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## Article

# Community Voices on the Experiences of Community-Based Participatory Research in the Environmental Justice Movement

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**Abstract:** Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is increasingly being used by academics to address urban health and inequity. While its foundational literature emphasizes CBPR's role in eschewing the traditional balance of power between communities and institutions, some scholars and grassroots activists note that it has not consistently delivered community-led, action-oriented strategies. Here we examine gaps between theory and current practice of CBPR. First, we assess its fundamental practices through social movement theory. Second, we examine narratives from grassroots leaders who have utilized CBPR in their environmental justice efforts. Three key facilitating factors are often cited for authentic applications of CBPR: (1) grounding research within community-specific opportunities for change, (2) collaborating with a strong community partner, and (3) facilitating flexibility in research processes. Building on previous scholarship, we investigate the complexity of CBPR implementation that may dampen its potency as a social change strategy and highlight the need for nuanced and critical application of best practices to suit local contexts. This is accomplished by pairing the theoretical framework with the experiences of four community leaders who are members of the Moving Forward Network (MFN). Narratives from their experiences with partnering with academic institutions speak to how theoretical complexities with CBPR occur in practice.

**Keywords:** community-based participatory research; environmental justice; equity; participatory practices

## 1. Introduction

Partnerships between communities and academics can yield impactful research and bring about much-needed change. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a tool that academics and communities have increasingly used to address urban health and inequity since the 1940s (Holcup et al. 2004). Many community-based organizations within marginalized communities see CBPR as an opportunity to boost the needs of their neighborhood in the realm of policy and social change. The foundational literature emphasizes the role of CBPR in eschewing the traditional balance of power between communities and institutions (Israel et al. 1998), a key strength often emphasized (Wallerstein and Duran 2010). However, improper application and rapid growth of CBPR have led activists to question if the research is actually community-led and if the project will ultimately lead to an action-oriented strategy (Minkler 2005). Recent scholarly discussions have further highlighted these

challenges, focusing on power imbalances, the need for a long-term commitment, and issues related to data collection and analysis (Horowitz et al. 2009; Jull et al. 2017). Environmental justice communities across the country have participated in CBPR projects, many of which have fallen short of the action-oriented commitments needed to create change.

Over the past few decades, the Environment Justice Movement (EJM) has grown and gained considerable momentum. The EJM includes grassroots organizations that represent frontline and fenceline, black, indigenous, people of color, and low wealth communities (Baptista et al. 2022). The EJM commits to a core mission and strategies to confront historical environmental, social, racial, and economic injustices, which require critical systemic changes. The EJM is a movement grounded in principles, which guided the leaders of the EJM in the early 1990s and inspired the Jemez Principles of Democratic Organizing that was drafted in 1996. This historic commitment to critical change is why the community sees CBPR as an effective path forward for action-oriented strategies that support this fundamental change. The EJM's commitment to critical systemic change and to applying CBPR within such movements is not without complexities.

The available CBPR literature details the history, challenges, and opportunities related to CBPR projects. Three key factors that facilitate authentic applications of CBPR are found in the literature: (1) grounding research within community-specific opportunities for change, (2) collaborating with a strong community partner, and (3) facilitating flexibility in research processes (Flicker et al. 2008; Khodyakov et al. 2011). While these three factors are critical to successful projects, there is considerable complexity in implementing the factors that may dampen the potency of any CBPR as a true social change strategy. Here, we provide context between the current literature on CBPR, often written primarily for an academic audience and the actual application of these practices by sharing the knowledge and experiences of four community groups involved with CBPR projects. We want to elevate the voices of the four participating groups from the Moving Forward Network (MFN) who presented their CBPR experiences at UC Santa Cruz's All-In Conference on 26–28 October 2022: the Tallahassee Food Network in Tallahassee, Florida; Little Village Environmental Justice Organization in Chicago, Illinois; Harambee House/Citizens for Environmental Justice in Savannah, Georgia; and CleanAirNow in Kansas City, Kansas. Historically, EJM organizations have participated in numerous CBPR projects ranging from public health-based ones to scientific air monitoring. These MFN members not only have extensive experience as the “subjects” of CBPR projects, but they also present their unique experiences of the challenges and limitations in the application of CBPR projects within their communities in reaching action-oriented goals outlined in the literature (Minkler et al. 2008, p. 120).

We begin by reviewing key concepts in contemporary CBPR literature, and then draw from the knowledge of community groups including the specific opportunities and pitfalls that CBPR can bring to their communities. By integrating our knowledge of working on CBPR projects within a more academic framework, we endeavor to provide greater insight into the process and also a resource to illustrate how CBPR can be better rooted in justice principles, led by the community, and culminate into action-oriented organizing on the ground.

