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Understanding the Relationships and Solar Experiences of US Community-Based Organizations



PREPARED FOR THE CLEAN ENERGY STATES ALLIANCE





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PREPARED BY

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Clean Energy State Alliance

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report, prepared by the Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA), explores selected topics covered in a national survey of community-based organizations (CBOs) that are engaged or interested in solar development in low- and moderate-income communities. The survey was carried out by a team of researchers from MIT, led by Professor Janelle Knox-Hayes; their findings are detailed in a report, *US Community-Based Organizations and Their Relationship to Solar Energy Development*.

CESA has produced this companion report to focus more narrowly on CBOs' relationships to their communities, stakeholder groups, and state governments, as well as CBOs' experiences with advancing solar work in their communities. Both reports were produced for the Solar with Justice project. Under this project, CESA and MIT are working with state and nonprofit partners to understand and improve how state energy agencies and community-based organizations collaborate on solar. Learn more at: <https://www.cesa.org/projects/solar-with-justice>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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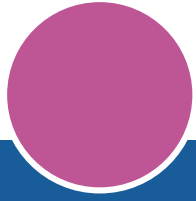


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INTRODUCTION

About the CBO Survey and Its Findings

This report is a companion publication to *US Community-Based Organizations and Their Relationship to Solar Energy Development*, by Janelle Knox-Hayes et al. of the MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. That report focuses on the characteristics of community-based organizations (CBOs) that do work related to solar, including their size, location, organization tenure, funding, and the focuses of their work. It also goes into depth on the origins of the survey and its relationship to previous research.

To capture the diversity and breadth of solar work conducted by CBOs in low-to-moderate-income (LMI) communities, the team of researchers from MIT prepared and disseminated a nationwide survey of CBOs. Its questions were based on learnings from 41 interviews previously conducted with CBOs across the United States, as well as from a national workshop and focus-group discussions with CBOs and state energy agency representatives.

The Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA) compiled a national database of CBOs that work on solar and renewable energy. The survey was sent to most CBOs in the database (though some CBOs have since been added to it). The survey was sent to 563 individuals, receiving 134 fully completed responses and 27 partial-but-usable responses between October 2022 and February 2023.

This report covers some of the survey questions and responses that are not fully explored in the report prepared by the research team at MIT. These survey responses reveal CBOs' views on their relationships with their communities, stakeholders, and state governments, as well as their solar experiences.

Community-Based Organizations' Relationships with Their Communities

Community-based organizations (CBOs) work at the local level to provide services to communities that improve their health and well-being. Survey results reveal that CBOs believe they have strong relationships with the communities they serve. Not only do they have established methods of communicating with their communities, but over 90 percent of CBOs report that they have learned from the communities that they serve, indicating that their communities are able to effectively communicate with the organizations. Almost all CBOs report that they have spent significant time building trust and relationships with the communities they serve. See Figures 1–3. (Note: Numbers on all the bar graphs reflect the number of responses, not percentages.)

Figure 1
My organization has established ways of communicating educational information to the communities we serve. (127 responses)

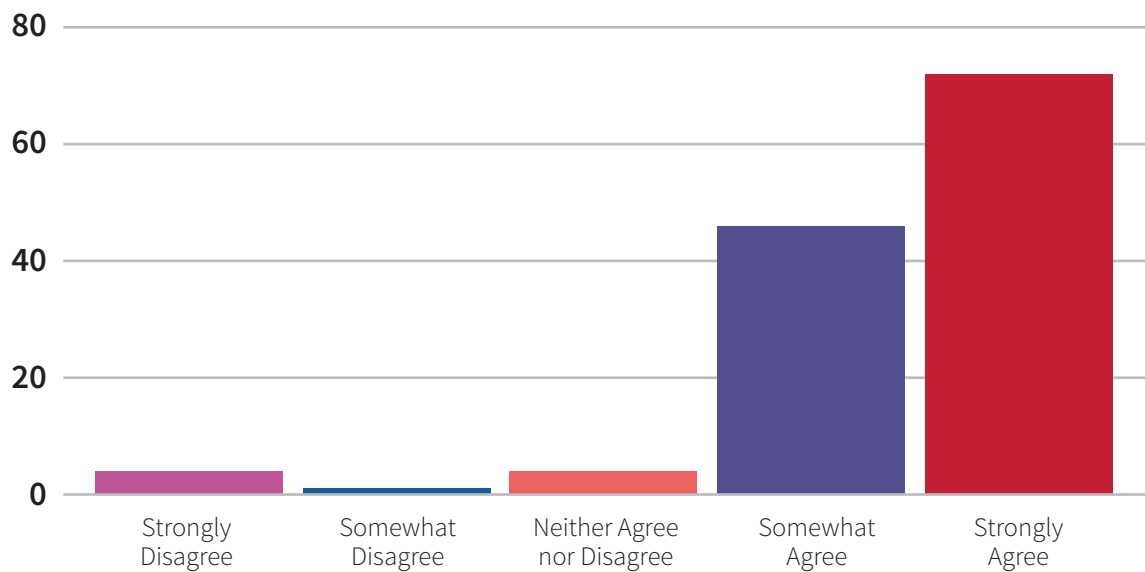


Figure 2
My organization has learned from the communities we serve. (124 responses)

