

Advancing Equitable Decarbonization Through Community Ownership

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ABSTRACT

Government policy is traditionally created and implemented through a top-down process, with community members only informed after critical decisions have been made. Often, this results in policies that either hurt or exclude communities on the frontlines of climate change. To alter this dynamic, several nonprofit and government partners developed an intervention process to shift power for building decarbonization policymaking to these frontline communities. This paper will explore how we utilized the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (CE2O) tool to foster equitable building decarbonization policy and program planning in nine U.S. cities and states. We detail how the project encouraged gradual change from community input on preconceived plans to a more movement-building approach where communities help guide the planning process from the beginning and create solutions informed by lived experience. This included early introduction of the CE2O framework to establish baseline engagement scores, integration of community priorities directly into the policy planning process, and subsequent assessments and workshops reassessing progress on the CE2O framework. By integrating the CE2O tool throughout the project, we created opportunities for community-based organizations and local governments to reflect on their practices and move beyond consultation toward deeper collaboration and shared decision making in decarbonization efforts. Government and community-based partners worked together to identify building decarbonization priorities and scope technical assistance to inform next steps. Using case studies from California and Chicago, this paper summarizes successes, challenges, and how community involvement affected policy and program goals.

Introduction

Building decarbonization presents both a climate opportunity and an equity challenge. These policies can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve health outcomes, but they can also increase housing costs, accelerate displacement, or exclude front-line communities from decision making. As local and state governments pursue ambitious decarbonization goals, key questions arise in terms of who shapes the policies, who benefits from them, and how accountability is maintained.

To address these challenges, the Institute for Market Transformation and its partners launched a multi-year initiative across nine U.S. jurisdictions that paired local and state governments with Community Based Organization (CBOs) representing frontline communities. The project supported policy and program development—including building performance standards, equitable decarbonization strategies, workforce planning, tenant protections, and community co-governance models—while also strengthening trust, transparency, and long-term relationships between governments and communities. IMT prioritized these relationship outcomes as critical infrastructure for equitable climate action, rather than as secondary benefits.

Underlying the project was a central hypothesis: durable and equitable decarbonization outcomes depend on meaningful community ownership of the processes that shape them. Communities that have historically assumed the greatest environmental, economic, and health burdens possess expertise essential for identifying risks, designing effective solutions, and building long-term support for policy implementation. We, therefore, approached community ownership as a precondition for successful decarbonization policy and program development. IMT selected the Community Engagement to Ownership (CE2O) framework as the project's guiding tool because it provides a practical method for assessing, strengthening, and institutionalizing community influence within policymaking processes.

Project Design and Methodology

This project was designed as a three-year strategic intervention that put into practice the principles of Community Climate Shift (CCS 2022), an initiative built with the goal of transforming how communities, technical assistance partners, and local governments work together. CCS is a collaborative of technical assistance providers, CBOs, and community-driven planning partners. These partners create a shared infrastructure for coordination, learning, and alignment across jurisdictions. The intention of the project was to build or strengthen relationships while advancing shared equity and decarbonization goals among state and local governments and CBOs in nine locations across the country. Locations included six cities (Chicago, Kansas City, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia and St. Louis), two states (California and Washington), and Washington, DC.

The project's goals and outcomes were two-fold: (1) to build CBO-Government partnerships as a means to deepen community buy-in and build power around the development or implementation of building decarbonization policies or programs; and (2) to move those policies or programs forward in line with local priorities. The following table outlines the specific goals and outcomes:

Table 1: Goals and outcome of the project

Goals	Outcomes
• Create or strengthen partnerships between community and government, building a foundation that will remain after this project for lasting impacts and future policies. • Develop and implement policy and programs through community-centered processes.	• Move toward community ownership of policy and program design. • Baseline and measure progress on metrics, such as energy use and burden, carbon emissions, job creation, and other priorities identified by community.

IMT led the project but included a suite of technical assistance partners that specialize in community-driven planning, climate justice, and equitable building decarbonization work. The project partners included Building Electrification Institute, Elevate, Emerald Cities Collaborative, Greenlink Analytics, Facilitating Power, Midwest Energy Efficiency Alliance, National Association of State Energy Officials, New Buildings Institute, Northeast Energy Efficiency Partnerships, and Upright Consulting Services.

For each location, multi-partner teams worked together to identify and recruit community-based organizations already working locally on aligned issues such as energy burden, utility intervention, and climate justice. Philanthropic support and grants distributed through the CCS fund enabled the CBO partners to work directly with the government department or agency to jointly develop a scope of work to execute together over the course of the project. The technical assistance (TA) partners delivered scope items that aligned with their service areas. The TA partner was intended to inform next steps for building decarbonization policy and program design. The following figure illustrates the main project phases:



Figure 1: Main phases of the project.

