



ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability USA

Sustainable Communities Suite

Equity – First Steps (2022)



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Introduction

Equity: First Steps introduces local governments to equity by helping them identify and track inequities that occur within their community. Equity: First Steps provides local governments with a **starting point** for tracking inequities in five distinct categories. These categories include: 1) Energy Access, 2) Public Health, 3) Infrastructure, 4) Economic Prosperity, and 5) Education. At minimum, these are the areas in which communities must analyze inequities.

Additional categories or topics you feel are relevant to your community can be addressed as well, but data can only go so far. Aside from collecting data and tracking indicators, **community engagement is just as—if not more—important than the data collection itself**. Community members live in, work in and experience the inequities in your community firsthand. To engage with the community and understand the issues they deal with every day is of utmost importance. Data collected through the Equity: First Steps process can be used as an entry or talking point for engaging community members; community engagement processes will complete the assessment process by filling in the gaps of this guide.

Creating and enhancing equity in your community is not a one-time effort; rather, it is a continuous process to build rapport between government and community and ensure equitable access for everyone. Throughout these pages, you will find links to a selection of **free tools and resources** to collect data on equity indicators in each of the categories.



Definitions

Term	Definition	Sources
Capitalism	An economic system in which products are produced and distributed for profit using privately owned capital goods and wage labor. Many assert that a critique of capitalism is essential for understanding the full nature of inequality, as global economic structuring based on capitalism reflects a particular ideology that celebrates individual wealth and accumulation at the lowest cost to the investor, with little regard for the societal costs and exploitation.	<i>Adapted from Movement4BlackLives</i>
Climate Reparations	Compensation mechanisms to former colonized and marginalized developing countries [and communities] that address historical and ongoing injustices of disproportionate impacts of climate change.	<i>Adapted from (Perry, 2020)</i>
Colonization	Colonization can be defined as some form of invasion, dispossession, and subjugation of a people. The invasion need not be military; it can begin—or continue—as geographical intrusion in the form of agricultural, urban, or industrial encroachments. The result of such incursion is the dispossession of vast amounts of lands from the original inhabitants. This is often legalized after the fact. The long-term result of such massive dispossession is institutionalized inequality. The colonizer/colonized relationship is by nature an unequal one that benefits the colonizer at the expense of the colonized.	<i>Racial Equity Tools</i>
Community Engagement	The process of working collaboratively with groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting those people.	<i>Adapted from National Institute of Health</i>
Diversity	The presence of different and multiple characteristics that make up individual and collective identities, including race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, national origin, socioeconomic status, language, and physical ability.	<i>NACo</i>
Environmental Justice	The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and	<i>EPA</i>



	enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.	
Equity	Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. Unlocking the promise of the nation by unleashing the promise in us all.	PolicyLink
Frontline Communities	Frontline communities are those that experience “first and worst” the consequences of climate change. These are communities of color and low income, whose neighborhoods often lack basic infrastructure to support them and who will be increasingly vulnerable as our climate deteriorates. These also include Native communities, whose resources have been exploited, and laborers whose daily work or living environments are polluted or toxic.	<i>Adapted from</i> Ecotrust
Health Equity	Means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including powerlessness and lack of access to good jobs, with fair pay, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care.	NACo
Inclusion	Creating environments in which any individual or group can feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to participate fully.	NACo
Justice	The process of society moving from an unfair, unequal, or inequitable state to one that is fair, equal, or equitable. A transformative practice that relies on the entire community to acknowledge past and current harms to reform societal morals and subsequently the governing laws. Proactive enforcement of policies, practices, and attitudes that produce equitable access, opportunities, treatment, and outcomes for all regardless of the various identities that one holds.	NACo
Just Transition	Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste-free. The transition itself must be just and equitable; redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be. Just Transition describes both where we are going and how we get there.	Climate Justice Alliance



