Equity and Climate Action Lens

Albemarle County
Office of Equity and Inclusion
Climate Protection Program

The County's mission is "to enhance the well-being and quality of life for all community members through the provision of the highest level of public service consistent with the prudent use of public funds."[1] Doing so requires accounting for how equitable our service is—including what is working and what isn't for community members. Fulfilling this mission also requires careful consideration of how climate change will exacerbate many existing challenges faced by our community and how responding effectively to climate change can contribute to well-being. Through numerous resolutions, comments to staff, and other actions, the Albemarle County Board of Supervisors has repeatedly emphasized the paramount importance of centering equity and climate action in our organization and service to the community.

Assessing the conditions that promote well-being and how these conditions are distributed in the County—especially in the context of systemic inequities and global climate change—is necessary to identify gaps in existing service delivery and to develop new policies and models of community engagement that improve the quality of life for all residents.

Staff should see this tool as a method of revealing information that can create opportunities for the benefit of our community. By incorporating the perspectives of equity and climate action in our work now, we will be setting ourselves up for a resilient, equitable, thriving community in the coming decades.

Purpose of Tool

In planning for the future development of Albemarle County, equity and climate action must be central to our vision, mission, and practice. We can start by using equity and climate action as a lens to enhance our work as an organization, and to see a fuller picture of the communities impacted. This tool will aid you in examining proposed policies, programs, or projects with respect to climate change and equity impacts.

Equity Context

Albemarle County's Office of Equity and Inclusion (OEI) defines equity as the continuous process of action, reflection & analysis of what is fair and just for all. This term is distinguished from equality: whereas equality means providing the "same to all," equity is a process that begins by acknowledging an unequal starting place and continues to correct and address the imbalance.

In the Albemarle County Equity Profile (2021), the figures indicate that the County is becoming increasingly racially/ethnically diverse.[2] Albemarle County is also home to a substantial number of foreign-born residents and older residents (over age 60). Such diversity requires that the County consider opportunities to deliver culturally sensitive public services to these respective groups.

Additionally, the 2021 Equity Profile revealed the discrepancies of American Human Development (AHDI) scores across census tracts in the County. These finding suggest that the neighborhoods with different scores experience different connections to the resources and access that our County provides.

Four Types of Equity

There are four types of equity that are important to our work.

1. **Recognitional equity:** Seeks to quantify/measure existing disparities in quality of life, health, education, economic opportunity, political participation, and access to resources and services, as well as the historical and present causes and conditions of such disparities, in order to inform decision-making.[3]
2. **Distributional equity:** Maximizes access to public services and program benefits for all members of a community, especially those most in need; minimizes cost burdens on disadvantaged community members.[4]
3. **Procedural equity:** Seeks to ensure meaningful involvement in community engagement processes by members of historically underrepresented or excluded groups.[5]
4. **Structural equity:** Aims to rectify policies and institutional practices that exclude some groups from participation in political processes or that systematically contribute to maintaining disparities in quality of life; embeds procedural equity into an organization's standard practice, with adequate resources.[6]

Climate Change Context

Global climate change refers to drastic shifts in climate and weather patterns around the world resulting from increases in average global surface temperature due to emissions of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide from human activity. This climate change is anthropogenic—caused by humans—and should not be confused with climate shifts that occur naturally over millions of years.

Climate change is affecting Albemarle County today through increasingly severe heat waves, rain events, and flooding. These and other climate hazards for our region will worsen in the coming decades, forcing our community to face extreme heat, precipitation, drought, wildfire, and pests. We need to build resilience in our community and in local government to the systemic shocks these hazards will cause.

Although some of the impacts of climate change are now unavoidable, there is still time to prevent the worst effects of climate change. Albemarle County is committed to reducing our community's greenhouse gas emissions and protecting carbon stored in the landscape. The County has set targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 45% of 2008 levels by 2030 and achieving zero net emissions by 2050.

Although it receives the most attention in the media, the climate crisis is not the only global environmental challenge that humanity faces. Similar human activities that are driving climate change are also creating habitat loss, declines in biodiversity, and related environmental degradation. Albemarle County has a Biodiversity Action Plan that—like the Climate Action Plan—should be integrated into all our work as an organization. One question in the lens addresses these additional challenges.