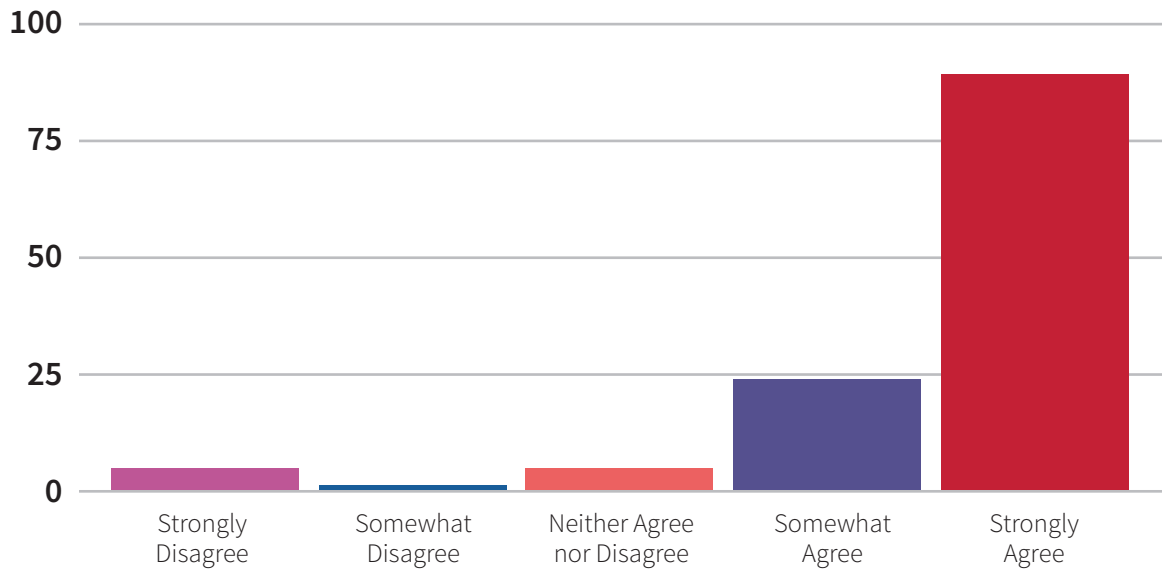
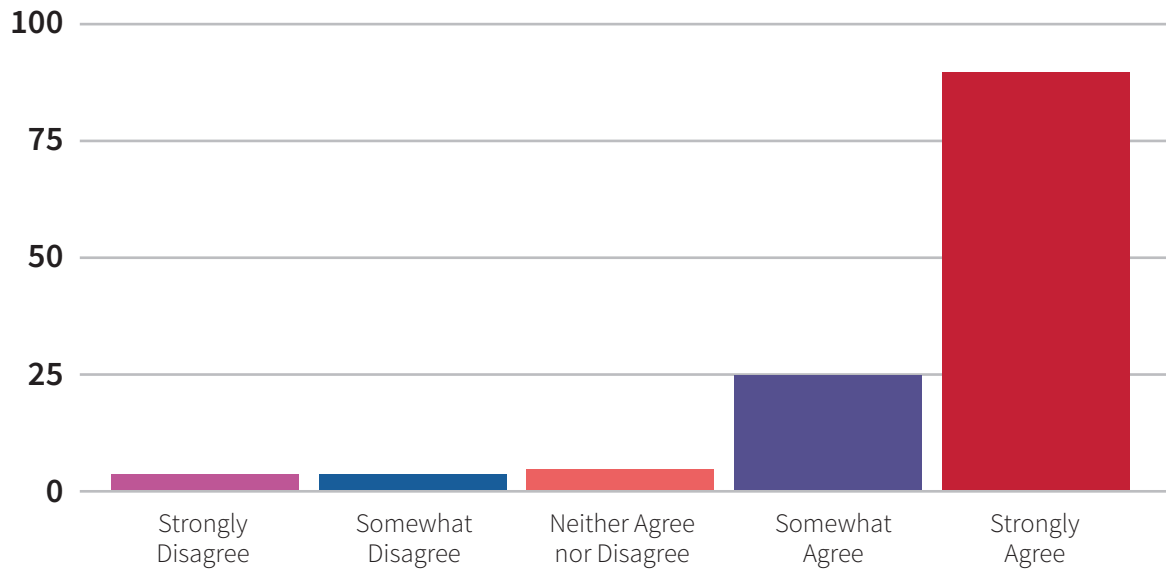


Figure 3
My organization has spent a lot of time building trust with the communities we serve. (128 responses)



In the survey, CBOs shared that some of the most important things they have learned from their communities are the importance of investing the time to get to know the community and of moving their projects forward at the speed of trust. Survey findings show that CBOs disagreed on the level of outreach their communities require: some mention a huge appetite for solar and the value of community-led solutions, while others say that their communities are unfamiliar with issues in solar energy and require a lot of education. Generally, CBOs report that their communities have a commitment to learning and can provide valuable insights.

CBOs use various methods of communication to connect to communities, see Table 1. Nearly all respondents report using email, social media, and in-person and virtual gatherings. Email and social media are most common, but in-person and virtual gatherings are also widely used, with 80 percent of CBOs reporting that they interact with their community in one of these ways at least monthly. Canvassing and paid advertising are much less common methods of communication.

Table 1
How often does your organization utilize the following communication channels to engage with the communities you serve?

	Respondents	Daily	Most Days	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never
Email	128	16.4%	14.1%	29.7%	29.7%	5.5%	4.7%
Social Media	126	16.7%	30.2%	26.2%	19.8%	3.2%	4.0%
In-Person Gathering	125	0.8%	5.6%	9.6%	54.4%	25.6%	4.0%
Virtual Gathering	125	1.6%	5.6%	20.8%	52.8%	13.6%	5.6%
Canvassing	122	2.5%	2.5%	7.4%	18.0%	23.0%	46.7%
Paid Advertising	120	0.8%	0.0%	1.7%	15.0%	19.2%	63.3%
Other	20	10.0%	5.0%	15.0%	20.0%	15.0%	35.0%

When asked to discuss their strategies for reaching out to and building relationships with their communities, CBOs highlight the importance of community-led decision-making and consistent, long-term communication. Perceived key components of developing trust are transparency, accessible messaging, and fulfilling promises and commitments. They frequently mention the value of face-to-face interactions and sharing information through word of mouth, particularly through direct, one-on-one conversations with trusted community members. Partnering with organizations and community members already familiar with community needs and leveraging their networks allows for neighbors to spread their knowledge of and experiences with solar technologies. Many CBOs also mention that they host or attend workshops, webinars, and public meetings to connect with their communities.

