

Inclusive Community Engagement Primer

Guidance to improve community engagement in implementing Climate Smart Community actions.



Inclusive community engagement is essential for successful environmental decision-making at the local level. The New York State Climate Smart Communities Program seeks to guide local governments in their community engagement efforts, particularly for inclusion of [Disadvantaged Communities \(DAC\)](#). Only through the leadership of those most affected by the climate crisis and environmental pollution can environmental and climate justice be achieved.

In this primer, you will:

- Learn concepts for the meaningful inclusion of these populations in your local climate and environmental planning activities.
- Be introduced to the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, a framework that visualizes the journey from community marginalization and harm to community empowerment and voice in decision-making.

- Learn best practices for inclusive community engagement that will challenge when, how, and with whom you engage.
- And be presented with examples and evaluation tools that demonstrate how to incorporate these practices into your community's CSC Certification actions.

Why Inclusive Community Engagement?

Acknowledging the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Disadvantaged Communities is essential for successful climate and environmental planning at the local level. Without acknowledgment,

RESOURCE:

explore the exercise on page 85 of the USDN's: [From Community Engagement to Ownership for additional self-assessment](#)

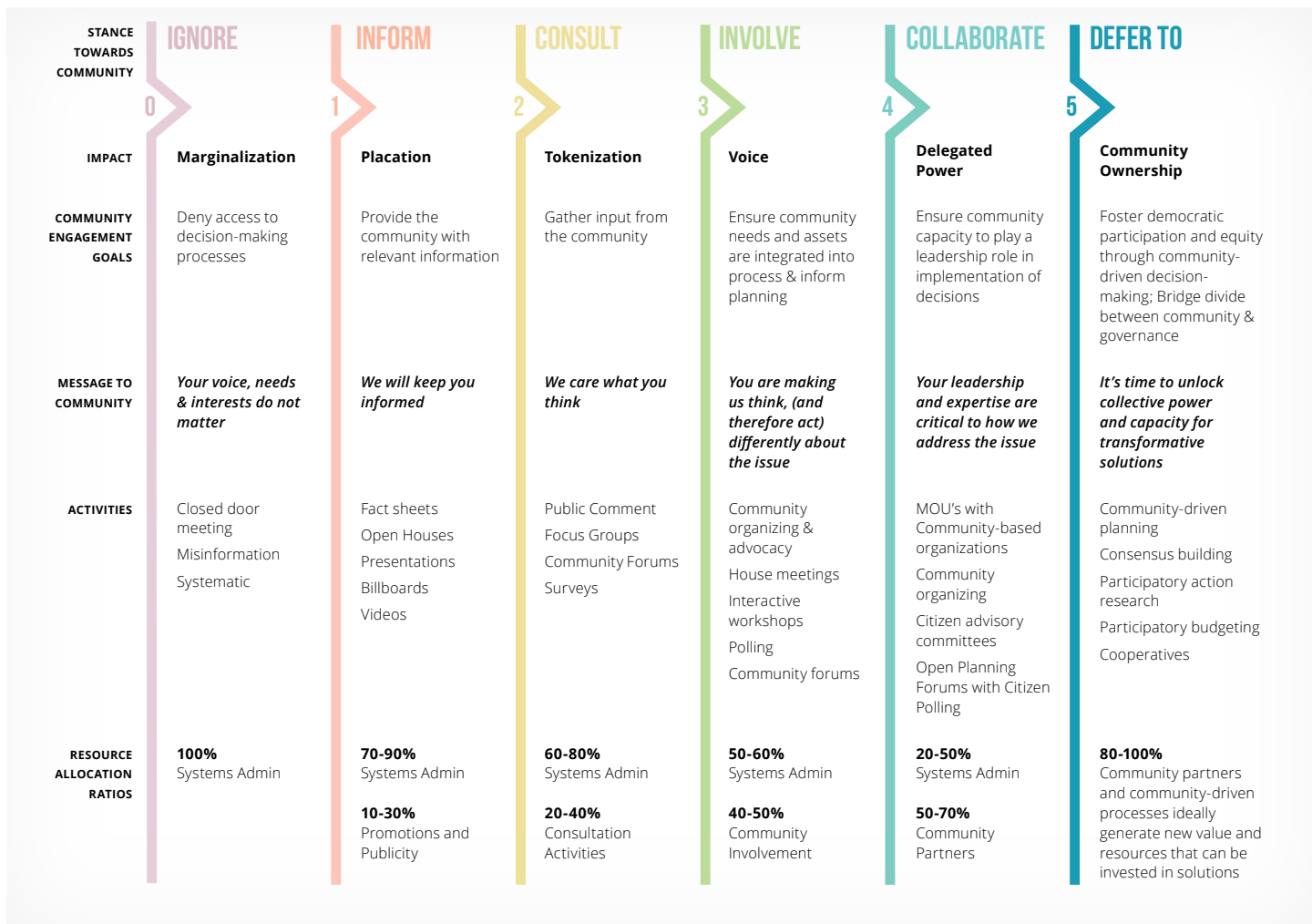


Figure 1. The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership. Each level of the Spectrum is represented by a column in the above table. Each column is headed by the municipality's stance towards the community and how this stance leads to certain impacts, the goals associated with that stance, the message this sends to the community, as well as the activities commonly associated with these community engagement activities (i.e. closed-door meetings are associated with the stance "Ignore"). Source: Facilitating Power by Rosa Gonzalez.

marginalization of these communities can occur by default. Committing to inclusive community engagement is the first step towards addressing this marginalization that perpetuates environmental and climate injustice.

The practice of inclusive community engagement has the power to create community buy-in for climate and environmental initiatives in addition to providing a forum to address past environmental harms. Climate Smart actions, when pursued using the concepts and best practices of inclusive community engagement, can interrupt the default marginalization of Disadvantaged Communities and create community ownership over projects.

Engaging Your Community is a Learning Process

Those municipalities that have successfully reached

a point of community ownership over planning and projects have done so through a gradual process of deepening engagement. The intended purpose of this resource is to assist municipalities in identifying the next steps they can take to deepen their community involvement.

