UMASSD EPA PREPARED

Community Narratives

Voices for Change: Stories That Drive Environmental Justice

UMass Dartmouth

In collaboration with The Dream Network

THE DREAM NETWORK

A guide designed to assist with capturing, analyzing, and integrating community narratives into decision-making, grant applications, and grant reporting.

EPA PREPARED: Building evidence-based tools to integrate community experiences

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This document is developed by the “EPA PREPARED: Building evidence-based tools to integrate community experiences” project under the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cooperative agreement for Promoting Readiness and Enhancing Proficiency to Advance Reporting and Data.

This guide serves as a resource for gathering community narratives and incorporating them into decision-making, grant applications, and grant reporting. This guide provides an overview of methods to collect, analyze, and integrate community narratives in decision-making and grant processes.

Electronic Access
The document is electronically available at the UMass Dartmouth EPA PREPARED website: https://epaprepared.sites.umassd.edu/

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is intended to help you gain a deeper understanding of community narratives and how they can be leveraged to inform decision-making and foster meaningful change within your community. By exploring the role of narratives, you will discover how they can be used to integrate diverse perspectives, influence decisions, and drive meaningful change within your community. Participatory storytelling can serve as a valuable tool for developing environmental programs by capturing community members' experiences with environmental, climate, public health, and other issues. This approach can be integrated into grant applications, as well as into the reporting and program evaluation processes.

The information in this guide provides example methodologies to help you effectively obtain narratives, collect stories, and experiences from members and groups within your community. It provides methods for narrative analysis to identify common themes and incorporate them into the processes of making community decisions, applying for grants, and reporting.

The guide provides example methodologies for collecting and analyzing community narratives, offering practical approaches for engaging with the local community. It is important to note that there are other methods and strategies to gather, analyze, and interpret these narratives. These alternative approaches can provide additional ways to gather and interpret community narratives based on your specific goals and context.

WHY COMMUNITY NARRATIVES?

Narratives involve the collection of personal stories from community members, illuminating their concerns and ideas, and hence are essential for capturing diverse perspectives within the community. The process uncovers aspects of community life that quantitative data often overlook, providing a more nuanced understanding that can inform and shape community-centered solutions.

These approaches can be also used to actively involve community members in the decision-making process, ensuring that the voices of diverse groups are heard. Linking individual experiences through narrative provides a comprehensive view of the community and emphasize shared challenges, fostering collaboration to tackle issues within the community.

Why are community narratives important in decision-making?

Integrating community narratives into decision-making processes helps ensure that the voices, needs, and experiences of the community are heard. Decisions become more reflective of the community's diverse perspectives, fostering solutions that are responsive to their needs.

Why are community narratives important in addressing environmental racism?

Comunity narratives are essential in the quest for environmental justice because they they tie the real-life experiences of people directly affected by environmental racism. Including these stories in decision-making is a moral imperative and necessary, as it honors the needs, knowledge, and perspectives of communities that have been historically ignored when facing these environmental impacts.

Communities that have long experienced disproportionate environmental and socioeconomic burdens have often been excluded from the decision-making and public dialogue.

Discriminatory land use policies and the lack of political power have marginalized several communities, leaving people and groups without the influence needed to shape decisions even within their own neighborhoods.

Community stories add important context to numerical facts and data, illustrating the human impact and toll of environmental issues. They also challenge systems of power that have historically overlooked marginalized groups, helping to perpetuate ongoing unjust outcomes. Community stories can also be used to create new, more just future visions of how to best achieve equitable implementation of environmental justice initiatives.

CAPTURING COMMUNITY NARRATIVES

Community narratives can be captured during community engagement events or through separate, organized initiatives. The most common approaches aimed at capturing community narratives include focus groups, discussion circles, and booths. Input from all three methods can be captured through various means such as voice recordings, written summaries, short reports, sticky notes on poster boards, and community maps.

Focus Groups

This approach brings together small, diverse groups of community members to discuss specific topics in a formal, structured format, led by a trusted facilitator from the community. These groups are intentionally designed to center the voices of residents who experience the direct effects of environmental injustices. This ensures that discussions remain focused on the realities of those most affected, fostering actionable insights and equitable solutions.

