

COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Capacity building programs help poor and disadvantaged communities to improve their ability to participate in the environmental decision-making processes. They encourage citizen involvement, and provide the tools that enable them to do so. Capacity building enables communities that would otherwise be excluded to participate in the process, leading to better, and more just, decisions.

The Department of Energy (DOE) continues to be committed to promoting environmental justice and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanup. DOE's Environmental Management Program (EM) is in full support of this commitment. Through its environmental justice project, EM provides communities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex technical decision-making process by furnishing access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance. This paper documents innovative initiatives in environmental justice and offers prospects for future activities.

DOE participates on the Federal Interagency Working Group for Environmental Justice (IWG), established by Executive Order 12898. The Executive Order, which was signed in February 1994, calls for making environmental justice an integral part of the mission of 17 Federal agencies to the extent practicable and permitted by law. The goal of the IWG is to increase efforts to identify, mobilize, and make use of Federal resources to benefit environmentally and economically distressed communities. Over the past year and a half, the IWG participants have formulated an Action Agenda around these key areas:

- Promote greater coordination and cooperation among Federal agencies
- Make government more accessible and responsive to communities
- Initiate Environmental Justice Demonstration Projects to develop integrated place-based models for addressing community livability issues

DOE's Environmental Management Program has partnered with the Environmental Protection Agency in supporting capacity building in two communities: Savannah, Georgia and Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The Federal agencies have partnered to provide computers and technical assistance to establish community technology centers. The partnership of Federal and local agencies, community organizations, and historically black colleges and universities will work to help the communities gain access to information and gain capacity to participate in environmental decision-making.

DOE takes the position that citizens who are active in environmental decision-making, and have a working knowledge of both the procedure and substance of an issue, can better protect themselves and help produce decisions that reduce conflict and save limited resources.

INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as "fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, income, or education level with respect to development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies." The definition further states that no population should suffer a disproportionate share of environmental burdens.

The Department of Energy (DOE) continues to be committed to promoting environmental justice, increasing public participation and involving its stakeholders more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanup. DOE's Environmental Management Program (EM) is in full support of this commitment. Through its environmental justice project, EM provides communities with the capacity to effectively contribute to a complex technical decision-making process by furnishing access to computers, the Internet, training and technical assistance. This paper discusses some of the initiatives that support this commitment.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING?

Community capacity building can be defined as the process that gives local community groups the necessary tools they need for meaningful participation in agency decision-making. Citizens, who come into a decision-making process with little or no information about the process or the subject matter under consideration, will find it impossible to make a meaningful contribution to the process. Despite the emphasis that Federal agencies have placed on public participation, numerous low-income and minority groups remain out of the process due to an inability to navigate the process or understand the subject matter under consideration.

In order to facilitate public participation where the stakeholder lacks an understanding of the decision-making process or the subject matter, it is necessary for Federal agencies to provide stakeholder assistance. Federal agencies should assist these communities in developing the administrative, technical and analytical expertise required to be effective participants in the process. This may involve supporting or developing training and technical assistance programs, providing technical assistance providers, and supporting national and regional efforts working with such affected stakeholders to improve their decision-making capacity.

Capacity building programs help communities to improve their ability to participate in the decision-making process. They involve citizens early and often in the decision-making process. They ensure that stakeholders can participate more directly in the planning and decision-making process by the following:

- identifying public concerns and issues;
- providing opportunities to assist in identifying issues and problems, and in formulating and evaluating alternatives;
- listening to the public;
- incorporating public concerns and input into decision-making; and
- providing feedback on the ways that decisions do or do not reflect the input received.

DOE works with stakeholders to conduct a variety of capacity-building activities. These include, among others, conducting training class, operating information hotlines, providing technical assistance and making information available on a variety of web sites. Each activity is designed to help our stakeholders become better able to participate in DOE decision-making.

There are several benefits to be gained from helping stakeholders improve their ability for greater participation in DOE decision-making. Some of these are:

- Meaningful involvement can lead to better and more just decision-making as well as cost-efficient decisions
- Stakeholders gain a working knowledge of the subject under consideration, as well as the procedures driving the decision-making process
- Communities are given the tools they need to participate more effectively
- Many communities would otherwise be unable to participate if not for these programs
- Youth Development

COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING IN ACTION: THE IWG.