Patience is key in this work. It takes persistence through multiple attempts to get people's attention and build trust, and not all approaches will work in every community.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (The Spectrum) is a framework that allows municipalities to reflect on and self-assess the way they engage community members around

CSC actions. The framework has its roots in “[A Ladder of Citizen Participation](#),” written by Sherry Arnstein that describes how buzzwords and “empty rituals” in community engagement processes perpetuate desired outcomes of those who have traditionally held power. A community engagement process that redistributes power to residents and disadvantaged communities, particularly those that are low income and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), is the means by which they can share in the benefits of the Climate Smart Communities program.

The Spectrum discussed in this primer was developed by Rosa González of Facilitating Power in 2020, building off Arnstein’s Ladder. It is particularly helpful for guiding municipalities in implementing CSC actions that are rooted in equity and racial justice. González demonstrates a process by which communities can self-assess their engagement activities, acknowledge harm from marginalization, and establish a path forward that breaks down barriers, redistributes power, and envisions a sustainable future for all residents.

The Spectrum includes examples of common language, activities, and outcomes based on six levels of engagement, ranging from “Ignore” which leads to marginalization to “Defer To” which builds community ownership (Figure 1). These levels of engagement can lead to varying impacts in the community ranging from Marginalization where access to decision making is denied to Community Ownership where community members are truly contributing to the development and execution of these actions.

This model recognizes top-down systems that create more risk for Disadvantaged Communities by excluding them from decision making processes and the benefits of climate action. The CSC program encourages participating municipalities to reflect on their community engagement activities taken as part of CSC actions. Where would these activities land in the spectrum? The Spectrum provides a pathway through reflection and self-assessment to build more inclusive, nuanced, and context-driven Climate Smart Communities across New York State.

This tool has been incorporated into community decision-making processes across the United States by entities such as the State of Oregon Department of Education and cities such as Santa Rosa, CA, Washington, DC, Portland, OR, Providence, RI and Seattle, WA. [The Urban Sustainability Directors Network’s \(USDN\): From Community Engagement to Ownership](#) outlines case studies for four of these cities and provide clear examples of how this framework can impact a community’s path toward equity and community ownership.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Participatory budgeting is a process in which municipal officials set aside a portion of the budget, engage community members in a facilitated project brainstorm, and then put the top generated ideas to vote by the community.

