

Building Trust in Environmental Justice Communities

A history of racist violence and discriminatory housing policies in the United States created highly segregated communities of color whose voices were ignored when powerful interests sought to build power plants and factories there. As a result, these communities—sometimes referred to as “environmental justice communities”—are burdened with a disproportionate share of health impacts from air and water pollution.

Building relationships and trust is a critical first step for scientists doing work in these communities. Trust is gained by showing you are prepared to listen and work to understand the environmental injustices they face, and that you are committed to working together to meet their needs. Below are some strategies that will help.

1. **Do your research.** Study all aspects of the issue before meeting with affected stakeholders. Most important is to know the demographics of the area, specific neighborhoods, and the people affected by the injustice. Information can be gathered from blogs, Facebook pages, local government websites, news stories, and YouTube videos. Community leaders, local clergy, and school officials are excellent sources of information about people’s sentiments, which will help you assess the top priorities that need to be addressed. If you’re from a local institution, find out if anyone from the institution has previously partnered with the community, and don’t expect your institution’s view of the work to be the same as the community’s. There may be historical tensions or issues that have not engendered confidence in the institution. Be willing to hear that history and show how you will be different, while acknowledging that you will probably make mistakes, will listen to feedback, and address your errors.
 2. **Meet with your partners face to face.** Make an appointment to sit down with local stakeholders as early as possible. Mostly listen at the first meeting and avoid jumping right into an action plan. Use this meeting to learn more about the facts, opinions, experiences, and feelings of the people affected. It is also important to identify potential power struggles between stakeholder groups or individuals, which you will want to keep in mind when thinking about how people will work together. Keep in touch through email, social media, meeting apps, and messaging apps.
 3. **Communicate what’s at stake and how people’s input will be used.** Discussions are most productive when stakeholders get answers to the following questions:
 - Why is it important that they’re here?
 - Is there anybody listening with empathy?
 - Why should they contribute ideas?
 - Who will “own” or have access to whatever information is collected or materials that are created?
 - How does your scientific knowledge contribute to action?
- Let the stakeholders know which of their ideas you’d like to include in the action plan, and design further communications based around their priorities.
4. **Maintain the momentum.** Set up a website, group chat, or whatever is easiest for the community to share concerns and ideas. Ask for invitations to discuss the issues at local events or regularly scheduled civic or community group meetings frequented by the affected stakeholders.
 5. **Make communications and meetings accessible to people with various needs.** Provide accommodations, food, childcare, and translated materials if necessary, and schedule meetings in locations and at times that will work for single-parent families, people from different religions, and people who lack access to personal or reliable transportation.
 6. **Communicate effectively.** Keep your explanations simple, avoid using scientific terminology, and use images to convey the message. People learn in different ways, so having resources that get the point across in multiple formats will help you reach the broadest possible audience. Visuals also stir emotions, which can contribute to a more engaging conversation.
 7. **Integrate educational materials.** Make sure to provide context that would be helpful for people new to the issue. And keep in mind that many people who aren’t educated in your area of expertise will feel uncomfortable expressing an opinion about it, even when their lived experience should hold weight as well.
 8. **Be patient.** It is crucial to be open-minded to the various responses you receive. A critical question to ask up front is “What are your priorities?” Stakeholders know what’s important to them, so by starting with this question you set a tone that lets people know you care about their needs and will use their answers to shape what comes next. Plus, this is a great way to keep stakeholders engaged and more likely to contribute to ongoing discussions.
 9. **Work with community leaders to promote activities.** Remember that members of an environmental justice community often feel disenfranchised and do not trust their government officials. Church leaders, civic groups, community center directors, free clinics, and school board officers are good resources for promoting your work and building trust.

Reducing Tensions when Working on a Sensitive Subject

You can expect some amount of tension when working on any environmental justice issue. If not defused, this tension—which often arises from a difference of opinion between the scientist and the community on the root cause of the issue—can lead to conflict that prevents a productive dialogue.

The best way to navigate tensions is to be a deliberate listener. As discussed in “Deliberative Dialogue to Expand Civic Engagement” by Martha L. McCoy and Patrick L. Scully (search by last names under “Big Picture Tools” at ncdd.org/rc), this technique emphasizes listening to and understanding the views of the affected stakeholders, drawing conclusions without making immediate comments. First discuss each stakeholder’s comments with them and then provide feedback in the context of their input. Most importantly, acknowledge if you have made a mistake or caused harm, and spend time repairing trust from a place of humility and appreciation for the work and the community.

Another source of tension can be power struggles between stakeholders. Try to recognize the different “camps” and provide an opportunity for all of them to contribute equally. Creating community guidelines and/or inviting an experienced facilitator to lead conversations can avoid having one person or group take over the discussion. You should also avoid getting in the middle of a power struggle or contributing to it in any way by taking sides, which will diminish your effectiveness in proposing strategies and outcomes. Maintain an unbiased position and be transparent about your reasoning, what you expect to contribute, and who you are affiliated with. Also, be honest with the stakeholders about your own feelings and motivations.

It’s not always possible to eliminate conflict and power struggles. Just stay focused on the ultimate goal: resolving the problem that is affecting everyone in the community.

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Additional Resources

AAAS Scientific Responsibility, Human Rights & Law Program

<https://www.aaas.org/programs/scientific-responsibility-human-rights-law>

Ecological Society of America Environmental Justice Section Resources

<https://www.esa.org/enjustice2/projects/community-ecologist-partnerships/resources>

EPA Community-Based Federal Environmental Justice Guide

<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice/community-based-federal-environmental-justice-resource-guide>

NAACP Environmental and Climate Justice Resource Organizations

<https://www.naacp.org/climate-justice-resources/resource-organizations>

National Humanities Center “Environmental Justice for All”

<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuseland/essays/envjust.htm>

North American Association for Environmental Education Environmental Justice Resources

<https://naaee.org/eeepro/resources/environmental-justice-resources>

Project Bridge

<http://www.projbridge.org/advocacy-toolkit.html>

Racial Equity Tools “Environmental Justice

<https://www.racialequitytools.org/plan/issues/environmental-justice>

Sustainable Communities Online Environmental Justice Center

<https://www.sustainable.org/creating-community/justice-a-equity/574-environmental-justice-resource-center-ejrc>

Union of Concerned Scientists Advocacy Tools

<https://www.ucsusa.org/best-resources-for-science-advocates>