## 2. Context and Methods

The Moving Forward Network (MFN) is a national network comprising more than 50 member organizations. The MFN centers on grassroots, frontline-community knowledge, expertise, and engagement from communities across the US who endure the negative impacts of the global freight transportation system. The MFN forms partnerships between leaders in frontline/fenceline communities, academia, labor, and three mainstream environmental organizations aiming to protect the communities from the adverse effects of freight transportation. The MFN's members are led by the environmental justice members representing more than 20 cities across the country.

Within MFN, a dedicated Research Work Group focuses on community-based research partnerships targeting socially and policy-relevant questions. In 2022, this work group

convened a panel of four organizations with substantial experience in community-based participatory research (CBPR) at UC Santa Cruz’s All-In Conference. The conference focused on the recent push beyond their often primarily academic audiences and building stronger community–university partnerships. Based on the conference description, these partnerships should represent a joint effort to be solution focused, to address the social ills impacting communities across the country. The MFN research work group recognized their unique expertise as being part of MFN, whereby they could bring together environmental justice leaders to inform the discourse at the Conference by sharing experiences and recommendations from the community leaders themselves. MFN proposed a community-led panel. EJ leaders from MFN’s network across the country deliberated on how their participation in CBPR projects has shaped their perspective, purpose, and process on research-based projects. This in-depth discussion incorporated a multitude of vantage points on CBPR’s complexities and barriers and underscored areas for CBPR practitioners to further refine and enhance CBPR as a fully realized tool for social change.

Our objective for the conference was to present the lived experiences of environmental justice leaders via a case study method. As a contemporary research technique, the case study method is advantageous when addressing the question of “how” CBPR can be best used to support community priorities and, ultimately, solutions (Yin 2014, p. 35). The multiple case studies presented endorsed the conclusion that viewing CBPR through a social movement lens can bridge the gap between the theory and practice behind CBPR (Yin 2014, p. 56). This gap is bridged only when communities are more than passive participants in the research and become the driving force, decision makers, and collaborators in the research process.

In our research, we employed a crosswalk approach for the thematic analysis, as this strategy enables a more comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). This approach facilitates the identification of significant themes across the data, highlighting similarities and variations in participants’ experiences and perspectives (Guest et al. 2012). Table 1 is an illustrative example of initial coding through crosswalk analysis of qualitative data from community-based participatory research presentations by the Panelists at UC Santa Cruz’s All-In: Co-Creating Knowledge for Justice Conference.

**Table 1.** A Crosswalk of Resonating Themes and Subthemes from the Community-based Participatory Research Panel Presentations.

Themes/Subthemes	Quote or Statement	Value to CBPR	Voice
Theme: 4.1. Grounding research within community-specific opportunities for change			
Subtheme: 4.1.1 Creating opportunities for empowerment in communities	“ . . . it is about co-learning and empowerment to our people, and then also building the strength and resources of the community. . . . One of the things I’m so happy about is that we’ve put the people in everything we’ve done . . . ”	When people in the community are at the center of the efforts, the empowerment can lead to community strength.	Community Voice 1
Subtheme: 4.1.2 Focusing research efforts on community interests	“ . . . The people most impacted by the problem should be at the table always in the aspect of process, and it has to be transparent. Everything has to be transparent throughout so everybody knows what it is, and how the strategies can be laid. We can’t lay out a strategy if you come to the communities and say, ‘Well, here the plan is . . . ’ ”	To be impactful and successful, it is imperative that research focuses on issues directly relevant to the community.	Community Voice 1
	“ . . . Trust building is the most important piece with working with community members . . . . . lived experiences are the expertise they bring to the table.. ”.	There is a need to recognize the importance of centering the work on community interests. It takes time to develop these relationships.	Community Voice 2

Table 1. Cont.

Themes/Subthemes	Quote or Statement	Value to CBPR	Voice
Subtheme: 4.1.3 Establishing long-term commitments for lasting outcomes to benefit community	"... We started CBPR work in 1999., we continue to do that work... we work with all sectors of community, it's an intergenerational fight..."	Communities persist and continue the work. The experience and efforts of communities reach far back in time.	Community Voice 4
	"... Capacity building is another benefit of a CBPR experience and is associated with long-term impacts. In Chicago, the CBPR experience helped cultivate our organization and other environmental justice organizations in the city which makes up the Chicago Environmental Justice Network..."	Built community capacity is a benefit to communities.	Researcher Voice
Subtheme: 4.2.4 Collaborating with a strong community partner	"... We still speak for ourselves, and we don't need academic institutions or the government coming in and telling us where our problems are or how to solve them. We already know..."	Strong collaboration reinforces authentic partnership in decision making and challenges the narrative in which institutions hold the power.	Community Voice 4

The use of these qualitative methods aligns with Creswell's (2013) recommended practices for ensuring the validity and reliability of findings in qualitative research. Additionally, our approach aligns with the principles of long-standing, equity-focused CBPR partnerships, as described by Coombe et al. (2020), emphasizing the importance of shared ownership, mutual learning, and capacity building in the research process.

