

# Community Engagement Guide for Conducting Research and Evaluation

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This community engagement guide is designed to help researchers, practitioners, and community organizations who are looking to explore nature’s impact on human health, create an evaluation plan or research project that is inclusive and equitable.<sup>13</sup> This guide includes the rationale for utilizing a community-engaged research process (CEnR), a brief explanation of the different types of CEnR, and some concrete examples you can use to engage community members in your own research process.

Research suggests that aspects of the built and natural environment influence human health.<sup>1</sup> Academic researchers, community organizations, and community members are increasingly looking for ways to partner to understand and address the complex environmental factors that contribute to human health. Promising practices have emerged that prioritize participatory and action-oriented research processes that are equitable, inclusive, and empowering. In contrast to traditional research paradigms that are top-down and expert-driven, community-engaged research approaches focus on grassroots involvement and the cooperative production of knowledge.

## **Community-engaged research**

There are many terms to describe research approaches that prioritize participation, engagement, collaboration, and knowledge co-production between academic researchers or practitioners and those most affected by the outcomes and implications of the research. We use the term “community-engaged research” as an umbrella term that describes research conducted in partnership with a community<sup>2</sup>. There is a wide spectrum of CEnR that can range from very low levels of community engagement such as conducting research within a community<sup>3</sup> to asking the community for input at various times during the research process to high levels of community engagement in which the community leads the research effort<sup>3</sup>. With high engagement efforts, community members become partners with the research team to deliver thoughtful research practices in their community that are driven by the needs and requests of the community. They are given the tools to shape and conduct the research in their community.

Before beginning you may want to explore different models of community-engaged research such as:

- Community-based participatory research (CBPR) utilizes a process in which the community and researchers engage in an equitable partnership to work together through all phases of the research process<sup>4</sup> and results in a substantial benefit to the community.<sup>5</sup>
- Participatory action research focuses on action as the ultimate goal of research, uses participatory processes to share power among researcher and participants; and actively engages participants in the research process.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Please note there are distinct differences between a formal research project and informal evaluation (e.g., of a program or intervention). That said, the authors feel that many of the principles shared here apply to both scenarios. For ease of presentation of material, the authors have chosen to use the term “research” primarily to indicate both formal research and informal evaluation, interchangeably except in cases where explicitly noted otherwise.

- Integrated knowledge translation (IKT) is a partnership between researchers and those who will utilize the knowledge generated from the research also called “knowledge users.”<sup>7</sup> This approach varies from other forms of CEnR in that the goal of integrated knowledge translation is to create research or knowledge that can be applied or utilized.<sup>7</sup>
- Research justice framework is similar to the community-based participatory research process but it goes beyond, creating an equitable process between the community and researchers by seeking to transform the structure that perpetuates inequities and create long-lasting change.<sup>8</sup>

Although distinct in their historical and theoretical development, community-engaged research approaches involve partnering with those directly affected by the research in its design, implementation and evaluation.

<p>Outcomes of Community-engaged Research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the likelihood that diverse perspectives are included throughout the research process</li> <li>• Ensure that research translates into action<sup>4,9</sup></li> <li>• Produce more equitable outcomes for research participants and their communities<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Ensure that research is contextually relevant<sup>10</sup></li> <li>• Increase study participation and retention</li> </ul>
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In community-engaged research, community knowledge and expertise are integrated into the design, implementation, and evaluation of the research process from the beginning. CEnR works to dismantle the traditional researcher-subject hierarchy that permeate the scientific field by unifying and valuing practitioner, community member, and researcher expertise. CEnR approaches acknowledge that community knowledge and experience are as valuable as scientific knowledge; therefore, reducing power differentials between research partners. CEnR increases the likelihood that diverse perspectives are included throughout the research process,<sup>4</sup> ensures that research translates into action,<sup>4,9</sup> helps produce more equitable outcomes for research participants and their communities,<sup>5</sup> ensures that research is contextually relevant,<sup>10</sup> and helps increase study participation and retention.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers are already required to adhere to ethical practices involving human subjects as mandated in the Belmont Report and its guidelines on respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. However, community engagement advocates challenge us to see that deeper community involvement in the research process is a more just and equitable way to conduct research: that researchers have a duty to the communities they work with to become actively involved in the research and decision-making processes and that the research should lead to a tangible benefit for the community.