The project team overlaid milestones on top of the policy to facilitate an ongoing dialogue around how the community-based partners experienced their power and influence in working with the government entity. That part of the methodology is discussed in detail in the next section.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership Framework

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (CE2O) framework was co-developed by one of the co-authors of this paper, Rosa González of Facilitating Power, in response to persistent gaps between equity commitments and actual practice in climate and energy policy (González 2021). Drawing on years of experience working with frontline communities, advocates, and policymakers, González observed that many engagement efforts failed because of fundamental gaps in approach to community involvement between grassroots and ‘grasstops’ groups. Seeing the need for shared language and structure for understanding community participation and power, González first looked to existing tools within public planning and brought them together with the insights of community organizing groups actively working to influence policy and transform community involvement.

CE2O was informed by a range of research and practice-based frameworks, including Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation, popular education models, and movement-building strategies from environmental justice and community organizing. It also draws from studies demonstrating that policies designed with meaningful community participation are more effective, equitable, and politically durable. Rather than creating another abstract theory of participation, Rosa designed CE2O as a practical, diagnostic, and planning tool that could be used by governments, advocates, and communities together.

The purpose of CE2O is to make power dynamics visible and actionable. It helps policy actors assess where an engagement process currently sits, articulate where it needs to go, and identify concrete steps to move toward greater community ownership (Facilitating Power 2021). At the core of CE2O is a spectrum that illustrates increasing levels of community power and influence.

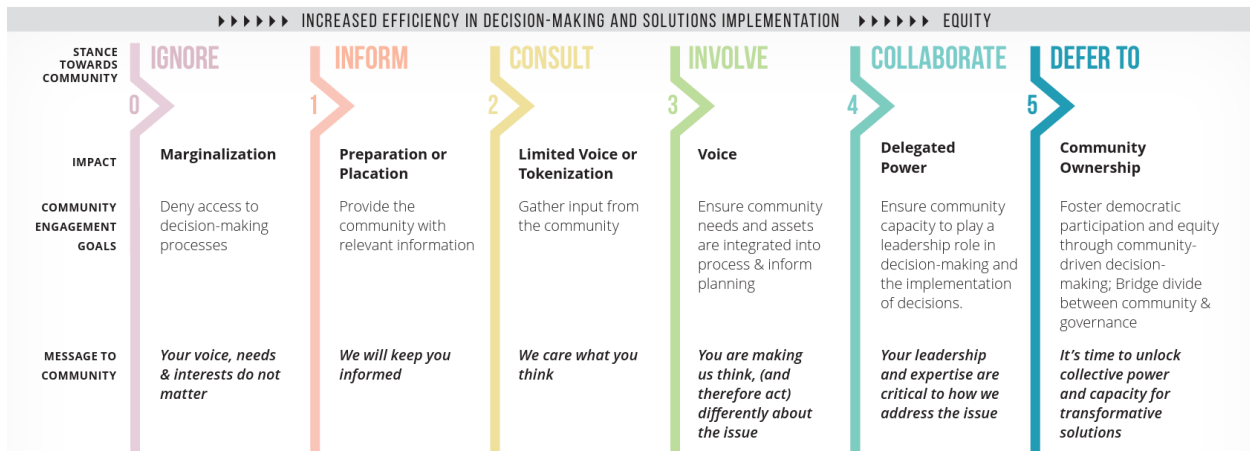


Figure 2. Snapshot of a portion of the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, specifically the impact of each level, community engagement goals and how they translate to communities.

Progression along the spectrum entails more than adding engagement activities; it requires structural changes in how policies are developed and governed. Indicators of movement include involvement of communities earlier in the process (ideally from pre-planning stages), greater transparency around how decisions are made and the specific ways in which communities can influence decisions and design, formalized roles for community anchor organizations in the design and facilitation of community involvement activities and in decision-making bodies, compensation (when appropriate) for community expertise, improved feedback loops, shared evaluation and enforcement authority, and community ownership of actual implementation projects.

Defining Community Ownership in the Policymaking Context. Community ownership refers to the degree to which community members—particularly those most impacted by a policy—have decision making power, control over resources, and the ability to shape policy goals, design, implementation, and evaluation. Ownership does not require that governments relinquish their authority; rather, it reconfigures how power is understood and wielded by recognizing grassroots groups rooted in impacted communities as co-creators of policy and programs.

Who the CE2O is For. CE2O is designed for a broad set of users involved in policy and program development. These include state and local government agencies designing building performance standards or incentive programs; advocates and intermediaries facilitating multi-stakeholder processes; and community-based organizations seeking to increase their influence over policy outcomes. Importantly, CE2O is not solely a tool for institutions; it is equally intended to support communities in naming inequities, setting demands, and negotiating for greater power and participation.