The transcripts used in our analysis were obtained to be able to accurately refer to the presentation given at the All-In Conference. MFN staff recorded the audio of the entire presentation. Transcriptions were completed using the online program REV. The article authors used the transcriptions to inform the development themes and subthemes using the crosswalk method. All participants consented to be part of the paper and to co-author this study.

### 3. Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) Background

The motivation to work with the studied communities stems from the belief that researchers should increase their attention to the variety of lived experiences that represent the full range of "social, cultural, and historical contexts" that mediate how individuals experience and interpret the world around them (Israel et al. 1998). Partnerships between communities and academics can yield impactful research and bring about much-needed change. By working together, each group can leverage its strengths with that of its partners to effectively produce positive changes. However, developing successful collaborations is not guaranteed, and there are barriers that can impede these partnerships from realizing their full potential. This is especially true for new partnerships who wish to pursue CBPR, which can benefit from understanding the complexities and barriers of CBPR.

Even the term CBPR can be ambiguous since there are several applications of the term used to categorize, name, and define research that engages community members, which can vary between authors. Despite the inconsistency, CBPR and all its related terms acknowledge that traditional academic institutions are not the only source of valid knowledge (Burns et al. 2011; Israel et al. 1998; Minkler 2005; Fine and Torre 2019; Gordon da Cruz 2017). Community-based research positions itself as a general practice that addresses the needs and issues of a specific community (Burns et al. 2011), and it upends traditional models of academic research that have not valued communities for their lived experience (Israel et al. 1998). Some researchers assert that community members must be involved at every stage of the research process for an accurate application of community-based research (Institute for Civic and Community Engagement n.d.); while others reserve this distinction



for their definition of CBPR (Burns et al. 2011; Minkler et al. 2008). CBPR emphasizes the research process's specific role in social change (Minkler et al. 2008), which differs from other definitions that focus on direct research analysis outcomes as the central factor supporting communities. The participatory processes produce knowledge that critically engages existing power structures, thus increasing the ability of research to act as a tool to shift power dynamics, empower historically marginalized communities, and lead to systemic change (Minkler et al. 2008; Tremblay et al. 2017; Gordon da Cruz 2017).

Some regard participatory action research as a synonym for CBPR (Huffman 2017). Others describe participatory action research as a more general, catch-all term for any research that involves collaboration and community members, which can include a spectrum of levels of community involvement (Schensul 1993). Community-based participatory action research is yet another term with varying definitions, and Burns et al. distinguish this from CBPR due to its specific targeted outcome of social change (Burns et al. 2011). However, the Institute for Civic and Community Engagement and Minkler already include an element of social action within their definitions of CBPR (Minkler et al. 2008). Other synonyms include community-wide research, community-involved research, and community-centered research.

Here, we use the definition of CBPR that aligns with Minkler's conception of the term: research that centers community within the research process towards action-oriented outcomes that improve life outcomes for residents and catalyze power shifts (Minkler 2005; Minkler et al. 2008). A "successful" implementation of CBPR is one that meets both the criteria of meaningful collaboration and social action outcomes. There are a few key facilitating factors that are commonly identified for successful CBPR projects: (1) grounding research within community-specific opportunities for change, (2) collaborating with a strong community partner, and (3) encouraging flexibility in research processes. This paper ties the social theory behind CBPR with real examples from four environmental justice community leaders to provide a practical context for how these factors have been implemented successfully in CBPR efforts. The complexities and challenges of each factor are also provided to highlight common barriers that need to be overcome to achieve the goals of a CBPR project.

#### 4. Results: CBPR Application

##### 4.1. Grounding Research within Community-Specific Opportunities for Change

Many traditional forms of research originate within academia, which often does not explicitly aim to promote change. While broader impacts are often loosely indicated, it is generally not standard in many disciplines to structure a research project on how the findings will be applied for the direct benefit of community members, projects are frequently disconnected from any action-oriented goals. Thus, the "ivory tower" perception of academia persists. In contrast, CBPR practitioners indicate that research teams that dedicate time to identify opportunities for change within their current communities (typically through policy shifts) are more likely to have a substantial impact on community well-being and empowerment (Israel et al. 1998; Minkler et al. 2008). In essence, designing a project from the beginning with community-specific goals for change is an essential component for CBPR.

