



STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL DECISION-MAKING: GOVERNANCE PATHWAYS FOR RESILIENT AND EQUITABLE COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

Abdul Ganiu Tanko^{1*} , Ansbert Akaturi Aduko² , Patrick Akukene³ , Harriet Osei Bonsu⁴ 

^{1,2,3} Department of Community and Regional Planning, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM, USA

⁴ Department of Regional and City Planning, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, USA

*Corresponding Author: Abdul Ganiu Tanko

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ABSTRACT

Federal environmental policies increasingly emphasize public participation, environmental justice, and community resilience as foundations for effective environmental governance. However, less attention has been given to whether these policies strengthen the community capacity needed to convert participation opportunities and policy commitments into meaningful influence over environmental decision-making. This study examines how federal environmental, climate, resilience, and environmental justice policies support community capacity in the United States through a qualitative analysis of ten federal policy documents.

The findings show that federal policies have expanded community access to environmental governance through participation mechanisms, equity initiatives, and resilience frameworks. However, opportunities for engagement are more consistently institutionalized than opportunities for influence. While communities are increasingly recognized within federal governance frameworks, fewer policy mechanisms support sustained community authority in shaping environmental priorities and decisions.

The study identifies community capacity as the critical link connecting participation, environmental justice, and resilience. It argues that strengthening community capacity is not simply a policy outcome but a governance requirement for achieving more resilient, equitable, and effective environmental decision-making.

KEYWORDS: Community Capacity; Environmental Decision-Making; Collaborative Governance; Environmental Justice; Community Resilience; Federal Environmental Policy; Public Participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communities across the United States are increasingly confronted with environmental challenges that threaten public health, livelihoods, and long-term sustainability. Climate-related disasters, environmental degradation, aging infrastructure, and unequal exposure to environmental hazards continue to affect communities differently, with socially and economically disadvantaged populations often bearing a disproportionate share of environmental risks (Agyeman et al., 2002; Mohai et al., 2009; Walker, 2009). As these challenges become more complex, environmental decision-making has emerged as a critical component of efforts to promote resilience, sustainability, and equitable development.

Effective environmental decision-making requires more than technical expertise and regulatory oversight. It also depends on the ability of communities to participate meaningfully in planning processes, access relevant information, engage with public institutions, and influence decisions that affect their environment and well-being. Research has consistently shown that public participation, collaborative governance, and

community engagement contribute to more legitimate, inclusive, and effective environmental outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Innes & Booher, 2004; Reed, 2008). At the same time, communities with limited resources, weak institutional connections, or historical patterns of exclusion often face barriers to participation, reducing their ability to shape environmental policies and investments that directly affect them (Schlosberg, 2004; Mohai et al., 2009).

Federal environmental policy in the United States has increasingly recognized the importance of participation, equity, and resilience. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) established a foundation for public involvement in federal environmental decision-making, while subsequent guidance expanded opportunities for citizen engagement and consideration of environmental justice concerns (Council on Environmental Quality, 1997, 2007). More recently, Executive Orders 13985 and 14008, the Justice40 Initiative, and the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool have sought to advance equitable access to environmental benefits and strengthen support for disadvantaged communities. These initiatives reflect a broader shift toward governance approaches that acknowledge the importance of



community engagement, climate resilience, and environmental justice in public decision-making.

Despite these policy developments, relatively little attention has been given to how federal environmental policies collectively strengthen community capacity as a foundation for effective environmental governance. Existing research has examined environmental participation, resilience, environmental justice, and governance as important but often separate areas of inquiry. Less attention has been paid to the role of community capacity in connecting these priorities and translating policy objectives into meaningful local outcomes. Understanding this relationship is increasingly important as federal agencies seek to improve environmental decision-making while addressing persistent social and environmental inequalities.

