Strengthening Community Ties: Insights from a Climate Knowledge Exchange on Campus

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Columbia Climate School and Barnard College had the opportunity to co-host a Climate Knowledge Exchange (CKE) workshop, invited by the New York City's Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ). Held in June 2024, this workshop focused on community engagement for flood planning in New York City, providing a space for agency staff, community members, academics, and non-profit leaders to share insights about engagement strategies in resilience planning and reflect on effective strategies to empower communities.



Audience listening to presenters at the CKE Workshop

The topics discussed in this workshop are crucial as the calls to address climate change challenges in an inclusive and equitable manner have grown louder. Recent regulatory progress, such as the passage of the 2022 Water Resources Development Act, and enhanced funding for community-based climate initiatives, underscore the urgency and commitment to comprehensive climate resilience. With more policies and advocacy pushing for equitable community engagement in resilience planning, interdisciplinary action to fill knowledge gaps across sectors is imperative for holistic benefits for all stakeholders.

To foster solutions toward equitable climate action in the city, the Climate Knowledge Exchange (CKE) was created by the New York City Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ) in 2020. A sustained engagement effort between various stakeholders, CKE workshops have laid out key priorities to improve engagement processes and increase community capacity over the past few years. As exemplified by the co-hosting partnership for this workshop, consistent communication to advance the goals made in prior CKEs, which

includes sustaining funding, making information accessible, creating and maintaining partnerships, establishing multi-way exchanges, and fostering fair and accountable spaces to empower communities.

Presentations during this workshop included Jessica Colon offering insights from MOCEJ's Climate Strong Communities project; Jesse Miller from the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) detailing the latest progress with the Harbor and Tributaries Focus Area Feasibility Study (HATS) Environmental Justice Coordination Committee (EJCC); Jill Cornell highlighting initiatives from Rainproof NYC; and Paul Gallay sharing research findings from the Resilient Coastal Communities Project (RCCP) at Columbia's Center for Urban Sustainable Development.



Roundtable discussions at the CKE Workshop

Attendees exchanged ideas through roundtable discussions with each presenter, sharing their thoughts and experiences. From the conversations, the value of early, interdisciplinary, and collaborative engagement was clear, with empowering examples that can be carried forward. In doing so, project leaders must ensure transparency and purposeful engagement to deliver multiple community benefits.

Early Engagement

At all the discussion tables, the necessity of early engagement and progress toward integrating communities at the onset of project development became an exchange topic. Several city agency employees, at both the tables with Rainproof NYC and MOCEJ, underscored the importance of early engagement to produce outcomes that are preferable to the community, rather than implementing what planners assume the community needs. At the MOCEJ table, discussions of future pathways noted the importance of meeting people where they are at, suggesting a diffused engagement strategy. Instead of holding large-scale meetings, government representatives would table in community centers and participate in community-run activities. To make this effective though, accessibility efforts will need to be increased, both in the availability of audience-friendly information and in addressing language barriers. Participants at the USACE table also voiced their concerns over the agency's plans for Early Actionable Elements (EAEs),

with many seeking and receiving feedback on their prioritization process. These conversations highlight how CKE attendees are emphasizing the need to conduct equitable planning practices from the beginning of project development and are seeking transparency and understanding between all stakeholders.

Multi-Purpose Engagement

Another component of "meeting the community where they are at" is finding ways to make the engagement process beneficial to community members and serve multiple purposes, rather than just obtaining input. This creates a reciprocal relationship, where instead of simply hosting a meeting, trust is built between agencies and community members. From the discussions at the tables, participants working with the HATS Environmental Justice (EJ) project discussed job training for this purpose. At the RCCP table, a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) resident and employee discussed the importance of this as the city aims to improve sustainable design in NYCHA housing. Understanding that different communities will adapt to their built environment differently creates opportunities for job creation, such as onsite composting, solar, or sanitation. Multi-purpose engagement can also be through education, like through hosting events for children in the community. It is important that through multi-purpose engagement project leaders demonstrate an appreciation of the time and expertise communities can provide by creating benefits to the communities. Many participants at the discussion tables mentioned a general lack of trust from the community as a result of poor engagement in past experiences. Rebuilding this trust and providing more purposeful engagement will ultimately result in better outcomes for all.

Engaging the next generation

The role of the next generation in working towards coastal resilience was seen throughout several of these discussion tables. For example, with participants from many different organizations at the USACE table, discussions of how HATS EJ and others could have fellows working on projects to both give fellows early career training opportunities as well as increase efficiency in these projects. This was suggested by a participant whose organization on Governor's Island already implements this program, sparking productive new discussions and ideas for future USACE projects rather than participants solely learning from USACE. Similarly, at the MOCEJ table, when talking about future pathways to create more meaningful community engagement, targeting the youth demographic to drive community awareness was a topic of interest. In many experiences of those at the table, they have found children to be most engaged in climate-related activities. Giving students opportunities to build climate awareness may significantly aid in further engagement in climate resilience work as it is their future they are working towards.

Interagency collaboration

Lastly, collaboration between agencies and academic experts was discussed as key to creating more equitable outcomes. The discussions at the MOCEJ table highlighted the need for communication horizontally across departments and vertically across different levels of government. The communities often have had past experiences, varying in quality, with different government agencies. It is therefore important to ensure that any ongoing engagement or past engagement with a community is understood before initiating a program. In engaging with a community on climate issues, project leaders additionally should aim to communicate with other agencies when issues are raised by the community that are unrelated to climate. Allowing communities to voice general concerns that they have been unable to prior is an important step in rebuilding trust. This will reduce redundancy in work across agencies but also serve to enable project leaders to leverage expertise from communities long term.

As climate change worsens, ensuring community engagement to create equitable and inclusive approaches to coastal resilience planning is becoming more important than ever. With the multi-way exchanges of knowledge between diverse stakeholders in the June 2024 CKE, attendees discussed the importance of and potential plans for increasing early community engagement, creating community engagement with multiple benefits, increasing the next generation's role in fighting for coastal resilience, and facilitating interagency collaboration. Building on top of and providing support for goals set forward in the 2022 CKE by continuing conversations with the New York City Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice (MOCEJ), we hope that the insights brought forth at this CKE can help work towards creating more resilient and community-engaged coastal plans.