Grounding research in a social opportunity-based approach to change shares a full framework with political theory. Political process theory highlights political opportunity's role in mobilizing individuals into social movements (Tremblay et al. 2017). Political instability, demographic changes, and shifts in institutionalized methods of cultural communication are examples of structural opportunities, and movements can take advantage of those opportunities to push for social change (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). The definition of "political opportunity" varies and many researchers include nonstructural factors within its definition (Goodwin and Jasper 1999). Social change can also be viewed in terms of strategic opportunities where movements can more directly influence outcomes through social networks and media coverage, but do not explain the existence or the successes/failures of a

movement to achieve broad social change. These ideas provide a framework to understand persistent barriers in applying opportunity findings within CBPR. Within this first overarching facilitating factor, three themes emerged from the experience that community groups shared: creating opportunities for empowerment in communities, focusing research efforts on community interests, and establishing long-term commitments for lasting outcomes to be beneficial to the community.

#### 4.1.1. Creating Opportunities for Empowerment in Communities

The first theme is that truly collaborative research creates opportunities for community empowerment, making it much more likely that there will be a positive impact. Several panelists stressed this theme; for example, Panelist 1 identified that "... it is about co-learning and empowerment to our people, and then also building the strength and resources of the community. ... One of the things I'm so happy about with the {Tallahassee Food Network}, [ ... ] is that we've put the people in everything we've done" (Panelist 1 2022). It is clear that when people in the community are at the center of the efforts, the empowerment created by this structure can lead to community strength.

Community empowerment that leads to change is reinforced in the context of advocating for policy change as highlighted by Panelist 2: "But some of the other expertise that community organizations ... have is when there is a public hearing, for example ... we put in our own recommendations, EJ recommendations informed by community members, ... However, for a community, it's powerful because they can use this information to go and be in front of decision makers" (Panelist 2 2022). As communities gather information and understand and synthesize results, this is empowering since their findings, concerns, and actionable next steps can be more effectively and directly communicated to decision makers.

If communities are not empowered, this can lead not only to a continuation of negative community impacts, but also to even greater exploitation as commented by Panelist 3 "... it's quite clear to us now, 25 years in, that when community doesn't have control, we are replicating colonial mentality. We are replicating exploitation and we are replicating extraction of our communities. We resist that as an organization and we resist that as a community ... We're working with the city. We finally convinced them to do their own air monitoring in the city of Chicago. So now we're getting ready to show them where they need the air monitors, especially if you don't trust them to put them in the right places, to put even the right ones out, much less monitor them correctly ... So we have empowered ourselves to have that information so we can ensure that they're doing their job right" (Panelist 3 2022).

There must also be a determined effort to ensure that community members are no longer marginalized or disregarded in the process, and as Panelist 4 points out, "... the academic institutions and the government and the community are all working together as equal partners, as equal partners ... you got to change their behavior, but also changing the behavior of the community that has been bearing the legacy pollution and racist behavior ... because a lot of times they come to the table thinking they're the servants, when actually they're the masters. So CBPR is about changing the behavior and the participation around the world. No business as usual. CBPR says there's no business as usual because this tool is a tool that is supposed to lead to what? Power. ... So trust the people. Engage them in an authentic way. Meet them where they are, and subject yourself to the tyranny of the people, not the tyranny of the government" (Panelist 4 2022). In short, this essential principle can be simply stated as "research by us, for us".

#### 4.1.2. Focusing Research Efforts on Community Interests

To be impactful and successful, it is imperative that research focus on issues directly relevant to the community. As stated by Panelist 1, "The people most impacted by the problem should be at the table always in the aspect of process, and it has to be transparent. Anything has to transparent throughout so everybody knows what it is, and how the

strategies can be laid. We can't lay out a strategy if you come to the communities and say, 'Well, here the plan is.'" (Panelist 1 2022). When developing the plan to address a problem, the plan must be centered on the community issue before it is even developed. After all, these issues are really about the well-being of the community as pointed out by Panelist 1, "The community effort has to be about culture, it has to be about family, and about wellbeing. We build that into our system of care because we have to take care of ourselves as organizers to make this work out" (Panelist 1 2022).

