Five foundations from across the state, known as the Community Foundations Water Initiative (CFWI), have been working since 2015 to advance sustainable water management solutions. The Initiative partnered with Local Government Commission to develop a report on the Equitable Integration of Water and Land Use which was released in 2019. Shortly following the report, each foundation selected one nonprofit in their region to advance the report’s regional recommendations and statewide strategies while building local capacity for coordination. This cohort of five NGOs has been working together over the past year, culminating their work in eight Guiding Principles for Equitable Engagement in Coordinated Planning.

The principles described below will require decision-makers to adjust the policy frameworks that have traditionally been used within our systems and institutions. A status quo that leaves Californians without access to affordable homes, safe drinking water, economic opportunity, and healthy communities is not an option. Inequity and racial injustice impacts every facet of how our communities operate and live. We must redefine what it means for governments to equitably and authentically engage, with a focus on building local community capacity and providing the resources and support necessary for marginalized groups to actively participate.

Guiding Principles

We recognize that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to community engagement, however using these principles may guide you in how to best adapt to a community’s unique characteristics. These principles are not new; they have been elevated in the equity work of many organizations and the decades of experience within this cohort.
1. Acknowledge and re-evaluate previous histories of inequitable decision-making.

Before outlining the planning process, agencies must assess previous efforts to see whether local input was representative of all community members, and identify if the feedback provided impacted the outcome of the project or planning effort. Recognize that more time and effort will be required to build trust in communities who have felt continuously overlooked or unheard.

- Identify and acknowledge how previous work, as an organization or sector, has perpetuated structural racism and the disenfranchisement of communities of color. Be honest about the lack of results from past efforts and assess the racial and socioeconomic impact of previous policies and investments.
- Identify how internal policies address systemic inequities, or if they fail to do so. Potential actions may include reviewing hiring processes and criteria for selecting project partners, equity education for staff, training on how to apply equity tools to planning, and ongoing conversions with community leaders to better understand local conditions.
- Look beyond median household income to define marginalized communities. Avoid using the term “disadvantaged” and consider other more precise terms - underrepresented, overburdened, structurally disenfranchised - depending on the situation. Use CalEnviroScreen, Healthy Places Index, CDPH’s Climate Change and Health Vulnerability Indicators, and other tools to ensure a transparent and shared understanding of marginalized communities. Definitions must be vetted by community leaders prior to adoption.
- Clearly define how decisions will be made moving forward and the role of each organization involved. Identify and share where community members can engage in the process, and outline how your agency intends to do the work to seek authentic input. Work with community members to see if and how engagement processes can be improved.

2. Require all planning processes, projects, and/or grantees to develop a plan for building authentic community relationships.

**Engagement plans must include:** community outreach channels, language and literacy needs, opportunities for multiple forms of public input (written, verbal, surveys, etc.), and identified feedback loops to share progress and receive community guidance on how to improve outreach efforts. *This should be a living document* with built-in flexibility for unforeseen circumstances, e.g. adapting engagement to a virtual format during the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of waiting until meetings can be held in-person again.
3. Increase and promote accessibility to public meetings, whether online or in-person.

The key is **not assuming what works best for the community**. Work with existing leaders from community-based organizations to identify accessibility barriers and communication needs.

- **Consult communities directly about the barriers they face to participating.** This may include public meeting times and locations, language access, childcare, transportation, literacy, adequate public meeting notice, or other socioeconomic challenges. Use this knowledge to proactively plan meetings that are inclusive to the community you are working with.

- **Ensure meetings are fully accessible regardless of race, language, socioeconomic status, age, size, ability or disability.** Consider what accommodations, translation services, and assistive technologies are necessary to enable full, active participation.
  - If broadband is an issue, reconsider other low-bandwidth options, phone call-in participation, or mail-in feedback. If technological literacy is a barrier, use traditional media (flyers, paper surveys, postcards).
  - Conduct virtual outreach where communities are already active online (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Next Door, etc.) Always provide meeting recordings with timestamps for video events.
  - Where possible, provide funding (honorariums or stipends) that will encourage and reward recurring participation.
  - Require live interpretive translation services (in-person and virtually). Never rely on translation apps, which cannot match the tone of the original resource.

- **Partner with community organizations to ensure that meeting materials and content are developed with the goal of having communities being able to shape the vision and decisions within their community.**
  - This can include reducing the amount of technical language and exploring different ways to communicate information (infographics, polling, build your own community). Professional jargon should be avoided as it creates a barrier for the community and hinders coordination among different sectors with their own technical language.

