

*Audio Podcast about the Symposium on the Science of Disproportionate Environmental Health Impacts*

CHRISTINE GUITAR: With us now is Dr. Nicholas Freudenberg and he will be discussing his paper on Community Capacity to Participate in Decision-Making. Hi Nick.

NICHOLAS FREUDENBERG: Hi.

CHRISTINE GUITAR: So, can you tell us about who you work for and a little bit about the paper that you presented at the symposium?

NICHOLAS FREUDENBERG: Sure, I'm a public health researcher at City University of New York School of Public Health at Hunter College and I've been working for many years in New York City working with and for community groups to develop public health programs to reduce disparities in health and improve communities' abilities to shape their own health.

CHRISTINE GUITAR: OK, and what was the paper that you were presenting on?

NICHOLAS FREUDENBERG: So, our paper focused on the capacity of communities to participate in making decisions about their environment and we asked the question is "Can such participation reduce some of the inequities in health we've seen between better-off communities and poorer communities?"

CHRISTINE GUITAR: And what were the results of the paper—what did you find?

NICHOLAS FREUDENBERG: Well, I think we asked three questions. We wanted to understand what the characteristics of communities are that contribute to their ability to participate in making environmental decisions so that both people working in communities and people working in health and environmental agencies could strengthen that capacity. Second, we wanted to look at what are the characteristics of environmental policy decision-making processes that encourage or discourage participation so that we could recommend to EPA or other agencies what are the characteristics of processes that are effective. And finally we asked how can EPA better support community participation in making decisions that reduce disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on low-income populations and communities of color.

And I think I can say just briefly what we found in each of those categories.

We found that there were several characteristics of communities that seem to be better able to participate – one was communities that had a history of working together and stronger ties between the different population groups in a community. Conversely, we found that communities where there had been high population turnover, what we called "churning," were, had a diminished capacity to participate. And, I think the implication of that is we need to be looking for ways to help communities maintain stability so that they have the connections between people that allow people to participate.

We also found that the leadership within a community played a very important role on their being able to participate, and those communities that were fortunate enough to have organizations working around environmental justice were perhaps better prepared to respond to crises than those that had never had that opportunity.

We also looked at environmental processes and we came up with seeing different kinds of environmental processes than those that simply gave the appearance of participation but not the reality and those that we called authentic participation. And, authentic participation requires that both sides --community residents and public agencies, including EPA -- are able to listen to what that other person has to say and realize that different constituencies have different perspectives and are able to make changes in what they plan to do after hearing from folks in the community. I think we found that what particularly upsets community residents is if they're asked to participate and then their points of view are ignored.

And finally, we asked the question "How can EPA better support community participation?" And, we've come up with several suggestions. We thought that it important to begin those participation processes early to engage the community right from the start. We found that it takes time to build trust—that an environmental agency, or for that matter a community, can't demand trust, you earn trust over time. We suggested that the EPA look for ways to create effective mechanisms to listen to community concerns—sometimes that's bringing people together, sometimes it means going around the community. It requires creating spaces in which all participants have an equal voice and are able to listen.

Another piece of that is the importance of developing culturally competent, culturally appropriate outreach processes—what you'd use in a community of recent immigrants from Central America might be very different from what you'd do in a long-established African-American community.

Another recommendation was to make government resources available to communities that would include support for technical assistance, scientific resources, but also developing skills and participating in the political system.

There was a lot of discussion in our paper about the importance of looking at cumulative impact, not just a single exposure at a time. People in a community see their environment as a whole, not as pieces and they're concerned about all the things they're exposed to. Researchers and public officials need to understand that. We found it was important to maintain participation over time. The fly-by or drive-through consultation usually ends up frustrating communities rather than satisfying them. We thought it was particularly important to evaluate participation over time and to have some clear markers of what's good participation and what's not-so-good participation.

And finally, we recommended that EPA make sure that they take actions based on what they hear from the community and that is the strongest reinforcer for communities to participate more.

CHRISTINE GUITAR: Those are very important recommendations. Thank you so much for your time, Dr. Freudenberg.

NICHOLAS FREUDENBERG: Sure.