

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Community Participation in the Environmental Decision-Making Process: Can It Reduce Disproportionate Impact?

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Environmental health exposures impose a disproportionate burden on low-income populations and communities of color. Although many factors contribute to this inequitable impact, one important influence is the ability of such communities to participate in making public policy decisions about environmental health. In this report, we seek to describe and analyze the characteristics of communities that contribute to their capacity to participate in making environmental decisions and of environmental policy decision making processes that invite or discourage such. The goal is to identify steps that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) can take to design programs and policies that achieve more meaningful participation.

Previous analyses have identified 10 important domains of action to strengthen community capacity: leadership, participation, skills, resources, social and organizational networks, sense of community, understanding of community history, community power, critical reflection, and community values. Our review of the specific literature on environmental justice and disparate exposures suggested three additional domains that are particularly promising for interventions: community cohesion, language capacity, and community information. In addressing all of these domains, we proposed five basic strategies for enhancing community capacity: training and technology transfer, technical assistance, community-based participatory research, empowerment approaches, and community organizing/social action.

Each of these capacity-building strategies offers some promise for helping environmental justice communities address their concerns. Our review suggests that many choices from bottom-up and Agency-down intervention are available to increase capacity. Careful documentation and evaluation of such efforts will help to establish a systematic body of knowledge that can help communities to make informed choices and match interventions to community contexts.

To more effectively reduce disparate environmental exposure and engage the public in making environmental policy decisions, we recommend that EPA engage relevant constituencies in participation processes early, provide these constituencies with the resources and information that can contribute to effective participation, and ensure that the outcomes reflect participation.

By strengthening community capacity, advancing authentic participation, and building democratic power, it may be possible to alter the demonstrated pattern of disparities that underlies the environmental “riskscape” of America—not by redistributing risk but by minimizing it in each of our communities. Thus, strengthening participation—by helping communities develop the capacities needed to be effective in such processes and by changing Agency practices to better incorporate such voices—will be a key and proper task for EPA in the years ahead.