Main Goals and Limitations. The primary goal of CE2O is to support a shift from extractive engagement to shared ownership. It aims to clarify different levels of engagement and ownership, provide a common language across stakeholders, support intentional movement toward greater equity and power sharing, and improve policy design, implementation, and outcomes. CE2O also has limitations. It does not automatically resolve conflicts, redistribute

power, or substitute for long-term organizing. Movement along the spectrum requires political will, resources, and time. Additionally, not all policy contexts allow for full ownership at every stage. CE2O is therefore best understood as a directional tool, not a rigid checklist or guarantee.

Why the CE2O. Building decarbonization policies directly intersect with everyday life—how people heat their homes, pay their utility bills, and experience comfort and safety. Without authentic community involvement, these policies risk resistance or unintended harm. Community involvement improves policy effectiveness by grounding standards in lived experience, identifying barriers early, and creating trusted messengers for implementation. It also enhances equity by ensuring that benefits—such as healthier homes, lower energy bills, and quality jobs—are realized by those historically excluded from climate investments. For the reasons outlined above, the CE2O was selected as the guiding tool for this work. CE2O provided a shared language, a strategic direction, and a practical framework for fostering equitable, effective, and durable building decarbonization policies across nine U.S. cities and states. This framework can be used as a tool, or an exercise, and will be referred to in that way, interchangeably, throughout the paper.

Fostering Equitable Building Decarbonization Policy and Program Planning with the CE2O

Conventional approaches to community engagement in climate and energy policy may be well-intentioned, but frequently fail to adequately involve impacted communities due to structural patterns of exclusion. Surveys and public comment periods are devoid of dialogue, while stakeholder listening sessions tend to take place late in the policymaking process after key decisions have already been made. Even community advisory committees—which have the most opportunity for genuine community voice and dialogue—tend to leave participants feeling tokenized.¹ Conventional approaches prioritize information sharing and consultation over genuine community participation and power, frequently extracting community input without creating meaningful mechanisms for accountability or influence (Jánová et al. 2025).

What appears to be most lacking is an understanding of the value that community groups bring to public planning processes. Community-driven approaches not only increase capacity for implementation of solutions, they often bring holistic perspectives rooted in lived experiences at the intersection of multiple issues. This allows for whole systems thinking and comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of climate impacts. Conventional approaches, on the other hand, often silo issue areas and limit collaboration. In the context of building decarbonization—where policies can directly affect housing costs, health outcomes, labor conditions, and neighborhood stability—these limitations are especially consequential.

Traditional engagement methods often privilege organizations and individuals with the time, resources, and technical fluency to participate, sidelining renters, low-income households, workers, and communities of color who are most impacted by building energy burdens and climate risks (Welton et al. 2026). Engagement is commonly framed as a box-checking exercise to demonstrate compliance rather than as a strategy for shaping better, more durable policy. As a result, many building performance standards and decarbonization programs struggle with implementation challenges, political backlash, or inequitable outcomes that could have been anticipated and mitigated through deeper community involvement.

¹ Tokenizing means holding a seat without any real power or influence.

Operationalizing the CE2O Framework in Decarbonization Policy

From the outset, the project team embedded CE2O into the project's design as a core metric. It was used to guide scope development, assess progress, and support accountability over time. The project also tracked shifts in community-government relationships.

IMT treated progress along the spectrum as a signal of whether the collaboration itself was on track. This included a comparison between an initial baseline assessment and a later reassessment point. By establishing CE2O as a metric early on and embedding it throughout, the project set a clear expectation that relationship quality, transparency, and shared decision making were foundational, not secondary, to technical or policy work. Additionally, the project team provided a series of workshops to all partners. These workshops provided training and offered real-time feedback loops to improve and expand the tool through practical application.

Establishing Baseline CE2O Scores Across Jurisdictions. Baseline CE2O assessments were conducted during three-hour kickoff meetings held between June and October 2024 across the nine participating jurisdictions. These facilitated sessions introduced the CE2O framework to all partners and generated a shared assessment of existing community engagement practices related to climate and building decarbonization policy. The CE2O framework asserts that marginalization of frontline and fence-line communities is the default for governments, unless an intentional and concerted effort is made by them towards meaningful engagement (Skinner-Thompson 2022).² For this reason, the scores assessed the government partner's current and prior level of engagement with the CBO partner (rather than governments scoring CBOs on how much they engage with city/state governments).

The kickoff meetings served multiple functions beyond establishing baseline CE2O scores. These sessions also surfaced government and community priorities, acknowledged past harmful actions or breakdowns in trust, and articulated a shared vision for what “moving up the spectrum” would require. CBOs and government partners jointly evaluated prior engagement across multiple dimensions, including frequency and duration of engagement with the CBO partner, transparency, responsiveness, and community empowerment. Scores ranged from 0 (“Ignore”) to 5 (“Defer to”).