Key Considerations

- Ensure that you have a trusted and skilled facilitator to lead the discussions and create a safe space for participants to share their stories. This facilitator should also have the ability to co-create spaces that are conducive to conversations free of fear, micro-aggressions, or intimidation.
- Establish and agree upon ground rules for such groups, including making space for participants of object, amend, or opt out of the conversation at any time.
- It is important to differentiate between community members at large and impacted residents, as the latter often have unique insights and lived experiences that are critical to understanding the full scope of environmental challenges.
- Conversations are typically guided by pre-determined prompts that prioritize the issues, needs, and challenges of impacted residents.
- It is ideal to have conversations and facilitation in the participants native language.
- Gain consent from each participant to record their stories.
- Make sure you have a mix of general, engagement and more specific question designed for the group of participants.
- Consider offering compensation for participation, if feasible.

Hint: Share relevant information with participants ahead of time to help them prepare for their focus group participation.

Discussion Circles

This approach is similar to focus groups but involves discussion circles that bring together those most impacted by environmental issues in a more informal and inclusive setting. Circles can accommodate larger groups than focus groups and prioritize creating a safe and respectful environment. While conversations may still center around specific topics, they often allow for open-ended dialogue. Proper protocols are essential to protect participants and ensure that everyone feels valued and heard. The relaxed atmosphere encourages open dialogue, making discussion circles particularly effective for exploring personal stories, shared challenges, and collective solutions in a supportive and equitable space.

Key Considerations

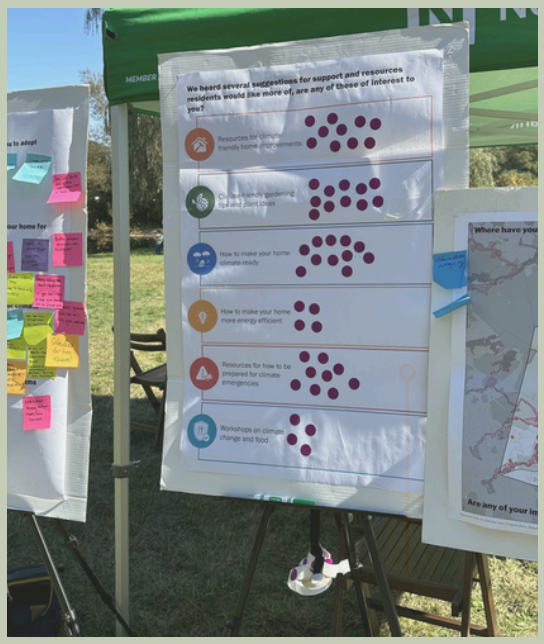
- Start by introducing the topic and establishing group agreements, such as confidentiality, mutual respect, and active listening, to safeguard personal experiences and foster trust.
- Ensure the presence of a skilled facilitator, ideally an impacted person from the community who guides the discussion.
- Depending on the goal of the discussion circle, consider splitting the larger circle into smaller, more topic focused sub-circles.
- For some community members and residents, these conversations may be triggering. Think about the needs of circle participants and ensure there are community support resources, such as counseling resources are available.
- It is ideal to have conversations and facilitation in the participants native language.
- Consider offering compensation for participation, if feasible.

Booth Setups

This approach involves interactive booths where community members can participate in activities or engage with materials, such as educational displays and hands-on exhibits.

Examples include poster boards where participants can write their thoughts on sticky notes or maps where participants can pinpoint areas of concern. Multiple booths can be used, each one led by a trusted facilitator and focusing on a specific topic.

Example booth set-up with ranking importance of support on topics associated with climate-friendly practices and climate change solutions (right).



Example booth set-up with flood risk areas as observed by community members(left).

