials and stakeholders to highlight assets, opportunities, and challenges** in low-income communities and communities of color to develop rapport and sense of shared concerns between decision-makers and local communities.
✓ **Using diverse communication techniques such as social media, pictures, video, painting**, and other types of art can help people who absorb information visually become more involved with the process and help ensure that all voices are heard. Also, housing the process within politically neutral sites and making use of community events such as local festivals may help bring a sense of legitimacy and fairness to the conversation.
✓ **Work with community organizations or community/university partnerships to conduct participatory action research**[4] to guide the process. These organizations will have a better connection to the community, and will be more familiar with the data and methods necessary to lift up diverse voices.
✓ **Create an inventory of past and current community initiatives.** The inventory can help spark a conversation at meetings on the efficacy of these initiatives, and can contribute to more informed understanding of actions and activities suited for success within the community.
✓ **Include equity representation on technical advisory committees.** They will be an important bridge to ensure that common interests of marginalized communities are translated up to complicated planning processes.

Develop cultural competency skills and cultivate humility. Developing cultural competency skills is an essential foundation for community engagement processes that build multicultural relationships and prioritize multiple types of knowledge. It involves building an awareness of and mutual respect for cultural differences, attitudes, practices, and histories; and establishing behaviors that demonstrate a commitment towards increasing community agency for change. Planner Leonardo Vazquez has established some guidelines for developing cultural competency in planning that can be a resource as you undertake these efforts.

Strategies to develop cultural competency:

✓ **Dedicate resources for staff training on structural racism and racial disparities**. The City of Seattle has made this mandatory for city staff as part of their Race and Social Justice Initiative,[5] and it has resulted in budget and programmatic changes through the awareness it raises.

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[3] For more information on study circles, visit http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/index.aspx.
[4] PolicyLink, 2012. *Community-Based Participatory Research: A Strategy for Building Healthy Communities and Promoting Health Through Policy Change*. http://www.policylink.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=lkIXLbMNJrE&b=5136581&ct=11762035.
[5] For more information on the City of Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative, visit http://www.seattle.gov/rsji/.

- ✓ **Assemble a diverse public agency staff**. Affirmatively hire people of color and those with histories in the communities you are working to serve.
- ✓ **Attend community meetings and cultural events as a participant**. Listen, ask questions, and reflect.
- ✓ **Translate all materials and provide interpretation at all meetings**.

Support capacity building to engage meaningfully. Capacity building is a critical aspect of leveling the playing field for residents and organizations to engage effectively in planning and decision-making processes. A lack of awareness and understanding of planning jargon, technical and policy expertise, political dynamics, knowledge of process, and bureaucratic norms can often inhibit the ability of participating groups and residents to have a meaningful voice. A growing number of training materials have been created for introducing the language and basic concepts of planning and sustainable development, and these can often be most effectively conveyed by organizations already based in the community.

Capacity building is a two-way process. While many government agencies, universities, larger community organizations have these technical capacities and resources to share with others, community organizations have capacities that they might lack: understanding of cultural norms, credibility with members of marginalized communities, substantive networks and relationships in the community. Connecting and working with these organizations and leaders can help build institutional capacity to conduct effective engagement processes.

Strategies to support capacity building:

- ✓ **Target resources for training, educational sessions, and conference attendance** for both community members/organizations and institutional partners. Work with community organizations to identify what types of activities will be most beneficial for their interests. Identify or structure equity-focused trainings and workshops for institutional players to attend.
- ✓ **Structure trainings and educational sessions** to maximize cross-learning from community and institutional partners. Ensure that trainers and participants represent low-income communities and communities of color. Work with facilitators who are experienced in racial and class issues and give them the opportunity to co-develop the agenda.
- ✓ **Provide opportunities for resident leadership development**. This could include technical workshops, as well as coaching on providing testimony at public hearings, meeting with elected or public officials, and submitting comment letters on plans and projects.
- ✓ **Work with community organizations to identify ways they can build institutional and government capacity to connect with marginalized communities.** Provide these organizations with the support they need to aid engagement efforts. Be cautious not to exclude organizations from collaborating in the planning process because they have the appearance of being 'low capacity.'

