

# Environmental Laws and Alternative Dispute Resolution: Tools for Environmental Justice

## Community-Based Participatory Research: A Tool for Achieving Environmental Justice

### Introduction

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a collaborative process of research involving researchers and community representatives. At its core, CBPR is a systematic way of involving the community in finding answers to questions or solutions to problems. It is an important tool for achieving environmental justice because it:

- Engages community members.
- Employs local knowledge in the understanding of health problems and the design of interventions.
- Invests community members in the processes and products of research.
- Involves community members in the dissemination and use of research findings.

### History of CBPR

Ultimately, CBPR enables community members to play a key role in reducing health disparities and achieving environmental justice.

Traditionally, community residents have been included in the research process only as subjects. The researcher uses the subject to investigate hypotheses or questions, and decides how that information is to be gathered. The researcher also determines the research priorities, methods, and utilization of the results. This conventional approach has a contentious history, and has led to a spectrum of problems. It has hindered the ability to acquire information necessary to answer questions about environmental exposures and disease disparities. And it offers limited opportunities to improve the health and well-being of communities that bear the dual burden of pollution and disease.

## NIEHS CBPR Program

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) seeks to reduce the burden of environmentally associated diseases and health conditions. It developed a CBPR program to implement culturally relevant prevention/intervention activities in economically disadvantaged and/or underserved populations adversely impacted by an environmental contaminant. NIEHS sought to improve scientifically valid intervention methods and strengthen participation of affected communities in this effort. The long-range goal is to improve the knowledge and behavior of disadvantaged or underserved community members regarding prevention, detection and treatment of environmentally related diseases and health conditions, and thereby reduce incidence and mortality rates of such diseases and conditions.

## History of CBPR, cont'd.

To address the deficiencies in conventional research, and because of the escalating interest in research that aims to improve the health of disadvantaged (minority, low-income, rural, central city, and other) populations, CBPR was developed as an alternative approach to conventional research. With a long and successful history in the social sciences and international and rural development, CBPR is now being used in

## How Does CBPR Work?

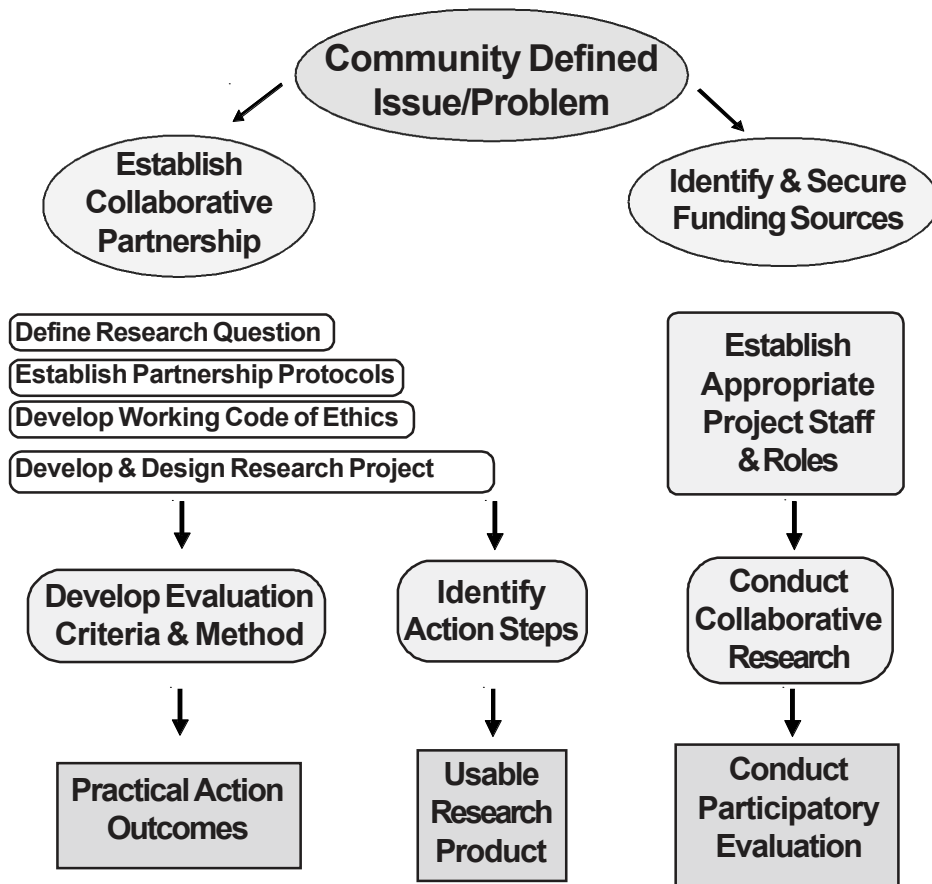
disadvantaged communities to address health and environmental concerns. There is a growing recognition of the importance and promise of this type of research within health services and public health institutions and funding organizations.