The main approaches to collect community narratives are summarized in the table below:

	Focus Groups	Circles	Booth Setups
Who?	**Participants** Small, diverse group of community residents with lived experiences **Facilitators** Trusted community members	**Participants** Larger, diverse group of community residents with lived experiences **Facilitators** Trusted community members	**Participants** Large, diverse group of community residents with lived experiences **Facilitators** Trusted community members
How?	Structured discussion with pre-determined questions to guide the conversation about specific topics	Informal discussion with open-ended conversation starters that can be centered around specific topics	Multiple booths centered around specific topics with engaging activities and educational displays
When?	Community engagement events or organized as a separate initiative	Community engagement events or organized as a separate initiative	Community engagement events, informal local festivals, and farmers markets

Discussion Topics

To capture environmental justice issues, it is important to acknowledge that many of the environmental challenges are deeply intertwined with social, economic, and cultural disparities faced by communities. Below are key topics for discussion during community engagement efforts, along with examples of how each issue manifests and the potential impacts on affected communities:

Environmental Challenges: Communities located near industrial sites, landfills, or other sources of contamination often face greater exposure to hazardous waste and land pollution such as illegal dumping and contaminated soil and water, or improperly treated wastewater that could pose health risks. Communities living near industrial zones are particularly vulnerable to water contamination from chemicals, heavy metals, and other pollutants including per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) with adverse health effects.

Climate Change: Extreme weather events, such as flooding, hurricanes, and heat waves, often disproportionately impact vulnerable populations. Coastal communities, for example, face an elevated risk of flooding, while urban neighborhoods with limited green space are more susceptible to heat waves die to the lack of vegetation and impervious surfaces.

Energy Justice: High energy costs can disproportionately burden low-income households, especially in areas that rely on older energy systems. The discussions could also highlight the importance of affordable clean energy solutions, and equitable energy transitions from fossil fuel energy sources to clean energy.

Transportation Barriers: Affordable and reliable public transit is a critical issue that can significantly limit access to employment, healthcare, education, and other essential services. Inadequate transportation options, particularly in underserved or rural areas, can create barriers for individuals to reach job opportunities, medical appointments, schools, and community resources, further exacerbating social and economic inequalities.

Environmental Health: Health conditions such as asthma, respiratory diseases, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and other chronic illnesses are often linked to environmental hazards. Environmental stressors can also have significant negative impacts on mental health such as anxiety and depression. When combined with social and economic challenges, these effects can be further exacerbated, leading to a cycle of poor health outcomes. Community discussions should also address the availability of support services, including access to healthcare, mental health resources, and social support systems, to help mitigate these health impacts.

Education: Challenges in accessing quality education are often exacerbated by inadequate school facilities. Many schools often have overcrowded classrooms, outdated or poorly maintained buildings, lack of modern educational technology, and insufficient access to basic resources like textbooks and learning materials. Environmental hazards such as poor air quality, mold, or inadequate heating and cooling systems can create unhealthy learning environments that negatively affecting students' physical and mental health.

Housing: Discussions should address the affordability and quality of housing within the community, particularly focusing on substandard living conditions that may expose residents to environmental hazards such as flooding, mold, or poor air quality. Ensuring access to affordable, safe housing is a fundamental aspect of environmental justice, as it directly influences the quality of life and overall resilience of communities.

Employment and Workforce: Job availability and fair wages are critical topics in the discussion of environmental justice, as they are closely linked to economic stability and overall community well-being. Access to stable and well-paying jobs may be limited, which can perpetuate cycles of poverty and social inequality. Moreover, jobs that offer inadequate compensation or lack essential benefits, such as healthcare, paid sick leave, or retirement savings, can exacerbate financial insecurity. Discussions should also focus on the need for job training programs and career advancement opportunities, which can which can promote increased access to quality jobs and in turn foster economic stability.

The following leading questions could cover a wide range of topics within environmental justice, starting with broad themes that encourage diverse perspectives and gradually narrowing to focus on specific community issues. Below are some examples:

What challenges or struggles have significantly impacted your community?
What job opportunities are available in your community, and do you feel they are accessible to residents?
Do you have reliable access to public transportation? How does this affect your daily commute and access to job opportunities?
Have you encountered issues related to lead in drinking water or lead-based paint in older homes? How has this affected your community?
Have there been any flooding events or other natural disasters in your area? What effects did these events have on your community?
What concerns do you have regarding contaminated properties in your community/area?
Are you currently living in an older building that may be considered unsafe? If so, could you share your experience regarding its condition and any safety concerns you have?
Do you have access to parks or green spaces in your community? What is the condition of the parks? Are they clean/safe?
Has your community experienced any issues with air pollution or poor air quality? How has this affected the health and well-being of residents?
Are there any areas in your neighborhood that you feel are being neglected or overlooked when it comes to environmental protections?
Do you have concerns about environmental justice in relation to the availability of safe drinking water in your area?

