



Lessons Learned

U.S. Virgin Islands Leadership Embraces Inclusiveness to Ensure Community Ownership of Clean Energy Vision

Getting the right People in the Room at the Outset

Getting the right people in the room is critical to ensuring buy-in from key stakeholders when setting the vision for an energy project or initiative. Like many island communities, the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) was almost 100% dependent on imported oil for electricity, water desalinization, and transportation in 2009. USVI electricity costs were nearly four times the U.S. national average.

Part of the Energy Development in Island Nations (EDIN) initiative, the USVI pilot project launched in late 2009 as a collaborative effort led by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI), the USVI government, the Virgin Islands Energy Office (VIEO), and the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA).

At the inaugural EDIN-USVI workshop in February 2010, USVI Gov. John P. Jongh Jr. announced his goal to reduce the territory's dependence on fossil fuel 60% by 2025. The next step was to form the project's leadership team and bring together key stakeholders to establish a vision for the USVI's clean energy future.

Challenge

After Gov. de Jongh announced the USVI's clean energy goal, the first challenge – and critical first step – was to charter and empower an effective leadership team for the project. The partners and stakeholders had different priorities and agendas, but each needed to be represented on the leadership team because each had expertise, resources, capacities, and capabilities that were essential to advancing the governor's goals. The leadership team also needed to include local energy champion with the influence, charisma, and insights to achieve buy-in for the project.

Once the leadership team was in place, the next challenge was organizing the first locally held EDIN-USVI planning workshop to get the right people in the room to set the vision. Because the territory had a history of unsuccessful government initiatives and poorly planned and executed renewable energy projects, the leadership team faced a fair amount of skepticism and apathy in engaging key stakeholders and persuading them to participate in the workshop.

Although the leadership team agreed in principle about inclusiveness as an ideal, it wrestled with how many people to invite to the workshop – and whom. The first day would be geared toward teeing up the project, whereas the second day would be highly interactive, with its primary goals to form steering committees and set the vision. Because energy was a major pain in the territory, the leadership team expected strong voices of opposition among the key stakeholders, and knew this would pose challenges to doing the work and controlling the public message.

The leadership team needed to strike a balance between including a broad set of public and private stakeholders with diverse interests and perspectives, and maintaining a manageable number of participants to allow work to be accomplished.

Solution

The governor's office appointed VIEO Director Bevan Smith and WAPA Chief Executive Officer Hugo Hodge Jr. to co-lead the project with the support of a steering committee composed of DOE and National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) representatives and Basil Ottley with DOI. Despite representing diverse interests and agendas related to energy transformation, this core group was tasked with developing and implementing a plan for achieving the governor's goal.

Ottley, a former senator, was well-positioned to serve as the project's local energy champion because of his deep roots and strong connections in the territory, lack of ties to any political administration, and keen understanding of the issues, needs, and challenges. The attributes, combined with his infectious enthusiasm for the project, made Ottley a valuable asset in identifying and engaging key stakeholders to participate in the early planning process. Along with other locally based members of the leadership team, he reached out to the various stakeholders to rally support and motivate them to participate in the first USVI planning workshop.

