

University of San Diego

Digital USD

---

San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative

The Nonprofit Institute

---

2022

## Laying the Groundwork for Equity-First Climate Adaptation

Michelle Robidas

Darbi Berry

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/npi-sdclimate>



Part of the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), and the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#)

---



**Climate  
Collaborative**  
SAN DIEGO REGION



# **LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR EQUITY-FIRST CLIMATE ADAPTATION**

**San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative**

# A FIELD GUIDE FOR PRACTITIONERS

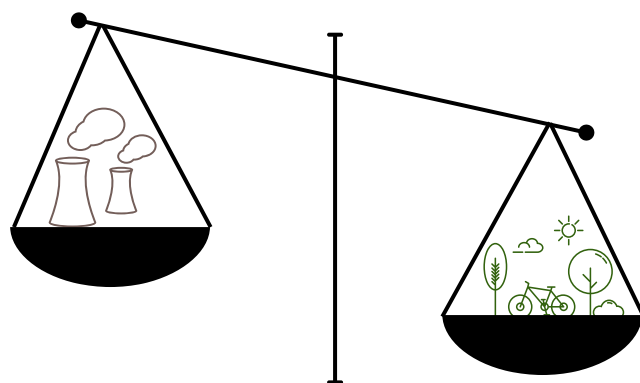
Climate equity recognizes the disproportionate burden of climate impacts on marginalized communities and foregrounds inequity at the root causes. San Diego's climate practitioners indicated a need for localized guidance and accessibility to resources that will support the implementation of equitable climate adaptation planning practices (1). To address this need, the San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative supported the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) as a sub-recipient of an SB1 Adaptation Planning Grant to develop an **Equity-First Approach to Climate Adaptation guidance document** (Equity Guidance; document). This document provides climate practitioners with resources to embed equity in the climate adaptation planning process.

This blog highlights the document's crucial steps for adaptation preplanning, including the equity implications of climate impacts, identifying social equity communities, and how to apply the four dimensions of equity to adaptation planning.

## IDENTIFYING SOCIAL EQUITY COMMUNITIES

When initiating the climate adaptation planning process, it's important for jurisdictions to identify vulnerable communities and populations. Specifically, social equity groups need to be prioritized; this includes but is not limited to homeless, tribal communities, undocumented immigrants, rural communities, outdoor workers, migrant workers, refugees, disabled individuals, seniors, youth, women, and gender non-binary individuals.

## Defining a Social Equity Community



*"Areas disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and other hazards that can lead to negative public health effects, exposure, or environmental degradation, or with concentrations of people that are of low income, high unemployment, low levels of homeownership, high rent burden, sensitive populations, or low levels of educational attainment (3)"*

Social equity communities will vary region to region. As an adaptation practitioner, it is important to utilize any available datasets and meaningfully engage with community stakeholders to identify social equity communities who may be disproportionately impacted by climate stressors.

## CLIMATE AMPLIFIES SOCIAL INEQUITIES

Impacts from climate change intersect with socioeconomic inequities and are important for practitioners to understand when initiating a climate adaptation planning process. The figure on the next page illustrates examples of these intersections for the San Diego region to consider (2).



**Wildfire** Amplifies inequities of community resiliency after disaster and distribution of recovery aid. Also causes air pollution, which particularly impacts essential workers and those who work outside.



**Precipitation** impacts water quality and the food system, and will leave the homeless population especially vulnerable to vector borne disease.



**Extreme Heat** impacts those who cannot afford AC, work outside, rely on public transportation, have health conditions, as well as homeless, elderly, and youth populations will be especially vulnerable.



**Sea Level Rise** causes coastal erosion and displacement of coastal communities that will move inland. Who pays versus who benefits from coastal adaptation is a major concern.