Additional Planning Considerations

- Before hosting a community engagement event, it is essential to conduct a background analysis using quantitative data. This will help you better understand the concerns and experiences you are likely to hear from community members. For guidance on how to conduct this analysis, refer to our series of data collection guides available here: https://epaprepared.sites.umassd.edu/resources/
- Ensure that all event materials are provided in the primary languages spoken within the community, and that facilitators are fluent in these languages to promote effective communication.
- Recognize that certain topics may be sensitive or triggering for participants. Consider providing designated emotional support spaces and resources to help participants feel safe and supported during the event.
- Incorporate participant support costs into your event budget, ensuring both community members and facilitators are compensated for their time and contributions.

ANALYZING YOUR DATA

Before you start

Conduct additional research on the history of the community to gain a deeper understanding of the history and its socio-political context. This will help you identify key issues the community has faced in the past and highlight potential themes or challenges that may arise in the narratives. To gain a deeper understanding of the community context, it is essential to reach out to grassroots community leaders, organizers, and elders who share lived experiences of marginalized people. These individuals often hold invaluable insights into the history and socio-political realities of the community that are not readily available in typical sources such as articles, libraries, history centers, museums, or databases.

Mainstream resources may unintentionally exclude the most marginalized voices due to factors like lack of access, cultural, or linguistic barriers. Engaging with these community members helps ensure that the narratives are authentic and reflect the realities of those most impacted. In addition to direct outreach, conducting research on the history of the community is vital to understanding past struggles and triumphs. This research will provide a clearer picture of key issues the community has faced, as well as potential themes or challenges that may arise in the storytelling process.
Work with community partners to ensure your analysis accurately reflects community members desires, feedback, and input.

Once you have collected narratives from your community, what comes next?

Community engagement events and participant-led discussions often generate a broad range of information and diverse experiences. The narratives should be screened to identify common themes. These recurring themes highlight the most pressing concerns or shared experiences within the community, offering valuable insights into the community's key needs and goals. By focusing on these commonalities, you can ensure that the community's priorities are effectively represented in future decisions and initiatives.

How can community narratives be effectively analyzed to uncover key themes and insights?

- **Transcribe Data:** If the narratives are in spoken form, transcribe them verbatim to ensure that all content from the interviews is accurately captured.
- **Conduct an initial review & organize them by topic:** Conduct an initial screening and then sort the collected narratives into distinct categories or topics, such as housing, healthcare, education, or environment.
- **Code the narratives**: Coding involves tagging sections of the text with labels that capture recurring themes such as "community resilience," "economic struggles", etc.
- **Identify patterns and develop categories:** Utilizing the codes, you can further group the narratives into sub-categories, for example "challenges with resources", "air quality concerns", "safe drinking water", and others.
- **Quantitative analysis**: You can count the frequency that each topic appears to identify its intensity or emotional weight.
- **Software for Qualitative Analysis**: You may also use software like NVivO, ATLAS.ti, MAXQDA, or RQDA. for analysis of large datasets based on pattern recognition.
- **Contextualization**: Consider how external factors (e.g., policies, economic shifts, historical events) might shape the narratives and what do they reveal about the community's values, priorities, challenges, or aspirations.
- **Identify Gaps**: In addition to the themes that emerge, look for gaps in the narratives that could point to experiences or voices that are underrepresented.

Prior to publication or dissemination of findings, make sure that you share share your findings with the community to ensure the analysis resonates with their lived experiences.

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STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION: COMMUNITY NARATIVES IN ACTION

The Neighborhood Revitalization (NR) Initiative, launched in 2008 by Habitat for Humanity International (HFHI), aimed to enhance housing conditions and improve the overall quality of life in smaller, underserved neighborhoods that had been severely impacted by economic challenges.

