Foundations and Principles for Equity-Centered and Inclusive Community Engagement

Foundations

1. Those who will be disproportionately impacted by climate change have a right to be involved in the decision-making process related to building their resilience.
2. The lived expertise of those experiencing social vulnerability is sought out, recognized, and valued in the process of defining problems, issues, and solutions.
3. The information needed to actively participate as collaborators in a decision-making process is provided to members of EJ and other priority populations in ways they can most readily absorb and understand it and with enough time and support to make sense of it.
4. The needs, concerns, goals, and priorities of community members, and specifically EJ and other priority populations, influence decisions. How this is done is shared and communicated in a transparent way.
5. Engagement is relational and not transactional. The process aims to build and sustain relationships based on mutual respect and reciprocity.

Core Principles

1. Honor Local Knowledge and Leadership

Community members hold direct knowledge about the different strengths, issues, and opportunities that exist in their communities. This knowledge provides important information and context for the decisions local governments need to make.

1A Diversify inclusion throughout the process. Diverse participation in planning and engagement processes and representation in decision-making bodies is key to upholding the foundations listed above. Focus on reaching people who historically haven't been involved in planning processes and partner with a diversity of people and groups in your outreach and engagement – especially EJ and other priority populations.

1B Include people before key decisions are made. The people who are most impacted by a decision should be involved upfront in defining the problems or issues, and what solutions look like and accomplish for the community. Developing partnerships with local leaders who are working in an informal or formal capacity to support and advocate for the needs of people in their community (including understanding their needs, priorities, and competing pressures) can help provide connections to the community members you seek to engage and learn from. Allocate budget in your projects to compensate local leaders for their time and contributions.

1C Start with community priorities. What is important to EJ and other priority populations may be different than what is important to municipal officials or people who do not live in those communities. Respecting people's right to self-determination requires sharing – or even handing – control of decisions over to the people who must live with, or are supposed to benefit from, those decisions. Sharing decision-making in this way also has the benefit of building trust.

1D Honor the community capacity and expertise that exists already. Focus on the strengths, talents, skills, resources, and capacities that are found in a group of people or place and center those assets in your engagement. For example, many communities have already experienced the impacts of climate change and other unprecedented crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognize the community-driven assets that have been developed in response, such as the creation of community spaces, mutual aid networks, or methods for sharing information. Consider how you can leverage such assets for engagement and how you can work with community groups and organizations to support and expand on their existing work. Value lived expertise—knowledge that comes from direct experience—as critical insight for informing planning and decision-making.

1E **Use data and talk with people.** Data included in sources like the U.S. Census are important to start understanding the characteristics of vulnerability in your municipality. The GEAR online tool will provide you with access to some such data. However, prioritizing going into communities and talking to people is also essential; the data that is available on the people who live and work in the community may not be granular or detailed enough to fully understand the vulnerabilities people face, and it does not provide information on their priorities.

2. Make Inclusion and Accessibility a Priority

Fostering inclusion and accessibility means making sure that all persons regardless of race, gender identity, ability, ethnicity, economic status, nationality, or sexual orientation feel welcomed, respected, and empowered in shaping decisions related to projects and planning for their community.

2A **Go where people are and where they feel safe.** When reaching out to people who have traditionally been excluded from planning processes, prioritize going to where that community congregates or lives – and feels safe. This may include partnering with local organizations or community groups to attend or participate in existing events, or hosting pop-ups or talking to people in spaces where people gather –whether that's at a park or playground, the local diner, or farmers market. Consider partnering with social workers to find accessible meeting spots at schools, health clinics, or community organizations' offices. However, it is important to recognize and respect when going into a community's space is unwanted because of a lack of trust. In such cases, working with partners who are trusted by the community will help find ways to engage with respect and care.

2B **Use accessible and people-centered language.** Use clear and direct language that speaks to people's experience and define key words and concepts that may be unfamiliar. Avoid technical language, acronyms, and idioms (expressions like "it's raining cats and dogs") that require specialized knowledge or that are harder to translate across cultures and languages. Adopt language that addresses people first rather than the barriers or disadvantages an individual deals with in their life. (For example, use "people living with disabilities" instead of "disabled people," or "people experiencing homelessness" instead of "homeless people.")

2C **Provide translation and interpretation.** Make it common practice to translate materials into the most common languages spoken in your community other than English, and to provide language interpretation at events. When your primary focus is to reach a community who speaks a language other than English, hold the event in that language and provide interpretation for the English speakers. Many online platforms, such as Zoom, make live language interpretation possible by enabling separate audio channels for interpreters. There is a statewide contract municipalities may use to procure translation and interpretation vendors.