Procedural equity	An examination of procedural rights that includes authentic engagement through an inclusive and accessible development and implementation of fair programs or policies.	NACo
Restorative Justice	Restorative Justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by crime and conflict. It places decisions in the hands of those who have been most affected by a wrongdoing, and gives equal concern to the victim, the offender, and the surrounding community. Restorative responses are meant to repair harm, heal broken relationships, and address the underlying reasons for the offense. Restorative Justice emphasizes individual and collective accountability. Crime and conflict generate opportunities to build community and increase grassroots power when restorative practices are employed.	Movement4BlackLives
Structural Equity	The identification and removal of institutional barriers to fair and equal opportunities with recognition of historical, cultural and institutional dynamics and structures that routinely advantage privileged groups in society and result in chronic, cumulative disadvantage for subordinated groups.	<i>Adapted from</i> NACo



Consider Local Context

Before exploring inequities in your community, it is important to spend time examining your local context. Each community is unique and its strengths and weaknesses must be considered before moving forward.

What makes your community great?

Activity: Think about the question "What makes your community great" and make a list of what comes to mind. There are no limits here! This list can include everything from historic sites, public art installations, and natural features to a special local industry, your downtown, or the local vibe—feel free to be creative!

Activity: Make a list of community assets. Community assets are the places, services, infrastructure, ecosystems, institutions, and other resources that a community believes it is important to protect and enhance. In other words, community assets are the tangible and intangible things that people and communities value.

What problems are you experiencing in your community that might be related to the changing climate?

Activity: Think about ways your community has changed in the recent past. Are summers getting hotter and drier? Are winters getting warmer? Has it been raining more often than you remember? Keep a list of your ideas.

Where is your community "at" with climate action?

Activity: Now is a great time to think about what your community has done to date on climate and to consider readiness to move forward in the adaptation space. Make a list of climate action your community has taken to date. This can include planning efforts (e.g., greenhouse gas inventories, sustainability plans, climate action plans), projects and programs (e.g., resilience hubs, emergency warning systems, green infrastructure), local laws and regulations (e.g., resilient building code updates, zoning), and public-facing commitments (e.g., climate emergency resolution, CDP/GCoM reporting, Race to Zero, Race to Resilience, and the Malmö Commitment).



The Role of Community Engagement

Community engagement is an integral part of assessing and addressing inequities in community planning. Any community planning process requires involvement of community members, as they will experience the effects of a plan, project or policy. Plans developed solely by the local government often miss this important step and as a result, plans are often disregarded by the community and sometimes can cause unforeseen harm to the community. For example, planting a community garden to help increase access to fresh, local food is an action local governments often take. But if the community garden is constructed in an area where community members cannot access it, this project will likely go unused. Therefore, it is best to co-create plans to ensure goals are being met and community needs are being addressed. [The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) showcases the range of community engagement from complete disregard for the community to community driven planning and ownership.

Local government sustainability staff and other department staff should complete an exercise to determine where the government usually falls in this spectrum. If you find you are in the lower range of the spectrum, consider increasing your community engagement and empowerment efforts. The most effective plans are created in the higher range of the spectrum where community members have ownership of the plan.