DOE participates on the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice (IWG), established by Executive Order 12898. The Executive Order, which was signed by President Clinton in February 1994, calls for making environmental justice an integral part of the mission of 17 Federal agencies to the extent practicable and permitted by law. The goal of the IWG is to increase efforts to identify, mobilize, and make use of Federal resources to benefit environmentally and economically distressed communities. The Executive Order identified specific objectives in the following areas:

- identify disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority and low-income populations
- coordinate research and data collection
- conduct public meetings; and
- develop interagency model projects.

It is clear that increased coordination and cooperation among Federal agencies will enhance identification, mobilization and utilization of Federal resources. In addition, increased coordination and cooperation will enable distressed communities to improve environmental decision-making and more efficiently access and leverage Federal Government resources.

In June 1999, the IWG began to develop the concept of an Integrated Federal Interagency Environmental Justice "Action Agenda" as a way of incorporating environmental justice in all policies, programs, and activities of Federal agencies. This agenda focuses these key areas:

- Promote greater coordination and cooperation among Federal agencies
- Make government more accessible and responsive to communities
- Initiate Environmental Justice Demonstration Projects to develop integrated place-based models for addressing community livability issues

Experience has demonstrated that efforts to address the environmental problems of minority and/or low-income communities without meaningful community input will fail. An informed and involved community is a necessary and integral part of the decision-making process, in addressing environmental protection and its integration with the community's economic and social goals. Experience also has demonstrated that environmental problems suffered by such communities cannot be fully addressed within the authority of any single governmental entity. It is therefore a goal of the IWG to help impacted communities gain the necessary resources for informed participation in the decision-making process in addressing environmental protection. As a result, the IWG is building dynamic and proactive partnerships among Federal agencies and has initiated Environmental Justice demonstration projects to develop integrated, place-based models for addressing community livability issues.

IWG DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS: PARTNERSHIP WITH EPA

One of the IWG demonstration projects is an effort to increase public participation and environmental justice through technology. This effort has been designed to tackle the challenges presented by the digital divide and build community capacity at the same time.

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The objective of this effort is to help these communities gain access to computers and the Internet in order to expand and develop capacity to participate in environmental decision-making. Specific activities associated with this objective which will benefit the community are:

- Create Community Technology Centers to give communities access to Federal agencies and a wide range of environmental information on the Internet;

- Conduct training programs that include computer-based and Internet tools; toxic release, chemical, and risk assessment information; and community economics;
- Supervise community use of the training and tools received;
- Create and implement youth development programs;
- Provide economic development tools, entrepreneurship training, and other resources such as proposal writing and grants management to make the centers economically self-sufficient;
- Provide continuous technical assistance from historically black colleges and universities and other sources via the Internet and e-mail;
- Conduct a research meeting with the targeted communities and others to discuss experiences, lessons learned, and implications for the future; and
- Conduct a research project to evaluate the results and examine the implications for program modification and replication.

These activities will serve as models for eventual replication by other communities.

The vital key to the success of the community technology centers is continuous technical assistance. Communities can obtain computers from a variety of sources, and they can get Internet access for less than \$25.00 per month. However, the access to trained, trusted, reliable and consistent technical assistance providers is required in order to help communities gain a clear understanding of decision-making processes and a ready source to explain the implications of technical and complex alternate choices.

WEB BASED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: TECHNET

Place based decision-making, community empowerment, environmental justice and public participation are important initiatives for the Federal government. As the Final report of the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee (The Report) states, “despite the major changes during recent years in how the Federal government involves members of the public in the decision-making process, some groups frequently continue to be left out of the process. In particular, the opinions and concerns of communities of color, indigenous peoples, low-income communities, and local government officials often have not been solicited, even though they have a substantial stake in the thoroughness and success of the cleanup activities.” The Report, page 97.

The Report further states that “the premise of this entire report is that federal facility cleanups will be more effective and efficient if there is a working partnership between the regulated agency, the regulating agencies, and the vast number of other stakeholders that are affected by environmental contamination at these facilities. However, the effectiveness of most of the earlier recommendations in this report regarding community involvement, advisory boards, and including other stakeholders in the budgeting and priority-setting process are dependent on the various stakeholder groups having the capacity to participate effectively.” The Report, page 97. “The Committee believes that the ability of all stakeholders to participate effectively in the federal facility cleanup decision-making process is essential to efficient, viable cleanup programs. Enhancing the capacity of stakeholders to participate will help establish working partnerships among regulated and regulating agencies and other stakeholders that will result in

cost-effective cleanup decisions.” The Report, page 104. While the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee (the Committee) concentrated its attention on federal facility cleanups, their conclusions and recommendations apply equally to all aspects of environmental decision-making, environmental justice and public participation.

