A key component of any sustainable development effort is authentic community and civic engagement. Yet that task can be especially challenging in cities and towns with underrepresented groups (immigrant, migrant, people of color, low-income and geographically isolated), especially since these groups have been historically excluded from top-down planning processes.

Joseph Krupczynski, Associate Professor of Architecture + Design at UMass Amherst, has developed the civic engagement plan for the “New England Sustainable Knowledge Corridor” project which aims to engage local under-served populations in civic dialogues that create opportunities for capacity building and community agency. This civic engagement plan re-establishes social equity as a key pillar in the understanding of sustainability and hopes to create a platform for transformative and sustainable change within Western Massachusetts’ communities.

Engaging Underrepresented Communities on Issues of Sustainability

What makes a Sustainable Community?

For sustainability to be effectively discussed within a community it must be locally-defined. In dialogues and workshops with community groups and residents, responses to how communities live sustainably are diverse. They include the desire to build community and create social capital with neighbors; to work to undo institutional racism; to provide for additional transportation and housing options; or create more community gardens. Throughout our dialogues we structured conversations and solicited feedback with an expanded definition of sustainability, avoided planning jargon and made the issues concrete and accessible for community residents.

Expanding the Definition of Sustainability

Traditional definitions of sustainability often include the three E’s: environment, economic development, and [social] equity. In practice, social equity often does not receive the same attention as the first two E’s. Our challenge was to re-establish social equity as an equal partner in the understanding of sustainability. One way we achieved this was by breaking down the somewhat abstract issue of sustainability down into topic areas like affordable housing, accessible transportation options, education and workforce training opportunities, or access to health food. The most important part of this process was to give participants permission to think outside of the strictly environmental connotation that sustainability carries and to understand what it means in the context of their own lives—and particularly in the lives of the under-represented and through a lens of social equity, and a just sustainability.
“New England Sustainable Knowledge Corridor” Project

The term “New England Sustainable Knowledge Corridor” is part of a place making effort to distinguish the Hartford-Springfield region of Connecticut and Massachusetts as a distinct area tied together by regional economics and a hub of educational advancement. The area is home to over 30 colleges and universities, including the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and over eight different community and technical colleges.

The “New England Sustainable Knowledge Corridor” (SKC) is a project funded by a “Sustainable Communities” regional planning grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The grant supports the three regional planning bodies in the region—the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), Capital Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), and the Central Connecticut Regional Planning Agency (CCRPA)—to collaborate on regional plans based around the concept of sustainability. The PVPC, which represents Hampshire and Hampden Counties in Massachusetts, contracted with Professor Krupczynski at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, to work with the local United Way affiliates, United Way Pioneer Valley and United Way Hampshire County to coordinate the work of engaging citizens about ideas of sustainability.

The HUD grant also comes with a specific focus on engaging “underrepresented groups” in the planning process. For this project those groups included people of color, low-income people, women, young people, English-language and adult learners, new immigrants, the geographically isolated and disabled people, among others. The end goal was to engage these communities throughout the Pioneer Valley in order to capture their understanding of sustainability, learn from their day-to-day stories about how they live sustainably, and bring their visions for future sustainability into the planning process. This is particularly important in Western Massachusetts as demographic trends show that population growth in the region is occurring among the very communities we are engaging through this process—a population that will play an increasingly important role as future advocates for sustainability in the region.

For more information on this project please visit: www.SustainableKnowledgeCorridor.org