


Guiding Principles for Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning



Inclusivity, accessibility, and shared decision-making are fundamental to developing resilient communities. Equitable engagement requires empowering marginalized voices to be co-creators in local planning efforts. Community expertise should be incorporated into every phase of planning, including how we define local needs and conditions, develop and implement solutions, prioritize resource allocations, and assess planning impacts.

Community Foundation Water Initiative NGO Cohort

Five foundations from across the state, known as the Community Foundation Water Initiative, have been working since 2015 to advance sustainable water management solutions. The Initiative partnered with Local Government Commission to develop a report on the [Equitable Integration of Water and Land Use](#) which was released in 2019. Shortly following the report, each foundation selected one nonprofit in their region to advance the report's regional recommendations and statewide strategies while building local capacity for coordination. This cohort of five NGOs collaborated for an entire year, culminating their work in these ***Guiding Principles for Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning***.

The principles described below will require decision-makers to adjust the policy frameworks that have traditionally been used within our systems and institutions. **A status quo that leaves Californians without access to affordable homes, safe drinking water, economic opportunity, and healthy communities is not an option.** Inequity and racial injustice impacts every facet of how our communities operate and live. We must redefine what it means for governments to equitably and authentically engage, with a focus on building local community capacity and providing the resources and support necessary for marginalized groups to actively participate.



We recognize that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to community engagement, however using these principles may guide you in how to best adapt to your community’s unique characteristics. These principles have been elevated in the equity work of many organizations and the decades of experience within this cohort. They speak from the perspective of local organizations actively building relationships with communities and working to shape decisions for the long-term. These principles should be considered by public agencies, funders, and organizations responsible for local resource management and planning.

1. Acknowledge and re-evaluate previous histories of inequitable decision-making.

Historically, power has not been shared with Black and Brown communities, resulting in decisions that disproportionately burden these communities. Recognize that more time and effort will be required to build trust in communities who have felt continuously overlooked or unheard. Clearly define how decisions will be made moving forward and the role of each organization involved. Identify and share where community members can engage in the process, and outline how your agency intends to do the work to seek authentic input. Work with community members to see if and how engagement processes can be improved.

Identify and acknowledge how previous work, as an organization or sector, has perpetuated structural racism and the disenfranchisement of communities of color. **Be honest about the lack of results from past efforts** and assess the racial and socioeconomic impact of prior policies and investments.

Identify how internal policies address systemic inequities, or if they fail to do so. Potential actions may include reviewing hiring processes and criteria for selecting project partners, equity education for staff, training on how to apply equity tools to planning, and ongoing conversations with community leaders to better understand local conditions.

Look beyond median household income to define marginalized communities. Avoid using the term “disadvantaged” and consider other more precise terms - underrepresented, overburdened, structurally disenfranchised - depending on the situation. Use CalEnviroScreen, Healthy Places Index, CDPH’s Climate Change and Health Vulnerability Indicators, and other tools to ensure a transparent and shared understanding of marginalized communities. Definitions must be vetted by community leaders prior to adoption. *For more information, check out: [Defining Vulnerable Communities In the Context of Climate Adaptation](#).*

2. Require all planning processes, projects, and/or grantees to develop a plan for building authentic community relationships.

Engagement plans must include:

- Community outreach channels, highlighting those already utilized by the community members;
- Plans for language and literacy needs in scope, budget, and timeline to prioritize meaningful engagement;
- Opportunities for multiple forms of public input (written, verbal, surveys, etc.) that allow people to interact in whatever format is best for them;
- Identified feedback loops to share progress and receive community guidance on how to improve outreach efforts.

An engagement plan should be a living document with built-in flexibility for unforeseen circumstances, e.g., adapting engagement to a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The goal should be to increase equity, accessibility, and inclusivity. Work with community members to see if and how engagement processes can be improved.