Funding agencies, academics, and other partners must all recognize the importance of centering the work on community interests. It also takes time to develop these relationships to serve the community better, as highlighted by Panelist 2: "Trust building is the most important piece with working with community members because community members are busy, but those experiences, lived experiences are the expertise they bring to the table, right? . . . California Air Resources Board was tasked with putting a request for funding proposals out . . . But guess who they talked to, to be able to be sure it matched the goals of the community? They talked to us, right? A community network organization, so we worked with them to create a blueprint where we already knew a lot of our community. EJ groups across the state were well-equipped to tap into those resources, right? . . . Communities are involved, should be involved in all aspects of the research study. The research should align with communities with experience, share group community knowledge, and then communicate research. (Research) is most effective when responsive and flexible and held to community priorities as they arise" (Panelist 2 2022).

By matching the call put out by funding agencies to the community's recommendations, the projects will be able to suit the community needs better. Otherwise, a misunderstanding of community needs will likely cause a mismatch between the project and community's objectives. Designing a project with the community at all steps will better serve the community. An example of this process was provided by Panelist 3, "We have a farm on our park because it wasn't good enough for us just to have outdoor space. Because we're a food-centered community, it was really important for us to have a space where we could lift up the type of work that we do. Many of our folks were immigrants, and have come to this country with farming expertise, but cannot put it into use. And so what we do is take whatever land we can and give it back to our community to be able to grow our own food in culturally relevant ways. . . . it wasn't good enough just to understand where these things were. We wanted to understand where the most vulnerable in our communities are too, so what you see here is a map of our schools and our parks; that are directly across the street, directly 500 feet away from these industries. Right, so we cannot act like it's just our folks living across the street from these things. We are walking to school. We are walking to work. We are going, living our entire lives in these neighborhoods impacted by enviro-racism every single step that we take in our neighborhood . . . if you come to us with a pre-made plan, we are not going to accept, because that plan did not come from our neighborhood" (Panelist 3 2022).

All the CBPR processes discussed by the panelists were rooted in ensuring that the research focused on health and well-being. They addressed EJ challenges and social determinant challenges that include heart disease, racism, air pollution and cumulative impacts, violence, and lead poisoning along with food insecurity. For these community leaders, research projects and data collection were not optional. "Our lived experience of not having local space wasn't good enough to get a park, so we had to become scientists. We had to become community scientists at that. And so that has been one of the key ways that our organization and community have been able to advocate change" (Panelist 2 2022).

#### 4.1.3. Establishing Long-Term Commitments for Lasting Outcomes to Be Beneficial to the Community

The third theme for grounding research within community-specific opportunities for change is the longevity of the partnerships and outcomes of CBPR. Many projects have a limited timeframe and suffer from short-term goals and finite funding support, which



can stop projects before actionable steps are taken and can lead to only minimal impact or change. It takes time and continued effort to, as Panelist 1 pointed out, “. . . identify and measuring meaningful and sustainable outcomes so that we’re not just talking about an activity that you don’t measure, something that is there, ongoing, and has made a difference in the community. . . . Community conversations we found are so critical in everything that we do. And we’ve engaged people at all levels of our community to find out what their thinking is, what their stories are, and it takes time. You can’t come here and then do this in three months, all right?” (Panelist 1 2022).

Regardless of limited-term projects, it is the communities who persist and continue the work. The experience and efforts of communities reach far back in time. As Panelist 4 commented, “We started CBPR work back in Savanna in 1999. And we continue to do that. There’s a newsletter coming out that our young people put together. We work with all sectors of the community. It’s an intergenerational fight. I have a study that the community of Hudson Hill did. We started off with about 15,000 pages; they’ve whittled it down to 10, and it was questions that they wanted to know for themselves, and it’s all about health. Because what? Health is our wealth” (Panelist 4 2022). Capacity building is another benefit of a CBPR experience and is associated with long-term impacts. In Chicago, the CBPR experience helped cultivate the panelist organization and other environmental justice organizations in the city that make up the Chicago Environmental Justice Network. Through the experience they have, they built the capacity to be together and figure out how to push the city on critical environmental justice issues such as air monitoring.

#### 4.2. Collaborating with a Strong Community Partner

Collaboration is key for CBPR projects. There are critical elements to building a strong collaboration. The common thread across the four case studies on building a strong collaboration was rooted in the values of collaboration and collective process rather than an institutional hierarchical structure commonly found in academic institutions. To build a strong collaboration, the community-based participatory researchers must better account for autonomy in decision making and shared leadership structure that acknowledges the expertise of the community (Israel et al. 1998; Minkler et al. 2008).