Community-engaged research must be done with care and requires the creation of authentic partnerships within communities. Building authentic partnerships within communities takes time and intentionality. Partnerships start with listening to community members’ experiences and concerns, and maintaining flexibility to adapt research processes to meet the needs of the community. CEnR approaches also prioritize building mutual respect and trust, and transparency throughout the research process. An authentic partnership entails building and implementing the research process alongside the community. If done ethically and respectfully, engaging communities in the research process can be a rewarding and transformative experience for all. We hope that this guide serves as an extension of the practices you are

<p>Authentic partnerships are rooted in mutual trust, respect, and transparency.</p>
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already using to engage communities, and acts as a resource to help you think through the most appropriate way to add additional community engagement strategies to your work.

Prior to beginning CEnR it is essential to understand community members' experience with, or perceptions of, research. Some communities have been over-researched, had negative experiences with research, or simply lack trust in academic institutions. Because of their previous experiences, some communities may not believe that research studies will have any impact or bring about change in their community. Listening to and understanding the attitudes and perspectives of the community will help to create an inclusive and equitable research process.

### **Key Considerations for Community-Engaged Research**

There are many things to consider before and during a community-engaged research process to make sure that you have adequately prepared.

**Build in extra time.** High levels of community engagement require an extended time commitment and additional resources. Community-based partners may want to work on a timeline that is different from yours. When mapping out your research project timeframe you should consider building in adequate time to accommodate possible changes requested by community partners.

**Ensure project sustainability.** You must consider how to sustain the project<sup>4</sup>. Many communities agree to partner with external partners only to be disappointed when the project runs out of funding or loses internal capacity. Do not begin a project that cannot be sustained, otherwise you may damage relationships necessary for future partnerships.

**Start with a strengths-based perspective.** All communities have strengths and all community members have knowledge that is valuable. Community knowledge and experience is just as valuable as academic knowledge and recognizing this helps equalize the power dynamic between researcher and community.

**Building trust<sup>11</sup> is the key to success.** CEnR starts by building trust,<sup>11</sup> listening to community concerns, and maintaining transparency<sup>5</sup> in the purpose, goals, and objectives of the research partnership. Transparency encompasses clearly defining roles and responsibilities for all partners involved and identifying partner capacities, expectations, and limitations. Creating a Memorandum of Understanding<sup>2</sup> between community members and researchers can be a good way to articulate expectations, roles, and responsibilities.

**Check your cultural competency and keep cultural humility in mind.** CEnR requires that research partners engage in a continual process of reflexivity – the intentional examination of beliefs, values, and judgements that may influence research processes and outcomes. If you are conducting research with a community with which you are unfamiliar, take time to explore your own levels of cultural competency and humility as well as that of your research team. Cultural competence has long been the standard method of practice when engaging with communities that differ from one's own. Cultural competence refers to the ability of a person to understand a culture different than their own. Becoming culturally competent entails not just understanding, but developing skills to engage with other cultures and

increasing your knowledge about the other culture<sup>12</sup>. Whereas cultural competence relates to developing skills, cultural humility acknowledges the ongoing process of self-reflection and examining one's own biases<sup>8</sup>. Cultural humility is the recognition that there is no way to truly be competent in someone else's culture, but encompasses the attitude of humility and a willingness to learn.

For a more in depth look into Cultural Competency, we suggest reading the National Association of Social Workers' [Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice](#).

**Every community contains diversity.** Keep in mind that the first people who volunteer to participate may be more affluent<sup>13</sup> or have adequate resources and thus have more available time. You'll need to identify and engage traditionally marginalized community members, ensuring any barriers to their participation have been mitigated (e.g., childcare, transportation). Existing community-based organizations may have useful experience and guidance in how best to overcome these barriers and how to thoughtfully and respectfully engage marginalized community members.

**Partner with other community-based organizations.** Explore whether there are organizations that are already rooted in the community and whether they would be willing to partner with you on your project. When partnering with other organizations make sure that they are treated with the same respect that you are also extending to community members: consider their expertise and experience, share power and decision-making, and consider their needs regarding the timeframe and organizational capacity. Compensating community-based organizations for their time is critical to showing that you value their contributions.

**Research deliverables should be co-created.** The community may need or want different deliverables than what is typical from a research project. Be prepared to be open and receptive to their needs and/or wants.

**Make your meetings accessible.** You will want to secure meeting spaces that are accessible, welcoming, and neutral. Meetings should be held at trusted community institutions where partners feel welcomed.

**Infuse equity throughout.** Approach your research project through the lenses of racial equity (understanding the existing racially disparities and historical contexts of race), language justice (ensuring language access<sup>8</sup>), and trauma-informed (working from the understanding that some participants have been or may be experiencing traumatic circumstances<sup>5</sup>).