Engagement plans should be part of a larger action plan, which is:

Clear - with well-defined, specific, and digestible goals and strategies

Measurable - with defined objectives that are able to be tracked

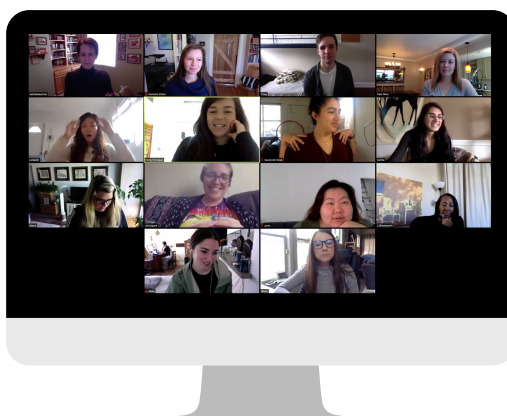
Realistic - given existing capacities & structure

Focused - with the desired outcomes at the forefront

Managed - with clearly assigned roles & responsibilities



Resource Tip: For best practices on engaging communities online, check out LGC's [Virtual Engagement Guide](#)



3. Increase and promote accessibility to public meetings, whether online or in-person.

The key is ***not assuming what works best for the community***. Work with leaders from community-based organizations to identify accessibility barriers and communication needs; and proactively plan meetings with accommodations, translation services, and assistive technologies that are inclusive to the community.

Consult communities directly about the barriers they face to participating; including public meeting times and locations, language access, childcare, transportation, literacy, adequate public meeting notice, or other socioeconomic challenges.

Ensure meetings are fully accessible regardless of race, language, socioeconomic status, age, size, ability or disability.



If broadband is an issue, consider other low-internet bandwidth options, phone call-in participation, or mail-in feedback. If technological literacy is a barrier, use traditional media (flyers, paper surveys, postcards).

Conduct virtual outreach where communities are already active online (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Next Door, etc.). Always provide meeting recordings with timestamps for video events.



Where possible, provide funding (honorariums or stipends) that will encourage and reward recurring participation.

Provide live interpretive translation services. Never rely on translation apps, which cannot match the tone of the original resource.



Partner with community organizations to ensure that meeting materials and content are developed **with the goal of having communities being able to shape the vision and decisions within their community.**

Reduce the amount of technical language and exploring different ways to communicate information (infographics, polling, build your own community). Professional jargon creates a barrier for the community and hinders coordination.

Provide multiple avenues for communities to engage in public meetings (e.g., attending in-person or virtually, watching a recording, submit written or emailed public comments, mail-in postcard, etc). Ensure that input opportunities are broadcasted through multiple channels (newsletters, social media, radio, etc).

4. Foster two-way communication and reciprocity with your community.



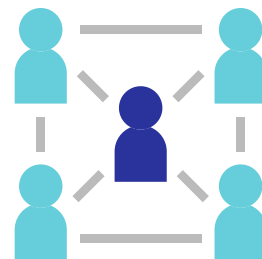
The goal should be to improve dialogue and understanding that allows communities to share their perspective and allow decision-makers to learn something directly from the community. This will require a process that incorporates recurring dialogue and holds space for disagreement to allow for discussion on new possibilities.

Communities may come to the table with different needs than anticipated, and agencies should encourage locals to share their concerns, strengths, and needs. **Explore how a multi-benefit approach can address multiple issues holistically** (e.g., an agency might be seeking input on bike lanes, but the community is concerned with urban heat and tree shade; the proposed project may be able to address both needs).

When an individual or group provides input, identify how the agency will respond to feedback and **how input altered the outcomes of the project, concept, or plan**. Receiving community input without responding to it can be detrimental to relationship-building, now and in the future.

5. Focus on building relationships with local organizations or informal groups that are already engaging with marginalized communities.

Partner with and fund local non-profits to expand education and build local capacity to engage in public processes. Community based organizations work in, and have long-standing networks in the target communities, and are far more effective than local governments at engaging the community base.



Local representatives on steering committees and technical advisory committees should be provided a stipend for their time. Community-based organizations are often expected to represent or mobilize their communities without compensation for their time and efforts.

Cultivate advocates, particularly youth leaders, and build their capacity to engage and educate the community.

Identify cultural brokers within the community and work with them to develop shared resources and educational materials to improve community participation in local planning. Cultural leaders should be compensated for their time and efforts in supporting local planning.

6. Coordinate with partner agencies and across internal departments to leverage resources, staff, and data to address engagement fatigue.

Agencies and departments should coordinate decision-making, and the engagement associated with that decision-making, to maximize effectiveness and address community concerns collaboratively. This collaboration should be across sectors and jurisdictions, where possible. For example, conversations about new housing developments should include water resource managers to help the community better understand the water-related impacts of land-use decisions.



