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Environmental policy: involving communities is crucial

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What do we mean by terms like 'transition', 'resilience' or 'clean energy'? Words used in the context of the climate emergency are key, but can generate misunderstandings. For local authorities this poses a particular challenge. In developing and delivering environmental policy, they need to act within national legislation while also supporting the needs of the communities they serve. This two-way tension is evident in the words used in formal communications and policy documents. These words are frequently loaded with technical meaning or have specific definitions that may not be known to most. The binding nature of these texts make them hard to read and to translate into practice. The risks, here, include:

- lack of progress in policy comprehension and enabling desired actions;
- disempowering those often most vulnerable to environmental change;
- excluding local knowledge, thereby limiting buy-in or bottom-up solutions.

With rising global temperatures and projected future risks from climate change, ensuring effective and inclusive communications is vital.

About the research

Conversations between scientists, engineers, historians, literature scholars, and others reveal a divergence in interpretation of even the most commonplace terms, including 'environment' itself. To explore these issues, Bristol University's 'Keywords for Environmental Research and Engagement' project held discussions with academics from a range of disciplines, initially focusing on a set of 'keywords' prominent at the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow: 'resilience', 'justice', and 'transitions'. In 2022 and 2023, workshops were co-created with climate-engaged community partners from diverse communities in Bristol. The aim was to explore their understandings of the same words, with a view to assessing the extent to which these abstract terms hinder collaborative decision-making and progress. In 2024, further workshops were held with community groups and business representatives to investigate the terms 'risk' and 'vulnerability'.

Key findings

Including community groups and businesses in climate policy development is crucial: valuing their lived experience, and being guided by local practitioner knowledge is fundamental to exploring possible futures. A creative approach enhanced engagement with those traditionally excluded from discussions and encouraged community-led solution finding.

- Key to our methodology was an introductory 'Walk and Talk' activity around the community groups' localities. Crucially, the walks not only acknowledged the group members as leaders and experts, but also provided shared experiences to draw on in later roundtable discussions.

- The process of establishing trust with community leaders, and early discussion of the needs of their communities, combined with a deep respect for their local knowledge, was fundamental in the overall framing of the activities.

- Working with community leaders increased the potential reach of these workshops and fostered inclusion, generating a 'network of networks'. This facilitated access to participants who are vulnerable to climate change impacts through socio-economic or other factors, such as limited language skills in English, health status, or isolation/lack of social networks. These discussions also ensured that the workshops were framed appropriately within the local context and personal circumstances of the community participants.

- Moving the discussion from abstract academic narrative to lived experience opened the way to uncovering diverse forms of knowing, personal values, and identities. This approach aligned with the now broadly recognised value of local knowledge and its importance in reducing risks from climate change and lowering emissions.

- A 'common language' for environmental engagement must extend beyond words to achieve concrete outcomes. Working with images, spaces, and practices, such as sharing food, can help include those vulnerable communities and individuals who are more likely to bear the brunt of our climate emergency.

Policy implications

- Although the research was conducted in Bristol, recommendations can also be applied to other geographic and administrative areas.

- Empower people to be part of the solution. The policy development process must include those who are/will be affected by that policy.

- Be alert to the vulnerability factors and risks facing the group(s) you are engaging with.

- Meet face-to-face in a location with which the participants are familiar.

- Facilitate exchange and equalise power dynamics with an introductory 'Walk and Talk' activity.

- Focus on single words relevant to your area (e.g. 'risk') to prompt discussion, but consider these as opportunities for participants to discuss underlying issues, for example physical safety, cost of living crisis, food and energy prices, or transport issues.

- Make discussions relevant to your area and reflective of the evidence-based current and future challenges most likely to be a factor in those locations.

- Apply this simple three-step framework:

  1. Start meaningful engagement and community-led input at the earliest opportunity in the policy development consultation process, working with local community champions.
  2. Approach consultees with a participatory framework and not a top-down agenda.
  3. Recompense participants and their time as an acknowledgement of their value.

Image: Future Leap 'Netwalking' event

Image: St Werburgh's open-air pizza making

Further information

The Environmental Keywords team engaged with organisations including: Eastside Community Trust, Foundation for Active Community Engagement (FACE), Heart of BS13, Bristol Disability Equality Forum, Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership, Future Leap Network, St Werburgh's City Farm, and the Cabot Institute for the Environment.

Climate change indicators reached record levels in 2023 (WMO) [accessed 21 March 2024]

IPPC, 2022: Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, et al (eds.)].

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