The most effective strategies for a strong collaboration reflect creating a project with authentic participation, in which participation equates with expertise. Autonomy in decision making ensures that the power in decision making includes selecting the problem, finding the solutions, and recognizing that institutions often have greater capacity that results in an unequal power dynamic historically favoring the institution as the decision maker (Garzón et al. 2013, p. 75). Panelist 4 noted that, “We still speak for ourselves, and we don’t need academic institutions or the government coming in and telling us where our problems are or how to solve them. We already know” (Panelist 4 2022). A strong collaboration reinforces authentic partnership in decision making and challenges the default narrative in which institutions hold the power. This means acknowledging equity in power in the community’s ability to mobilize and to have trusted relationships which can strengthen the data collected during the CBPR project.

It is an expertise that institutions lack and yet is not valued the same. “Because we have real collaborations and integration with our local community, we’ve been building partnerships, long term partnerships, building a base” (Panelist 1 2022). While institutions and researchers hold credibility as experts with decision makers and funders alike, in the end, it is the community leaders’ credibility within the community itself that has the power to determine if the community will be collaborative or act as gatekeepers (Garzón et al. 2013, p. 74). Community leaders are accountable to the community. Any time a researcher enters the community with promises of a CBPR project that will collect data to support the need for change, develop a project that will result in increased resources for the community, and/or support change that will inform decision makers, they do not acknowledge the detached nature of research. The community is responsible for and to the community, they do not leave when the project is completed, and they enter projects to

address a need or solve a problem. “Our work is rooted in something called Ujima. Ujima is one of the principles of the Nguzo Saba that is rooted in the Black community. Ujima means ‘collective work and responsibility’. So we are engaged in a collective process, and we are responsible and accountable for the outcomes” (Panelist 4 2022). While researchers and institutions are often given more “credibility” they lack accountability to the community. Strong collaboration ensures that accountability and outcomes have equitable power and priorities such as capacity and scientific expertise.

CBPR projects’ ability to comprehensively address power imbalances between academics and community members lies in their ability to convince other academics, politicians, and other mainstream sources of power the value and validity of community knowledge. This is done through strong collaboration that supports the community as decision makers, scientists, experts, and leaders throughout the development, implementation, and interpretation of the CBPR project. “We know what our community needs and we know how to make sure that that work is really being driven by the community” (Panelist 2 2022) When this is not done, the community takes it upon themselves to bring their existing skills in order to reach the ultimate goal—support for critical change. “Our lived experience of not having local space wasn’t good enough to get a park, so we had to become scientists. We had to become community scientists at that. And so that has been one of the key ways that our organization and community have been able to advocate change” (Panelist 3 2022). For power dynamics to be challenged, community-based organizations must have the final decision-making power on priorities and questions, allowing the research process to reflect fully the knowledge and lived experiences of community members (Minkler et al. 2008).

One panelist shared the challenge of bringing already tired community members to project-based meetings, charette, etc., to milk their brains without providing meals or compensation for their expertise. Their CBPR experience itself must compensate those community members for their time and, at the very least, feed them. Another panelist stated that their CBPR experience paid community members as educators who taught doctoral students and paid community households who housed doctoral students for summer ethnographic field schools.

#### 4.3. Facilitating Flexibility in Research Processes

CBPR promotes the co-creation of knowledge by academics and communities. This requires not only their agreement on the meaning of research outcomes, but also their fundamental alignment on values, on how problems are framed, and on the mental models of what “good research” looks like (Israel et al. 1998). The research process must be flexible enough to reflect the shared standards created within academic–community partnerships. One significant barrier against innovative, collaborative research projects is institutional standards that dictate what is considered to be convincing scientific research within the academic and policy-making sectors (Israel et al. 1998). CBPR literature details how academics can break the mold and foster new standards and processes within their collaborations (Ritas 2003; Schensul 1993).

CBPR projects can also play an important role in comprehensively addressing power imbalances between academics and community members. Besides convincing academics, politicians, etc., on the value and expertise of community knowledge, successful CBPR projects must also include addressing power imbalances often reinforced by funding agencies and philanthropy. Funding agencies are typically peer reviewed by discipline-specific academics that may not be aware of the value of CBPR or do not understand the flexibility that is often required in the research process. CBPR practitioners can give more attention to the processes and help guide academics and noncommunity collaborators to advocate for more inclusive standards within general academic and policy spaces.

Experiences shared at the All-In Conference not only highlight issues found within CBPR from the perspective of the communities but also address how CBPR can be built in a way that would address many of the inequalities perpetuated through institutional and community-based projects. The value of collaboration is clear, but a flexible process is

essential to ensure that justice and equity are continually centered throughout the project, as well as to support subsequent actions by CBPR to promote positive change for the communities. When researchers come to communities for a partnership, the facilitation of a flexible research process is vital. Many communities also require research process flexibility in the academic–community partnership in both principle and practice. This breaks with traditional project proposals that often require a more rigid, linear approach.