#### Community engagement suggestions for each phase of the research process

Just as there are a multitude of ways to conduct research, there are many ways to engage the community in your research. Below is an outline of standard research steps and with accompanying suggestions for varying levels of community engagement that could be utilized. The table is not all encompassing nor is it necessary to utilize every suggestion contained therein. Instead, the table is intended to be a guide for how you might engage the community in your efforts.

Research step	Considerations	High level of CE	Low level of CE
<b>Identifying the problem</b>	<p>How did you arrive at the problem?</p> <p>Is this topic important to the community? Why?</p> <p>How can you align your research priorities with the priorities of the community?</p> <p>What values<sup>8</sup> do you share with the community?</p>	<p><i>Community members are equal partners in the research process. They co-lead.</i></p> <p>The research question is created by the community.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>The community undergoes an open and inclusive process to determine the problem that they want researched.</p> <p>A Citizen Advisory Committee<sup>2</sup> is formed to oversee the research process.</p>	<p><i>Community members provide input.</i></p> <p>The community and/or community organizations provide input on a predetermined research project.</p> <p>Conduct a needs assessment within a community.</p>
<b>Research Design</b>	<p>How will you design the research process to ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The communities' expertise and experience are just as valuable as the researcher's expertise?<sup>5</sup></li> <li>People feel open to sharing their information or experiences?</li> <li>You are increasing the capacity of the community and community-based orgs to change policy and access needed resources.<sup>8</sup></li> </ul> <p>How could a typical research process cause indirect harm to this community?<sup>8</sup></p> <p>How can I avoid unintentional consequences?</p>	<p>The research project is co-designed and planned with community members.</p> <p>Leadership is shared between researchers and community members and organizations.<sup>5</sup></p> <p>Community members actively recruit other community members to join the design process.</p>	<p>The community is informed of the research design and has an opportunity to provide feedback.</p>
<b>Developing Instruments</b>	<p>How often have researchers conducted research in this community?</p> <p>How might this community feel about engaging with yet another researcher?<sup>14</sup></p>	<p>Research instruments are co-designed with community members and take into account cultural norms within the participating community.</p>	<p>Instruments are designed with the community in mind and consider cultural appropriateness.<sup>4</sup></p>
<b>Defining the Population</b>	<p>How were you planning to define the population? Does that align with the communities' defined population of interest?</p>	<p>Work with existing community members to understand how they define their community in terms of geographic boundaries, important social considerations, people who make up the community, etc.</p>	<p>Learn about the community.<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Establish relationships<sup>2</sup> within the community in which you will be conducting research.</p>
<b>Data Collection</b>	<p>How will you set the community members up for success?</p>	<p>Hire and train community members to conduct research. Focus on capacity building of participants.</p>	<p>Community members advise on how/where to best collect data.</p> <p>Researchers are trained in cultural norms prior to collecting data.</p>

<b>Data Analysis</b>	How will you ensure that the data is analyzed and interpreted in the way it was intended by the community? <sup>8</sup>	Analysis is conducted collaboratively <sup>13</sup> with the community.	Analysis is conducted in a transparent way and confirmed by the community.
<b>Findings and Conclusions</b>	Are your findings answering the questions initially posed by the community?	Interpretation of results is conducted collaboratively with the community. <sup>13</sup>  Conclusions and recommendations are created collaboratively with the community.	Participants provide feedback on findings and conclusions generated by the research team (e.g., member checking).
<b>Disseminating the Findings</b>	How can these findings be used to spur action or support for the community?  Use accessible language and visuals <sup>13</sup> when sharing the results.  How will the results/findings of the research affect community members?  Will the community be harmed by the outcome of this research? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could it portray the community in a negative way?<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Could the findings cause community members to internalize the results?<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Could the findings be used for a purpose other than intended and produce negative outcomes?<sup>5</sup></li> </ul>	Host an event in partnership with the community to share the findings. <sup>2</sup>  Co-write the findings with community members who were engaged in the process and with your non-academic partners.  Connect the community to additional partners who can help with implementing the intervention.  The participating community receives some type of tangible benefit as a result of the research project. <sup>5</sup>  Create deliverables that are specifically what the community wants/needs/articulates (e.g. briefing papers, fact sheets, posters, art, slide decks) in addition to papers/your own deliverables.  The community determines what information they want shared publicly. <sup>8</sup>	Host an event to share findings with the community.  Write about your findings and share it with the community.

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