Data gathered during kickoff meetings included:

- Community-identified priorities and concerns
- Government policy and program priorities
- CE2O spectrum scores and rationale
- Existing engagement practices and constraints
- Explicit acknowledgment of historical harms or exclusions
- Initial suggestions from both parties on actions needed to advance along the spectrum
- Two goals both the CBOs and Governments could commit to working on together over the course of the project

² A fenceline community lives immediately adjacent to highly polluting facilities like fossil fuel infrastructure, industrial parks, or large manufacturing facilities, and is directly affected by the traffic, noise, operations, and most-concerningly, chemical and fossil fuel emissions of the operation.

Translating Priorities into Scope and Technical Assistance. Following kickoff meetings, location leads convened recurring meetings with government partners, CBOs, CBO relationship managers,³ and technical assistance providers to develop integrated scopes of work grounded in the priorities identified through the CE2O process.

During the recurring meetings, teams worked to align community priorities, such as tenant protections, workforce development, or investment in frontline neighborhoods, with government policy objectives and constraints. Technical assistance was then designed to support both sets of community and government priorities through governance model development, workforce analysis, building performance standards policy recommendations, or other technical support.

Peer Learning. The CE2O framework was applied iteratively throughout the project rather than treated as a single-use assessment tool. Framework concepts were revisited during check-in meetings, tailored workshops, and conferences. Feedback from its real-world application was then used to refine and update the tool.

In October 2024, Facilitating Power led a virtual workshop with CBO partners from all nine jurisdictions to support the midpoint collaborative assessment of the project and to refine the spectrum assessment materials based on partners' experiences applying the tool. During the workshop, CBO partners reviewed the mid-point assessment approach, articulated a shared vision for effective community–government partnerships dedicated to equitable climate solutions, and identified indicators of success aligned with that vision. The session also prepared CBO partners to provide structured input on the assessment tools and facilitation approach, while cultivating relationships among their peers across the country. Feedback from this workshop informed revisions to the tool's language, indicators, and facilitation methods, improving its usability and relevance. Building on this work, Facilitating Power reintroduced the tool during two in-person CCS convenings in the summers of 2024 and 2025, which further supported relationship-building, peer learning, and cross-jurisdictional exchange around shared implementation challenges and lessons learned.

In March 2025, Facilitating Power facilitated a parallel workshop for government partners focused on grounding participants in the purpose of community involvement in building decarbonization. Because the workshop was exclusively for government partners, it created a peer learning space where participants could ask candid questions and learn from one another's successes and challenges across jurisdictions. Project partners applied the tool to existing government processes, helping surface shared barriers, points of resistance, and areas of uncertainty. The workshop took place at least six months before midpoint reassessments, intentionally creating time and space for reflection, learning, and course correction.

Midpoint-Project Close Out Reassessment. Between September and December 2025, the teams held midpoint and closeout meetings to reassess CE2O scores and reflect on progress across the project. These sessions mirrored the original kickoff structure and compared initial

³ A “CBO relationship manager” role was designated to support CBO participation, troubleshoot challenges, and advocate for alignment when needed. This role was not intended to, and did not replace direct relationships between CBOs and government staff, as strengthening those partnerships was itself a core objective of the project.

assessments with current practice, enabling teams to document movement along the spectrum and identify areas where progress had slowed or stalled. The meetings focused on:

- Re-scoring and comparing kickoff assessments
- Celebrating successes and concrete shifts in practices
- Identifying persistent gaps in community-government partnership
- Articulating key actions needed to continue advancing along the spectrum

Originally, these sessions were designed as a true midpoint check-in, providing an opportunity to assess the health of each collaboration and determine whether continued partnership was viable. In particular, the reassessment was intended to create space for course correction or to exit the project if city or state government partners were unable to demonstrate progress toward at least the “3 – Involve” stage of the spectrum. However, following loss of funding, the midpoint reassessment functioned as a project closeout. As a result, these sessions served both as a final evaluation of progress to date and as a reflective moment to capture lessons learned, document achieved gains, and clarify what would be required to sustain or deepen community–government partnerships beyond the project.

Case Studies

California Case Study: California Energy Commission and Five Community Based Organizations

California has long been a leader in energy efficiency and climate action. It also has a long history of systemic racism and environmental justice challenges. More recently the state has taken steps toward inclusive decision making and a just transition. Senate Bill 350 of 2015 (SB350 2015) set statewide efficiency goals and created an 11-member [Disadvantaged Communities Advisory Group](#) (DACAG) to advise the California Energy Commission (CEC) and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) on how to design and implement policies and programs to be more effective on behalf of disadvantaged communities. [Assembly Bill 209 of 2022](#) (AB 209 2022) authorized the CEC to create the Equitable Building Decarbonization Program to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in homes and advance environmental health and energy equity. The program’s Direct Install Program contracts with CBOs to provide decarbonization retrofits to low-and moderate-income households. California invested [\\$433 million](#) in the Equitable Building Decarbonization Program (Building Decarbonization Coalition 2026). \$922 million was originally allocated to the program prior to federal and state cuts.