Based on the crosswalk analysis, three subthemes emerge under facilitating flexibility in the research process: meet the evolving needs of the community under shifting concerns, support adaptability of the applied research methods, and integrate new knowledge from the community to work toward more relevant research and solutions.

#### 4.3.1. Meet the Evolving Needs of the Community under Shifting Concerns

In order for research to reflect their major concerns, the local community must first decide what those concerns are. Panelists expressed two major ways to determine this. The first way is by being sure that people being affected by the research topic are at the table. As an essential aspect in their work, the Tallahassee Food Network (TFN) and the Health Equity Alliance of Tallahassee (HEAT) insist that people who are most impacted by a health problem being addressed by research partners always be at the table in each aspect of the research process. In their CBPR projects, the TFN holds up transparency as a key principle and promotes partnership practice in the planning and strategizing process from the beginning to the publishing phase at the end. The TFN makes it clear that if researchers come to a community with already laid out plans, it ties the hands of community members and interferes with community members' even knowing how to participate. This makes it imperative that the CBPR process is flexible enough to be guided by an actively engaged community.

The second way to determine whether the research reflects a major concern of the local community is by having academic researchers be familiar with the work the community is already doing before coming up with the proposal. Panelist 3's organization, the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization in Chicago, Illinois, requires researchers to "look at what work is already being done in the community before coming with a proposal" (Panelist 3 2022). Often, researchers present an already thought-out research topic to a community without first determining if their proposal actually fits in with what is already being done. A plan that is unable to be flexible and conform to the community's needs is doomed to fail from the start.

Facilitating flexibility in a CBPR project that holds up and ensures that trust building is strong throughout the research process was expressed as the most important consideration when working with community members by Panelist 2 of CleanAirNow in Kansas City, Kansas. Panelist 1 also shared that trust building is the most critical piece when working with community members, especially because community members are so busy; yet those lived experiences are the expertise that they bring to the table. Panelist 1 goes on to state that the TFN academic partnership story has been going on since 2007 and that it has taken time to build trust and to get the research done. In their experience, people were involved in every aspect. For example, the TFN has participated in the dissemination of research results from community engagement to the co-authorship of academic publications, and this example supports a community-led process.

Similarly, trust building during CBPR in Panelist 2's organizational experience takes time and flexibility as they pointed out that it is "... a good thing because you're building that trust and we know that trust building takes a long time, right? It's okay to make mistakes along the way and the commitment to the time means that there is a built bond with that community group and that the work is moving forward" (Panelist 2 2022). Their community wanted to make sure the right researchers were at the table and that they would be instrumental in getting their community to the place where they could use the information gained to move policy at the local level or ensure resources are allocated equitably.

Panelist 3's organization has empowered itself with information through the CBPR process. This gives their community the ability to acknowledge whether academic researchers are doing their job right. Trust building happens when the community can see that academic researchers are flexible and have made an effort to know and align their actions with the Jemez principles as well as with the organization itself. In fact, Panelist 3's organization has decided that if academic researchers come to it with a pre-made plan, they will not accept that plan because it did not come from their neighborhoods.

Panelist 4 with the Harambee House/Citizens for Environmental Justice shares that their experience with trust building has led academic researchers to craft a CBPR process that facilitates a flexible approach that strongly trusts the community. The benefit of facilitating flexibility in the CBPR process is the engagement of quality and practical local knowledge. Panelist 4 spoke eloquently about the value of the practical knowledge of people. They went further to reference community engagement in the House/Citizens for Environmental Justice's CBPR process as subject-matter experts. This approach engages community members in an authentic way, a way in which the academics meet them where they are. We can take this process, this community, and root it. The Harambee House/Citizens for Environmental Justice also leads academic research efforts to incorporate flexible approaches that are rooted and anchored in the Jemez principles, in the 17 environmental justice principles, rooted and anchored in the principle of love and justice, and rooted and grounded in the Nguzo Saba—the seven principles that guide its work. In the experience of the Harambee House/Citizens for Environmental Justice, the flexible approach of CBPR meant academic researchers were open to these principles that guide their community work. For the Savannah community, this is their strategy for winning, which means finding environmental justice for all. For the Harambee House/Citizens for Environmental Justice's CBPR experience, trust building was built into the CBPR research process, and the process was flexible enough to be adjusted when needed, ensuring that the community's voice would be heard as subject matter experts—a position of power and influence.

