

# INTEGRATING SOCIAL EQUITY

How do we integrate considerations of social justice and equity into our campaign plans in a way that is meaningful and results in just solutions to the climate crisis?



The Climate Advocacy Lab's recommendations for integrating equity address **four critical aspects** of how and where we must deal with these issues. In order to properly integrate social equity into our work, we cannot simply aim to improve organizational (or coalition) strategy and individual work plan goals, but must also engage in personal transformation and culture change.

Likewise, at the Lab, we don't *just* advance a framework for "integrating social equity" because it's the right thing to do or because it's strategic; we also advance these perspectives recognizing that people who have historically been marginalized hold invaluable expertise in solution-generation and resilience. These tips are not a replacement for additional training, nor an argument for why you should integrate equity into your work, and we encourage you to think of this as a starting point – not an endpoint.



## 1. IDENTIFY WHY THIS MATTERS TO YOU

Each of us is affected in different ways by social injustices and inequities, or by a failure to include the voices that represent the diversity of communities touched by the work we do. We're not always part of the directly impacted community, and sometimes it can be hard for us to see the connections between our experiences and the challenges facing others. So, why does social justice matter to you? Identifying why these issues are important to us can serve as a "true north" to return to as we navigate complex and often challenging issues.

**EXAMPLE:** *"As an immigrant, I've seen my mom treated unfairly too many times. I want to create a world in which my generation and those who come after us simply don't have to waste time and energy, or feel harmed by this kind of baseless discrimination."*



## 2. DISRUPT MISPERCEPTIONS THAT COULD HOLD YOU BACK

For too long, much of the mainstream environmental movement has had the misperception that huge swaths of the American public, including low-income communities and people of color, don't care about environmental issues like climate change. A growing body of research from the last decade demystifies this misperception, an important starting point for how we think about public engagement.

**EXAMPLE:** *Research from Yale University, George Mason University, and partner organizations has helped illustrate just how far off public perceptions are regarding who cares about issues like climate change, and who doesn't. In a nationally representative survey that confirms what community-based organizations have known for decades, diverse segments of the US public underestimated the environmental concerns of nonwhite and low-income Americans, thinking them lower than those of white and more affluent Americans. A decade of nationally representative public polling shows similar trends ([explore these data here](#)). Research has shown that some of these groups are actually more likely to take action on climate, like participating in a campaign or contacting a government official.*



### 3. ENSURE YOU HAVE AN ORGANIZATIONAL (OR COALITIONAL) COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY

As you begin developing a climate campaign or initiative, are values of justice, equity, inclusion and diversity integral to your work? Does your organization or coalition support these values and the (often tough) work of making them real each step of the way? You will need to ensure these values are shared up and down your decision-making ladders, and across the individuals working to create just and equitable solutions to climate change.

**EXAMPLE:** Coalitions that we've seen advance just climate solutions in the last few years have also detailed the long work of centering values of justice and equity, redefining how groups work with one another, and re-envisioning how climate coalitions actually need to work together to achieve visionary wins. Case studies documenting the wins of the [Portland Clean Energy Fund](#) (Portland, OR), the [Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act](#) (NY), and the [Future Energy Jobs Act](#) (Illinois) provide fine-grained detail for what is required to do this.



### 4. CLARIFY SPECIFIC ACTIONS TO DRIVE JUST AND EQUITABLE OUTCOMES IN YOUR WORK

Where in your day-to-day work do you have “[Choice Points](#)” that can change the course of your impact from “business as usual” (i.e., perpetuating social inequities that intersect with climate or energy issues) to proactively ensuring just outcomes?

**EXAMPLE:** From the start, leaders involved in discussions leading to the [Portland Clean Energy Fund](#) ballot measure pushed connection and coordination with the groups working with low-income communities and communities of color. Similarly, members of the coalition that won the [Future Energy Jobs Act](#) in Illinois made several strategic decisions in the course of developing their campaign to ensure the bill and the process were accessible to members. This included defining a campaign narrative centered on racial and economic justice, which described the state's energy situation and the bill in terms relevant to low-income communities and communities of color.



