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Centering Communities: Navigating Clean Energy with Care

The United States must rapidly expand renewable energy to affordably and reliably meet energy demand while tackling climate change. Achieving this transition in a way that benefits both people and nature requires thoughtful clean energy project planning that reflects local priorities and values.

At The Nature Conservancy, we believe that it is possible to accelerate clean energy by improving outcomes for nature and people. A clean energy transition that fairly balances benefits to climate, conservation, and communities—the 3Cs—depends on renewable energy project development that is inclusive, transparent and reflective of local priorities.¹

This guide highlights practical approaches for developers, community leaders, local governments, conservation practitioners and other decision-makers seeking to build more inclusive processes and better outcomes for communities.



¹ Boudet, H., Hazboun, S., Haggett, C. et al. Going slow to go fast: public response and engagement in renewable energy projects. *Nat. Rev. Clean Technol.* 1, 877-889 (2025). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44359-025-00116-3>

Potential Benefits of Community-Centered Renewable Energy Development

Many communities have been cautious or resistant about new solar and wind energy projects because of real and perceived impacts on land use, cultural resources and local economies. Centering inclusive community leadership can help address these concerns and create mutual value: projects advance more smoothly, developers gain stable social license and affected communities see tangible improvements in economic opportunity, land stewardship and quality of life.

This approach contributes to strengthening the country's energy transition while ensuring that the people most affected by development also equitably benefit from it. Some potential benefits include:²

- Creation of short-term site preparation and construction jobs, as well as long-term operations and maintenance positions.
- Workforce training programs for local communities.
- New revenue for communities from taxes or payment in lieu of taxes agreements, land leases, project agreements, etc.
- Economic growth from businesses attracted by new clean energy projects.
- Remediation and repurposing of contaminated or unproductive sites.
- Reduced air and water pollution, with potential health benefits for society in the short and long term.
- Preservation of natural and working lands in the area
- Reduced electricity costs (in some cases).
- Increased energy resilience and reliability from locally generated power.

Best Practices for Centering the Community

1. Approach Communities with Humility, Openness and Respect

Strengthen Your Capacity

- Examine and increase your knowledge, skills and capacity for engaging authentically with local communities and particularly groups representing overburdened or disadvantaged communities in the area.
- Expand capacity and skills in community-related planning and engagement.
- Develop robust plans for inclusive community engagement and benefits from the start of project planning. This includes engaging not only real or perceived leaders, but also sub-groups traditionally excluded from community governance.
- Commit to a project development timeline that aligns with inclusive community input processes.
- Build sufficient time and budget into project development to partner with impacted communities early, identify local priorities together and develop community benefit arrangements that reflect local needs.
- Understand the difference between community engagement (shared decision-making with affected communities), public relations (shaping public perception to support an organization's goals) and conflict management (addressing disagreements to prevent escalation and support resolution) and commit to high standards for each.
- Honor data sovereignty by respecting the right of communities to control their own data and ensure this sovereignty is upheld.

² US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). (2023, March 16). *RE-Powering Benefits Matrix*. RE-Powering America's Land. <https://www.epa.gov/re-powering/re-powering-benefits-matrix>

Support Community Participation

- Provide funding and access to expertise to help community members define project parameters they would support, including benefits. The Center for American Progress's [Guide to Rural and Tribal Capacity-Building Programs](#) highlights how rural and Tribal communities often need additional support to realize the benefits a project can bring.
- Recognize the power dynamics in terms of capacity to engage and the ultimate outcomes of the project.
- Facilitate networking with other communities that have received desired benefits and have embraced local clean energy development.
- Hold listening sessions, workshops and other meetings at times, locations and in modalities that will maximize community participation.
- Assist with transportation, childcare and meals to support participation by a broad range of community members.
- Value community expertise and compensate local experts fairly for their time and contributions to the process, especially representatives of overburdened, or disadvantaged communities and sub-groups. Support local community organizations to do local outreach.
- Develop events, communication materials, signage and engagement in relevant languages and provide interpretation where needed. Create events, layouts and visuals that are inclusive and accessible and consider different levels of literacy, mobility constraints and time availability.

2. Know the local lived histories and context of a community

- Use socioeconomic, environmental, health and other community data, such as that in the Clean Energy Compass, to understand community characteristics and burdens.
- Develop an understanding of the community's current and historical social and cultural landscapes as it relates to past infrastructure development.
- Talk to local leaders and community members about how the context shapes current realities. City council agendas might provide insights into the issues communities are facing.
- Use planning tools to identify lower-impact areas for development, such as landfills, brownfields or mine lands.

Be Transparent and Consistent

- Announce meetings and other forums for engagement early through a variety of communication mechanisms to maximize inclusive participation from broad groups of people.
- Respond to community outreach or questions in a timely manner. If progress on community engagement is contingent on project milestones, be transparent about gaps in communication.
- Be transparent about the potential benefits of the project as well as the potential tradeoffs, including how a project might impact different sub-groups within communities.
- Produce educational and informational material early, using clear language and avoiding jargon. Consider the different languages spoken and literacy levels in the community.
- Show the community how their input has guided decisions. Be transparent about decisions that do not reflect community priorities.