This study examines how major federal environmental, climate, and environmental justice policies support community capacity for environmental decision-making in the United States. Through a qualitative analysis of key policy documents, the study explores how federal policies promote public participation, advance equity and environmental justice, strengthen community resilience, and support collaborative governance. By identifying common themes, strengths, and gaps across these policy frameworks, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on environmental governance and highlights pathways for building more resilient and equitable communities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Community Capacity and Environmental Decision-Making

Community capacity has become an increasingly important concept in environmental planning and governance because environmental decisions are rarely implemented in isolation from the communities they affect. While government agencies often establish environmental policies and regulatory frameworks, the effectiveness of these interventions frequently depends on the ability of local communities to engage with decision-making processes, access information, mobilize resources, and participate in collective action. Consequently, community capacity is not simply a measure of local participation; it reflects the broader ability of communities to influence environmental outcomes and shape decisions that affect their well-being.

The literature suggests that community capacity is built through a combination of social, institutional, and informational resources. Adger (2003) emphasizes the importance of social capital and collective action in enabling communities to respond to environmental change, while Norris et al. (2008) identify community competence, social networks, and access to resources as critical components of resilience. These perspectives highlight that participation alone is insufficient. Communities must also possess the knowledge, organizational structures, and institutional connections necessary to engage effectively in environmental governance.

Public participation represents one of the primary mechanisms through which community capacity is expressed.

Arnstein's (1969) seminal work remains influential because it frames participation as a question of power rather than consultation alone. Her argument suggests that opportunities for participation are meaningful only when communities can influence decisions rather than merely observing or reacting to them. Subsequent scholarship has reinforced this distinction. Innes and Booher (2004) argue that collaborative participation can improve decision quality and legitimacy when stakeholders are actively involved in deliberation, while Reed (2008) demonstrates that stakeholder participation contributes to more effective environmental management when it is inclusive, transparent, and linked to decision-making outcomes.

Despite these advances, participation remains uneven across communities. Environmental decision-making processes often require technical knowledge, access to information, organizational resources, and sustained engagement over time. Communities lacking these resources may encounter barriers that limit their influence even when formal participation opportunities exist. As a result, community capacity should be understood not only as the presence of participation mechanisms but also as the ability of communities to use those mechanisms effectively. This distinction is particularly important for environmental governance because policies designed to encourage participation may produce limited outcomes if communities lack the capacity to engage meaningfully.

2.2 Environmental Governance and Collaborative Decision-Making

Environmental governance has evolved considerably over the past several decades. Earlier approaches often relied on centralized institutions and regulatory authority to manage environmental resources and address environmental problems. While these approaches remain important, scholars increasingly recognize that complex environmental challenges require broader forms of collaboration involving governments, communities, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006).

This shift reflects the recognition that environmental problems are frequently characterized by uncertainty, competing interests, and interconnected social and ecological systems. Folke et al. (2005) argue that adaptive governance provides a useful framework for addressing such challenges because it emphasizes learning, flexibility, and collaboration across institutional scales. Similarly, Ostrom (2009) demonstrates that sustainability outcomes depend on interactions among governance systems, resource users, and environmental conditions rather than on any single institution acting independently.

Collaborative governance approaches have received particular attention because they provide opportunities for communities to participate more directly in environmental decision-making. Leach et al. (2002) found that stakeholder partnerships can improve policymaking by encouraging information sharing, trust building, and joint problem-solving. Berkes (2009) further highlights the importance of co-management arrangements that combine local knowledge with formal governance structures. These approaches suggest that



governance effectiveness depends not only on institutional authority but also on the quality of relationships among stakeholders.

However, collaborative governance does not automatically produce equitable outcomes. Newig and Fritsch (2009) note that participatory governance can improve environmental decision-making, but outcomes depend heavily on how participation is structured and who is able to participate. Governance arrangements that fail to address power imbalances may reinforce existing inequalities even when participation processes appear inclusive. Consequently, strengthening community capacity becomes essential because communities require sufficient resources, knowledge, and institutional access to engage effectively within collaborative governance systems.