Federal facilities in numerous agencies are conducting environmental restoration and reclamation activities. In each Agency, there is a firm commitment to increase public participation and involve stakeholders of every stripe more directly in the planning and decision-making process for environmental cleanups. Public stakeholders who come into a decision-making process with little or no information about the operating procedures or the subject matter under consideration will find it all but impossible to make a meaningful contribution to the process. Despite the emphasis that Federal agencies have placed on public participation, many groups remain outside the decision-making process due to an inability to successfully navigate the process or understand the subject matter under consideration. The successful design and implementation of TechNet will give federal facilities another tool to help public stakeholders acquire and maintain the necessary resources for meaningful participation in federal facilities environmental cleanups.

The Committee found that “the ability of all stakeholders to participate effectively in the federal facility cleanup decision-making process is essential to efficient, viable cleanup programs. Enhancing the capacity of stakeholders to participate will help establish working partnerships among regulated and regulating agencies and other stakeholders that will result in cost-effective cleanup decisions.” In order to facilitate public participation where the stakeholder lacks an understanding of the decision-making process or the subject matter, it is necessary for federal facilities to provide stakeholders the appropriate tools for meaningful participation. Federal facilities should assist these stakeholders in developing or acquiring, technical and analytical expertise required to be effective participants in the process. This may involve supporting or developing training and technical assistance programs, providing technical assistance providers and supporting national and regional efforts working with such affected stakeholders to improve their decision-making capacity. Since the Internet knows neither borders nor boundaries, it presents an ideal mechanism to develop and provide environmental education, technical assistance and analytical expertise to a nationwide audience of federal facilities stakeholders.

Environmental decisions frequently involve technical and highly complex matters. There are few cases where information and knowledge play an important role than in issues surrounding the environment. Having access to a wide range of environmental information enables one to be a viable stakeholder in the science of projecting environmental risks that are still somewhat indefinite and must rely on incomplete data, various assumptions and mathematical extrapolations. Chemistry, toxicology, bio-statistics, engineering and hydrology are among the various disciplines that are typically engaged in the extent to which an environmental insult actually threatens the short term and long term to persons exposed. The effects of environmental contamination can be either acute or chronic.

Consequently, understanding, if not explaining how a risk analysis of an environmental activity is undertaken to a lay impacted audience is a daunting undertaking. There is therefore, a need to create a useful environmental education communication tool that can be available on the Internet. Absent access to such a tool and trusted technical assistance, those who have traditionally lacked

access to decision-makers that shape public policy and government action will remain spectators rather than participants in environmental decision-making. The purpose of TechNet is to provide technical assistance to local community groups and other stakeholders who wish to participate in federal facilities environmental remediation decision-making.

The objective of TechNet is to provide a tool that will help community groups, municipalities and others build, maintain and increase capacity to effectively participate in environmental decision-making. The foundation of this effort is a web-based resource to provide environmental technical assistance to community groups and other stakeholders that wish to participate in environmental decision-making. Since the Internet knows neither borders nor boundaries, this tool will be available to provide technical assistance and analytical analyses to a nationwide audience of stakeholders who are impacted by environmental remediation projects and other contamination activities. This objective will be met through the following activities:

- Develop a website (TechNet) and listserv to provide technical assistance and other information to community groups and other stakeholders through Internet e-mail.
- Recruit technical experts across the country in various disciplines to join the TechNet Listserv, monitor TechNet on a regular basis and respond to questions and inquiries from community groups and other federal facilities stakeholders.
- Promote TechNet through conferences, workshops and professional presentations.
- Conduct an annual community based research conference for community groups and other stakeholders to discuss their experiences with TechNet, federal facilities cleanups, lessons learned and implications for the future.
- Conduct a research effort to evaluate the results of the project and implications for the future.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that energy and environmentally literate stakeholders who are active in the decision-making process can better protect themselves than any other entity. However, these stakeholders need the tools to give them meaningful participation. Effective stakeholder participation can lead to more efficient and less costly environmental decisions. It is therefore our goal to monitor and evaluate the capacity building process underway and replicate those in other jurisdictions where warranted.

Computers and the Internet present means for access to information from various quarters. The keys to making technology work in the best interest of our stakeholders are to insure that they have access to the technology, they know how to use the technology, and they have access to technical assistance to help navigate technical and often complex issues. These keys are all included in our capacity building efforts.

REFERENCE:

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Final Report of the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee: Consensus Principles and Recommendations for Improving Federal Facilities Cleanup*, April 1996.