Key Opportunities

- **Regional Community Needs Assessment**

Local and regional agencies can leverage resources by collaborating on large-scale community assessments, such as the L.A. County Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment, to inform future funding and address localized inequities.

- **Incentivize Collaboration Through Funding**

Governments and funders should promote grant guidelines that require cross-sector, inter-jurisdictional collaboration, such as 2020 Sustainable Groundwater Management Watershed Coordinator Grant Program.

- **Increase Coordination Capacity**

Building capacity for coordination is critical. The CivicSpark program places fellows with local governments to increase community resilience. This provides an opportunity for collaboration and coordination to address emerging environmental and social equity resilience challenges.

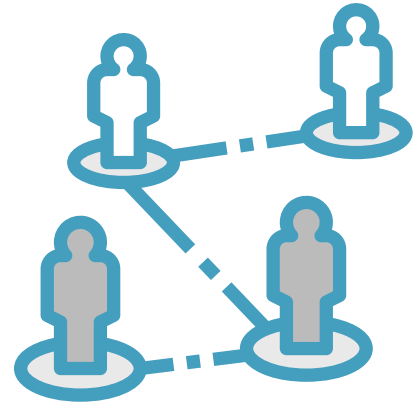
7. Governments must be responsive to the interconnectedness of community concerns.

Current events will impact the relationship between communities and their decision-makers. Dismissing local concerns that may appear unrelated to the plan or project can negatively impact the trust built between a public agency and the community. While planning is often departmentalized, community members see and experience the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social challenges. Authentic community engagement provides an opportunity to *learn from* the community and see where opportunities for coordination and integration are possible.

8. Establish an advisory committee, task force, or community decision-making body to inform local planning processes and support marginalized communities in owning and shaping environmental solutions.

These committees should consider equitable representation across sectors, ages, demographics, socioeconomic status, and interests so that the few environmental justice voices are not overpowered by other interests.

Counties and cities should engage locals that are less likely to participate in government processes because of structural barriers, such as unincorporated areas. Local governments can approach a pre-existing community task force or local council for input and decision-making.



There must be a shift from just “giving input” to **communities shaping decisions**; develop a structure in which communities have a clear role in decision-making.



The Guiding Principles for Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning can help shift the current paradigm of community engagement. This process mobilizes community members into community leaders, building a long-lasting movement, using comprehensive approaches that guide the integration of water and land use in an equitable, inclusive, and accessible manner.

These principles were developed through the collaborative work of Local Government Commission and the CFWI NGO Cohort, which includes:

- *ClimatePlan: Chanell Fletcher, Executive Director; Nicole Cheng, CivicSpark*
- *Youth United for Community Action: Ofelia Bello, Executive Director; Caitlin Macomber, CivicSpark*
- *Fresnoland: Danielle Bergstrom, Executive Director*
- *Nature for All: Belinda Faustinos, Executive Director; Bryan Matsumoto, Program Organizer*
- *Anza-Borrego Foundation: Brianna Fordem, Executive Director; Meet Panchal, CivicSpark*



CASE STUDIES

Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning

Collaborative Planning in Borrego Springs

This unincorporated community in San Diego County is completely reliant on groundwater. Under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, Borrego has to reduce their groundwater pumping by 75% over the next 20 years. Historically, land use planning by the County and local water management have been divorced, but the community cannot achieve sustainability without coordinated planning.



Previous planning efforts led by decision-makers have not adequately or meaningfully engaged community members especially the LatinX community, leaving large gaps in planning efforts. Local community groups have elevated several opportunities for equitable engagement in Borrego Springs:

- *Hosting events in English & Spanish and creating bi-lingual educational materials and resources;*
- *Engaging existing formal and Informal networks early on;*
- *Creating job opportunities for young Borregans and empowering young leaders to Invest In and shape the community's future; and*
- *Coordinating water and land-use decision-making that meets the needs of all community members, and ensures a reliable water supply for generations to come.*

Find out about the Anza-Borrego Foundation at www.theabf.org.

For information on integrated planning in Borrego Springs, go to www.lgc.org/borrego-springs

The Fresnoland Lab at the Fresno Bee

Fresno is one of California's fastest-growing regions, yet we haven't figured out yet how to harness our growth to better support the communities and neighborhoods that have long existed in the region. Where we build new infrastructure, housing, and services says a lot about what neighborhoods we prioritize the most.