2.3 Environmental Justice and Equity

Environmental justice emerged in response to evidence that environmental burdens are not distributed equally across society. Research has consistently shown that marginalized populations often experience disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards while receiving fewer environmental benefits and protections (Agyeman et al., 2002; Mohai et al., 2009). These inequalities have elevated environmental justice from a social concern to a central consideration in environmental planning and policy.

Over time, environmental justice scholarships have expanded beyond questions of distribution to include issues of recognition and participation. Schlosberg (2004) argues that justice requires not only fair outcomes but also recognition of affected communities and meaningful opportunities to influence decisions. Walker (2009) similarly emphasizes that environmental justice involves procedural dimensions that shape who participate, whose knowledge is valued, and whose interests are prioritized within governance systems.

These perspectives are particularly relevant in the context of climate adaptation and resilience planning. Anguelovski et al. (2016) demonstrate that adaptation initiatives can generate uneven social outcomes when equity considerations are overlooked. Likewise, Shi et al. (2016) argue that climate adaptation efforts must explicitly address justice because decisions regarding infrastructure, land use, and resource allocation influence which communities receive protection and support.

From this perspective, environmental justice and community capacity are closely connected. Communities are more likely to achieve equitable outcomes when they possess the capacity to engage in decision-making processes, advocate for their interests, and influence policy implementation. Conversely, limited capacity can weaken procedural justice and reduce the ability of communities to benefit from environmental programs and investments. Community capacity therefore serves as an important mechanism through which environmental justice objectives can be translated into practice.

2.4 Community Resilience and Adaptive Capacity

The concepts of resilience and adaptive capacity have become increasingly prominent in environmental planning as communities face growing environmental uncertainty. Although resilience is defined in various ways, most definitions emphasize the ability of communities and systems to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and adapt to environmental disturbances (Meerow et al., 2016).

A growing body of research suggests that resilience depends on physical infrastructure or emergency response systems. Norris et al. (2008) argue that resilience is rooted in social and institutional capacities that enable communities to organize and respond collectively. Similarly, Cutter et al. (2010) identify social, economic, institutional, and infrastructural conditions as important determinants of resilience.

Adaptive capacity further strengthens this perspective by focusing on the ability of communities and institutions to respond to changing environmental conditions. Adger (2006) highlights the relationship between vulnerability and adaptive capacity, emphasizing that social conditions influence how environmental risks are experienced and managed. Moser and Ekstrom (2010) identify institutional, informational, and governance barriers that can hinder adaptation efforts, while Biesbroek et al. (2013) demonstrate that adaptation challenges frequently arise from governance constraints rather than technological limitations.

These findings suggest that resilience is fundamentally linked to governance capacity. Communities that possess access to information, institutional support, technical resources, and opportunities for participation are generally better positioned to adapt to environmental change. Ahern's (2011) call for "safe-to-fail" planning approaches further reinforces the importance of flexibility, learning, and community engagement in resilience-building efforts. Consequently, resilience should be understood not simply as an outcome of environmental policy but also as a product of community capacity and governance effectiveness.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed above suggests that community capacity occupies a central position within environmental decision-making. Participation, governance, environmental justice, and resilience are often discussed as separate areas of scholarship, yet they are closely interconnected in practice. Communities require sufficient capacity to participate effectively in environmental decisions. Meaningful participation strengthens collaborative governance. More inclusive governance contributes to procedural and distributive justice. Together, these conditions enhance the ability of communities to prepare for, respond to, and adapt to environmental challenges.

This study therefore adopts a conceptual framework that places community capacity at the center of environmental governance. Four dimensions guide the analysis: public participation, collaborative governance, environmental justice, and community resilience. These dimensions provide a basis for examining how federal environmental and climate policies support community engagement, address equity concerns, strengthen adaptive capacity, and create opportunities for more effective environmental decision-making.



