



Recommendations for Meaningful Community Engagement in Clean Energy and Carbon Removal Projects

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The Aspen Institute and Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice hosted a three-day forum in October 2023 to discuss what *meaningful* community engagement looks like in decarbonization, net zero, and carbon dioxide removal (CDR) strategies in the United States. The forum provided space for environmental justice leaders and community groups to engage with policymakers and scientists to share how the deployment of clean energy projects is affecting their communities and to begin the process of collaborating on a new standard of community engagement. Throughout the discussion, participants returned to the topic of environmental justice, noting that it is not simply a goal to achieve, but rather a process that requires continuous evaluation and commitment, and highlighted the importance of learning how to best engage with communities directly from the communities.

The dialogue was prompted by the fact that many communities, particularly those that have suffered significant environmental injustices (i.e. polluted air, water), have been left out of conversations and disproportionately burdened by emerging efforts to meet decarbonization goals (i.e. building carbon removal pipelines). Given this history of wrongdoing, many communities have concerns about history repeating itself through the intended and unintended effects of new clean energy projects, specifically CDR technologies, where many unknowns and rushed timelines have prohibited any kind of meaningful trust building or reassurance. The conversation was also prompted by the increased federal funding for many of such new technologies and projects and [calls from scientists](#) that both technological and nature-based approaches to CDR are necessary to mitigate legacy emissions. In the U.S., the recent subsidies for CDR technologies have been delivered through tax credits and funding opportunities in the [Inflation Reduction Act \(IRA\)](#), [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law \(BIL\)](#), and federal procurement. As part of the BIL, the Department of Energy has launched the new Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations which announced the first two [Direct Air Capture \(DAC\) hubs to receive federal funding in Louisiana and Texas](#).

Questions remain about these technologies, however, which makes community engagement so essential. For example, when Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) is removed through these technological approaches, it needs to be broken down and sequestered underground, or utilized in products like cement. And when sequestered underground, it requires transportation through often contentious underground pipelines, so to reduce these pipelines, these DAC hubs should be cited where geographically and geologically appropriate in relation to the hub itself.

Further, states are applying for primacy to the EPA, which means state governments would be able to start approving projects like these, rather than the federal government, leading to the question of what happens when pipelines cross state lines?

In addition to concerns about these technologies being deployed equitably and safely, many participants expressed their concern that these technologies will not only extend the lifetime of existing harmful industries (i.e. oil and gas), but enable these industries to continue benefiting from a system that has caused so much harm- thereby perpetuating a cycle where the same people and groups continue to benefit and the same people and groups continue to be harmed.

Driven by this concern, many communities are wary of developers and have been hesitant to engage with new projects for this reason. It was repeatedly pointed out, however, that while taxpayers continue to subsidize these new systems, community members should engage in conversations to inform their shaping, while still maintaining a long term view of paradigm shifts that might be possible later on. Participants suggested that one way to begin these dialogues would be to mandate phase out plans for the entire lifecycle of the fossil fuel industries before they are allocated federal funding to help mitigate this concern around extending their lifecycle and bring communities in with greater trust in the companies.

Participants also noted that total opposition from community groups could stymie projects all together, thereby forfeiting potential new economic benefits and workforce opportunities in those places. Many communities with existing oil and gas infrastructure have skilled workforces in place that are at risk of being displaced, and these jobs could be transferred to newer, cleaner industries if given the attention and opportunities.

With these risks, benefits, and dynamics in mind, participants shared the foundations of what a playbook for *meaningful* community engagement should be built around.

TRUST: It was noted frequently that building trust and listening to communities and their needs, with no other objectives, is a critical step and that this commitment to listening is a form of environmental justice and should be embraced throughout the project's lifecycle.

This listening stage is often bypassed in the interest of urgency, as there is great perceived urgency to implement the IRA and deploy CDR technologies as extreme heat and other climate impacts worsen, and yet it takes time to build genuine trust with communities. Ideally, developers would meet with communities without preconceived motives first, so that those relationships are in place before these more difficult conversations are raised and so that that trust would remain in place throughout the project's lifecycle and would ease concerns about private industry intentions.

Another important component of this trust building is education to establish a common set of definitions and shared understanding to ensure all parties are working from the same sets of facts and operating on equal footing. This entails outside entities meaningfully educating themselves on the communities they are engaging with by communicating directly with the communities, and also informing the communities about their company, its services, their funding, and how they see it contributing to the long term benefit of the community. Companies should seek to identify players in the communities, invite them to share their needs, with the mutual understanding that this process will take time and that they might need to build out multiple timelines that encompass each step of the process.

In this process, companies should also be prepared to demonstrate emergency management plans and answer questions like “How will this project impact future generations? How long can we keep greenhouse gasses underground? Will we have problems later on? Are we prepared to deal with the aftermath if it doesn’t go well?” It was also asked whether communities should have a codified veto power, should the answers to these questions suggest significant future risks to the communities.

EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT - COMMUNITY GROUPS, FINANCING, ACCOUNTABILITY, OVERSIGHT, ENFORCEMENT: On the other side of this more robust engagement, participants also shared a sense of fatigue that some communities, and particularly environmental justice leaders who are often called on as spokespeople, feel in receiving repetitive requests of their limited time and resources. Participants suggested that by rethinking how community “experts” are defined, this can help to broaden the pool of “experts” who are called upon as there are some groups who don’t feel they are being called on enough.

Additionally, ensuring adequate compensation and recognition for those community members is key to compensate for their time and resources in informing the direction of the project. Further on this financing thread, participants suggested sending payment directly to community engagement groups so that they can pick the researchers who they want to work with if necessary for a project. Furthering the conversation on advancing environmental justice and equity, cash ownership, board seats, dividends, and a holding company that the community owns a portion of, were also suggested for communities to not only feel - but to be - invested in the projects.

Participants underlined the importance of community advisory boards and more formalized neighborhood planning units to ensure that community governance structures are developed to move beyond engagement to formal governance, particularly for federal projects. Local representation can be formalized by collaboratively developing MOUs (as accountability and verification mechanisms) that appropriately reflect the concerns and values of the communities, create community ownership stakes over infrastructure, among other benefits. In this vein, participants also suggested an Emily’s List for community engagement centered candidates for co-op boards, local elected officials, and others could be helpful. It was emphasized that when projects are embraced by the community, benefits have been deeply real. To support this, the current overreliance on NDAs should be rethought, as it doesn’t work for community engagement.

On accountability, participants also encouraged Community Benefits Plans (CBP) to be made publicly accessible and that data be more readily shared and identifiable. They also suggested that legalized commitments to repair past harms that communities have to sign off on would increase accountability. Participants did flag that in these decisions, the tension between those actually living in the community versus external stakeholders should be carefully weighted to ensure that those outside the community don’t outweigh those within.

On a larger accountability scale, the regulatory space for CDR was also described as greatly lacking. Participants suggested reorganizing the regulatory space for carbon management so that emergency management plans are in place.

FUNDING: Community engagement requires funding. Participants encouraged philanthropies to adjust funding calls, prioritize planning grants so that academics have time to engage with communities and agencies have more time to bring people together, and evolve beyond project specific funding to multi-year grants which are necessary to build trust. Funders should require interdisciplinary focuses in projects and grants and all who participate should receive an outcome. They should also seek to lift up and support institutions that have a history of community engaged excellence (HBCUs, tribal colleges) and offer complete transparency in funding sources in the co-production of knowledge.

LESSONS LEARNED: Participants spent a portion of the dialogue sharing lessons learned from past clean energy projects, including where engagement was ineffective, or missing, as well as examples of engagement done well. Participants shared the importance of transparency, trust, and airing historical wrongs, so that companies can avoid building on past detrimental practices. For instance, with solar, participants flagged a lack of honesty around energy savings and costs for many past projects, raising the point that it is important to not over promise and erode trust.

Another example of this eroded trust and promises is in Port Arthur, Texas, where industries were dumping toxic chemicals that were creating huge health problems in the community, but high-paying jobs the industry had created prevented early opposition from taking hold. Advocates, however, managed to work alongside communities through education and other efforts to raise these health concerns and alternative economic pathways that could transfer skills and positions from the oil and gas infrastructure to cleaner industries.

It was noted that current discourse around the clean energy transition has been conceived in the best case scenario, often omitting the costs of updating systems and the true cost of inequality. The legacy of utility redlining means that many communities have been underinvested in and transitioning them to new grids will be more costly. Historically, specifically, black rural communities were the last communities connected to electricity, left vulnerable, and relegated solely to roles of energy consumers, which defeated the purpose of and nullified some of the benefits of electrifying communities. Participants called for a broader view of the transition beyond viewing it as a market for select businesses, and underscored the need to address long standing maintenance issues and to ensure equitable access to all benefits of clean energy.

Finally, participants touched on the ever-evolving nature of these projects, and the need to sometimes revisit the original plan and direction of a project to ensure it meets the needs and goals of the community. Clean energy technology is often designed for buildings and homes in affluent communities without considering the infrastructure in lower income areas, which raises the question of how we can reasonably introduce new technologies to low income communities, especially when there is less resiliency in those communities due to lack of resources, investment, and funding. The transition should be thought of more holistically so that families across the nation are in homes that are healthy and resilient to climate change.

Note: This is a summary of a discussion that took place Oct 1-3, 2023 in Huntsville, Alabama co-hosted by the Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice and the Aspen Institute Energy and Environment Program. It is intended to capture the essence of participant dialogue held under the Chatham House Rule among more than 30 participants, but individual participants or their organizations may not agree with every aspect of the summary or the contents herein.