Almost all CBOs report that they work with a diverse set of populations, including youth, seniors, communities of color, energy-burdened communities, and low- and moderate-income communities. Of those working with communities of color, most serve Black and Latinx populations.

Community Characteristics

While most residents are excited about and understand the benefits of solar energy, they are not necessarily prepared to embrace and participate in solar projects and programs. Community members see solar panels in their communities, but only 21 percent of CBOs agree or strongly agree that their communities are aware of available residential solar programs. See Figures 4–7.

Figure 4
The communities we serve understand the benefits of solar energy.
(124 responses)

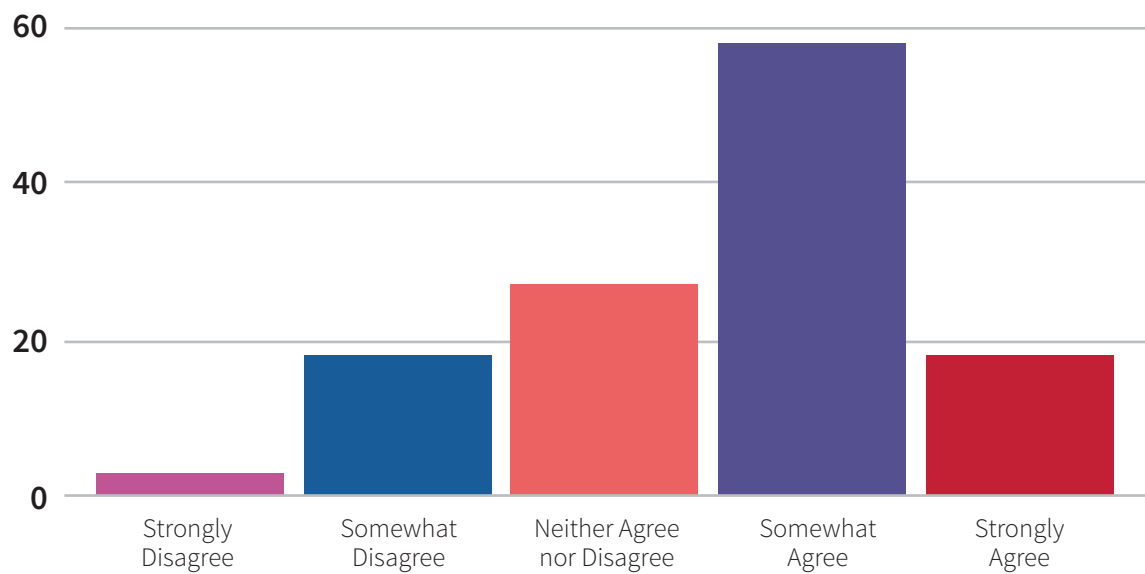


Figure 5
The communities we serve are excited about solar energy.
(124 responses)

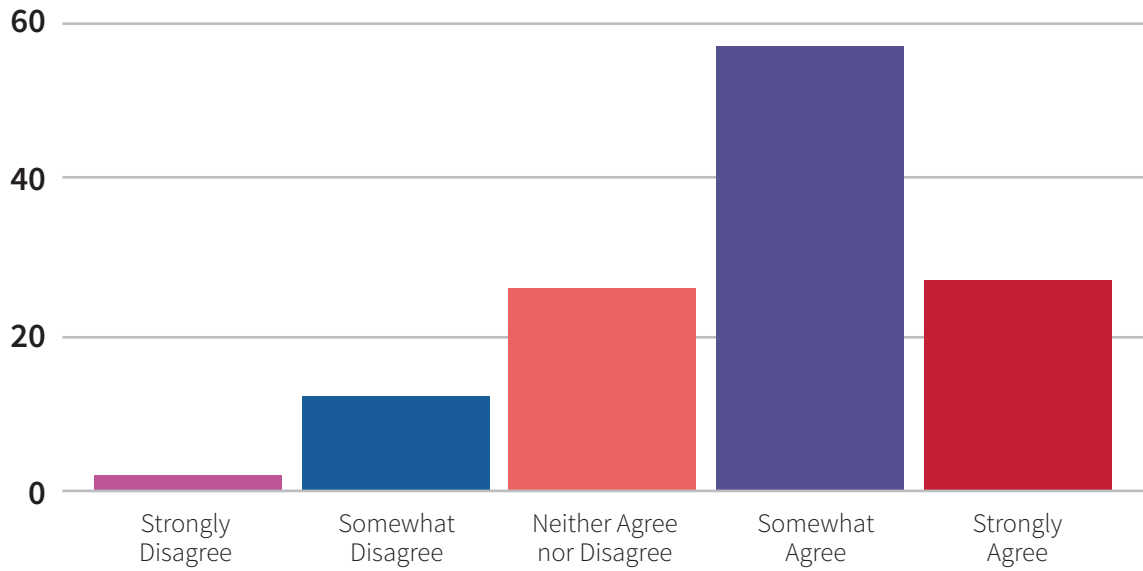


Figure 6
The communities we serve have seen solar panels in use in their community.
(125 responses)