#### 4.3.2. Support Adaptability of the Applied Research Methods

Another benefit of facilitating flexibility in a CBPR process is that a variety of skill and knowledge sets are united to address a problem, and these may not be apparent until after the project starts. Panelist 1 of the Tallahassee Food Network emphasized that the CBPR process takes all sectors into an action-oriented undertaking that includes community, academic, and policymaker participation for lasting change. Panelist 3's organizational perspective shares a similar sentiment that widespread sector engagement is needed for success and that they do not participate in a CBPR process where the research design happens prior to consultation with the community. In their experience, researchers have come to their organization with memorandums of agreement that were already designed and ready for a signature by a community leader. They clearly expressed that if they did not write the memorandum, then they will not sign off on it. This is an example of the importance of facilitating flexibility in the CBPR process and that predetermined memorandums or projects do not foster meaningful CBPR.

Learning and practicing how an outside researcher should enter a community is a benefit of a facilitated flexible CBPR process. It ensures that academic researchers come to a community in a way that is respectful and ultimately contributes to the building of trust. This again relates to facilitating a process where community members can ask questions and share thoughts about a specific research project and feel respected. It allows a process where the research project is not already planned out, but the thought or idea is budding, and the community is invited in to help/participate and be a part of planning. This process of learning and practicing along with a community takes time.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

When used effectively, CBPR is a valuable tool that can promote positive change and improve the well-being of communities. Both academics and communities view this as a way forward to work toward addressing EJ issues, but CBPR can fall short of achieving its full potential. To understand successful implementation of CBPR, three key facilitating factors for the most effective CBPR projects are often identified in the academic literature: (1) grounding research within community-specific opportunities for change, (2) collaborating with a strong community partner, and (3) facilitating flexibility in research processes. The All-In Conference provided an opportunity to bring together community leaders to share their experiences participating in CBPR projects, which can be used to examine these factors more closely in a practical way by listening to community voices. The MFN's unique panel led by EJM leaders supported a space within the conference where the audience could hear directly from those who are often the "subject" of CBPR projects on what lessons are learned from the application of CBPR, specific elements on what worked, and what did not across CBPR projects. The presentation highlighted that universally across geographies, projects, and partners were themes that were consistently presented from the perspective of the "community" and that by understanding these themes, CBPR would benefit from reaching the goals of being action oriented and ensuring meaningful collaboration. Although treated separately, we note that these themes are often intertwined and strengthening; one can strengthen another. For each factor, we identify a few components that were common themes in the panelists' experiences that serve as a guide to others, especially those that wish to create new partnerships. By lifting up the experienced voices of the community members in this work, we wish to promote effective CBPR.

First and foremost, the CBPR project must be grounded in community-specific opportunities for change. Actual change is more likely to happen when the community becomes empowered. Empowerment comes in different forms, including learning from research that can be used to inform the community regarding a particular issue that they are concerned about. The research must be focused on an issue that is of interest to the community, and this knowledge will put communities in a better position to advocate for themselves and bring about positive changes. The process can take a long time and long-term commitments must be established to see the project through all the way to actually implementing an action plan.

Collaboration with a strong community partner is another critical factor that should emphasize shared leadership instead of maintaining hierarchical structures. This includes building on pre-existing efforts and knowledge within communities, as well as working with the existing community leadership structure. The emphasis should be clearly placed on partnership to prevent perpetuating any pre-existing power imbalances. All partners have strengths and weaknesses, which can be optimized in strong and equal partnerships.

All aspects of the research process must be flexible. Starting with the inception of the project, the academic–community partnership should start by clearly addressing a community concern. After all, it is the needs of the community that should be the center of the CBPR project. These needs may shift over time and the project goals must be flexible to change with those needs, with the goal of creating actions that will help address and alleviate those issues. The methods themselves should also be flexible, especially as knowledge is shared by community members and the approach to reaching the project goals might have to change to adapt from that new information. Flexibility at all stages is an important aspect since the project must be agile enough to evolve with shifting concerns and approaches.

It is important to note that the case studies examined here are examples of some of the most effective implementations of CBPR in recent years. There remain many projects that adopt the label of CBPR but do not meet the basic tenets of community-centric knowledge creation and full participation towards the purposes of social action (Minkler 2005). As CBPR practitioners here have done, they have the opportunity to further expand the



capabilities of academic–community partnerships past their current peak. Finding ways to overcome the limitations of government-funded work and the misalignment of motivational structures between academia and the community will help make room for CBPR to expand into analyses of structural opportunity for change, facilitate partnerships with a broader array of communities, and create institutional flexibility for different research processes.

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