Using this framework, the study evaluates whether federal policies move beyond procedural participation to support the resources, institutional access, and governance conditions necessary for communities to influence environmental decisions and contribute to more resilient and equitable outcomes.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative policy analysis to examine how federal environmental policies support community capacity for environmental decision-making in the United States. Qualitative policy analysis is particularly appropriate for studies that seek to understand how policies frame problems, establish priorities, define governance responsibilities, and create opportunities for public action. Rather than measuring policy outcomes, this approach focuses on the content, objectives, and governance mechanisms embedded within policy documents.

The study is guided by the premise that community capacity plays a critical role in determining whether environmental policies translate into meaningful local outcomes. While federal policies increasingly emphasize public participation, environmental justice, and resilience, their effectiveness depends in part on the extent to which communities possess the resources, knowledge, institutional access, and decision-making opportunities needed to engage with these policy frameworks. Consequently, the analysis focuses on how federal policies support community capacity as a foundation for resilient and equitable environmental governance.

3.2 Policy Document Selection

The study analyzes ten federal policy documents that collectively represent major environmental governance, environmental justice, public participation, and resilience frameworks in the United States. These documents include:

1. National Environmental Policy Act (1969)
2. Environmental Justice: Guidance Under the National Environmental Policy Act (1997)
3. A Citizen's Guide to the National Environmental Policy Act (2007)
4. Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government (2021)
5. Executive Order 14008: Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad (2021)
6. Interim Implementation Guidance for the Justice40 Initiative (2021)
7. Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool Methodology (2022)
8. National Resilience Guidance: A Collaborative Approach to Building Resilience (2022)
9. Community Resilience Planning Guide for Buildings and Infrastructure Systems (2016)
10. Fifth National Climate Assessment (2023)

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select these documents. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative policy research when documents are selected based on their

relevance to the research objectives rather than random selection. The selected policies were chosen because they represent the principal federal frameworks that influence environmental decision-making, public participation, environmental justice, resilience planning, and community-centered governance.

Document selection was guided by four criteria. First, the policy had to address environmental decision-making or environmental governance. Second, it had to contain provisions related to public participation, community engagement, or stakeholder involvement. Third, the document had to incorporate equity, environmental justice, or support for disadvantaged communities. Fourth, the policy needed to address resilience, adaptation, or long-term environmental planning. Collectively, these criteria ensured that the selected documents reflected the major policy instruments shaping community engagement in environmental governance within the United States.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis is guided by a community-capacity framework developed from the literature on public participation, environmental governance, environmental justice, and resilience (Adger, 2003; Lemos & Agrawal, 2006; Norris et al., 2008; Reed, 2008). Within this study, community capacity refers to the ability of communities to access information, participate in environmental decision-making, mobilize resources, influence policy outcomes, and adapt to environmental change.

To examine how federal policies support community capacity, four analytical dimensions were derived from the literature review and used throughout the policy analysis.

The first dimension, public participation, focuses on the extent to which policies create opportunities for community involvement, consultation, information sharing, and stakeholder engagement. The second dimension, collaborative governance, examines institutional coordination, interagency cooperation, partnerships, and mechanisms that facilitate shared decision-making. The third dimension, environmental justice and equity, assesses whether policies recognize disadvantaged communities, address procedural fairness, and promote equitable access to environmental benefits and resources. The fourth dimension, community resilience, evaluates how policies support adaptation, preparedness, capacity building, and long-term responses to environmental risks.

These four dimensions provide a consistent framework for comparing policy documents and assessing their contributions to community capacity for environmental decision-making.

3.4 Data Analysis

The policy documents were analyzed using a thematic content analysis approach. Content analysis is a widely used qualitative technique for identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within textual materials. Each document was reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with its objectives, governance provisions, implementation mechanisms, and community-related strategies.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. The first stage involved an initial review of each document to identify policy



objectives and governance priorities. The second stage involved coding policy content according to the four analytical dimensions of public participation, collaborative governance, environmental justice and equity, and community resilience. The third stage involved cross-document comparison to identify recurring themes, policy strengths, governance gaps, and areas of convergence across the selected policy frameworks.