**Drought** impacts ecosystems and food system, which will leave the homeless, agricultural workers, and food-insecure populations especially vulnerable.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPLANNING

Preplanning for climate adaptation increases equitable outcomes by identifying who will be impacted by adaptation strategies, who to engage, and opportunities to holistically enhance community resilience. Successful pre-planning connects adaptation to the four major dimensions of equity: procedural, structural, distributive, and interactional. Procedural equity ensures inclusive decision-making and develops community adaptation leadership. Structural equity reflects on the history of systemic injustice, asking practitioners to reflect how their adaptation work includes vulnerable populations to discontinue this narrative. Interactional equity encourages practitioners to consider power dynamics when working with disadvantaged communities by using accessible and trust-building communication.

Distributive equity considers the inequitable allocation of resources, what has the community identified as missing and necessary? Implementing the equity opportunities on the following page, practitioners are more likely to conduct equitable adaptation, by understanding the underlying systemic issues that contribute to inequities and recognizing community-identified needs.

## CAPACITY BUILDING

Both organizational and community capacity building are fundamental to a successful adaptation planning process.

Organizational capacity building starts training staff to recognize unequal distribution of climate impacts, their intersections with existing social inequities, or additional factors that produce these inequities. Building an organization's capacity to develop social and cultural competencies will aid practitioners throughout the adaptation planning process.

Community capacity building starts with understanding that communities have strengths, assets, social cohesion, and resilience and may already work directly or indirectly on climate adaptation activities. It is important for practitioners to recognize that building community capacity is an asset to the adaptation planning process. It focuses on deepening connections with and empowering frontline communities by enhancing local coordination and leadership, assisting with knowledge and skills, and improving access to resources.



# Preplanning for Adaptation: Opportunities to Integrate Four Dimensions of Equity

## PROCEDURAL

Establish trusted and ongoing (mutually-beneficial) relationships with the community, community groups, and CBOs.

## STRUCTURAL

Recognize systemic injustice and persistent inequities embedded in systems including policies, procedures, and the distribution of resources.

## INTERACTIONAL

Enhance the community's adaptive capacity through accessible, trust-based engagement that is mutually beneficial.

## DISTRIBUTIVE

Direct resources to communities that have experienced racism, chronic disinvestment, carry pollution burden, high unemployment, etc.

# LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT

It is important when prioritizing equity that practitioners ensure and establish continuous learning and community engagement throughout all phases of the climate adaptation planning process (figure below).

