



2020 challenge support cycle: City of Buffalo

Understanding refuge – an equity planning framework for developing Buffalo as a climate haven

Buffalo, New York, is strategically located at the junction of Lake Erie and the Niagara River along the US-Canadian border. With abundant access to water, a moderate to cold climate and a low risk of being affected by the worst impacts of climate change like sea level rise, heat waves or severe storm events, Buffalo has been rated [a safe destination for climate migration](#). Furthermore, having experienced deindustrialization and population decline, the city has vacant housing and large-scale infrastructures to accommodate substantial numbers of new residents. Acknowledging the opportunity of these favorable conditions to revitalize the local economy, Buffalo Mayor's office has recently, in 2019, announced Buffalo as a climate refuge and invited migrants to the city.

In order to preserve these assets and prepare the city for upcoming developments, the city has identified three key priorities for action within their upcoming climate planning process:

- Firstly, environmental protection and climate mitigation efforts will be systematically maintained and strengthened to preserve Buffalo's natural resources.
- Secondly, climate adaptation measures will be developed and implemented. Even as a low-risk city, increasing temperatures and precipitation levels will impact residents and the local environment. Infrastructure like pipes and sewers need to be future-proofed, while green spaces and fresh-air corridors need to be protected to preserve the mild conditions in summer.
- Thirdly, a cross-cutting equity focus will be incorporated. Social inequality has been one of the main transition challenges in Buffalo. Upgrading old buildings and aging infrastructure for current and new residents will require targeted investments, while neighborhood development is likely to aggravate trends of gentrification. The effects of increased in-migration due to the climate haven status, for different communities in particular and for social systems overall, will be assessed and addressed through equity components in sustainability initiatives.

Key questions

- What are key pillars to ensure a clean, healthy environment and an equitable provision of services in Buffalo?
- What stressors to services and infrastructure exist, and how will these be impacted by climate change?
- Throughout the climate planning process, how can the city of Buffalo prepare for climate-related in-migration?



Support process: reflections

This support package compiles key points and questions, and provides clear recommendations for action. Support tools and resources are provided based on the following sections:

Two main outcomes of the Alliance challenge exchange process are 1) the implementation of equity planning framework is a learning process for all involved that should be evaluated and adjusted over time and 2) development of Buffalo's award-winning Raincheck 2.0 program to align the climate planning methodologies and community engagement with social equity considerations.

The equity framework developed for Buffalo's award-winning [Raincheck 2.0 program](#) - an infrastructure technology toolkit to maximize stormwater, environmental, equity and economic benefits - will be adjusted to provide an equity lens for the cities' climate planning.

The city of Buffalo has committed to incorporating a cross-cutting equity focus to ensure that climate change mitigation and adaptation interventions are in line with community needs and do not perpetuate or increase existing inequalities. Even with a comparatively moderate climate, more extreme and varying wind, precipitation, and temperature events will exacerbate vulnerabilities in local communities and increase the risk of urban system failure.

A local climate change task force has been established connecting relevant city departments with youth, academia and committed residents, while a vulnerability assessment is underway to map expected impacts on critical infrastructure. The city is looking to incorporate a cross-cutting equity focus in its future-proofing measures to mitigate social inequalities, one of its main transition challenges. Equity components will be assessed and addressed in interventions such as upgrading old buildings and ageing infrastructure for current and new residents, which will risk aggravating trends of gentrification, as well as for the effects of increased in-migration and economic shifts due to the climate haven status.

Support process: milestones

-May-July 2020: Needs assessment. Conducted preliminary diagnosis of the city's challenges and opportunities. Mapped the common interests and available resources among the member cities and their networks.

-11 August 2020 – [Alliance Challenge Webinar Buffalo](#). Develop potential strategies and solutions together with external experts and best practices from member cities.

-08 October 2020: [ICLEI's Daring Cities "Prioritizing equity in local climate action"](#). Advocated the lessons learned in Pittsburgh and acquired public feedback.

Support tool and resource: Social Equity Framework

Throughout the climate planning process in Buffalo, how can the city of Buffalo prepare for climate-related in-migration? It is necessary to establish a common and tangible understanding of



social equity among all stakeholders working toward the goal. From the various projects and programs that the industrial legacy cities have shared under the Urban Transitions Alliance project, we have developed an equity framework based on three simple dimensions that could provide a conceptual framework for the city of Buffalo. Here are three dimensions of the social equity framework:

ACCESS- How can programs support equal access to public services and infrastructures for all local residents – independent of factors like age, neighborhood, income, social group or language?

PARTICIPATION- The more programs are designed with rather than for residents, including all voices across the city and involving those affected early-on, the more they meet local needs and generate long-term impacts.

OPPORTUNITY- To offer fair perspectives for all, how can interventions provide 1) improved access to quality education for all, 2) provision of career perspectives and 3) increased diversity in employment?

These dimensions help to communicate about social equity, spur equity thinking and can be used to assess and incorporate positive equity outcomes in sustainability projects. They are by no means mutually exclusive – very often, programs succeed best when all three aspects are considered early on. More information see here the [Social Equity Framework](#)

At a glance: Recommendations

- **Well-grounded equity narrative:** “Start with people, stay with people.” The full potential of equity-focused policy design can only be achieved by weaving equity thinking into all stages of the planning cycle. While developing the [2019 sustainability plan](#), Baltimore invited residents to share their personal stories and comment on the draft plan to understand local needs and realities. These inputs shaped the language and framing of a joint equity narrative, while an equity consultant supported the sustainability office throughout the process.
- **Partnerships to increase capacity and impact:** Since staff time is limited, realistic planning of capacity is key for cities to achieve their equity commitments. To strengthen outreach and increase activities, the city of Turku has created a [SECAP card model](#) for collaboration with private companies and public entities, and invited local residents to join a climate action team. Baltimore has worked with community ambassadors to scope concerns and priorities in different neighborhoods, in hindsight recommending maintenance of a moderate number of such ambassadors and providing reimbursement to ensure commitment. Grant funding, e.g. from organizations specifically supporting the equity work, can be a pathway to finance additional capacity.
- **Guidance through established frameworks and tools:** There is no need to develop processes from scratch. Buffalo has found valuable state support for their climate planning activities through the NY [Climate Smart Communities](#) program, with the city recently receiving bronze certification, and the [Five Cities Energy Program](#). ICLEI USA offers tailored [guidance on equity and inclusive planning, climate action and adaptation](#)



[planning](#), as well as an Integrated Climate Action Plan Template designed with an equity pillar.

- **Monitoring for side effects:** During the conversations, questions were raised around the unintended externalities of climate protection and/or adaptation measures that could further increase inequality challenges. For example, green infrastructure installations have been shown to trigger higher rents and contribute to gentrification. To understand these risks and identify gaps across current activities, Buffalo is currently undertaking a vulnerability assessment that will inform the climate planning process.
- **Setting targets and measuring progress:** A strong interest has been voiced around equity-related metrics and evaluation criteria to track and report progress. Baltimore is following both a distributional approach based on demographics and location as well as assessing policies against race and equity frameworks. They publicly share [annual progress reports](#) on the goals of the Baltimore Sustainability Plan. The [Pittsburgh Equity Indicators](#) project has been established to assess annual progress toward equitable opportunities and outcomes. In the subsequent years of 2017 and 2018, the status of these indicators has been evaluated to inform the city's investment decisions. The questions around tools and indicators to measure equity in climate planning will be taken up in future Urban Transitions Alliance conversations.