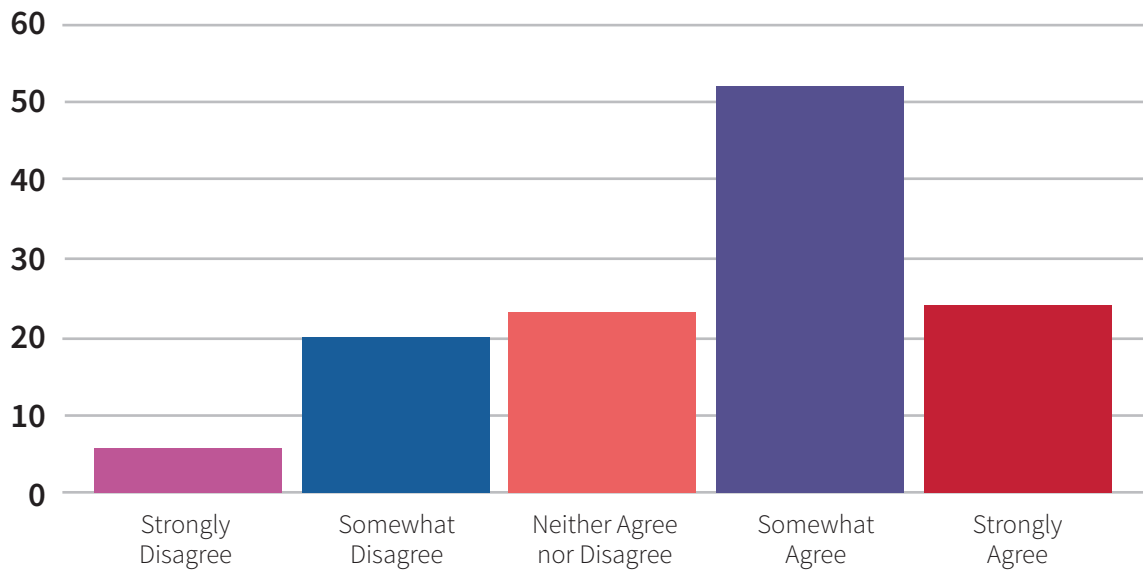
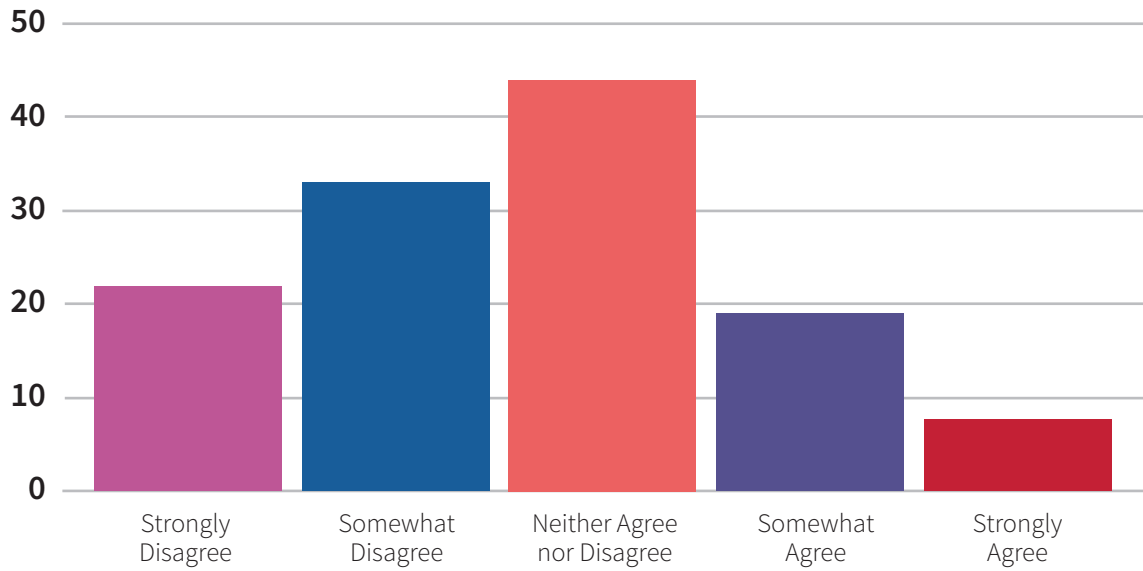


Figure 7
The communities we serve are aware of available residential solar programs.
(126 responses)



The survey found that community members generally lack confidence in solar installation companies—nearly half of CBO respondents believe that the communities they serve consider solar installation companies to be untrustworthy, while only 17 percent of the CBOs believe that the communities they serve trust solar installation companies.

CBOs' Relationships

Nearly all CBOs reported that they connect with several types of stakeholders and organizations in their work to advance solar in their communities, but they mostly engage with community members and community organizations, followed closely by solar developers. See Table 2.

CBOs generally find that misaligned values and incentives among the various stakeholders involved in the solar project development process create challenges to their work. CBOs believe philanthropic institutions and foundations are striving to support equity initiatives in the organizations and projects they fund, but they report that the profit-driven incentives of solar installers can make working on low-income and community solar difficult.

Several CBOs report that they have challenges communicating the opportunities for involvement with solar to diverse communities, particularly in Hispanic, low-income, rural, and tribal communities.

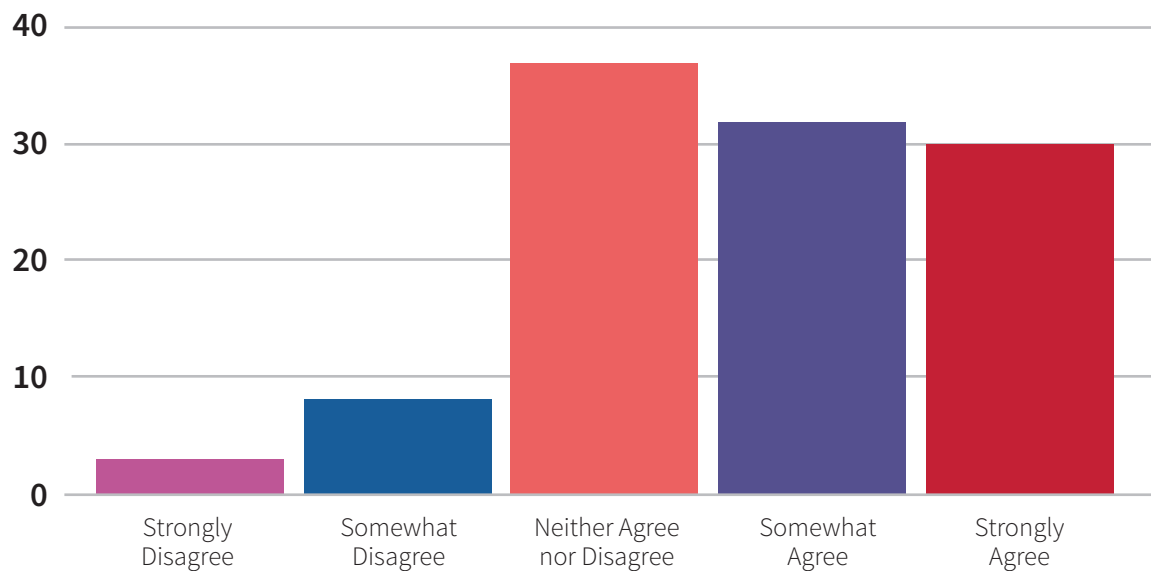
Table 2
Which stakeholders does your organization engage with in relation to your solar-related work?