The Newburgh Urban Farm and Food Initiative (NUFFI), received a USDA grant to complete a comprehensive plan for urban agriculture in the City of Newburgh. The project will take stock of the food system and agricultural capacity of the city of nearly 30,000 people in the mid-Hudson Valley. NUFFI, which is a grassroots, nonprofit organization, hired a project manager to coordinate the effort.

In the grant proposal, NUFFI requested money to provide stipends to community members that are representative of the City’s geography and diversity to serve as “Ward Ambassadors”. These community members serve as a bridge between the project manager, a Task Force of 30 community leaders, and the residents of the city’s four wards. In addition to the Ward Ambassadors, a Youth Ambassador will reach out to youth in the city to connect them with the project and make sure their voice is elevated throughout the project.

NUFFI understood that it was important to have a neighbor, and even perhaps a friend, be the person that communicates with residents about their food needs, the capacity they have as a community to grow food in their city, and their willingness to interact with a larger network of government, community organizations, and other residents to get healthy, local food. While the project manager is a capable and passionate advocate, distributing the community engagement activities to people that are in a relatable situation with residents is key to having comfortable and honest communications around people’s needs and desires.

Reflect on Your Community's Engagement

Self-reflection is a great way to assess where your municipality currently stands. [The Spectrum of Community Engagement](#) contains exercises for self-assessment on pages 6-7. These questions will help you understand the Spectrum through your local context. Some questions encourage you to take a historical look at your region. The questions will guide you through each level of the Spectrum, from "Ignore" to "Defer to". Pages 8-11 can be used as a tool for planning and goal setting, either for a single campaign or for your work more generally.

Best Practices for Inclusive Community Engagement

Your community will be challenged on its journey through the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership. In your effort to move from one level to another you will be challenged to rethink when, how, and with whom you engage. Refer to the following best practices for inclusive community engagement as you develop your next community project or plan.

When do we involve community members?

The earlier the better. Bring community members into the process at the very beginning before projects and consultants have been selected.

Even better, approach community members before you form an agenda. Allow them to set municipal priorities by drawing on their lived experience.

Who do we engage with?

Look outside your list of traditional stakeholders.

Seek out representatives trusted by the community who can be a liaison with the local government especially when trust has been broken.

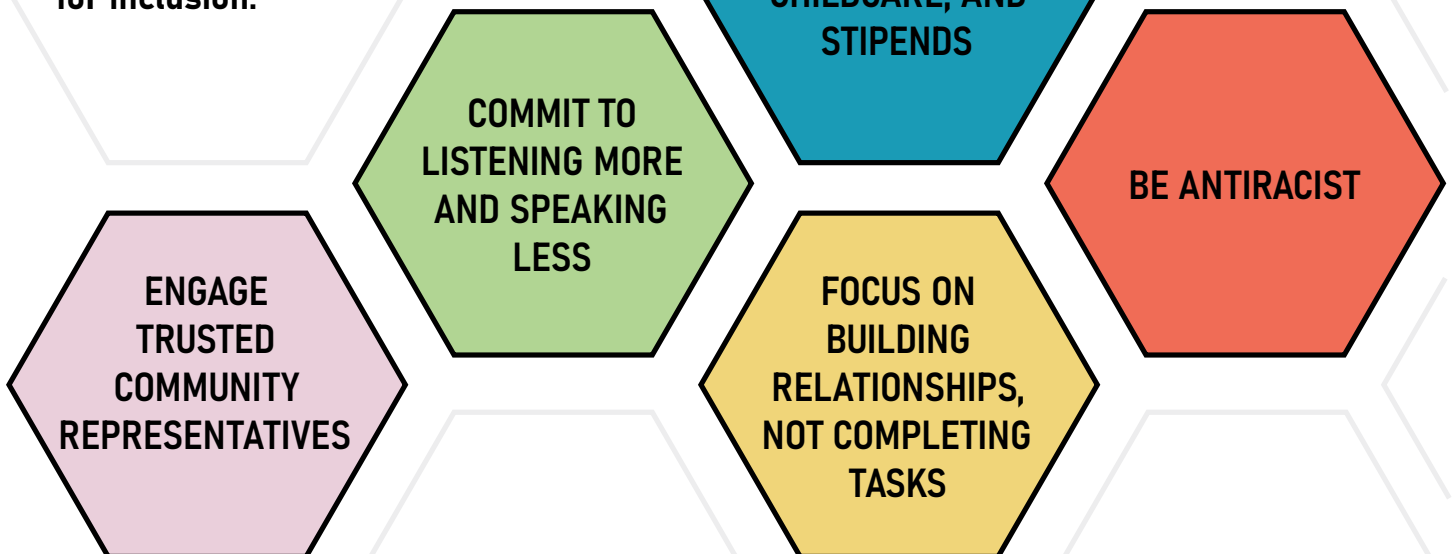
How should we engage with our community?

