



SEAFARE

Supporting Equitable Access to Funding for Adaptation Resources

The Nature Conservancy's Maryland/DC Chapter is leading an effort designed to identify ways to more equitably allocate coastal climate adaptation funding to marginalized frontline communities. Through the SEAFARE project our goal is to ensure that community voices are elevated, and underserved communities have better access to the coastal climate adaptation funding they need.

Overview

Impacts of climate change are unequal.

Underserved and overburdened communities – frequently communities of color – are disproportionately impacted by climate change, yet they often must overcome the greatest hurdles to access adaptation funds. Climate adaptation laws and policies do not yet center climate justice goals. Legislative frameworks, solicitation language, and funding criteria are restricting community access to nature-based climate adaptation funding. These aspects of federal and state funding systems manifest in climate adaptation programs that perpetuate and even exacerbate systemic inequities. Environmental justice and equity are frequently acknowledged as being important considerations for grant programs but are inconsistently and inadequately used to guide the fair and equitable allocation of coastal climate adaptation resources. With worsening impacts of climate change, there is an urgent and increasing need to address the climate adaptation priorities of underserved and frontline communities.

PHASE I - Cross-State Analysis

In 2021, TNC hired Upwelling Consulting to review the lifecycle of climate adaptation funding in five US states including Maryland, California, Louisiana, New York, and North Carolina to identify inequities in laws, policies, and programs, as well as opportunities for improvement to increase equitable access to and distribution of climate adaptation funding.

The cross-state analysis of climate adaptation programs revealed three general patterns, and while this analysis isn't comprehensive of all the inequities that exist, it provides a starting point for our work in Maryland.

- **Built-in Inequities:** The funding life cycle often includes embedded inequities at the source, where funding is often allocated via legislation, and at the sink, where solicitations for grant programs include inequities in the criteria required for selection, often on a competitive basis. At the source, silent or permissive

language (e.g., may, can, should) rather than prescriptive language (e.g., must, requires, shall) reflects embedded inequities. At the sink, specific criteria generally demonstrate a model for thinking about how grant programs should be administered to achieve the best return on investment, either financial or scientific, rather than how grant programs should be administered to serve the most vulnerable communities.

A synthesis of funding criteria from the evaluated states revealed a striking disparity between criteria that prioritized environmental justice versus privileged communities. On average, 40 points were allocated to criteria that assume existing access to resources (e.g., application quality, readiness, expertise, match). In contrast, only 20 points on average were allocated to criteria that considered equity (e.g., public/social benefit, need). In one of the most straightforward steps for emphasizing equitable access to adaptation resources – using solicitation criteria that prioritizes equity – privileged communities are being given double the advantage.

- **Inconsistent terminology:** Provisions that allocate funding to environmental justice programs are a direct result of what defines a disadvantaged community (DAC). It involves not only deciding on a set of criteria for the definition, but also choosing the data points that will measure that criteria, and then working out how to combine those data points to score and rank every community in the state.

Terminology and Criteria are often used inconsistently both across states, and within states. While terminology should be addressed on a state-by-state level due to the unique nature of each state, there is an opportunity to design and adopt frameworks for identifying the most impacted communities. Consistency in terminology and associated grant solicitation criteria can help to address the most important climate adaptation challenges faced by socially vulnerable communities.

- **Dependence on existing maladapted legislation and/or capital budgets:** Practitioners rely upon maladapted legislation and capital budgets to address climate adaptation challenges. To achieve environmental justice benefits, these goals must be expressly stated in legislation to carry through to solicitation criteria. There is a need for legislation to focus specifically on environmental justice communities and climate adaptation through the lens of community priorities.

From Awareness to Action

State-level climate adaptation policies and programs facilitate the pathway from federally allocated climate adaptation funding to municipal level climate adaptation action. To implement socially just climate adaptation, states will need to demonstrate a willingness to invest in the following actions:

- **Re-imagine stakeholder engagement, with community knowledge held on par with other sources of knowledge.** (e.g., ecological, political knowledge, engineering, economics) as a primary driver for how climate adaptation policy making, and planning should occur. Current frameworks for public participation reflect the minimum requirements to engage stakeholders and often involves outside experts telling communities what they need, rather than the other way around. Vulnerable communities are best positioned to identify efficient use of funds for their unique needs.
- **Revise and create legislation and solicitation criteria to address climate adaptation injustices.** Vulnerable communities are best equipped to identify embedded inequities in both legislation and solicitation criteria and anticipate how the language will reflect their communities' needs. Gain situational awareness by identifying whether relevant terms exist in law or policy, and if so, whether the terms warrant revision. Engage the community in the drafting of the legislation to define terms by law, and the design of policies established to implement the term.
- **Re-establish and/or establish connections between defined terms, policies, and funding allocations.** The link between underserved communities and funding allocations needs to be made explicitly clear. Terms are best defined at the state level due to the unique conditions, present in each state. For example, what constitutes socially vulnerable in California will likely need to be differently reflected than what constitutes socially vulnerable in Maryland. A key policy level is connecting the term to policies, where the term is referenced in legislation to specifically allocate funding and put forth conditions for grant solicitation criteria.

States and municipal governments are on the frontlines of the climate crisis. Adaptation practitioners and the communities impacted by climate change face economic, financial, and social barriers that can be greater challenges to coastal protection than technical limits. The above three general patterns of barriers, and three solutions to address those barriers is not a comprehensive list, rather a jumping off point to dive deeper into state specific issues and solutions.