Senate Bill 48 of 2023 (SB48 2023) tasked CEC with working with community, equity, and tenant advocates as well as other stakeholders to develop a strategy to equitably decarbonize large public and private existing buildings in order to achieve the state’s climate and efficiency commitments and to present the strategy to the legislature by summer 2026. SB48 requires the strategy to center on equitable building performance. CEC plans to publish a draft strategy for formal public comment prior to finalizing and submitting the strategy to the state legislature.

In this context, CEC sought to engage in extended dialogue with community-based organizations representing frontline communities around the state to guide CEC in developing the SB48 strategy. CEC also engaged with the DACAG in September of 2024 and will solicit input from the DACAG on the draft SB48 strategy following draft publication. Strategic Actions

for a Just Economy (SAJE), a non-profit economic justice organization with a 30-year history serving its South Los Angeles community, played a leading role in developing SB48's tenant and equity protections, some of which were stripped from the bill before passage. California was selected as one of the two state jurisdictions to join the project because (1) SB48 provided a strong opportunity for community-led policy making and (2) as the fourth largest economy in the world, equitable decarbonization policies in the state can have a large impact.

Four CBO partners from the Building Energy, Equity & Power (BEEP 2022) coalition were selected to represent frontline communities across Los Angeles and the Bay Area: Physicians for Social Responsibility–LA, PODER (People Organizing to Demand Environmental and Economic Rights), Emerald Cities Collaborative, and Local Clean Energy Alliance (LCEA). The project team also engaged SAJE as a CBO partner due to its leadership and advocacy in shaping SB48 work described above. Four of these organizations are also active participants in CCS. This existing ecosystem strengthened trust, reduced onboarding barriers, and allowed the project to build on relationships and strategies already underway. While the CBOs brought deep local ties and strong community-led advocacy experience, many had limited prior engagement with state agencies. Together they represent major population centers, though the scale of California's nearly 40 million residents meant the project could engage only a small portion of the state's diverse frontline communities.

CE2O baseline score and project goals. At the September 2024 kick-off meeting, CEC and the CBOs completed the Spectrum exercise to generate a baseline assessment to document the level of engagement they believed they achieved at the time. Based on limited interaction, the CBOs put the CEC closer to a "3" (Involve) out of 5, and CEC staff assessed themselves closer to "2" (Consult) out of 5 on the spectrum. Both agreed that their goals were to move up to a 4 on the spectrum. In their limited interaction with state agencies, the CBOs have felt ignored or given short shrift and been daunted by bureaucratic processes. The CBOs reported having better experiences with CEC than with other state agencies. CBOs called out CEC's Equitable Building Decarbonization program as particularly successful in centering and resourcing CBOs to deliver benefits to their communities.

The CEC and CBOs agreed to an ongoing collaborative process with a commitment for the CBOs to share communities' perspectives with CEC staff, give the CBOs the information they need to understand the statewide policy context, and submit formal comments into the SB48 docket with programs and policy recommendations reflective of the concerns and priorities of frontline communities.

Community-identified priorities and concerns. The CBOs' priorities were grounded through deep community engagement across the state and coalition work across each CBO's communities. In 2022, through the BEEP coalition, CBOs released their first Preliminary Report (BEEP 2021). Some of the concerns include low-income communities being excluded from policy decision making, significant cost barriers to adoption, displacement, lack of quality jobs, and ignoring health and safety upgrades in buildings (BEEP Coalition 2022). Key community priorities included: holistic whole building approach for equitable building decarbonization investments; strengthening state and local tenant protections both in policy and in practice; preventing displacement; workforce training and job pathways; continued investment in low-income retrofit programs; neighborhood-based hubs or navigators to support program access; and a focus on improving health including through improved indoor air quality and reducing pollutants from fossil fuel combustion.

Technical assistance. As a core project deliverable, the CBOs and CEC identified shared areas of interest and concern and technical assistance that could inform their mapping of a path forward. Emerald Cities Collaborative (national) completed preliminary work to assess workforce readiness in the state. This work helped clarify gaps and reinforced the need for an assessment of state workforce to meet the demands of the accelerated building renovations that would result from a BPS. BEI completed an affordable housing literature review informed through desktop research and CBO discussions. It outlines recommendations to the state legislature and agencies focused on tenant protections. Additionally, the CEC has agreed to meet with the CBO cohort after the draft SB 48 report publication to address any questions prior to submitting a comment into the docket.

CE2O Tool Impacts on Policy, Program, and Decision Making

The CE2O tool provided a framework to understand and strive for community-led decision making. CBOs indicated that they would like to achieve a level 4 with CEC; given capacity, this was the appropriate goal for the partnership. By the midpoint assessment in November 2025, both partners' scores had moved from "2-3" to between "3.5 and 4." This change reflected almost a year of productive dialogue. CBOs perceived that CEC staff had been sincerely working to address their priorities in the draft SB48 strategy. In addition, the CBOs and IMT were able to create peer collaborative working relationships with the CEC staff engaged in this project. Those relationships withstood a series of external political shifts and reductions to the resources available to the project.