Why Do We Need a Climate Action Lens and an Equity Lens?

Merely stating that we need to prioritize equity and climate action in our service to the community does not guarantee successful outcomes. Achieving these outcomes requires effectively integrating an understanding of equity and climate impacts across the organization. To ensure that our service is equitable, staff throughout local government must be able to assess the probable implications on different groups in our community of any given initiative.

Likewise, reducing the severity of climate change by reducing our emissions—known as *mitigation*—and preparing for the local impacts of climate change—building *resilience*—require staff at all levels of our organization to account for the effects on mitigation and resilience of the policies, programs, and projects that we produce.

To the greatest extent possible, every policy (e.g., update to the Zoning Ordinance, entrance corridor guidelines), program (e.g., affordable housing fund for developers), and project (e.g., facility construction at a public park) should be designed to enhance the County's efforts to reduce the severity of climate change, to build resilience to its local impacts, and to provide a more equitable community. At a minimum, policies, programs, and projects should avoid creating conditions that make mitigation, resilience, and equity more difficult to achieve.

Staff should regard this tool as a method of revealing information that can create opportunities for the benefit of our community. By incorporating the perspectives of equity and climate action in our work now, we will be setting ourselves up for a resilient, equitable, thriving community in the coming decades. The alternative—pursuing policies or initiatives without attending to equity and climate impacts—positions our community to be less resilient and prosperous.

Who Should Use This Tool, and When?

Albemarle County staff who are responsible for policymaking (e.g., planning, revising local ordinances), program development and implementation (e.g., affordable housing fund), and project design and execution (e.g., new facilities construction) should use this tool to ensure equity and the best possible alignment with the County's climate action and biodiversity goals.

Answering the questions in this tool will help staff make policies, programs, and projects more equitable and bring them into greater alignment with the County's climate action goals, or, if that is not possible, to be transparent about the impact of proceeding without alignment.

For new initiatives, staff should use this tool at the outset of work to inform the initiative's development from the start. For existing policies or programs, staff can use this tool to help refine and improve the work going forward. The tool can also be used to audit and reflect on past policies or programs to enhance learning that can inform future work.

How to Use the Tool

At its core, the tool asks several questions that will help to identify the extent to which an initiative makes a meaningful contribution to the County's goals for equity and climate action. The tool contains two preliminary questions and seven main questions. Using a 5-point scale, the main questions will reveal whether an initiative—such as a policy or a project—have significant, little, or no meaningful

impact on equity or climate action. Two preliminary questions will help identify any major red flags associated with an initiative that warrant an assessment of whether the initiative should be altogether redeveloped.

The preliminary questions are:

Equity & Climate Action Lens – Preliminary Questions
Does the initiative account for preexisting disparities and climate impacts that intersect with the issue at hand? *(Yes or No)*
Is there a compelling reason or evidence to suggest that this policy objective would *set back* efforts…
to achieve a more equitable and resilient community? *(Yes or No? If yes, please list the reason or evidence.)*
to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or engage in other forms of climate action? *(Yes or No? If yes, please list the reason or evidence.)*

The preliminary questions are designed to surface unintended adverse consequences that might result from a proposed policy, program, or project.

- If the answer is "no" to both preliminary questions, then proceed to the main questions.
- If the answer is "yes" or "maybe" to one or both of the preliminary questions, then this should be taken as an opportunity to pause and reassess the purpose of the proposed initiative. Staff should ask several questions: Why is this initiative being proposed? What underlying community or organizational need is the proposed initiative attempting to address? Is there another method of addressing that need that does not adversely impact equity or climate action?

The main questions reflect seven priorities related to advancing equity and climate action in the community.

Equity & Climate Action Lens – Main Questions
To what extent does the policy objective...
include **meaningful involvement** by affected or underserved groups in its design?
advance **equitable access to benefits** or services created through pursuing the objective?
integrate **equitable distribution of the costs** associated with pursuing the objective?
help **overcome structures** and/or institutional practices that create disparities?
enhance the community's **resilience** to the impacts of climate change?
lead to **reduced greenhouse gas emissions** in Albemarle County (or build the County's future capacity to reduce emissions)?
enhance the **health and biodiversity** of the local natural environment?

