

## **LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD: TAKING SOCIAL EQUITY INTO ACCOUNT IN ADAPTATION ALTERNATIVES**

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Industry experts leading vulnerability assessments are experimenting with various methods to incorporate social equity in the prioritization of local mitigation strategies. Social equity, or environmental justice, is defined by the federal government as the “fair treatment and involvement of all people and communities—regardless of race, gender, national origin, or income level—in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” Economists and policy makers have long debated the fairness of the federal standard for calculating benefit-cost analyses (BCA) for federally-funded infrastructure. With a focus on coastal resilience, engineering consultants are guiding local governments with the addition of a social equity element to supplement decision making for local flood mitigation and adaptation projects.

Policy guidance from the current administration directs that social equity be evaluated in federal agency assessments. For example, the Justice40 Initiative sets a goal that 40% of the benefits of federal investments should support disadvantaged communities. In 2022, FEMA published guidance permitting an alternative cost-effectiveness method for calculating BCA for Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) and Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA) grants. This experimental method used publicly available geospatial data, produced by the CDC’s Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) to identify areas of social equity. Other federal social equity tools using Census data to determine pockets of increased vulnerability are the EPA’s Environmental Justice mapping and screening tool, EJScreen, and CEQ’s Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool.

Adaptation strategies for reducing localized flooding in one of SFWMD’s basins will be presented, as well as how social equity could be included in the evaluation and prioritization of potential projects. A preliminary analysis will show the benefits of linking today’s needs with future planning via Dynamic Adaptive Policy Pathways. An alternative method of calculating BCA demonstrates possibilities for changing the way adaptation projects are evaluated.

**PRESENTER BIO:** Dr. Angela Schedel is the Director of Coastal Programs at HDR. A licensed Professional Engineer, she manages client development, proposal reviews, and project performance evaluations for coastal work. In this position, her main role is to strengthen and accelerate the firm's efforts in helping communities face coastal zone impacts.