Potential Outcomes. While the ultimate policy outcomes associated with SB48 remain under development, the project helped establish conditions that make more equitable decarbonization outcomes possible. Through sustained engagement between CEC and frontline community organizations, priorities such as tenant protections, anti-displacement measures, workforce development, neighborhood-based implementation support, and continued investment in low-income retrofit programs became important components of discussions surrounding California's equitable building decarbonization strategy. If reflected in the final SB48 recommendations and/or subsequent implementation efforts, new policies and enhanced implementation could improve indoor air quality, reduce exposure to fossil fuel pollution, expand access to decarbonization investments, create pathways to quality jobs, and reduce the risk that climate policies exacerbate housing insecurity. Equally important, the project strengthened relationships between state government and community-based organizations, increasing trust, improving communication channels, and creating a foundation for ongoing collaboration beyond the life of the project. These outcomes suggest that community ownership may not only improve the equity of decarbonization policies, but also increase their durability, legitimacy, and effectiveness over time.

Chicago Case Study: City of Chicago Department of Environment and People for Community Recovery

Chicago's building decarbonization efforts sit at the intersection of ambitious climate equity goals and longstanding environmental justice challenges. In 2022, the City released an Equitable Building Decarb Strategy that included 26 policy recommendations, developed through research, stakeholder engagement, focus groups, and a 54-person working group. Yet,

the City's ability to implement those strategies was constrained by a recent history of under-resourcing and the fact that the Department of Environment (DOE) had been inactive for several years. The DOE was reestablished under Mayor Brandon Johnson's 2023 administration, and the department was still building staffing, capacity, and internal systems in parallel with this project.

In this context, the DOE's decarbonization goals were tied to broader climate commitments, including the 2022 Climate Action Plan and ongoing efforts to strengthen the city's climate governance. Chicago was selected for the project because it is a major city with significant environmental justice challenges and a commitment to pursuing equitable building decarbonization. Furthermore, it could serve as a model for similar cities. The city had already done significant groundwork on policy recommendations but was interested in forming a durable, community-centered governance structure to guide implementation. The City of Chicago's rebuilding of DOE presented an opportunity to shape a new model of community-government collaboration from the ground up.

People for Community Recovery (PCR) was selected as the community partner due to its long-standing relationship with key city stakeholders, leadership status in Chicago's environmental justice landscape, its deep community trust, and its strong track record in community-led advocacy. PCR is rooted in the Altgeld Gardens neighborhood and it serves other frontline communities. It has maintained a grassroots model focused on leadership development, transparent decision making, and community-led campaigns. PCR's work already included equitable decarbonization priorities such as energy affordability, tenant protections, and workforce development. Additionally, PCR was meeting regularly with DOE staff, making them a natural partner for community-led decarbonization work.

CE2O baseline score and project goals. At the kick-off meeting in June 2024, PCR and DOE completed the CE2O baseline assessment. The City's DOE expressed that for the work they oversee, such as benchmarking and building performance standards, they were somewhere between a level "2" (Consult) and level "3" (Involve).

PCR scored DOE mostly at a "1," meaning the engagement was primarily informational. The score reflected the reality that the DOE was rebuilding and still establishing capacity, and that community trust had been harmed by past decisions, such as the relocation of a polluting metal scrapping facility in Southeast Chicago. In that context, DOE acknowledged and agreed with the score. PCR noted that prior progress often required legal intervention or external pressure, and they wanted a new structure that would prevent the need for litigation to achieve accountability. Meanwhile, the DOE expressed commitment to deeper partnership but acknowledged uncertainty about how to operationalize power-sharing in a municipal context.

Both parties committed to developing a formal community co-governance structure for building decarbonization, building on existing co-designed engagement models such as the City's Environmental Equity Working Group and cumulative impacts processes. This goal was informed by the City's 2023 Cumulative Impact Assessment, which PCR played a central role in advancing, and by ongoing efforts to codify cumulative impacts into zoning and permitting through the proposed Hazel M. Johnson Cumulative Impacts Ordinance (Chicago City Council 2025), named for PCR's founder. While the ordinance was still under consideration as of mid-2025, both PCR and the City viewed co-governance as a necessary complement to policy reform, helping ensure accountability and continuity across staff and political transitions.

Community-identified priorities and concerns. PCR's priorities developed through resident engagement and coalition work across Chicago's environmental justice and decarbonization

landscape. PCR is an active member of the Illinois Clean Jobs Coalition, which includes a deep bench of local and national climate advocates working together to align on shared policy goals across the state. Key priorities for PCR included equitable decarbonization investments in public housing and schools, workforce training and job pathways, building performance standards, tenant protections, continued investment in low-income retrofit programs, neighborhood-based hubs or navigators to support program access, and an Altgeld Gardens demonstration project. Underlying these priorities was a central concern: the need for a formal, enforceable structure to ensure community influence persists through staff turnover, political transitions, and shifting funding landscapes.