### 5. GET HONEST ABOUT THE WAYS YOU (YES, YOU!) MAY NEED TO CHANGE

Biases and blind spots can be difficult to identify because they are often systemic and, therefore, embedded in lots of areas we're often not aware of. Do you have blind spots you are aware of, but have not yet worked to shed new light on? Do you have trusted partners that you can ask for feedback about how you show up in a room where diverse identities and experiences are represented? Are there interpersonal dynamics that you find challenging when divergent opinions and perspectives are voiced in the rooms you work in? As adults, we all continue to develop and evolve, and we must make time to reflect deeply on where each of us personally can [learn and grow new capacities](#) to drive and embody the transformational change we seek.

**EXAMPLE:** Over the past few years, the Lab has reckoned with how we needed to change to ensure our commitment justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion was more than just words on a website, but a “north star” that guided all aspects of our work. Through ongoing conversations with Lab members, we learned that many organizations had made similar, big commitments to equity and justice but were unsure of the path forward to operationalize them – particularly given the sensitivity of the issues and a fear of potential missteps. In 2020, the Lab kicked off a six-month Peer Learning Circle with 25 other climate advocates to discuss how we can build a more equitable movement; share plans to transform our own organizations; and support each other on our personal, organizational, and coalitional journeys towards justice.





## 6. DEVELOP A CULTURE CHANGE STRATEGY

There's a saying among organizational change professionals: "[Culture eats strategy for breakfast](#)." Put differently, if you don't change the culture of established social norms, interpersonal interactions, or how processes or priorities are determined, the best-intentioned justice strategies are unlikely to succeed. The most intangible of the fronts on which change must occur – culture change – happens in how we relate to one another and the world around us. Principles for engagement, or ground rules, help guide us in an arena where interventions are not hard and fast, but manifest differently from one interaction to another. Change in this arena is likely to be felt more than seen (and that's OK!).

**EXAMPLE:** Organizations are increasingly demonstrating that different cultural strategies are necessary for different initiatives to succeed. The BEAI Initiative requires all participants to adhere to the [Jemez Principles](#) as they shift the outdated culture of resourcing the environmental movement. Similarly, the winning NY Renewables coalition developed their own [Points of Unity](#) to supplement their use of the Jemez Principles, while Vote Solar established [Just Partnership Principles](#) for staff and partners to use in holding the organization accountable to their values.



## 7. ADOPT "EQUITY PRIMES"

In the heat of an important meeting or the pressure of an urgent campaign, we often revert to habitual practices instead of flexing new muscles. Adding in "equity primes," or reminders to stop and check our *assumptions* and habitual actions, can help. Equity primes can serve as a form of [double-loop learning](#), helping us improve by examining the assumptions underlying the decisions we make (not just the impact of habitual decisions). Then, we can determine whether or not an additional change to a decision or process is needed.

**EXAMPLE:** Tools like the [People's Solutions Lens for a Green New Deal](#) can help prompt us to more closely evaluate the assumptions underlying our work. Questions like "Who else will this impact?" would have been a useful equity prime for environmental advocacy groups who learned the hard way that celebrating the closure of coal-fired power plants alienated working-class people who experienced job loss and other negative impacts of this "success."



## 8. PRACTICE RIGOROUS EVALUATION

Your attention will follow your intentions, and if you're clear about your social equity and justice goals (and the importance of making progress on them) you'll regularly evaluate them. Transparently self-reporting on progress can increase ownership of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives; help change cultural norms; and enable institutional and individual accountability.

**EXAMPLE:** [Kentuckians for the Commonwealth](#) work on many energy issues that impact the daily lives of Kentuckians, some of whom are paying as much as 23% of their annual income on electricity bills. KFTC's Power House Project culminated with an [Internal Evaluation Document](#) that captured learnings, challenges, and insights, and made their innovative organizing approach replicable for others. The document also captured how effective the project's workshops were for "meeting people where they are," engaging individuals and communities not otherwise interested in their broader political and organizing strategies. Sierra Club, a very different organization, used their [2019 Multi-year Equity Plan](#) to report back on 2015 goals and to articulate future goals. Note that this included measuring some "cultural" shifts, such as employees' experience of "inclusivity" at the organization!



### IN SUMMARY, WE HOPE YOU'LL CARRY FORWARD:

Renewed clarity about why these issues are important to you, and an expanded sense of who is "us" within the environmental and climate movement

A holistic framework to advance both internal and external transformation in order to achieve better and more just outcomes.

The ability to employ equity primes to help drive your own behavior change, as well as clear examples of how you can measure & evaluate your work in this arena.