2D **Expand accessibility for all abilities**. Design documents that can be read by text-to-speech software for people who benefit from text being read aloud. Include closed captioning options in videos and online meeting platforms, and American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation when needed at in-person events. Many online platforms, such as Zoom, provide closed captioning options.

2E **Create multiple ways for people to get information or participate.** Hosting meetings and events at different times of the day, including weekends and evenings, can help accommodate different work schedules. Consider seasonal commitments like agricultural cycles and school schedules when picking event times. Using several different strategies will also help boost participation and meet cultural needs of different groups**.** Offer hybrid or virtual options for people to join online, or live-stream events through local access television or on platforms like Facebook Live. Other engagement options like surveys that can be completed at any time may also be good options to hear from people who are less likely to join a meeting or event.

2F **Include the whole family.** Provide childcare and meals during meetings to make it easier for parents, older siblings, and other caregivers to participate. Consider partnering with community organizations or municipal recreation centers that could help provide facilities or childcare. Tailor conversations to include youth, and when relevant, design family-friendly activities for people of all ages to participate.

2G **Make transportation easy for in-person events.** Selecting locations that are near public transportation stops and/or accessible by biking or walking makes it easier for people with disabilities and people with limited transportation options, including youth, to participate. Consider providing transportation vouchers to reduce the cost burden, or organizing a carpool or shuttle service to provide transportation access.

2H **Respect the cultural practices of your neighbors.** Equity-centered practice requires respecting and integrating the cultural practices of people of color, immigrants, and other groups who have been traditionally excluded or underrepresented in local government committees and decision-making. For example, this may mean that meetings begin with a meal and the agenda does not begin until the meal is over or that there is more time for conversation before addressing any agenda items. The additional time spent together provides the opportunity to build relationships outside of the specific project being worked on.

3. Foster Long-term Commitment

Equitable engagement is an ongoing process that involves developing relationships, shared understanding, and ways of working together based on mutual respect and trust. When thinking about engagement, consider how interactions and collaborations build on past experiences, contribute to stronger relationships beyond the immediate project, and support EJ and other priority populations participating in future planning projects or advisory committees.

3A **Take time to build relationships.** Many communities who have experienced long histories of exclusion, marginalization, and harm from government planning processes, including Black, Indigenous, and communities of color, people with low-income backgrounds, and people living with disabilities, hold well-founded skepticism about participating in government-related projects. It may take time to repair relationships and build trust. If initial outreach efforts are not successful, consider working with community partners to understand why, and what additional changes or steps can be taken to build trust and to make the interaction more valuable, inviting, or relevant to the community you are hoping to reach.

3B **Recognize historic harms.** Recognize the history of systemic bias and marginalization that has been perpetuated and has led to increased climate vulnerability for people living or working in your community. Finding ways to begin the process of redressing harm can sometimes feel overwhelming due to the enormity of the task. Starting small can help. All municipalities have various ways to tell history. These histories often get used as foundational narratives in documents like community plans, websites, and books or articles. However, most of these histories are one-sided and tend to reinforce a single perspective. One action to consider includes forming a working group

tasked with developing a more inclusive narrative. This could include working with Indigenous experts to understand their history of place and incorporating this perspective into the history of the town. This information could then be used on the website and any other future documents.

3C **Promote transparency.** Transparency is critical to building and maintaining relationships. A lack of participation in engagement efforts can often be the result of community members feeling like their input and voices are not being heard, or feeling like nothing ever comes of the input they provide. To address this problem, it is important to be clear about your engagement goals, how you expect to use the input provided by the community, and to follow up to share the outcomes. Internally, it is also important to understand the staffing and financial resources that you have dedicated for engagement efforts to avoid overpromising to the public.

3D **Build relationships that are mutually beneficial.** Work to understand how the municipality can support community needs and goals and show up for community efforts. Consider how any engagement activity can support an ongoing relationship, not purely information collection to serve the project's goals. This could include:

- Working with community leaders to identify ways to support community capacity, including strategies aimed at developing or accessing new skills, knowledge, social networks, resources, or funding sources that will make it possible to continue resilience work or advocate for resilience work even after a project ends.
- Providing residents with greater clarity on local government functions, including why a particular department exists, how it serves the community, and how residents can advocate for or influence policy or program development.

3E **Integrate joy.** Outreach and engagement should be designed to be joyful, fun, and foster hope. Climate resilience work is already hard. Relationship building is hard. Making it fun helps to get through the hard parts.