Engagement processes should include space to be iterative and reflective. Who creates the space for engagement? Who decides whom and what interests will be invited to the table? How do we measure success? Meaningful community engagement is sometimes messy, ambiguous, iterative, and not likely to conform to your standard public participation schedule. As knowledge from the community is generated and shared, new issues and needs may be uncovered, and changes to timelines and goals may be required. The process in its entirety should remain flexible enough to make mid-course corrections where needed. Part of building community capacity is allowing space for reflection, risk taking, and cultivating the humility to learn from mistakes and modify the approach.

Strategies for iterative and reflective processes:

- ✓ **Work with community members and equity organizations to identify benchmarks for success** on both community engagement and program/policy outcomes. These conversations can often take place in the abstract; try to develop concrete and measurable benchmarks and identify accountable parties. If achieved, this specificity can help to bring integrity to the process and build trust between public agency staff and the community.
- ✓ **Establish regular check-ins to gauge progress** with stakeholders, partners, and residents, gain feedback on the process, and gain new ideas for cultivating connections and maintaining relevance to community concerns.

Target resources to support ongoing engagement. Because community engagement encompasses a multifaceted set of strategies implemented by many partners, these partners will need to be creative in identifying funding sources to sustain this work. This may necessitate changes to service delivery, organizational structures, and budgeting processes in order to ensure implementation. Ongoing funding streams will be critical to successful implementation of engagement strategies.

Strategies to target resources for ongoing engagement:

✓ **Put implementation front and center.** Emphasize that the hard work and the opportunities for impact in marginalized communities lies not in the development of plan, but in its implementation. Residents will feel more confident about the process if it results in tangible outcomes along with the resources and political will to implement the plan effectively.
✓ **Contract with local, community-based organizations in low-income communities and communities of color to conduct engagement processes**. Several grantees are successfully implementing regranting programs for community engagement organizations, including the Twin Cities, Puget Sound, California's San Joaquin Valley, and Knoxville, to name a few.
✓ **Create a community liaison or community organizer position**, ideally filled by a member of the community, who can play an important "bridging" role necessary to close the cultural, relational, racial, language, and socio-economic divides that often exist between public and private institutions and low-income communities and communities of color. These liaisons will be incredibly important to help develop consistent relationships in the community, connect residents to resources, and surface key community concerns.[6]
✓ **Leverage additional funds to support engagement** through partnerships with foundations and other public agencies.

Building Local Capacity Through Regranting: Lessons from the Twin Cities

Members of the Corridors of Opportunity regional planning consortium in the Minneapolis-St. Paul region of Minnesota knew that in order to gain valuable and significant feedback from those most impacted by the expanding light rail system they had to expand beyond the reach of the Metropolitan Council, their regional planning organization. From their nearly $5 million grant, they allocated $750,000 to regrant to community organizations along the light rail corridors to engage the low-income communities, communities of color, and immigrant communities in these areas. The Community Engagement Team of the consortium, formed by three engagement and equity-focused local intermediaries, is managing the RFP and granting process. After the first round of grants, 10 community organizations were awarded an average of $30,000 to engage their constituencies in the region's plan for development along these new transit corridors. With these grants, organizations with deep reach into low-income communities, communities of color, immigrant communities, and the disability community have been able to engage their constituencies in shaping future investments around transit stations. For more information, go to http://engagetc.org/.

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[6] While this idea has been popular in the public health field, some planning departments, including the City of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods, have successfully utilized community liaisons to build better engagement processes.

Align engagement efforts with clear opportunities to influence more equitable policies and allocation of resources. Strong relationships, multisector partnerships, and greater participation from traditionally marginalized communities in planning processes are essential but not, by themselves, sufficient. For engagement to be transformative, it needs to be aligned—in both content and process—to actionable processes and policies that can improve equity outcomes for people. One large barrier to more interest in engagement is the perception (and often reality) that involvement will have minimal impact. Connecting engagement processes to tangible policy change is what makes the transformative nature of community engagement possible.

Strategies for policy alignment:

- ✓ **Develop key community priorities into policy agendas.** If they do not already have an existing policy agenda, work with them to identify possibilities for action.
- ✓ **Identify lead agencies with authority to address policy priorities.**
- ✓ **Develop timelines to synchronize processes with decision points**, and be prepared!
- ✓ **Establish regular communication mechanisms** (i.e., standing monthly calls) and communicate early and often to ensure that engagement activities are on a similar timeline to the official process. If these become out of synch, work with partners to bring them back together.

Frequently Asked Questions

In this section we address some common challenges that grantees have expressed, and provide some steps towards resolving these issues.

