

Engaging Socially Vulnerable Communities and Communicating About Climate Change–Related Risks and Hazards

Extreme weather events exacerbated by climate change can compound existing vulnerabilities and inequities experienced by socially vulnerable people including pregnant people, children, low-income populations, Indigenous populations, immigrant groups, the elderly, people with disabilities, vulnerable occupation groups, communities of color, and people with preexisting or chronic medical conditions. Decision makers need to adopt strategies for engaging these communities on an ongoing basis to inform and empower individual decision making, identify and understand local concerns, and provide the necessary resources.

STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

FORM PARTNERSHIPS WITH TRUSTED AND DIVERSE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Community organizations can have strong ties to the people they serve. They have experience tailoring key messages to their audience, have trusted leadership that can step in as effective spokespersons, and are critical assets in communicating effectively and efficiently across communities. Effectively leveraging a trusted organization's connection to a community involves genuine partnership – a two-way dialogue that builds a shared vision for helping the community.

ADDRESS KEY STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES THAT INCREASE VULNERABILITY

Racial and gender inequities can impact a community's ability to undertake adaptation or hazard mitigation actions at the individual or community level. It is important for decision makers to acknowledge the impact of structural factors, such as resources, housing, and transportation, when communicating with vulnerable communities. Beginning or continuing to advance equity, both within and beyond the context of extreme weather, is an important tool to making communities safer and more resilient.

FACILITATE A STRUCTURED DECISION-MAKING PROCESS BETWEEN DECISION MAKERS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

An established process for making decisions enables understanding and engagement with new policies and changes. Sharing such a structure gives the community a common basis for dialogue and can explore how scientific evidence, cost, benefit, and risk assessments shape decision making. Communities need to be engaged in an inclusive process that gives them a voice and a place at the decision-making table. To participate in the process, individuals might need to be compensated for their time and provided with other resources to make their participation possible.

ALLOW AND ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP OF THE RESPONSES

Best practices for public ownership include actively seeking engagement with community members, listening to feedback, and implementing bottom-up approaches with community members leading solutions.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING RISK AND PROMOTING ADAPTATION

1. USE SIMPLE, CLEAR MESSAGES BY PARING DOWN TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Design your message so it can be understood by the people that need to be reached — if things are too complicated or require a frame of reference the audience doesn't have, they may not listen.

2. UNDERSTAND HOW MESSAGES ARE INTERPRETED BY DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

Paying close attention to how people interpret messages can help in designing communications targeted at different communities.

3. REPEAT MESSAGES OFTEN

Frequently reminding people something important will help ideas stick — it can even make people less susceptible to misinformation.

4. ENLIST CARING MESSENGERS TRUSTED BY BOTH DECISION MAKERS AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Leverage voices that the community already know. The keys for a trustworthy messenger are expertise, trustworthiness and benevolence.

5. ARTICULATE CLEAR OBJECTIVES FOR CLIMATE AND DISASTER-RELATED ACTIONS

Share how the values of different decisions align with the key concerns of the community.

6. MOVE BEYOND THE ABSTRACT, AND DESCRIBE RISKS IN TERMS THAT ARE PSYCHOLOGICALLY NEAR IN SPACE AND TIME

People care most about their immediate surroundings — things close to them in space and time. Focusing on the present can help build resilience for the future.

7. TRIGGER AFFECT-DRIVEN RESPONSES, BUT USE EMOTIONAL APPEALS JUDICIOUSLY

Seeing the catastrophic impacts of climate change can move people to take action — but, when done carelessly, purposefully stoking negative emotions can lead to hopelessness or a loss of credibility.

8. EMPHASIZE EMERGING SOCIAL NORMS AROUND ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE

Leverage social norms. If there is an example of a person or nearby community that is liked taking action, share it — people will follow a good example.

9. FRAME CLIMATE CHANGE-RELATED HAZARDS AND RISKS STRATEGICALLY

Clearly explaining the costs, benefits and moral considerations for taking action or not acting can help people understand decisions and why they are made.

10. CONVEY THE AVAILABLE RISK MANAGEMENT OPTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

People are more likely to act if they believe they are capable of implementing an action successfully and they see the action as being effective in minimizing any adverse effects.

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