Entity	No. of Responses
Electricity utility	80
Solar developers	97
Community members	118
Community organizations	119
State government agencies	82
Tribal nations	21
Federal government agencies	52
Local government	81
Philanthropic institutions/foundations	79
National or regional nonprofit organizations	84
Workforce development agency	42
Other	18

Issues with Solar Development

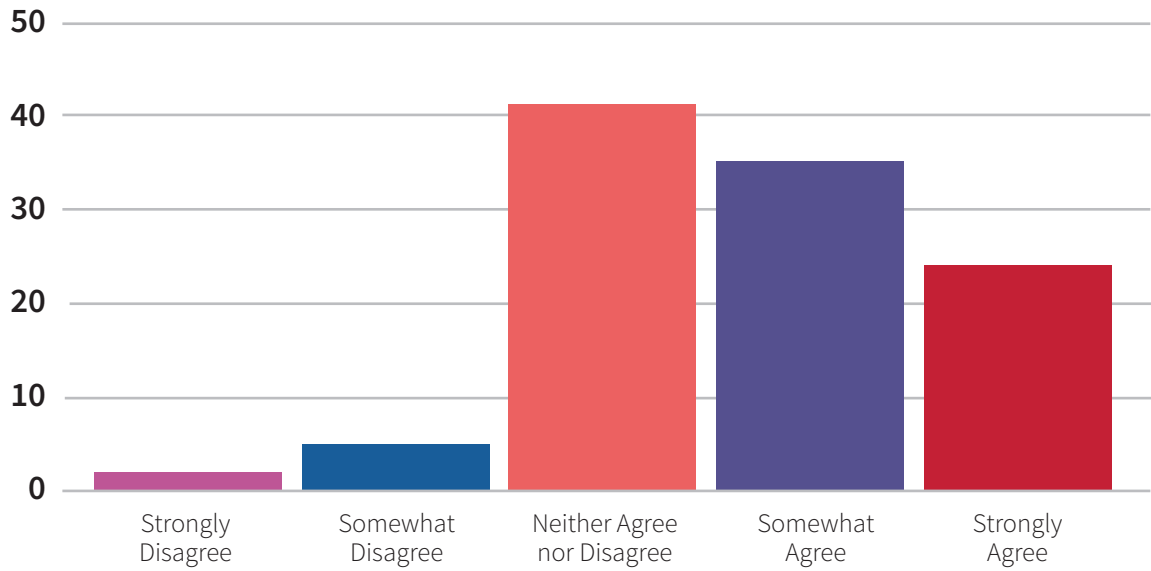
CBOs identified many obstacles to solar project development. These include limited access to adequate technical assistance, difficulty developing projects according to the anticipated timeline, and insufficient grant funding. Most respondents (56%) agree that solar projects usually take longer than the projected timeline. See Figure 8.

Figure 8
Solar projects usually take longer than the projected timeline.
 (110 responses)



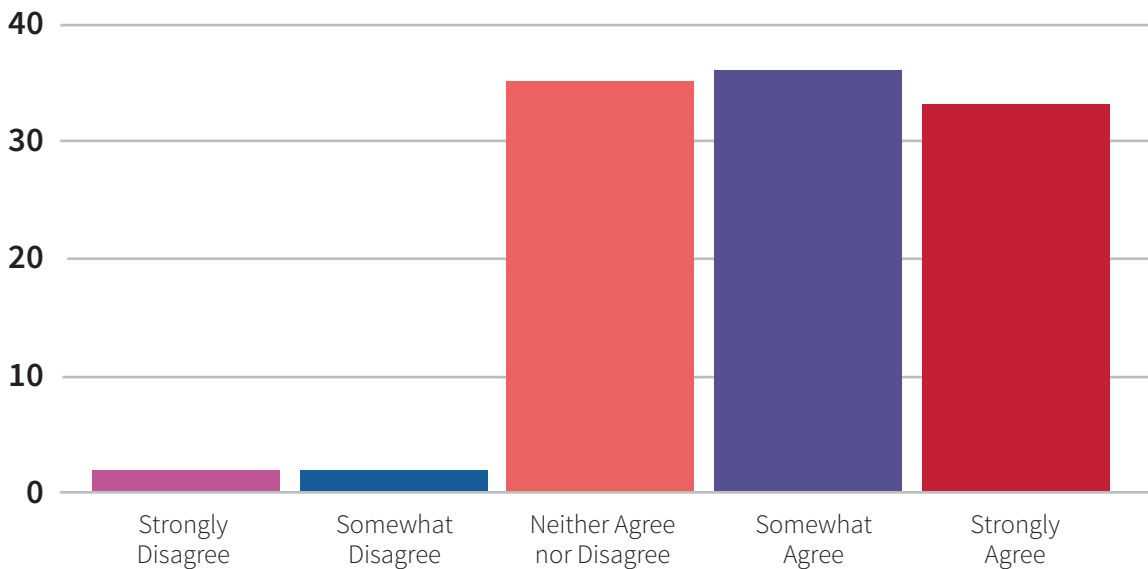
Most CBOs (54%) face challenges obtaining required technical assistance or feasibility studies during solar project development. See Figure 9.