Q. *I can't seem to get anyone interested in attending any meetings about our regional plan, let alone people from disinvested communities. How can I get people interested in talking about regional issues when their concerns and interests are so individual and/or parochial?*

A. **Don't discuss the region in abstract, use it to illustrate concrete issues of mutual concern. To help make the process more concrete:**

- Connect human stories to policy issues and concepts that some may find too abstract.
- Make sure everyone can see themselves in the story you tell (it's about "all of us," not just "those people"). People relate to storytelling and narratives; use this to illustrate development patterns which are sustainable and healthy.
- Describe development in terms of its impact on people and communities.
- Characterize the substantial investments that are in the purview of the plans (e.g., transportation and housing investments, workforce opportunities) that need community input.
- Connect the regional systems (such as transportation) to the local scale, and show how they are interconnected, and how people in a number of communities may be facing similar issues.

Q. *We are having a difficult time trying to get people from immigrant communities, low-income communities, and communities of color interested in participating in a plan on sustainability, nor are they interested in the idea of sustainability. It seems like many of their concerns are more immediate than a vision for the future, such as deportation, health care access, crime, or unemployment. What can we do to make sure that we don't leave these groups out of the process?*

A. **This is a prime example of why planning processes should be rooted in community concerns and led by leaders from marginalized communities.** The concept of sustainability is not new; sustainability may be defined differently in different cultures, so it is important that the planning process surfaces the ways in which sustainability resonates with them.

One way to understand how you might connect your process with these immediate realities is to conduct listening sessions, facilitated by leaders with established trust in these communities and experience dealing with issues of race, poverty, or immigration status. Let the primary issues that emerge out of these sessions guide the process and prioritize what the plan includes. It may be that crime prevention or immigrant integration, issues that regional planning organizations often do not address, emerge as the primary concerns from the community. Work with organizations and leaders that represent these communities, as well as the appropriate government and non-government institutions, to identify ways in which the plan can incorporate these concerns. Even if the issues are out of the typical purview of the agency responsible for implementation, they can play a key coordinating role.

Q. *What are some best practices or considerations for doing engagement in rural areas, especially those with a very large geography?*

A. **Before beginning engagement in rural communities, it is important to understand that the experiences of rural communities are very diverse**. For example, some rural communities may be experiencing rapid growth, while others in the region struggle with persistent poverty. A first priority then must be to engage with the community around what their priorities are. It is also important to remember, from the beginning, that distance matters when it comes to engaging with rural communities. In this regard, planners should be prepared to take community engagements and public meetings "on the road." Such efforts to offset financial costs and access barriers in rural areas may greatly enhance sustained engagement and effective participation in the engagement process. And finally, important goals that should guide the engagement process with rural communities do not differ greatly from engagement goals in general, and include:[7]

- encouragement of youth participation;
- cooperative relationship-building between rural communities;
- network development among diverse stakeholders representing various interests of rural communities;
- an "open door" policy or easy accessibility to public policy leaders involved in guiding the planning process;
- opportunities for real decision making for community participants; and
- open access to information or other technical resources.

Q. *What are some best practices or considerations for engaging immigrant communities?*

A. **This is similar to other ideas on community engagement, and includes creating a focus group of immigrant leaders and residents to identify community concerns and interests. Community engagement processes should:**

- Allow for facilitation and leadership of meetings by leaders from immigrant communities.
- Provide opportunities for members of the same immigrant communities to speak together in native languages to ensure understanding and full participation.
- Provide opportunities for small group as well as large group participation.
- Immediately address dynamics that create less than a safe place for participation (such as prejudicial comments made about a particular group).
- Reach out through the schools and parents' organizations. Sponsor a contest in the schools about ideas for sustainability and engage the parents through that. It's a method for connecting where people are still connecting (and are less afraid).

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[7] Jason Reece, *Growing Together for a Sustainable Future: Strategies and Best Practices for Engaging with Disadvantaged Communities on Issues of Sustainable Development and Regional Planning* (Columbus, OH: The Kirwan Institute, 2011).