Technical assistance. Technical assistance aligned with PCR’s priorities and supported the development of a co-governance model. Facilitating Power led workshops for both partners to deepen their understanding of the CE2O framework and explore practical ways to move up the spectrum. IMT provided technical assistance on co-governance models used across the U.S., helping the partners envision what shared decision making could look like. TA partners completed workforce program mapping and analysis and identified existing training programs, missing technologies, and barriers to entry for workers. The work completed helped clarify gaps and reinforced the need for institutionalized equity protections in decarbonization planning.

CE2O Tool Impacts on Policy, Program, and Decision Making

Applying the CE2O tool and embedding its practices throughout the project helped shift the partnership from information sharing to a more structured, collaborative approach. By the midpoint assessment in September 2025, PCR’s scores of DOE had moved from “1” to somewhere between “3.5 and 4” and the City self-evaluated at about “3.5”. This change reflected real shifts in practice: DOE increased staffing and resources dedicated to the work, and senior leadership reaffirmed commitment to community-driven decarbonization programs.

Throughout the project, PCR alongside DOE and the Department of Housing, applied and were selected for a formal co-governance pilot led by Chicago United for Equity and the Office of Equity and Racial Justice. This pilot will re-establish a citywide decarbonization working group and develop enforceable mechanisms for shared decision making over an 18-month period. Co-governance is now a primary objective, placing the partnership at the upper end of the CE2O spectrum.

Potential Outcomes. While many of Chicago's decarbonization initiatives remain in development, the project helped establish institutional conditions that may support more equitable implementation over time. Through the partnership between PCR and DOE, community priorities such as tenant protections, workforce development, equitable investment in public housing and schools, neighborhood-based implementation support, and building performance standards became more directly connected to the City's decarbonization planning process. Perhaps most significantly, the collaboration advanced the development of a formal co-governance model intended to create durable mechanisms for community participation and accountability beyond individual projects, funding cycles, or political administrations. If successfully implemented, these structures could strengthen public trust, improve policy responsiveness to frontline communities, and increase the likelihood that decarbonization investments produce community benefits while reducing the risk of displacement or inequitable outcomes. The project suggests that institutionalizing community influence through co-

governance may be as important to long-term decarbonization success as the technical policies themselves.

Project Analysis

Across the nine jurisdictions, CBO and government partners were generally well aligned in their initial assessments of where government engagement practices fell along the CE2O spectrum. Baseline scores clustered around the early ranges, with an overall average and median near the “Inform-Consult” stages (approximately 1–2.5), suggesting a shared understanding between CBOs and governments that most partnerships were at this stage (Figure 3).

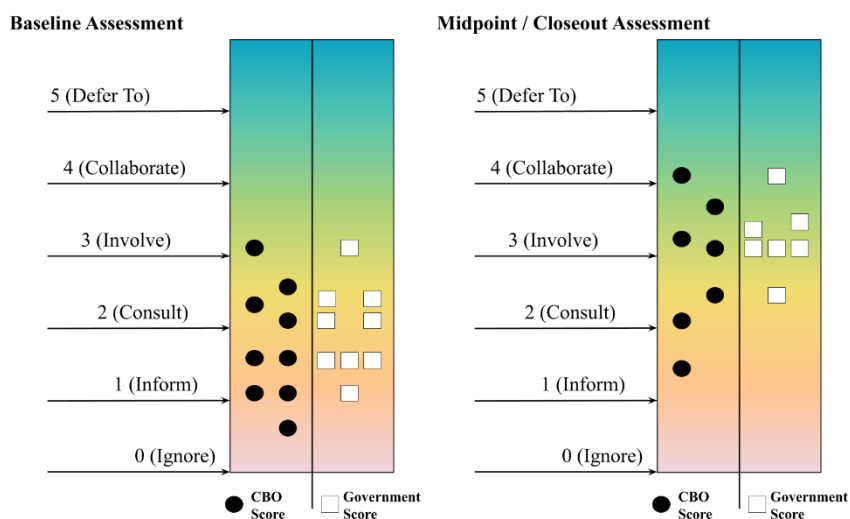


Figure 3: Summary of Baseline Assessment and Closing Assessment scores using the CE2O framework across nine locations. Note: Two locations could not complete a closing assessment.

Midpoint and close-out reassessments indicate that government scores improved across the majority of locations, with the overall average and median shifting closer to the “Involve–Collaborate” range (approximately 3–3.5). There was alignment in how CBOs and Governments re-scored the engagement, with two main outliers. In one case, the CBO assessed the government as further along the spectrum than the government assessed itself, while, in another, the government consistently rated its level of engagement higher than the CBO across both baseline and midpoint assessments. In two cases, the location partners were unable to carry out the midpoint/reassessment due to scheduling conflicts and staff departures.