CBPR seeks to expand knowledge and understanding of the potential causes and remedies of environmentally related disorders. At the same time, it enhances the capacity of communities to participate in processes that shape research approaches and intervention strategies.

The process begins by identifying community concerns and ideas. This is most effectively done through community dialogue sessions. These sessions are used to provide basic training on CBPR methods. They also allow participants to identify community (and other) information and data; and begin initial identification and assessment of community expertise, resource needs, and initial identification of partners.

Research projects are conducted in a manner that reinforces collaboration between community members and research institutions. Relevant results are disseminated to the community in clear, useful terms. They are designed to be culturally appropriate – social, economic, and cultural conditions that influence health status are considered. Unique cultural factors are identified and incorporated into intervention strategies, which increases acceptability, use, and adherence by the intended beneficiaries of the research. Ultimately, CBPR seeks to maximize the potential for change in knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

The strength of CBPR is that community members and groups work along with researchers, specialists and other stakeholders (e.g., government, business) to carry out projects in equitable partnerships. The following diagram (next page) was prepared by the Southeast Community Research Center to explain the CBPR process:



## How Does CBPR Relate to Environmental Justice?

According to the Southeast Center for Community Research, CBPR is research that is conducted as an equal partnership between traditionally trained “experts” and community members that are unified by a particular concern. In CBPR projects, the community participates fully in all aspects of the research process. The views, concerns, and interests of all participants are given equal weight in determining the focus of the research question, the approach employed to attempt to identify answers and solutions, and the use and significance of the products of the research endeavor.

CBPR is important to community residents confronted with pollution and disease because it:

- provides a process to develop an action strategy that evolves from a strong community foundation to involve many parties and stakeholders,
- creates an avenue to ensure an understanding by all parties of community concerns, and
- ensures the involvement of impacted community groups in decision-making in an equitable, multi-disciplinary and collaborative framework.

CBPR creates partnerships that can:

- facilitate the definition of important environmental health issues and concerns,
- promote the development of measurement instruments that are culturally appropriate, and
- ensure the establishment of trust that will enrich the value of data collected.

## Relating CBPR to Environmental Justice, cont'd.

The CBPR model can also be applied to other government activities addressing environmental justice challenges. First, it can be used for conducting risk assessments. The CBPR model can help ensure that risk assessments are informed by local knowledge and conditions. Second, it can help direct agency research and intervention strategies. The CBPR model promotes active community involvement so that agency research questions are guided by the environmental health issues and concerns most important to community members.

### Examples of CBPR

***PCBs and Health in the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne:*** This CBPR project examined the extent to which exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) affected the physical and psychological functioning of individuals living in the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne. The project was conducted in collaboration with university based scientists/researchers (from the school of public health at SUNY-Albany) and members of the Akwesasne community. **Reference:** "Building A Community-Based Research Partnership: Lessons from the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne," *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 26, No 2. (Written in collaboration between SUNY-Albany & ATFE).

***Community-Level Exposure to Diesel Fumes in Harlem:*** This CBPR project was undertaken by West Harlem Environmental ACTION (WE ACT) in collaboration with the Columbia University-based Harlem Health Promotion Center. It involved a study of the effects of diesel fumes on adolescents in Harlem, NY. Harlem's borders are heavy traveled freeways, and it is home to 4,200 city buses and 650 Port Authority buses. The research findings showed measurements for small diesel particles to be 200 percent higher in Harlem than the EPA's standards. **Reference:** WE ACT produced a report on this study, which was published in the March 2000 issue of *Environmental Health Perspectives*.

### Conclusion

The complexity and extent of environmental health challenges confronting communities burdened with pollution and disease demands constant improvement in government research and decision-making. CBPR is an essential new approach that is anchored by the people who are intended to benefit from government action.