3. Acknowledge, share and balance power and benefits

Ensure Benefits for the Community

- Plan to engage in a negotiated benefits process, which may result in a Community Benefits Agreement or Community Impact Fund.
- Practice robust engagement with community stakeholders to arrive at mutually determined community benefits agreements. Throughout the process, evaluate whether community stakeholder representation is inclusive and fair.
- Strive to share benefits equitably across various stakeholder interests.
- Establish strong accountability and enforceability measures within community benefits agreements.
- Prioritize employing residents, utilizing local businesses as suppliers and subcontractors and contribute to workforce development opportunities.

Follow Through

- Create a **written** commitment to honor any agreements for the life of the project.
- Provide a point of contact for the life of project and plans for what will happen if the project is sold.
- Plan for handling conflicts or concerns that arise and document all contacts with the public.
- Have a decommissioning plan for the clean energy project.

Community Benefits Agreements

Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) codify the benefits to a community for a specific project and a defined period. CBAs are fundamental catalysts for realizing best practices and are highly valued tools for centering a community. Here are four core principles for effective CBAs:

- It is negotiated by a coalition that effectively represents the interests of those living in the impacted area including disadvantaged communities
- The CBA process is transparent, inclusive and accessible
- The terms provide specific, concrete and meaningful benefits and deliver what the community needs
- There are defined, formal enforcement mechanisms to ensure accountability

Building trust is often cited as the most important factor for effectively partnering with a community³

³ Susskind, L., Chun, J., Gant, A., Hodgkins, C., Cohen, J., & Lohmar, S. (2022). *Sources of opposition to renewable energy projects in the United States*. Energy Policy, 165. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2022.112922> Aitken, M., Haggett, C., & Rudolph, D. (2016). *Practices and rationales of community engagement with wind farms: awareness raising, consultation, empowerment*. Planning Theory and Practice, 17(4), 557-576. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2016.1218919>

Appendix A: Additional Resources to Center Communities

I. Community Engagement & Energy Equity Frameworks

These resources help developers and communities understand impacts, strengthen engagement and build shared decision-making power.

Social Life Cycle Assessment & Energy Justice

- **Social Life Cycle Assessment Framework** – Fortier et al.
A tool for evaluating energy justice impacts across a project's life cycle, including indicators such as community involvement in siting decisions, displacement patterns, cultural impacts and access to resources.

Community Identification & Power-Sharing

- **Conservation by Design – Interested Parties Module** – The Nature Conservancy. Helps teams identify relevant groups, assess who benefits or is harmed and co-design strategies with community partners.
- **Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership** – Facilitating Power. A pathway for moving beyond traditional engagement toward shared ownership and community power.

Community-Driven Engagement Practices

- **Community-Driven Engagement Toolkit** – Georgetown Climate Center. Recommendations for meaningful engagement with frontline communities at early decision-making stages.

Energy Justice Evaluation Tools

- **Energy Justice Scorecard** – Initiative for Energy Justice. Helps communities evaluate whether projects meaningfully include marginalized groups, remedy harms and deliver economic, social or health benefits.

II. Equitable Benefit-Sharing Resources

These resources support communities and developers in designing, negotiating and implementing Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs), Host Community Agreements and Community Benefits Plans.

Foundational Guides & Primers

- **Community Benefits Handbook** – Renewable Thermal Collaborative. A guide to help organizations navigate the process of community collaboration and equity-focused project planning.
- **Maximizing Community Co-Benefits Through Clean Energy Procurement** – Clean Energy Buyers Institute. Guidance for corporate clean energy buyers, developers and partners on how to integrate social equity into clean energy procurement.

Capacity, Legal & Negotiation Support

- **Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services** – Provides pro bono and sliding-scale legal counsel on environmental issues, including community benefits agreements.
- **Sustain Our Future Foundation** – Helps structure and implement community benefit funds that direct capital from large-scale infrastructure projects into locally defined priorities.

Organizing & Coalition Building

- **Community Benefits Resources** – PowerSwitch Action. Reports, policy guides, legal briefs and other tools.

Regional Models & Case Studies

- **ReImagine Appalachia** – Community resources specific to the Appalachian region, including CBA banks and guides to responsible development with community benefits.

Academic Resources & Databases

- **Community Benefits Agreements Database** – Columbia University Sabin Center. Expert insights and database of ~55 CBAs.
- **Energy Project Benefits Agreement Database** – California Forward and University of California Berkeley Possibility Lab. Includes 328 agreements across the energy supply chain, sortable by industry, supply chain phase, counterparty type, benefit type and community characteristics.

Energy Justice & Policy

- **Community Benefits Policy & Energy Justice** – Initiative for Energy Justice. Guidance on when CBAs are most useful, risks of institutionalizing CBAs and how to leverage them for energy justice.

III. Resources for Community Members

These resources are written for community members who are interested in learning more about the energy system and how they can effect change in their communities.

- **Citizens Toolkit** – Citizens Planning Institute. A guide by neighbors for neighbors about how to get things done in your neighborhood.
- **Utilities 101** – Initiative for Energy Justice. Covers the current electric utility landscape, the evolution of utilities and electrification, the future of electric utilities and how to make them more just and equitable.
- **People's Utility Justice Playbook** – Energy Democracy Project. Resources to help communities engage with local governments, utilities and developers.