The Role of Tools and Resources

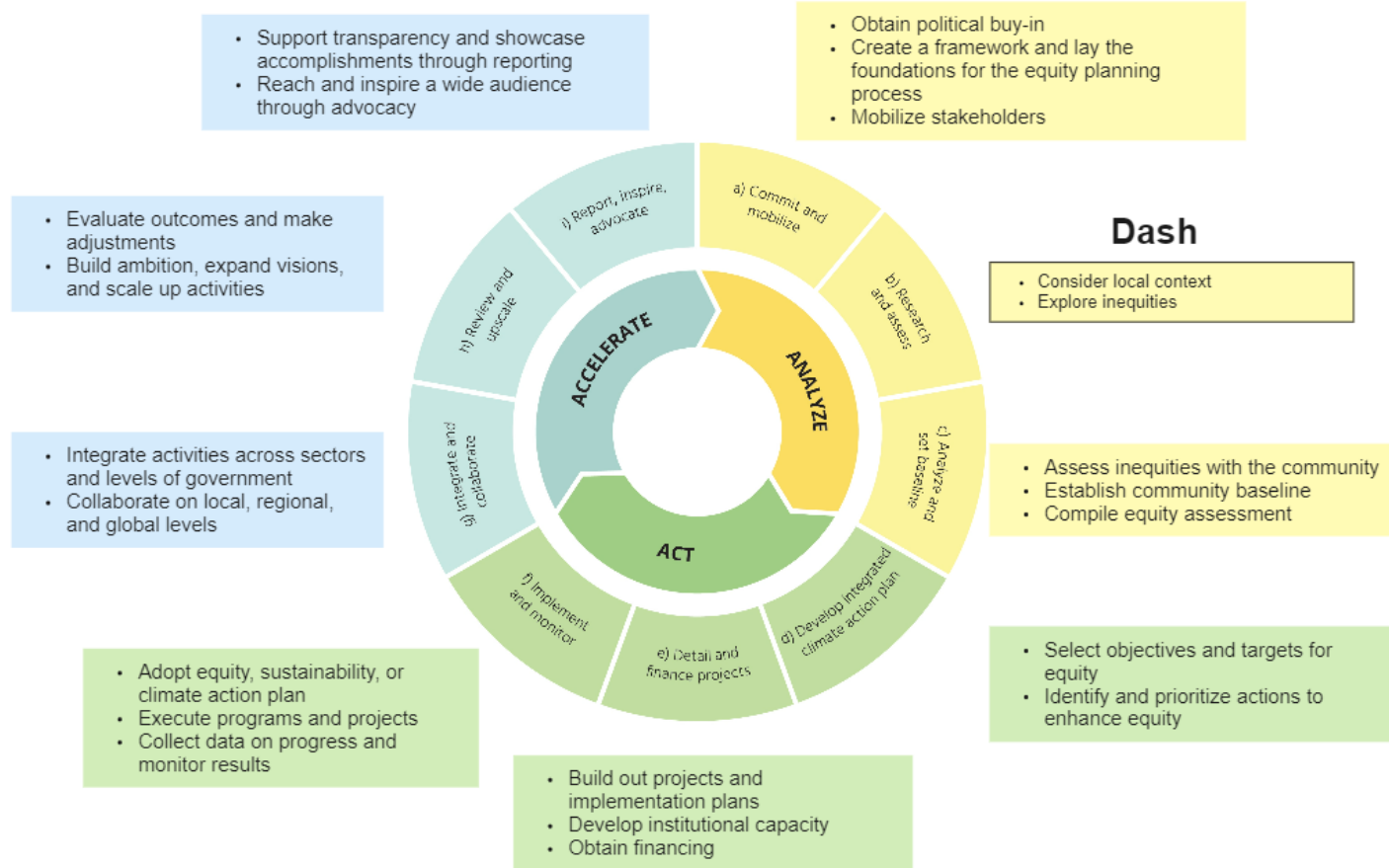
We suggest a number of tools and resources that can help you learn more about your community's inequities throughout this guide. It is important to acknowledge that a tool may meet the needs of some communities while it excludes others. For example, many tools do not provide data on the tribal nation level. Tools focused on social vulnerability often rely on data from the US Census, which is known to undercount people of color, people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness, immigrants, people with disabilities, and tribal communities on reservations at higher rates than more advantaged groups ([O'Hare, 2019](#)). Hence the importance of community engagement to work with community members that may not be included in the data provided.

Equity in ICLEI's Analyze-Act-Accelerate Framework

The diagram below is a high-level overview of the equity process mapped across ICLEI's Analyze-Act-Accelerate framework. Communities lay a foundation in the Analyze phase by



making commitments and exploring data. In the Act phase, communities move forward setting goals, developing plans, projects and programs, and beginning implementation. Accelerate phase, communities advance efforts with reporting, networking and advocacy. This Equity: First Steps guide covers part of the Analyze phase by helping governments consider local context and explore inequities in the communities they serve.



ICLEI Green Climate Cities framework, [U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit Steps to Resilience](#)



Explore Inequities

What are inequities?

Inequities can be defined as the deprivation of resources for certain groups that are provided or available to other groups ([UNICEF](#)). Many times, the groups that are deprived of resources consist of the elderly, youth, black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), disabled; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit (LGBTQIA2S+); people belonging to particular religious groups, people with low income and many others.