Figure 9
My organization needed pre-development technical assistance or a feasibility study to develop a solar project. (110 responses)



Across the survey, lack of funding was one of the most frequently mentioned barriers to solar development and solar-related initiatives. Most respondents (64%) agreed that their solar installation projects required grant funding, while only 4 percent disagreed. See Figure 10.

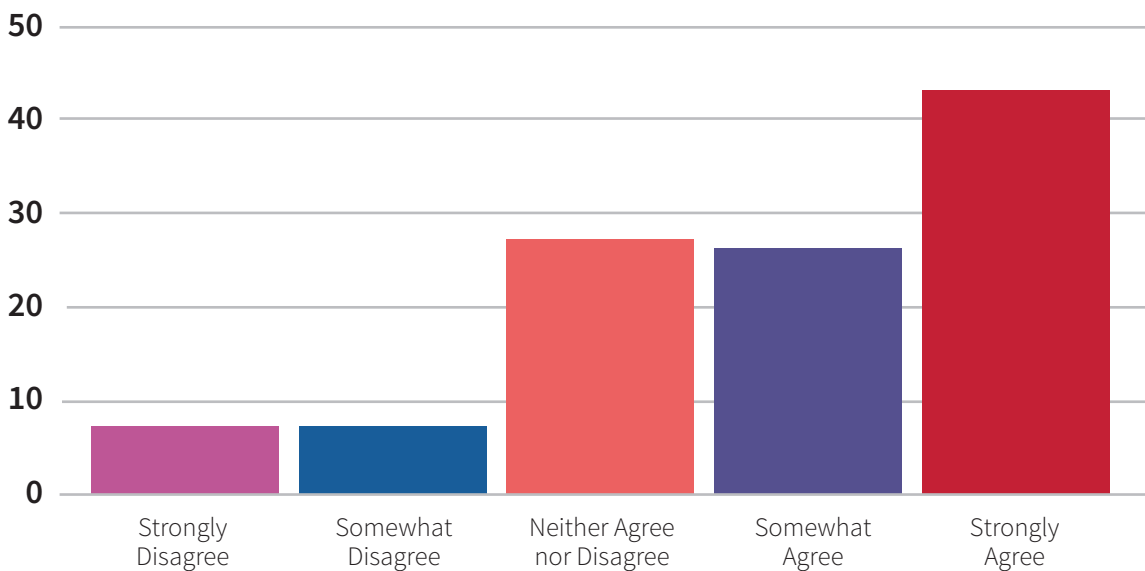
Figure 10
The solar installations my organization works with would not be financially viable without grant funding. (108 responses)



CBOs frequently reported that they would like to see their organization expand its capacity through technical assistance and improved relationships with their community and other organizations. Additionally, they would like to get involved in or see more investment in workforce development. They would like their local communities to increase their involvement in solar development and develop or engage in projects that prioritize equity.

CBOs view working with utilities as a pervasive barrier to solar development. CBOs often face interconnection issues (see Figure 11), have difficulty engaging with utilities, and have different policy interests than utilities regarding LMI and community solar. Many CBOs perceive that electric utilities are not amenable to community requests for rooftop and community-owned solar. They see utilities as slow to make policy changes and resistant to policies that provide necessary financial incentives.

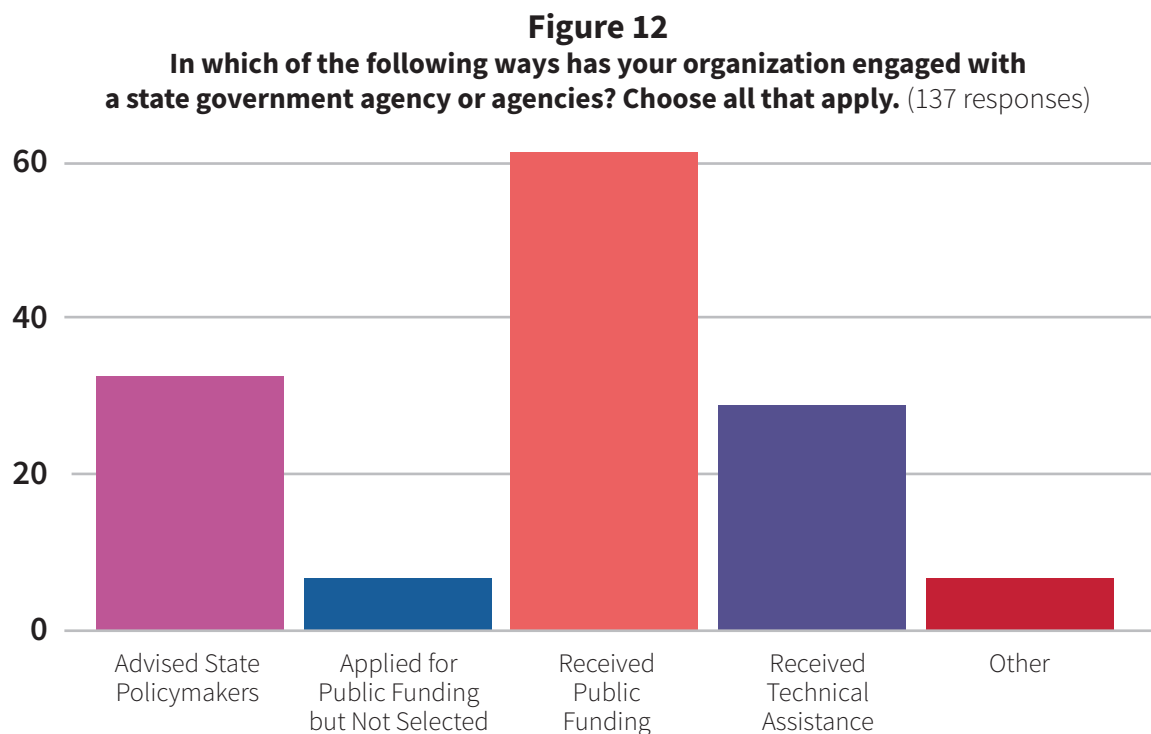
Figure 11
Solar installations face interconnection issues with the utility. (110 responses)