Community narratives were employed as an intervention to address needs and promote sustainable improvements in housing and overall neighborhood well-being in the West End neighborhood of Roanoke, Virginia. By capturing and amplifying the voices of local residents, these narratives helped identify key challenges and opportunities, guiding efforts to revitalize the community and foster lasting positive change.

Over 30 stakeholders participated in interviews, either individually or in small groups, resulting in a total of 20 in-depth discussions. The group of interviewees was diverse, encompassing community residents, local business owners, and representatives from non-profit and community-based organizations. Additionally, conversations with city government partners were also incorporated to provide the perspective of the local government.

During the interviews, the stakeholders were asked about:

- High and low points in the neighborhood
- History of the neighborhood
- Relationships with the neighborhood
- Transitions experienced in the neighborhood
- Neighborhood revitalization strategies

The personal stories obtained from the community narrative interviews were analyzed to determine collective themes. These themes provided a sense of transformative changes in the neighborhood.

Residents participate in the design and planning of the Southwood Community in Charlottesville, Virginia. *Adopted from Habitat from Humanity.*

Key outcomes of the NR initiative:

- Home builds and improvements in the neighborhood including affordable housing as short-term outcomes
- Medium-term outcomes included collaborative partnerships formed within the community that created a sense of community and social cohesion.
- Longer-term outcomes included improvement of the quality of life and sense of safety improved in the neighborhood.

The information on the case study was obtained from Habitat for Humanity's website and Jason, L., & Glenwick, D. (2016). Handbook of Methodological Approaches to Community-Based Research: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods.

INTEGRATING COMMUNITY NARRATIVES INTO GRANT APPLICATIONS AND REPORTING

Why are community narratives important in grant writing and reporting?

Community narratives are crucial in the grant process because they provide a social dimension to a community's story that quantitative data alone cannot capture. By including personal experiences, local challenges, and community aspirations into grant applications and reports, these narratives offer a deeper and more relatable understanding of the issues at hand.

Grant Writing: Identifying Key Environmental Justice Issues Beyond Quantitative Data

Quantitative analysis typically focuses on physical environmental factors such as pollution levels, but it often overlooks the psychological and emotional toll that living in an unhealthy environment can take on residents. While federal and state databases can provide a clear and objective snapshot of the situation, they often fail to capture the human, social, and systemic dimensions of environmental justice issues.

For example, stories from residents who live near a hazardous waste site might describe feelings of stress and uncertainty about their future, knowing that their children may inherit health problems. Such personal narratives reflect the emotional burden of environmental harm, which is not captured by statistical data alone

Another key limitation of the quantitative analysis is that they can capture physical displacements caused by environmental hazards, but it often does not account for cultural displacement or the loss of community identity.

Leveraging Narratives in Grant Reporting: Amplifying Community Impact Beyond the Numbers

Reporting and program evaluation require a comprehensive assessment of a project's performance, detailing short-term, medium-term, and long-term outcomes. By integrating community narratives into this process, you can provide a more meaningful understanding of a project's impact–focusing not just on metrics, but on how the initiative has truly affected the lives of community members. These narratives offer valuable insights into the real-world outcomes of environmental improvements, serving as a powerful tool for gauging whether the intended benefits are being experienced by the residents. Additionally, incorporating community voices acts as a critical checkpoint, ensuring that the project aligns with the needs and expectations of the community and that the environmental changes are translating into tangible improvements for its members.

Key Points Where Community Narratives Provide Powerful Insights:

- **Showcasing the Social, Cultural, and Psychological Effects:** Community narratives can highlight the social, cultural, and psychological impacts of a project, including how people feel about their future, safety, and community cohesion. They can also illustrate how relationships have improved and how cultural identities or traditions have been preserved or strengthened.
- **Acknowledging Persistent Challenges:** Narratives can be used to acknowledge ongoing challenges within the community that may not be captured by quantitative data, such as continued barriers to participation or systemic inequities.
- **Complementing Quantitative Data with Qualitative Insights:** Qualitative narratives can enrich quantitative data. For example, if data shows a reduction in pollution, a community narrative might describe how residents now feel safer letting their children play outside, adding a personal dimension to the data.