Particular attention was given to how policies support community involvement in environmental decision-making, improve access to information and resources, address environmental inequalities, and strengthen local capacity to respond to environmental challenges. This comparative approach made it possible to evaluate how different federal policies contribute to the broader goal of strengthening community capacity and promoting resilient and equitable environmental governance.

3.5 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on the content and governance approaches contained within federal policy documents rather than evaluating policy implementation or outcomes. As a result, the findings reflect how community capacity is conceptualized and promoted within federal policy frameworks rather than how policies are experienced by communities in practice. In addition, the analysis is limited to federal policies and does not include state, local, or Tribal policy frameworks, which may also play an important role in environmental decision-making. Future research may build upon this study by examining policy implementation and community experiences across different governance contexts.

FINDINGS

4.1 Public Participation and Environmental Decision-Making

The analysis indicates that public participation is firmly embedded within federal environmental governance, but policies vary considerably in their ability to support meaningful community engagement. NEPA and the *Citizen's Guide to NEPA* establish formal mechanisms for public involvement through environmental review, public comment, and stakeholder consultation. These provisions create important opportunities for community participation but largely emphasize procedural access rather than the capacity needed to influence decision-making.

More recent policies, including Executive Orders 13985 and 14008 and the Justice40 Initiative, reflect a broader understanding of participation by recognizing that underserved communities often face structural barriers to engagement. These policies emphasize equity, targeted support, and improved access to federal resources, suggesting a shift from participation as a procedural requirement toward participation as a component of inclusive governance.

Across the policy documents, however, a consistent gap remains between participation opportunities and participation capacity. While federal policies encourage community engagement, fewer provide clear mechanisms for strengthening the technical knowledge, organizational resources, and institutional support required for effective participation. As a result, the findings suggest that federal environmental governance

has made significant progress in expanding opportunities for public involvement but has been less successful in ensuring that all communities possess the capacity to engage on equal terms.

4.2 Environmental Justice and Equity

The analysis indicates that contemporary federal environmental policies place significant emphasis on identifying disadvantaged communities and directing environmental and climate benefits toward historically underserved populations. Across the policy documents, environmental justice is increasingly framed as a matter of equity in resource allocation, investment priorities, and program delivery rather than solely as a concern within environmental review processes.

This shift is particularly evident in Executive Orders 13985 and 14008, the Justice40 Initiative, and the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST). Together, these policies establish mechanisms for recognizing communities that experience disproportionate environmental, climate, health, and socioeconomic burdens and for prioritizing them in federal decision-making. Justice40, for example, seeks to ensure that disadvantaged communities receive a substantial share of the benefits associated with federal climate, energy, water, transportation, and environmental investments, while CEJST provides a framework for identifying communities that may require targeted support.

A notable finding, however, is that the policies place greater emphasis on identifying and supporting disadvantaged communities than on expanding their decision-making authority. Environmental justice is frequently approached through benefit distribution, resource targeting, and federal investment strategies, but less attention is given to how affected communities can influence the design, implementation, and evaluation of those initiatives. In this respect, communities are often positioned as priority beneficiaries of policy interventions rather than as active partners in shaping environmental governance.

This pattern is also reflected in the relationship between environmental justice and community capacity. While the policies acknowledge environmental inequalities and seek to reduce them through targeted action, they provide fewer mechanisms for strengthening the long-term institutional, technical, and organizational capacities that enable communities to participate effectively in environmental decision-making. As a result, recognition and resource allocation are more strongly institutionalized than community influence.

The findings therefore suggest that federal environmental justice policy has evolved beyond the identification of environmental burdens and now incorporates equity-based investment and targeting strategies. However, the transition from equity as a distributional objective to equity as a governance practice remains incomplete. Strengthening community capacity requires not only directing benefits to disadvantaged communities but also expanding their ability to shape the decisions that determine how those benefits are defined, delivered, and evaluated.