The Fresnoland Lab seeks to investigate, discuss potential solutions, and engage those that have the most at stake in driving the conversation. The Lab is publishing a series of stories about the impacts of inequity in water access, affordability, and supply; sharing opportunities people have to advocate for themselves and their communities, and identifying potential solutions to some of the water inequities in the Central San Joaquin Valley. Read the stories at www.fresnobee.com/fresnoland.

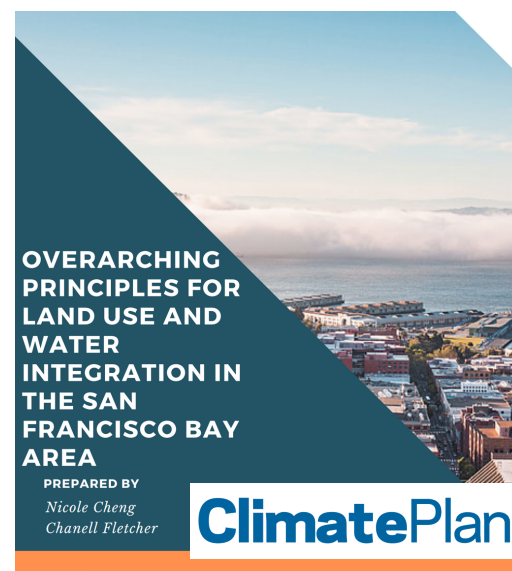
CASE STUDIES

Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning

Integrating Planning Efforts In the San Francisco Bay Area

ClimatePlan has recognized how water supply and water affordability are connected to land-use decisions in the Bay Area, and how vital it is to connect these water decisions to ClimatePlan's holistic vision of connecting transportation, land-use, housing, and climate decisions and grounding these decisions in community voice.

*Based on their research, ClimatePlan has created a comprehensive report for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments on Overarching Principles for Land Use and Water Integration in the San Francisco Bay Area. This research, and its recommendations, are focused on the San Francisco Bay Area's regional transportation plan, Plan Bay Area 2050. Check out [**ClimatePlan.org**](https://climateplan.org).*



Read the report

Community Engagement Gaps



In the Silicon Valley, there are many opportunities for people to give feedback and input, from climate action planning to residential and commercial development projects. However, this is a big part of the challenge to integrating land-use and water. Not only do these conversations that deeply involve land-use and water planning occur in silos, in parallel with one another, but also community members get spread thin across all of these important discussions. As we all know, government, real estate, etc. have actively divested from communities of color through redlining and environmental racism. Now these purposely designed long-standing racial inequities must be addressed.

*The way in which communities are engaged is deeply problematic. It's extremely seldom that the most impacted communities get to co-plan a project or get any decision-making power. Marginalized community members are consistently asked to "come to the table" to attend meetings in order to "check off" the box of engagement requirements. While opportunities to participate in the region may be abundant, it doesn't mean community members feel heard. There has been a lack of transparency in information, hindering the community from understanding issues and updates. This inherently excludes community members from having any decision-making power in these processes. Read more about YUCA at [**www.youthunited.net**](https://www.youthunited.net).*

CASE STUDIES

Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning

Community Advocacy & Leadership Development

Municipalities and agencies need to pivot to a community-centered practice of Inclusive, collaborative planning. Making decisions without the leadership of people most impacted results in myopic planning, continued unmet needs, and a lack of community ownership.



This is playing out with the new Safe Clean Water Program, a \$300 million/year taxpayer-funded measure to increase stormwater capture and water quality projects across the region. However, like many state and local funding measures, it lacks specificity around community engagement. So the result has been very little deep engagement, with disadvantaged communities in particular. Through the Our Water LA Coalition's advocacy, specific requirements have been successfully embedded to ensure it benefits underserved communities, engages communities and builds local support.

Nature for All also teaches classes about civics, park needs, watershed planning, and advocacy in our Leadership Academy, so residents gain the skills to secure equitable investments in their communities. One of the graduates, lives in a very park-poor part of the County, and helped expose that public engagement for a proposed regional stormwater project at the high school field was completely inadequate. She mobilized the school board, got community members to testify at numerous meetings, and got the community to a much better place. Because the County Public Works was put on the spot, they have committed to stronger engagement and collaboration with the high school and neighbors. The project is approved with \$31 million dollars of funding, and stakeholders are activated to ensure a model joint-use, green infrastructure park that serves the community's needs. More information at www.lanatureforall.org.