Historical Inequities

Historically, plans and policies related to community development (land use, infrastructure, jobs/economy, housing etc.) have been – **by design** – harmful to certain communities. These policies and plans were rooted in biases that have transcended generations, evolving into historical inequities. Historical inequities are the continued resource and opportunity disadvantages a community faces based on race, gender, sexual orientation, age, income, language, religion, legal status, ability, etc. and are intensified by, for example: environmental injustice, redlining, undistributed wealth, language barriers, and immigration and refugee status.

The inequities experienced by these groups are often exacerbated by our changing climate and must be eliminated to create an equitable, sustainable community.

How to track inequities?

Inequities can be tracked through the use of indicators. Indicators are data points that provide information on trends that occur in an area. In this matter, equity indicators will help a local government track inequities that transpire in their community in order to take action and eliminate them.

Equity indicators covered in this guide are divided into five categories: Energy Access, Public Health, Infrastructure, Economic Prosperity, and Education. The indicators are listed below along with data sources for collecting this information.



Energy Access

Energy access involves ensuring that every member of a community has access to affordable, clean energy. Without proper energy access, communities suffer from high energy costs that can lead to and exacerbate adverse health effects from inefficient living conditions and economic insecurity ([ACEEE](#)).

Local governments can examine energy access by tracking the following indicators:

- Energy burden
- Clean energy access

Energy Burden

A prominent metric used to track energy cost is the percent of income used for energy costs. There are many data sources that can be used to track energy cost. For a high-level overview of energy cost by household income, the [ACEEE Energy Burden Report](#) can be referenced. In this report, ACEEE provided a high level energy burden percentage for metropolitan areas and national areas. The [National and Regional Energy Burdens fact sheet](#) provides a quick overview of the energy cost burden across the Country.

Another resource to collect this information includes the [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#). This tool determines whether a community is disadvantaged in several different areas, including energy burdens. This tool collects data by census tract to determine disadvantages experienced by the community. The use of this tool will provide you with a high-level understanding of the census tracts within your governmental boundary that struggle with energy cost burdens.

Lastly, the [Low-Income Energy Affordability Data \(LEAD\) Tool](#) can be used to collect the percentage of income used by energy costs. This tool provides energy burden and annual energy cost by state, county, city, census tract and tribal area.

Clean energy access

Community access to clean energy is not only crucial for emissions reduction, it is also important for community health. Access to cleaner fuels in a household reduces negative health impacts. To ensure clean energy can be supplied to a community, the regional grid for your community needs to be cleaner. The [eGRID Power Profiler](#) provides emissions for power production and the main sources of power at a regional level.



To directly assess local community energy sources, the House Heating Fuel table within [Census](#) data can be used to collect the use of different energy sources such as natural gas, wood, kerosene etc. among households.

Public Health

Public health is often directly linked to many of the historical inequities faced by disadvantaged communities. For example, poor air and water quality are often linked to redlining and locations of fuel refineries and oil rigs. There are many indicators that could be tracked for this sector, but the Equity: First Steps guide covers the following:

- Food security
- Open space access
- Tree canopy
- Healthcare
- Water quality
- Air quality

EPA EJScreen

The EPA's [EJScreen Tool](#) can provide data by census tract for most of the indicators listed directly above. This tool can be used to determine census tracts in your community that have low access to food/grocery stores, low access to medical care, poor water and air quality, and many more. Other areas that are covered by the EJ Screen include wildfire, drought and flooding hazards. This tool is a great high-level tool that can help the local government determine what areas are experiencing multiple inequalities and need more support and resources.

Tree Equity Score

The [Tree Equity Score](#) tool can be used to assess tree canopy in a community. This tool provides a tree score by census block group or by city. This tool will convey areas in the community that do not have adequate tree canopy. The tool determines the tree score by analyzing the following topics: tree canopy, percent youth, percent experiencing unemployment, percentage of people of color, percentage of elderly, percent experiencing poverty, temperature, and a health index.