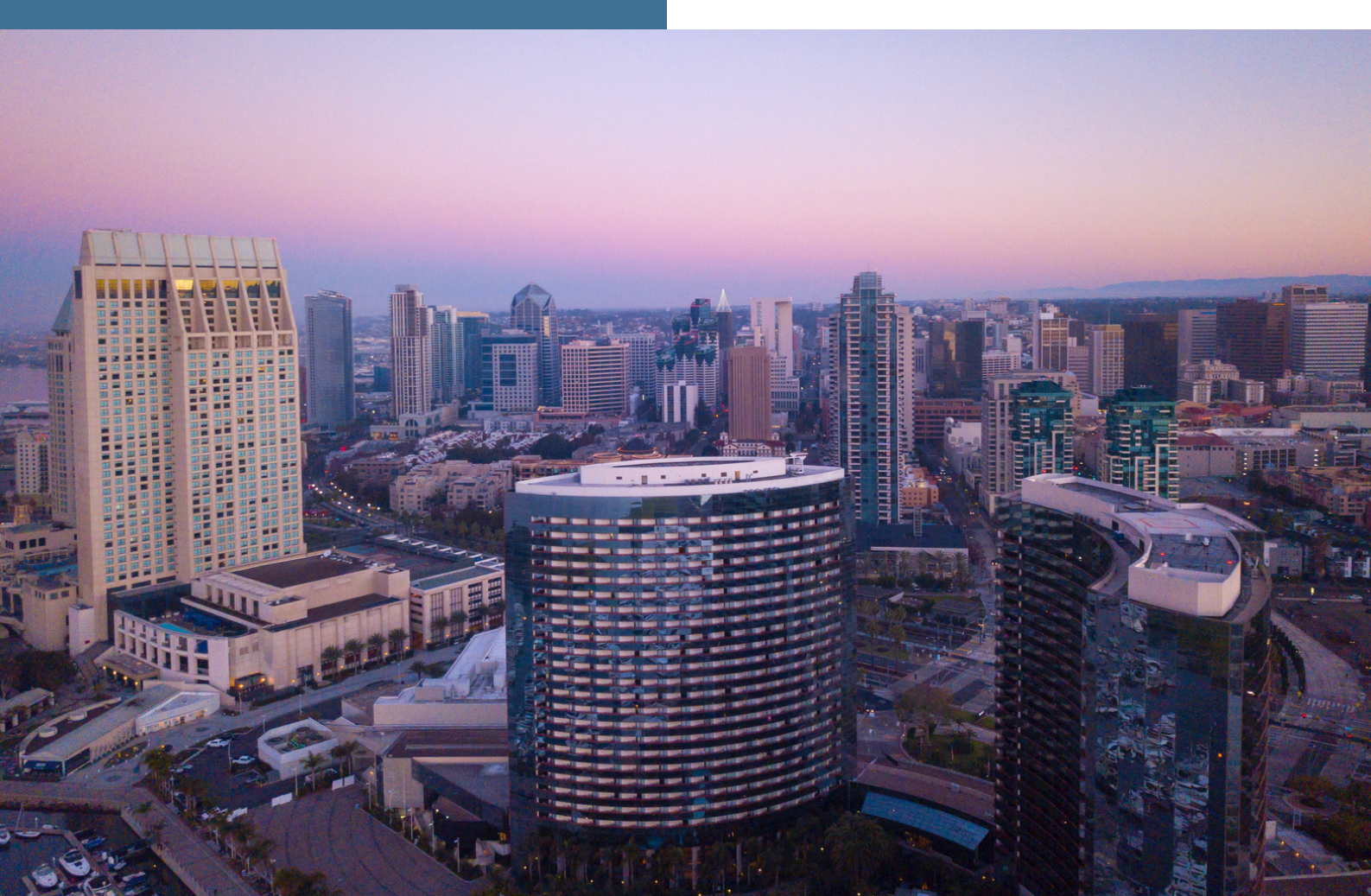
## Integrating Outreach, Engagement and Learning in the Adaptation Planning Process



(Adaptation Phases of the Climate Adaptation Planning Process. Cal-OES, California Adaptation Planning Guide. 2020: Mather, CA).

Practitioners must intentionally set-up feedback loops to ensure learning is integrated throughout all phases of climate adaptation. This can happen by creating pop-up events to solicit feedback and ideas for strategy adjustment when needed. Additionally, practitioners need to enable pathways to collaborate directly with the community, this includes when updating strategies and progress on program implementation.

An appropriately-budgeted, robust, and on-going community engagement strategy will build trust between the planning team and community stakeholders, which will develop an adaptation plan that has collective support (4). Building trust, engaging with the community, and providing frequent opportunities for stakeholder feedback and practitioner learning are essential for effective and equitable climate adaptation.



## SOURCES

1. San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative, San Diego Association of Governments, Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, and The San Diego Foundation, "Regional Adaptation Needs Assessment" (2020). San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative. 13. <https://digital.sandiego.edu/npi-sdclimate/13>
2. Kalansky, J., et al., *California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment: San Diego Summary Report*. 2018.
3. Shi, L., From progressive cities to resilient cities: Lessons from history for new debates in equitable adaptation to climate change. *Urban Affairs Review*, 2020: p. 1078087419910827.
4. Cal-OES, California Adaptation Planning Guide. 2020: Mather, CA.

The San Diego Regional Climate Collaborative was established in 2011 as a network for public agencies to advance climate change solutions and is currently housed at The Nonprofit Institute at the University of San Diego.