Integration of Community Priorities and Goals

We developed a qualitative scale in order to assess the degree to which collaboratively developed goals between CBO and government partners, community identified priorities, and requested technical assistance were integrated into the project. Choices were: yes, mostly yes, somewhat, mostly no, and no.

IMT incorporated the indicators above into project activities to varying degrees. Most locations reported that community priorities were addressed at least partially: two locations said ‘Yes,’ indicating full alignment, three locations said ‘Mostly Yes’ and three locations said ‘Somewhat.’ One location reported “N/A” since no collaborative goals were generated at the kick-off. No jurisdiction indicated community goals and priorities were unaddressed. In the

majority of cases, community priorities were translated into project activities. Given the limited sample of nine jurisdictions, these findings should not be interpreted as universal, but indicative of patterns observed across this specific project cohort.

Lessons for Community & Government, Policy Design, and Implementation

The project served as an opportunity to cultivate and strengthen partnerships through community-centered processes as a foundation for lasting impacts and future building performance policies. Collectively, we achieved our intended outcomes to move toward community ownership of decarbonization policies and programs. We did this by creating or enlarging space for intentional partnership, and by measuring progress through metrics and priorities identified by CBOs serving frontline communities. Overall, this project demonstrated that effective community-government partnerships and policymaking require intentional and equity-centered institutional design across sectors, geographies, and contexts. The section below captures a few lessons learned from integrating the CE2O tool into this project:

Community-Government Partnership

Community-based organizations play a critical role within the ecosystem of equitable emissions reduction, and the CBO partners represented their impacted communities with intentionality throughout the entire process. Steps toward co-governance can be realized especially when CBO-government relationships are institutionalized in, for example, advisory board appointments, and there are structural clarity and accountability mechanisms in place for the advancement of community-led solutions. Generally, government partners demonstrated genuine intent toward engaging CBOs and centered transparent communication especially about their limitations in order to build trust within the relationship. Whether or not preexisting relationships exist, governments must prioritize relationship-building with CBOs and frontline communities as infrastructure, not just process.

Policy Design

Equitable policy design requires more than inviting input; it requires structural clarity and breaking down internal silos before community engagement even begins. Governments need to work with communities to understand community needs, and together, clearly define the scope of the work and explore what constraints actually exist (timelines, budget, authority, etc.). Without this clarity, policies risk missing the mark of passing policy that advances the priorities of impacted communities instead of compounding harm and injustice. Where there is interest in co-governance, pathways to formal mechanisms must be designed; shared language and decision making can be codified in structures such as: memorandums of understanding; written agreements; advisory bodies with clear, community-accountable mandates; and community roles within regulatory processes.

Implementation

Effective policy implementation on this scale requires continued trust and follow-through on the progress gained through strengthened community-government partnerships and the process to uncover community-driven climate solutions. The commitments and priorities

surfaced through collaborative engagement and equitable policy or program design must be carried forward in order to achieve outcomes. When communities see their expertise valued and applied in action, trust deepens and the political will for this approach increases. The implementation should explicitly document how recommendations were created, with feedback loops clear and active, and with resources aligned with commitments. This approach to policymaking creates truly equitable, sustainable and transformative climate solutions in the building decarbonization sector.

Conclusion: Reframing Decarbonization as a Democratic Process

Building decarbonization is often treated as a purely technical challenge: standards, incentives, and implementation pathways. This project underscores that it is also a governance challenge. Policies succeed not only because they are technically sound, but because they are legitimate, durable, and shaped by the communities most affected by their design and implementation. Across nine jurisdictions, the CE2O framework provided a structured way to make power dynamics visible, measurable, and actionable. As jurisdictions accelerate climate action in buildings, the question is no longer whether to engage communities, but how to intentionally design programs and institutional structures that enable local and state governments to engage as deeply and meaningfully as possible.

The outcomes observed across this project suggest that deeper community ownership can help create the conditions for more equitable and effective decarbonization. Through stronger community-government partnerships, communities were better positioned to elevate priorities such as tenant protections, anti-displacement measures, workforce development, equitable investment strategies, and community-centered implementation approaches. Over time, these shifts have the potential to improve policy design, increase public trust and participation, strengthen implementation, and help ensure the benefits of building decarbonization—including healthier buildings, reduced energy burdens, improved air quality, and access to quality jobs—are reaped by the communities most impacted by climate change and energy inequities.

At a moment when federal priorities have shifted toward equity and community-driven climate policy disinvestments, the responsibility of local and state governments to uphold these commitments is even more pronounced. Equitable decarbonization depends not only on distributing clean energy investments, but on sustaining the democratic infrastructure that makes shared decision making possible. CE2O offers a pathway to strengthen relationships between local/state governments and community partners.

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AI tool [Claude] was used for generating paper outline ideas and help with citations.
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