When proceeding to the main questions, there are three tasks:

1. Assign a score from 1 to 3 based on the defined range listed below.
2. Provide a reason to support the assigned score, citing research or data as evidence whenever possible.
3. Provide a recommendation for how the score could be improved by meaningfully addressing the associated priority for equity and climate action.

Scoring Range

Score	1	2	3
Rubric	**Status Quo:** Does not address the question in a meaningful way. The initiative can be expected to have no positive impact on the priority indicated by the question (or otherwise maintain the status quo).	**Incidental Impact:** Partially addresses the question. The initiative can be expected to have some incidental positive impact on the priority indicated by the question.	**Meaningful Impact:** Clearly addresses the question. The initiative can be expected to have meaningful positive impact on the priority indicated by the question.

Completing the Tool

Staff should complete the tool as a group exercise, including staff who are responsible for the initiative under consideration, additional staff topic experts, and staff from the County's Climate Protection Program and Office of Equity and Inclusion. Group work will produce more accurate answers, as a group can integrate multiple perspectives and generate a more complete rationale. Working collaboratively, staff can use the tool to reveal opportunities for policymaking and program design that will more effectively advance an equitable, resilient, thriving community.

The tool can be found in the following web form: [link to web form]. The form contains helpful information and tips to support staff in working with the questions.

Comparing Options

In some cases, staff may wish to compare several alternative policy or program options. The tool can also be completed as a spreadsheet to allow for easier comparison across multiple options under consideration.

The spreadsheet contains three tabs: Scores and Reasons, Glossary, and Scores Summary. In the first tab, individual initiatives to assess can be listed in rows. The seven main questions are located in the column headers Under each question is a pair of columns marked *Score* and *Reason*. Fill in the information as directed above.

The Glossary tab provides definitions for key concepts used in the questions about equity and climate action. The Scores Summary tab replicates the scores from the Scores and Reasons, allowing for easier side-by-side comparison of scores and averages across questions.

Need Help?

Contact staff in the Office of Equity and Inclusion or the Climate Protection Program.

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[1] Albemarle County, "County Executive," accessed March 10, 2023, https://www.albemarle.org/government/county-executive.

[2] Siri Russell, Barbara Brown Wilson, Michele Claibourn, Alissa Ujie Diamond, Sam Powers, and Michael Salgueiro, *Albemarle County Equity Profile: Centering Equity in Evaluating Well-Being & Quality of Life for Albemarle County Residents*, The Equity Center, A UVA Democracy Initiative for the Redress of Inequity through Community-Engaged

Scholarship and the Albemarle County Office of Equity and Inclusion, 2021, https://virginiaequitycenter.org/research/content/8306.

[3] Meerow, Pajouhesh, and Miller define **recognitional equity** as "(1) acknowledging community members' different intersecting identities... (2) recognising that these identities are shaped by historical injustices and can shape individual vulnerability to shocks and stresses, ability to access resources, and capacity to participate in decision-making, and (3) fostering respect for different groups". Sara Meerow, Pani Pajouhesh & Thaddeus R. Miller, "Social Equity in Urban Resilience Planning," *Local Environment* 24, no. 9 (2019): 797. https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2019.1645103.

[4] **Distributional equity** ensures that "resources, benefits and burdens of a policy or program are distributed fairly and prioritize those with the highest need". City of Portland and Multnomah County, *Climate Action Plan: Local Strategies to Address Climate Change*, 2015, 148, https://www.portland.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/cap-2015_june30-2015_web_0.pdf. See also: Urban Sustainability Directors Network (USDN), *Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning*, 2017, 17.

[5] **Procedural equity** means that "processes are fair and inclusive in developing and implementing any program or policy". City of Portland, *Climate Action Plan: Local Strategies to Address Climate Change*, 2015, 148. See also: USDN, *Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning*, 2017, 17.

[6] **Structural equity** refers to a "commitment to correct past harms and prevent future unintended consequences... address the underlying structural and institutional systems that are the root causes of social and racial inequities". USDN, *Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning*, 2017, 17. See also: City of Portland, *Climate Action Plan*, 2015, 148.