- Make events more accessible to all and commit to a process-oriented approach.
- Offer multiple times and locations where events can occur.
- Hold events in locations such as a community center, local nonprofit headquarters, or places of worship.
- Provide a way to participate virtually.
- Once at the event, commit to listening and building relationships above all else.

Reflection:

- Refer to the table on page 2.
- Describe an engagement activity you organized that might fall into **Column 2/Consult**.
- How would you move to **Column 3/Involve**?
- Reflect on your protocols, and due diligence, where do these fall on the spectrum?

Some best practices for inclusion:



Example: Developing a Watershed-Based Flood Mitigation Plan

CONSULT

Tokenization

- Open house on draft plan
- Advertised on Town website
- Held at Town Hall
- Little consultant time left
- Input posted on website

INVOLVE

Voice

- Public forum early in process
- Engage hard to reach community members
- Forum eases participation
- Additional avenues for participation
- Process informs plan
- Follow up input

Moving from Consult to Involve

Fortunately, many communities have intentionally moved away from a toxic engagement framework of ignoring and marginalizing community members. They may share information through fact sheets or videos or even ask for public comment—but many get stuck at this level and don't incorporate community voices into decision-making processes.

Apart from "Ignore", each level of the Spectrum is necessary to travel through to reach community-ownership and support communities in taking the lead on initiatives. Regardless of where a community may start, the purpose is to move forward rather than to stay in the same place, adding to the tools available in engaging with community members.

Here, we go through an example of how a community pursuing CSC certification might get unstuck and move away from treating the public with a tokenizing—or "check the box"—consultation role and toward a more equitable engagement process that involves community members, allowing them a voice in a process or project. Let's consider a community working with a consultant to create a Watershed-based Flood Mitigation Plan.

At the "Consult" level, community members are informed about the plan for the first time through an open house to present a draft that has already been created. Then, community input is gathered and documented by the consultants and/or municipal officials. The open house is held at the town hall



and advertised on the town website. The consultants developing the plan have used up most of their budget before the open house. Input from the meeting is collected and posted on the town website.

Conversely, at the “Involve” level, start with a diverse, community-based advisory group engaged from the beginning of the project. Follow up with a well-advertised forum and alternative means of participation to inform the process before a draft plan is created. This public input could be used to identify vulnerable assets and areas of concern as well as incorporate local knowledge about flooding. Equitable engagement best practices are followed, including holding the forum at a local community center and

RESOURCE:

Groundwork USA tips for community engagement

additional avenues of participation are used—white boards in local libraries or online participatory mapping. That information would be incorporated into the analysis and then shared again in a public forum. In this scenario, a portion of the consultants time would be spent gathering public input before a draft is ever created.

This shift from “Consult” to “Involve” does not go all the way to “Collaborate” or “Defer to” but is a large shift away from tokenization to giving community members a voice. The effort and budget is relatively small to make this shift--it primarily takes thinking ahead and coordination with local stakeholders.

How do I use this primer and its resources?

This primer should be used in conjunction with certain planning actions within The CSC Certification Program. The concepts and best practices you have learned here are most applicable to planning actions that impact community members. These include but are not limited to:

- PE2 Community Climate Action Plan
- PE6 Comprehensive Plan with Sustainability Elements
- PE7 Climate Vulnerability Assessment
- PE7 Climate Adaptation Plan
- PE8 Green Economic Development Plans

Conclusion

Achieving climate justice at the local level is the next frontier for any certified Climate Smart Community. The [NY Climate Act](#) directs state agencies and authorities to realize benefits for Disadvantaged Communities through their funding programs. However, the most direct route for achieving climate justice exists at the local level. It is at this level that community members have their most direct interface with government officials. This experience can be empowering or marginalizing depending on the stance, message, and activities of the local government. By practicing inclusive community engagement, local governments can move the needle towards more empowering experiences that build trust and strengthen relationships between local officials and community members.