Many CBOs expressed concerns about the obstacles for developing solar projects for affordable housing and rental homes. The CBOs believe residents face layered challenges—as one responded, “Those that face the highest energy burdens exist in our oldest homes, are often renters, and have limited wiring/panel/roofing sufficiency.” They would like more programs to allow renters to take advantage of solar programs, and to expand relationships with affordable housing developers, housing organizations, and labor organizations.

State Government Interactions with CBOs and Their Communities

About 25 percent of CBOs have advised state policymakers, mainly by informing state lawmakers about solar programs and lobbying for solar program legislation (see Figure 12). Twenty-eight (28) CBOs responded that they had influenced the creation of a state solar program.



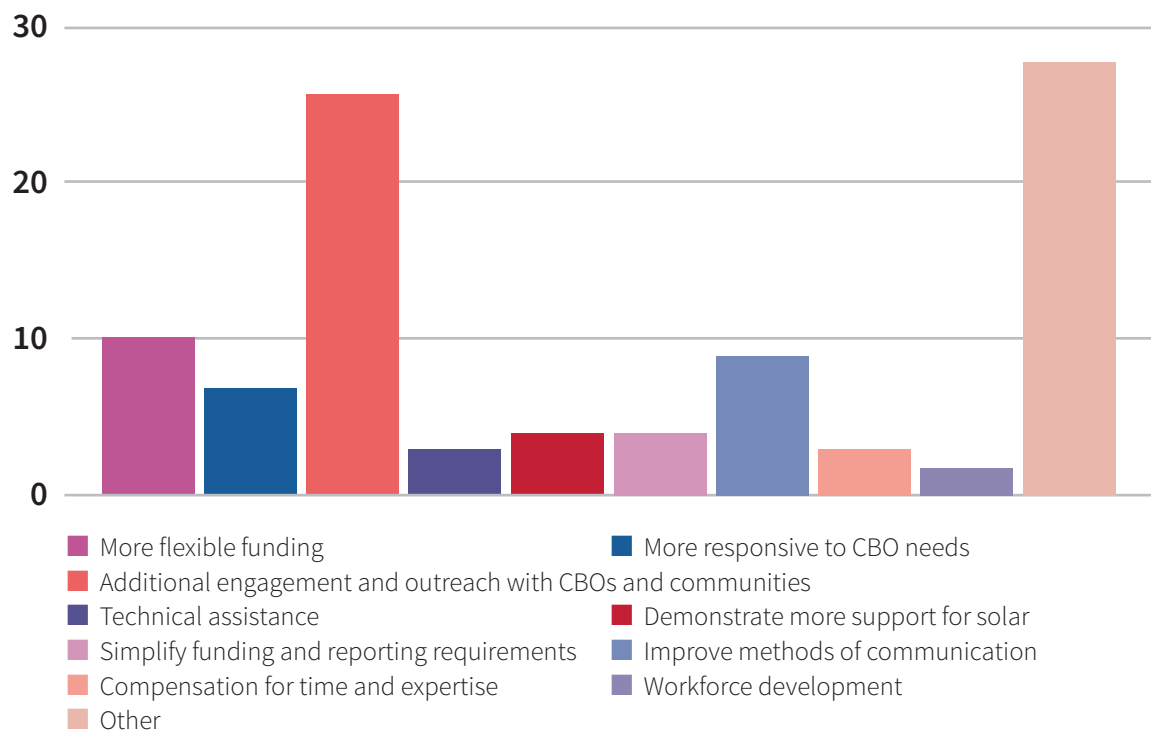
Most CBOs find relationships with political leadership and state government to be difficult. The reasons for this include perceptions that politicians are resistant to change, not as interested in equity, or that bureaucracy and red tape make funding feasible projects challenging.

Few CBOs have applied for funding through their state government or state agencies for their solar-related work. They do not report strong opinions on state funding opportunities for solar programs, as the majority neither agree nor disagree as to whether the process is fair, transparent, and straightforward. When asked to expand upon their responses, CBOs emphasize the importance of including the voices of Black people, Indigenous people, other people of color, and LMI stakeholders in any programs related to equity. State funding opportunities for solar are not easy to find or access for many CBOs—many have no experience with these opportunities and were not aware they existed. For those that have used them, they emphasize a need for enduring, long-term funding, especially for rural and low-income communities and grid resilience projects.

Among CBOs involved with state solar programs, nearly half of respondents say they were motivated to increase equity in clean energy, particularly by expanding access to low-income communities.

Generally, CBOs desire more proactive and direct engagement from their state energy offices (see Figure 13). They request more frequent and creative community engagement, such as using CBOs’ networks to help accomplish energy goals or engaging the faith-based building sector for community actions. Several CBOs would like their state agencies to be more cognizant of the resources that it takes for community organizations to respond to requests. The time spent in stakeholder meetings, responding to surveys, and providing consultation is valuable, and CBOs would like to be compensated and acknowledged for the time and expertise they provide. They would also like state government agencies to be more familiar with the unique needs of specific communities, particularly when working on tribal lands, working in communities with multiple languages, and designing education programs.

Figure 13
What advice would you give a state’s energy office for working with an organization of your size and purpose.