- **Provide multiple avenues for communities to engage** in public meetings (e.g. attending in-person or virtually, watching a recording, submit written or emailed public comments, mail-in postcard, etc). Ensure that input opportunities are broadcasted through multiple channels (newsletters, social media, radio, etc).

4. **Foster two-way communication and reciprocity with your community.**

The goal should be to improve dialogue and understanding that allows communities to share their perspective and in turn, you learn something directly from the community. This will require a process that incorporates recurring dialogue and holds space for disagreement to allow for discussion on new possibilities, even while maintaining different views on issues.
Communities may come to the table with different needs than anticipated, and agencies should hold space for locals to share their concerns, strengths, and needs. **Explore how a multi-benefit approach can address multiple issues holistically** (e.g. an agency might be seeking input on bike lanes, but the community is concerned with urban heat and tree shade; the proposed project may be able to address both areas).

- When an individual or group provides input, identify how the agency will respond to feedback and **how input altered the outcomes of the project, concept, or plan**. Receiving community input without responding to it can be detrimental to the relationship-building now and in the future.

5. **Focus on building relationships with local organizations or informal groups that are already engaging with marginalized communities.**

Partner with and fund local non-profits to expand education and local capacity to engage in public processes.

- Community-based organizations are often expected to represent or mobilize their communities without compensation for their time and efforts. Local representatives on steering committees and technical advisory committees should be provided a stipend for their time.
- **Cultivate advocates, particularly youth leaders**, and build their capacity to engage and educate the community.
- Be aware of cultural differences and lived experiences with previous engagement efforts. **Identify cultural brokers within the community** and work with them to develop shared resources and educational materials to improve community participation in local planning. Cultural leaders should be compensated for their time and efforts in supporting local planning.

6. **Coordinate with partner agencies and across internal departments to leverage resources, staff, and data to address engagement fatigue.**

Outreach should be incorporated into pre-existing community meetings where possible. Agencies and departments should coordinate local engagement efforts to maximize effectiveness and create opportunities to address community concerns collaboratively. For example, conversations about new housing developments should include water resource managers to help the community better understand the water-related impacts of land-use decisions.

- **Key Opportunity: Regional Community Needs Assessment**

Local and regional agencies can leverage resources by collaborating on large-scale community assessments, such as the L.A. County Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment, to inform future funding and address localized inequities.
• **Key Opportunity: Incentivize Collaboration Through Funding**
  Governments and funders should promote grant guidelines that require cross-sector, inter-jurisdictional collaboration, such as 2020 Sustainable Groundwater Management Watershed Coordinator Grant Program.

• **Key Opportunity: Increase Coordination Capacity with CivicSpark Fellows.**
  CivicSpark Fellows were placed with three of the five NGOs in the cohort to provide greater representation in cross-jurisdictional work and expand their research and outreach efforts.

7. **Governments must be responsive to the interconnectedness of community concerns.**

Current events will impact the relationship between communities and their decision-makers. Dismissing local concerns that may appear unrelated to the plan or project can negatively impact the trust built between a public agency and the community. While planning is often departmentalized, community members see and experience the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social challenges. Authentic community engagement provides an opportunity to learn from the community and see where opportunities for coordination and integration are possible.

8. **Establish an advisory committee, task force, or community decision-making body to inform local planning processes and support marginalized communities in owning and shaping environmental solutions.**

These committees should consider equitable representation across sectors, ages, demographics, socioeconomic status, and interests so that the few environmental justice voices are not overpowered by other interests.

• Counties and cities should be required to engage locals that are less likely to participate in government processes because of structural barriers, such as unincorporated areas. Local governments can approach a pre-existing community task force or local council for input and decision-making.
• There must be a shift from just “giving input” to **communities shaping decisions**. There must be a structure developed where communities have a clear role in decision-making.

*These Guiding Principles were developed through the collaborative work of Local Government Commission and the CFWI NGO Cohort, which includes:
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  - Fresnoland: Danielle Bergstrom, Executive Director
  - Nature for All: Belinda Faustinos, Executive Director; Bryan Matsumoto, Program Organizer
  - Anza-Borrego Foundation: Brianna Fordem, Executive Director; Meet Panchal, CivicSpark*