

**SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS WITH SOCIALLY VULNERABLE POPULATIONS****Carson MacPherson-Krutsky**, University of Colorado Boulder**Melissa Villarreal**, University of Colorado Boulder**Mary Angelica Painter**, University of Colorado Boulder

Funding timelines and institutional structures can make it challenging to maintain long-lasting relationships with socially vulnerable populations and with organizations that serve them. With intention and time, however, it is possible to develop trusting and enduring relationships and research collaborations. This check sheet summarizes best practices and draws on case studies for examples.

**BUILD AND MAINTAIN TRUST**

Socially vulnerable populations are more likely to experience harm from disasters. Afterward, they remain susceptible to broken promises and repeated injustices from institutions that claim they “were there to help.” The result is populations that are understandably wary of new connections with organizations that have previously harmed them, such as universities or government agencies (Rivera, 2020). Authentic trust-building is essential to developing partnerships that will last. McNeish et al.’s study (2019) on community-based interventions found that, “[trust was built] through a considerable investment of time in sharing ideas, breaking down pre-conceived notions of one another, and discussing shared perspectives on issues to underlay community need.” Here are steps you can take to build trust:

» **Consider how you plan to build and maintain trust.**

- Identify the actions you and your team will take to ensure you are building and maintaining trust with a community partner. Elements of trust building include consistency, transparency, reliability, and early planning.

» **Acknowledge past harms to prevent future ones.**

- By recognizing past injustices and transgressions, your team can better determine how your processes and practices will prevent future harm. This can be done internally with your team and in coordination with your community partners.

» **Take time to get to know one another.**

- Host meetings that prioritize relationship building over the project topic. Keep in mind that to advance trust, project leads must be intentional and set aside time for connection. Remember, “...trust building and trust maintaining is a never-ending process” (Christopher, 2011).

**CENTER COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES**

Historically, researchers and practitioners have left socially vulnerable populations out of decision-making spaces while their experiences were minimized or discounted. To avoid continuing these harms, it is critical to honor their local knowledge and practices. Below are ways to ensure the voices of affected populations inform your research. Keep in mind that you may need to alter your practices to align with the community’s needs. In an article co-written by community and academic partners on doing community engaged research with American Indian communities, Christopher et al. (2011, p.1401) shares that, “when university partners trust the expertise of community partners, community partners are freer to fully participate, and the research is enhanced.” To center community knowledge and practices:

- » **Discuss with the research group and community partners how you can elevate, honor and incorporate the perspectives of the populations you are working with.**
  - Topics should include giving credit for expertise and community knowledge, bringing in community partners as collaborators and co-authors on projects, and compensating for time spent on the project (West et al., 2021).
    - \* For example, Hirsch et al. (2021) used participatory action research methods in Houston, TX to involve community members and partners in a project exploring the recovery experiences of Hurricane Harvey survivors. Community partners were co-researchers who participated in all stages of the research. Their report gives explicit credit to all involved.
- » **Identify how you will share your data and findings with your partner populations.**
  - For example, Tribal nations often have specific protocols for gathering and sharing data collected with Tribal members or on Sovereign Tribal Lands. The Nez Perce Tribe requires a [research permit](#) to be submitted 90 days in advance of research starting that describes the proposed study. The form is then reviewed by the Tribal Executive Committee. Without their approval, a study cannot be conducted. It is important to honor and respect these data collection practices and community protocols.

## WORK TOWARD SHARED GOALS AND MUTUAL BENEFIT

Trusted partnerships are founded on shared goals or values from which each party benefits. Researchers should define these values early and communicate how the research project will benefit all parties. Benefits may include monetary compensation, data sharing, network building, professional training, resource sharing and more. Defining these benefits alongside partners can help ensure the longevity of these partnerships. Here is how:

- » **Outline shared goals individually and with a community partner.**
  - Ask your community partners what they are hoping to get out of this partnership and discuss what short- and long-term benefits would make the project worthwhile.
- » **Clarify what deliverables would be useful for the community.**
  - Publishing in academic journals may be good for a grant justification but is unlikely to benefit communities. Consider other types of outputs, such as community presentations, informational handouts, workshops, or other community education efforts.
    - \* For example, West et al. (2021) sought to develop a landslide hazard guide for Puerto Rico. They partnered with the Puerto Rico Seismic Network and conducted extensive informational interviews with decision makers and residents before developing the guide. These conversations informed development of the informational pamphlets to ensure a broad audience of Puerto Ricans found it relevant.
- » **As partnerships evolve, check in with partners to ensure needs and interests are still being met.**
  - It is important to maintain communication with consistent contact, which can include having regular meetings, communication forums, group chats, and more. You may also develop evaluation metrics to ensure goals are met in a timely manner.

## COMMUNICATE AND BE ACCOUNTABLE

Productive communication is a cornerstone of long-lasting partnerships. Sometimes individuals or groups disagree on how to move forward and handle a problem, but finding ways to work through those differences can forge strong partnerships. The most successful projects have found ways to communicate clearly and consistently. Here are some best practices:

- » **Keep the commitments you make.**
  - Show up to meetings on time, meet deadlines, and generally be responsible towards relationships with your community partners. By showing responsibility, you are reinforcing your commitment to the relationship.
  - Do not promise anything you are unable to deliver. Be transparent about what you can and cannot provide and why.
- » **Be sensitive to communication style and burdens.**
  - Some individuals or community groups may not have the capacity to respond to daily emails, nor should they be expected to always be available. Some may prefer in-person meetings, while Zoom will work for others. Speak with partners to determine what will work best for them.

\* For example, Roque et al. (2023) co-developed a survey with community partners in Puerto Rico on food, energy, and water systems that are impacted during disasters. The researchers took on the main task of developing the survey questions but sought feedback from community partners throughout the project to ensure it also met their local needs.

» **Consider what communication styles work best for your partners.**

- Researchers should regularly discuss the format and frequency of check-ins with their team and community partners.
- Sharing the planned meeting structure and questions in advance is good practice. Sharing meeting notes with partners following a meeting can also be helpful to ensure what was discussed was recorded appropriately.

## CENTER COMPASSION AND GRATITUDE

Each partnership and community's experience with hazards is unique. Some partnerships may require researchers to go beyond or adjust what is included here.

We encourage anyone hoping to work with socially vulnerable populations to reflect deeply and educate themselves about the populations they hope to work with to ensure they do not incur further marginalization or harm. If partnerships are developed with care, compassion, and consideration, they can be transformational for those involved. It is crucial to always show gratitude for expertise, time, and willingness to collaborate.

## » CHOOSE THESE PROJECTS WISELY

Not all research projects may be a good fit for community-engaged research with socially vulnerable populations. They are time-intensive and require careful balancing of scientific objectives, ethics, and community benefits. Researchers will need to consider if the time investment is reasonable for them and what level of engagement is appropriate for a specific research project. The International Association for Public Participation developed the [Spectrum of Public Participation](#) that includes levels of participation as a helpful tool to determine what kind of engagement is appropriate. If needed, partnering with other researchers who have done this type of work can help to ensure the research is carried out in ways that benefit all participants and partners.

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