NEJAC RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

Validating and Incorporating Lived Experience into Assessments and Processes

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

In October 2024, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council Cumulative Impacts Workgroup published a report of recommendations to the EPA, Reducing Cumulative and Disproportionate Impacts and Burdens in Environmental Justice Communities. To improve environmental health protections by reaching a larger audience, the Union of Concerned Scientists prepared eight fact sheets summarizing the workgroup's recommendations. Natalie Gehred, a doctoral student in molecular biology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Dr. Kristie Ellickson, a senior scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists, prepared the summaries.

This document summarizes Theme 5 of the report: EPA should validate lived experience and incorporate it into assessments and processes through co-design and shared leadership.

For additional summaries, please visit act.ucusa.org/NEJAC. For the full report, please visit act.ucsusa.org/NEJAC-report.

Cumulative impact assessment is a step toward an environmental regulatory system informed by real-life conditions in overburdened communities. Residents of such communities often possess essential knowledge about specific impacts on their environments, their bodies, and the people around them, as well as information relevant to tracing the causes of such impacts.

This "lived experience," a critical source of information not easily accessible in other ways, tends to be fine-grained and locally specific. Due to their lived experiences, people may have distinct perspectives on the origins and nature of—and possible solutions to—environmental and health problems. Crucially, from a cumulative impact assessment standpoint, people's lived experiences can also help others understand the intersections among various impacts and why a particular impact may take on added significance. Best practices should include involving community members in assessing cumulative impacts, developing long-term solutions to problems identified through an assessment, and determining whether an intervention is successful or sufficient.

Union of Concerned Scientists

Define lived experience and related terms for cumulative impact assessment.

Clear definitions of lived experience and experiential knowledge will encourage regulators to use them accurately and consistently in cumulative impact assessments.

Lived experience. A lived experience is direct and first-hand. It is the experience of an incident or situation to which a person has an intimate connection, either because the incident or situation affected them personally or affected people or environments nearby (physically or emotionally). Lived experience is "embodied" in that it depends on proximity in time and space to what is happening. When speaking generally of lived experience, it refers to the totality of experiences meeting the above criteria.

Experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge derives from lived experience and consists partially of intuitive understandings reflected in people's thoughts and behaviors. In practice, these insights often draw knowledge from other sources and perspectives beyond lived experience. Experiential knowledge differs from professional knowledge, which usually derives from "discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others" (Borkman 1976). Experiential knowledge is more likely to arise incidentally—as a byproduct of everyday activities—rather than as a product of concerted study.

Community knowledge. Community knowledge is more than the totality of personal, experiential knowledge. It occurs when a community's shared understandings offer general insights into its condition. Indigenous knowledge, an example of community knowledge, represents an integrated body of knowledge belonging to the community as a whole, accumulated over a long period, and incorporating ancestral knowledge. Recognizing and respecting community knowledge in the processes and decisionmaking of cumulative impact assessment relates to, but is distinct from, respecting the individual voices of community members who participate in assessment directly.

Specify who has lived experience and where to find it.

While everyone has lived experiences, most important to cumulative impact assessments are those from people directly impacted by the resulting decision or people closely related to or acquainted with these individuals (e.g., a child). Predominantly, but not always, this includes the people living near a proposed project or in an overburdened community. For example, persistent toxicants can travel in the atmosphere and bioaccumulate in different climates hundreds or thousands of miles from the source. Also relevant are the experiences of people affected by the people or institutions implicated in creating, perpetuating, and remediating environmental and health impacts.

Overcome barriers to including lived experience.

Environmental researchers, regulators, and activists have accorded lived experience more respect recently (Health and Human Services 2024), it is still too often considered inferior to professional, academic, and scientific knowledge for professional purposes. Consequently, beyond endorsing lived experience in a general way, regulators and advocacy groups should explain its epistemological value.

All forms of knowledge have strengths and limitations. Thus, experiential knowledge may not be comprehensive or impartial enough for evaluating impacts on a comparative basis or may be difficult to articulate with precision. That said, scientific data collection and analysis methods also suffer from blind spots, and they are often employed too far from everyday life to capture the texture of what people experience. Experiential knowledge is an essential piece of a larger picture compiled from a variety of methods.

Develop and institutionalize guidance and training around lived experience.

The ability to engage meaningfully with lived experience is a professional skill important to a wide range of government positions and initiatives. While not everyone can be experts in lived experience, environmental and health regulators should be familiar with the concept and its relevance to their work. The training of employees involved in public-facing work should include active listening, avoiding implicit bias (to mitigate the potential for unconscious prejudices that could affect how testimony is received), and avoiding defensiveness when lived experience testimony is combined with implicit or explicit criticisms of the government.

Educate regulators and increase the use of the tools for capturing lived experience.

Many tools are available for capturing experiential and community knowledge, including, for example, soliciting public comments in oral or written form. However, without concerted analysis, data from public comments can accumulate without improving understanding. Using experiential knowledge in assessments often requires comparing or integrating it with other kinds of data, particularly quantitative data. Practitioners of mixed-methods approaches in the social sciences have developed a variety of strategies for bringing together qualitative and quantitative data, as well as assuring the quality and validity of the conclusions reached (Ellickson 2024). When the conclusions of regulators contradict community experiences, the regulators owe community members a careful explanation that acknowledges the contradiction and, when possible, tries to account for it.

References

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