4.3 Community Resilience and Adaptive Capacity



The analysis reveals a significant shift in how resilience is framed within federal environmental and climate policy. Earlier approaches often emphasized physical infrastructure, hazard mitigation, and emergency preparedness. In contrast, the policies examined in this study increasingly recognize that resilience is shaped by social, institutional, and governance conditions. The National Resilience Guidance, the Community Resilience Planning Guide, and the Fifth National Climate Assessment all acknowledge that resilience depends on factors such as institutional coordination, access to information, local knowledge, community networks, and adaptive capacity.

This broader understanding represents an important advancement because it moves resilience beyond a purely technical or infrastructure-focused objective. Through the policy documents, resilient communities are increasingly described as communities that can learn, adapt, collaborate, and respond to changing environmental conditions. The policies therefore recognize that resilience is influenced not only by the resources available to communities, but also by their ability to organize, access support, and engage with governance systems.

However, the analysis also reveals a persistent governance gap. While federal policies increasingly recognize the importance of community capacity for resilience, resilience-building remains largely organized through federal planning frameworks, technical guidance, and institutional programs. Communities are encouraged to participate in resilience planning and adaptation efforts, but the policies provide fewer mechanisms for transferring decision-making authority or strengthening long-term community influence over resilience priorities and investments. In many cases, communities are expected to become more resilient within governance structures that remain largely externally designed and managed.

This finding is particularly evident in the treatment of adaptive capacity. Across the policy documents, adaptive capacity is frequently associated with preparedness, information access, planning processes, and institutional support. These elements are important, but they often position communities as recipients of resilience initiatives rather than as active actors in shaping resilience strategies. As a result, resilience is more strongly institutionalized as a policy objective than as a community-governance practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that federal resilience policy has expanded its understanding of what makes communities resilient. Yet the transition from resilience planning to resilience governance remains incomplete. While community capacity is increasingly recognized as a critical component of resilience, the policies provide stronger support for planning and coordination than for community-led decision-making and long-term governance participation.

4.4 Governance Pathways for Community Capacity Building

The cross-policy analysis reveals that federal environmental governance has undergone a significant shift from procedural participation toward broader efforts to improve community access to environmental decision-making. Across the selected policies, three governance pathways are consistently

evident: expanding access to environmental information, increasing recognition of disadvantaged communities, and strengthening resilience planning and support mechanisms. Together, these pathways reflect growing federal attention to the role of communities in addressing environmental challenges.

The first pathway is built around information and participation. NEPA and the *Citizen's Guide to NEPA* create formal opportunities for public engagement by improving access to environmental information and establishing mechanisms for public review and comment. The second pathway focuses on equity and recognition. Executive Orders 13985 and 14008, the Justice40 Initiative, and the Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool seek to identify disadvantaged communities and improve access to federal environmental and climate investments. The third pathway centers on resilience and adaptation. The National Resilience Guidance, the Community Resilience Planning Guide, and the Fifth National Climate Assessment emphasize preparedness, collaboration, and adaptive capacity as foundations for long-term resilience.

While these pathways differ in purpose and scope, they share a common characteristic: they primarily expand community access to environmental governance. Communities are provided with more information, greater visibility within policy frameworks, and increased opportunities to participate in environmental programs and planning processes. However, the analysis suggests that federal policies are less consistent in creating mechanisms that enable communities to exercise sustained influence over environmental decision-making. Opportunities to participate are more clearly defined than opportunities to shape priorities, allocate resources, or guide implementation.

This distinction between access and influence represents the most significant governance gap identified in the policy analysis. Participation frameworks improve procedural access, equity frameworks improve recognition and targeting, and resilience frameworks strengthen planning capacity. Yet these approaches are often pursued independently, with limited integration around community decision-making authority. As a result, communities are increasingly recognized as stakeholders, beneficiaries, and partners, but less frequently positioned as active contributors to governance outcomes.