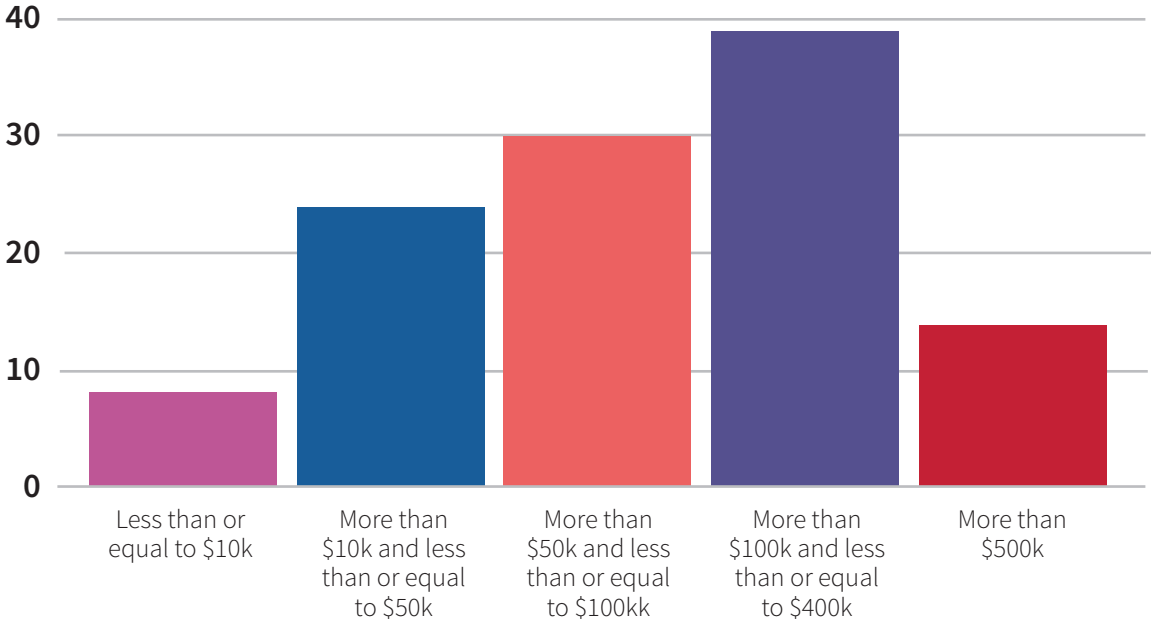
CBO Thoughts on Funding Needs and Uses

As stated earlier, the most pervasive need across all CBOs is more reliable sources of funding for solar projects. When grant funding is not available, their projects are largely not financially viable. As one CBO responded, “The current model of modest short-term grants, competitions, and one-off technical support is entirely inadequate. Long-term operating and [technical assistance] support are required.” Many respondents specifically requested that government grants offer more flexible funding mechanisms and reporting requirements. The funding programs that do exist are not sufficient for the needs of LMI communities and/or long-term work. Additionally, state funding opportunities tend to focus on project development and not community development, a crucial first step for community-owned energy projects.

Other CBOs mention that accessing funding is difficult, especially with limited staffing. Initial guidance from state solar programs would be helpful when CBOs begin working in solar project development, as it is difficult to know where to start with regard to funding and technical assistance.

When given an opportunity to indicate which level of solar-related funding they would be most likely to apply for, the largest group of CBOs (33%) selected funding amounts between \$100,000 and \$500,000, although the majority of CBOs picked amounts of under \$100,000 (see Figure 14). When asked to expand on what they would do with an unrestricted grant to advance solar-related work, the most common response was to spend the funds on project capital and capacity building. Several organizations outlined detailed plans for each funding level, indicating that they have projects planned and strategized, yet lack the funding to initiate them.

Figure 14
When applying for additional funding for your organization's solar-related projects, which of the following ranges of funding would your organization be most likely to apply for. (115 responses)



Conclusions

Community-based organizations can provide valuable insights into understanding the barriers to developing solar projects in low- and moderate-income communities by bridging the gap between policymakers, the solar industry, utilities, and communities. By analyzing survey responses regarding CBOs' views on their relationships with their communities, stakeholders, and state governments—and their solar experiences—we are left with the following takeaways:

- CBOs feel they have strong relationships with their communities
- Establishing and maintaining trust with their communities is critical for CBOs to fulfill their solar and solar-related projects
- Many do not trust utilities, solar companies, and government officials
- Up to now, CBOs have not been well served by government funding and technical assistance programs
- CBOs feel they need long-term flexible funding
- More collaboration between CBOs and policymakers on solar program development and implementation could lead to better outcomes

The Clean Energy States Alliance (CESA) is a national, nonprofit coalition of public agencies and organizations working together to advance clean energy. CESA members—mostly state agencies—include many of the most innovative, successful, and influential public funders of clean energy initiatives in the country.

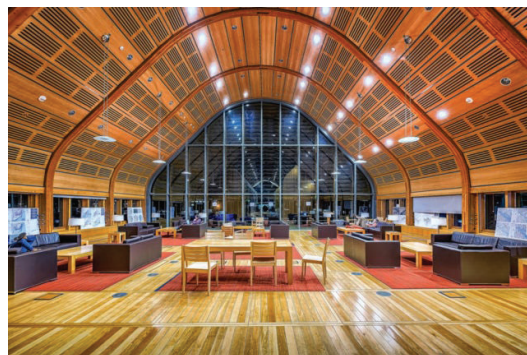


CESA works with state leaders, federal agencies, and other stakeholders to develop and promote clean energy programs and markets, with an emphasis on renewable energy, energy equity, financing strategies, and economic development. CESA facilitates information sharing, provides technical assistance, coordinates multi-state collaborative projects, and communicates the views and achievements of its members.

Ørsted US Offshore Wind/Block Island Wind Farm



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