Q. *All of these suggestions around more meaningful community engagement are great, but we've already hired a consultant and are well underway into our process. Is there anything we can do at this point?*

A. **Yes! There are still several things you can do to ensure that the plan is a legitimate representation of marginalized communities.** First, take a look at your consortium structure. Are there representatives from organizations that represent low-income communities and communities of color across the chart? Are they substantively represented on each working group, committee, and policy board, such that their views will not be marginalized? Is there racial, ethnic, and income diversity across the consortium? If the answer is no to any of these questions, open the consortium and undertake an affirmative process to ensure that there is diversity of representation across the decision-making bodies of the grant. You may need to reconsider how groups that have larger proportions of equity and community-focused organizations are connected to other decision-making groups in the consortium as well, making sure that there are clear communication channels and opportunities to ensure that the community and equity work informs the other elements of the grant.

Second, if you are working with a consultant, connect them to local leaders from low-income communities and communities of color and facilitate opportunities for inclusion throughout the process. If you haven't hired your consultant yet, work with community leaders to shape the criteria for the RFP. Or, better yet, consider hiring local community organizations to conduct engagement processes, as grantees in the Puget Sound, the Twin Cities, California's San Joaquin Valley, Kansas City, and Knoxville have done, among others.

Q. *Should we engage with residents of low-income communities and communities of color, or organizations that represent these communities, or both? How do you know when to engage one or the other?*

A. **Community engagement processes should include mechanisms that will engage both residents from and organizations that work with low-income communities and communities of color.** These will mostly operate at different levels of engagement. As we've mentioned before, you should begin with organizations that work with these communities, building them into your consortium structure with decision-making authority, and potentially utilizing them to conduct community engagement processes with residents. Resident engagement may come in specific corridor or transit-oriented or neighborhood plans; at large stakeholder meetings; through participation in leadership development processes; in community meetings; in scenario prioritizing processes; in listening sessions; or in one-on-one relationship building sessions. Keep in mind individual residents' views are important, but not *representative*. Organizations bear the responsibility of being representative, and can exercise the staying power to have oversight on implementation of the planning effort. Engagement with both residents and organizations is necessary for a legitimate process built on trust, and their collective engagement will result in a better process altogether.

Q. *How can we use technology to help us engage low-income communities and communities of color? What are some challenges of using technology in these contexts?*

A. **Many technologies have the potential to create engagement opportunities for low-income communities and communities of color.** Mobile technology is more prevalent, for example, than home Internet access, and smart phones can allow people to engage in any online conversations via their phone. There are a few questions to ask when thinking about the use of a particular technology in engagement:

- How familiar is your audience with technology in general?
- Is the tool easy to use and intuitive?
- Is the technology transparent? (Are the technology's inputs and outputs clear? Can users see how their input is used? Or is the tool a "black box" that spits out data or analysis without any way to see how it works?)
- Is the technology something that can be accessed by non-English speaking or low literacy community members (e.g., could it use info-graphics or other non-verbal communication means)?
- Is the technology something that communities can use repeatedly (i.e., is it low-cost, easy to use, does it help answer questions or solve problems that arise frequently)?
- Could the use of the technology further alienate or intimidate users?

Q. *How does having organized opposition to the process impact engagement?*

A. **If organized opposition exists, it can further discourage engagement of typically underrepresented communities who may be engaging in decision making for the first time.** Designing engagement processes to minimize disruption (a topic discussed in other forthcoming resources and guides by capacity building intermediaries) will help to minimize the impact. It is also worth discussing with champions, advocates, etc. in advance of any meetings or contexts where there might be conflict, in order to help improve understanding of the context and opposition's point of view. It is critical that any meetings or conversations remain civil and that any inappropriate comments or behavior be handled quickly so that all engaged stakeholders trust the planning team and feel that their engagement is supported.

Selected Resources

Websites
Community Problem-Solving Lab at MIT
Everyday Democracy
Place Matters, Inc.
International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)
National Charrette Institute

Model Programs and Policies
Urban Habitat Boards and Commissions Leadership Institute
King County (WA) Community Engagement Continuum and Worksheet
City of Seattle Race and Social Justice Initiative
DiverseCity onBoard (Toronto, ON)

Readings
Why Place and Race Matter (PolicyLink)
America's Tomorrow: Equity is the Superior Growth Model (PolicyLink and PERE)
Diálogos: Placemaking in Latino Communities (ed. by Michael Rios, Leonardo Vazquez)
Principles of Culturally Competent Planning and Placemaking (Leonard Vazquez)
Growing Together for a Sustainable Future: Strategies and Best Practices for Engaging with Disadvantaged Communities on Issues of Sustainable Development and Regional Planning (The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity)

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