The findings therefore suggest that community capacity occupies a pivotal position within contemporary environmental governance. Across the policy documents, stronger community capacity is implicitly linked to more effective participation, more equitable policy implementation, and more resilient communities. However, community capacity itself is rarely treated as a central governance objective. Instead, it emerges as the connecting element through which participation, equity, and resilience are translated into meaningful environmental decision-making outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that federal environmental governance in the United States is undergoing an important transition. Contemporary policies increasingly emphasize public



participation, environmental justice, and community resilience, reflecting a broader recognition that environmental challenges cannot be addressed through technical and regulatory approaches alone. Yet the analysis also demonstrates that expanding access to environmental governance is not the same as expanding community influence within environmental governance. Across the policy documents, participation opportunities, equity initiatives, and resilience programs are more clearly institutionalized than the mechanisms needed to strengthen long-term community influence over environmental decision-making.

This distinction between access and influence represents the central insight of the study. Federal policies have created multiple entry points through which communities can engage with environmental governance. NEPA establishes opportunities for public participation, Justice40 and CEJST improve the visibility of disadvantaged communities within federal decision-making, and resilience frameworks encourage greater collaboration between institutions and local stakeholders. Collectively, these policies improve access to environmental governance. However, the findings suggest that access alone does not guarantee meaningful influence. Communities may be invited to participate, recognized as priorities, or included in resilience planning efforts without possessing the institutional, technical, or organizational capacity needed to shape environmental outcomes.

This observation extends existing scholarship on participation and governance. Arnstein (1969) argued that participation should be understood in terms of power and influence rather than consultation alone. The findings support this argument by demonstrating that participation mechanisms remain uneven in their ability to strengthen community authority. Similarly, collaborative governance scholars have emphasized the importance of stakeholder engagement, social learning, and institutional cooperation in addressing complex environmental problems (Folke et al., 2005; Lemos & Agrawal, 2006). The policy analysis suggests that these governance objectives are difficult to achieve when community capacity is treated as a secondary outcome rather than as a core condition for effective participation.

The study also contributes to environmental justice scholarship by highlighting a distinction between equity as recognition and equity as governance. Recent federal policies have made substantial progress in identifying disadvantaged communities and directing resources toward historically underserved populations. However, the findings suggest that recognition does not automatically translate into decision-making authority. Communities may be prioritized for investment while remaining limited in their ability to influence how programs are designed, implemented, or evaluated. This reinforces arguments that environmental justice requires not only equitable outcomes but also meaningful participation and procedural fairness (Schlosberg, 2004; Walker, 2009).

A similar pattern emerges within resilience policy. The policy documents increasingly recognize that resilience depends on social networks, institutional relationships, local knowledge, and adaptive capacity rather than infrastructure alone. This reflects broader shifts in resilience scholarship that emphasize

governance, learning, and adaptation as essential components of resilience-building (Adger, 2006; Meerow et al., 2016). However, the analysis indicates that resilience remains more strongly institutionalized as a planning objective than as a community-governance practice. Communities are expected to adapt to environmental change, yet the policies provide fewer mechanisms for strengthening their long-term authority within resilience-related decision-making processes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that community capacity functions as the governance infrastructure that connects participation, environmental justice, and resilience. Participation creates opportunities for engagement, environmental justice identifies communities that require attention and support, and resilience frameworks seek to strengthen long-term adaptive capacity. However, these objectives are most likely to produce meaningful outcomes when communities possess the knowledge, resources, institutional access, and organizational capacity necessary to influence decisions. Community capacity is therefore not simply one objective among many within environmental governance; it is the mechanism through which broader governance goals become operational in practice.

The study therefore contributes to environmental governance scholarship by demonstrating that community capacity occupies a pivotal position within contemporary federal policy frameworks. While federal policies increasingly support community access to environmental governance, the institutionalization of community influence remains less developed. Strengthening community capacity should therefore be understood not merely as a desirable outcome of environmental policy but as a foundational requirement for resilient, equitable, and participatory environmental decision-making.

6. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings suggest that the future effectiveness of federal environmental governance will depend less on creating additional opportunities for participation and more on strengthening the conditions that allow communities to influence environmental decision-making. Across the policy documents reviewed, participation mechanisms, environmental justice initiatives, and resilience frameworks have expanded access to environmental governance. However, the analysis indicates that access alone is insufficient when communities lack the capacity, authority, or institutional support needed to shape outcomes. The central policy implication of this study is therefore that community capacity should be treated as a core governance objective rather than as an indirect outcome of environmental programs.

A first priority is to institutionalize community capacity-building within federal environmental and climate initiatives. While many policies encourage participation, fewer provide sustained support for the technical, organizational, and leadership capacities required for effective engagement. Integrating capacity-building requirements into environmental programs would help communities move beyond consultation and



participate more effectively in planning, implementation, and oversight activities.

A second priority is to strengthen community influence throughout the policy cycle. Existing participation mechanisms often focus on public review and consultation after policy priorities have been established. Expanding community involvement during agenda setting, program design, implementation, and evaluation would create more meaningful opportunities for communities to shape environmental decisions and hold institutions accountable for outcomes.

A third priority is to better align participation, environmental justice, and resilience initiatives within a unified governance framework. The analysis shows that these policy areas are often pursued through separate mechanisms despite sharing a common objective of strengthening community outcomes. Greater integration would help ensure that communities identified through environmental justice programs are also supported through participation and resilience-building efforts, creating more coherent and sustained pathways for community engagement.

Ultimately, strengthening community capacity requires a shift in how environmental governance is understood. Communities should not be viewed solely as stakeholders to be consulted or beneficiaries to be served, but as partners in environmental decision-making. Policies that strengthen community influence alongside participation are more likely to support resilient, equitable, and durable environmental outcomes.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined how federal environmental, climate, resilience, and environmental justice policies support community capacity for environmental decision-making in the United States. Through a qualitative analysis of ten federal policy documents, the study explored the relationship between public participation, environmental justice, resilience, and governance within contemporary federal policy frameworks.

The analysis shows that federal environmental governance has evolved beyond traditional regulatory approaches to place greater emphasis on participation, equity, and resilience. Policies such as NEPA, Justice40, Executive Orders 13985 and 14008, and federal resilience frameworks have expanded opportunities for public engagement, improved the recognition of disadvantaged communities, and strengthened institutional support for resilience planning. These developments represent important progress toward more inclusive environmental governance.

However, the study also identifies a consistent pattern across the policy documents. Federal policies have become increasingly effective at expanding community access to environmental governance, yet they are less effective at institutionalizing community influence within environmental decision-making processes. Communities are provided with opportunities to participate, are increasingly recognized within equity frameworks, and are encouraged to engage in resilience planning. Nevertheless, the capacity to shape priorities, influence implementation, and participate in long-term governance remains unevenly supported across policy frameworks.

This finding highlights the central contribution of the study. Participation, environmental justice, and resilience are often treated as distinct policy objectives, yet the analysis suggests that their effectiveness depends on a common underlying condition: community capacity. Community capacity is the mechanism through which participation becomes meaningful, environmental justice becomes actionable, and resilience becomes sustainable. Without sufficient capacity, access to governance may expand while community influence remains limited.

The study therefore argues that community capacity should be viewed not as a secondary outcome of environmental policy but as a core governance objective. Strengthening the ability of communities to access information, mobilize resources, engage institutions, and influence decisions is essential for translating policy commitments into practical outcomes. As environmental challenges become increasingly complex, the long-term success of environmental governance will depend not only on who is included in decision-making processes, but also on who has the capacity to shape the decisions that emerge from them.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Approval

Not applicable. This study was based solely on publicly available policy documents and secondary literature and did not involve human participants or animals.

Data Availability

All data used in this study are publicly available through the policy documents and literature cited in the manuscript.

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