ParkServe

The [ParkServe® tool](#) can be utilized to determine park access throughout a community. This tool, similar to the Tree Equity Score tool, provides a score for a City's park/green space. The



tool analyzes park space by the following characteristics: access, investment, acreage, amenities, and equity. It produces a map of areas in a community that have less access

Infrastructure

Resilient infrastructure is needed to aid communities through the changing climate, economic downturns, pandemics and other events. Historically disadvantaged communities often are the first communities to be burdened with the impacts of these situations and require more resources and aid. The Equity: First Steps guide covers the following indicators for infrastructure:

- Public Transportation
- Critical Facilities
- Flooding
- Wildfire
- Drought

Resilience Analysis and Planning Tool (RAPT)

The [Resilience Analysis and Planning Tool \(RAPT\)](#) can be used to assess critical infrastructure and climate hazards that occur in and around a community. These climate hazards can include flooding, drought, wildfires, storms and many other phenomena. The Adaptation: First Steps gives more guidance on exploring climate hazards and vulnerabilities.

EPA Smart Location Mapping

The EPA's [Smart Location Mapping](#) site contains a host of mapping tools to analyze access to public transportation. These tools include the Smart Location Database and Calculator and the Access to Jobs and Workers Via Transit Tool. These tools can be utilized to assess the areas of a community that are underserved by public transit.

AllTransit

[AllTransit](#) analyzes connectivity, access to jobs and service frequency of transit services at the City level. The AllTransit tool provides a Performance Score for a city's transit access by analyzing the following metrics: jobs, economy, health, equity, transit quality, and mobility.

Economic Prosperity

The topic of Economic Prosperity revolves around the ability of disadvantaged groups to thrive and achieve better economic opportunities. Communities with the resources to succeed are



more prosperous than communities that have been neglected over generations. The Equity First Steps covers the following indicators for economic prosperity:

- Diversity
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- Affordable Housing/Home Ownership
- Internet Access
- Language Barrier

US Census

The [US Census](#) is an expansive resource that can provide data on population diversity, unemployment, low to medium income households, housing costs, broadband access, and languages spoken in a community. The US Census can provide an average or this data can be collected by census tract.

EPA EJScreen

The [EJScreen Tool](#) is a multifaceted resource to collect economic prosperity data. The EJScreen tool maps socioeconomic indicators such as low income, unemployment, linguistically isolated populations, people of color populations, and broadband access.

Education

Education is another important element of the prosperity of communities. Providing quality education to the community enhances the ability to own a home or business and increase income. Many disadvantaged communities do not have access to quality education. The Equity First Steps covers the following indicators in relation to Education:

- Education Attainment
- Education Quality

US Census

The [US Census](#) provides data on education attainment of below a high school level, a high school degree, and a bachelor's degree by census tract. This tool can also provide data on education by gender, exploring school enrollment of female students compared to male students.

The Opportunity Atlas



[The Opportunity Atlas](#) is a robust resource to analyze youth education and the outcomes of their education. This tool cross references household poverty data, race and gender to areas where education quality may be less beneficial than other areas. There are many outputs that can be received from this tool, including youth outcomes with the characteristics of the neighborhood they are from.

Additional Resources:

- ❖ [ACEEE Energy Burden Report](#)
- ❖ [Green Link GEM Map](#)
- ❖ [City Resilience Index](#)
- ❖ [Metro Monitor 2019: Inclusion remains elusive amid widespread metro growth and rising prosperity](#)
- ❖ [National Equity Atlas](#)
- ❖ [Living Wage Calculator](#)
- ❖ [Energy Justice Mapping Tool - Disadvantaged Communities Reporter](#)
- ❖ [Healthy Places Index](#)

Next Steps:

The Equity: First Steps Guide is an introduction to many of the inequities faced throughout US communities that a local government can track through indicators. The list of indicators and topics covered in this guide are not a complete record of inequities that communities may be facing; this guide is aimed to be a starting point for analyzing a few of the inequities that may exist within a given community. The data collected in this guide can be used in an initial report or sustainability dashboard that covers a few of the inequities faced by a community.

The inequities in this guide provide local governments with a snapshot of the discrimination and unfairness that communities face, but it does not provide a complete picture. The best way to complete the inequity analysis process is to engage the community at hand. **Community engagement is the most beneficial tool in reducing inequalities experienced by community members.** Through a community engagement process, governments can fill in the gaps left by this guide to get a complete picture of inequities faced.