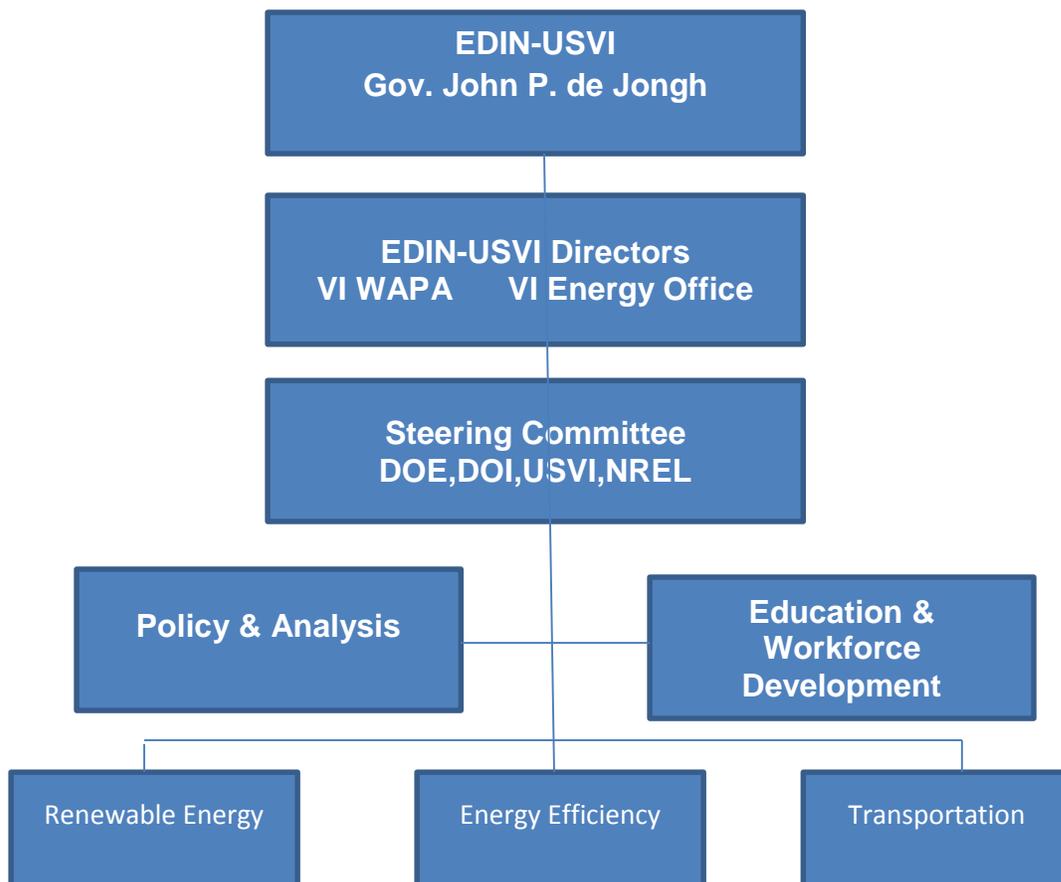
While Ottley was key to gaining local support, DOE brought to the table unbiased technical expertise in renewable energy and energy efficiency. DOE would be critical to ensuring that the proposed technical solution best used USVI's natural resources while meeting the goal.

The steering committee members tapped in to their organizations' public affairs and communications staffs to assist with the stakeholder engagement effort. In the end, the committee invited a diverse mix of public and private stakeholders—potential opponents included—ranging from legislators and government administrators to activists, educators, and local business leaders. Among the individuals and groups represented were:

- The USVI senate

- Government agencies (regulatory and permitting, housing, transportation, tourism)
- Chambers of Commerce
- Local tourism groups and hotel owners
- Community activists and advocacy groups (St. Croix Environmental Association, AARP, etc.)
- Local solar installers
- Real estate developers
- Energy service companies
- University students and staff.

USVI Organization Chart



Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

To achieve a clean energy vision goal, it is important to determine who will lead the effort and clearly define roles and responsibilities. In the USVI, three groups led the effort:

- Leadership team
- Steering committee
- Working groups.

Leadership Team

The USVI leadership team included executives from the governor's energy office and the utility.

Steering Committee

Representatives from partner organizations DOE, DOI, and NREL comprised the USVI steering committee. The group was tasked with developing and implementing a plan for achieving the goal, which it achieved by organizing the inaugural strategic energy planning workshop that led to the development of the USVI Energy Road Map.

Working Groups

The USVI working group were composed of many public and private stakeholders, who focused on five key areas: energy efficiency, renewable energy, transportation, education and workforce development, and policy and analysis. They began in the planning phase by developing a set of task-related initiatives to be considered. Next, they performed detailed analyses to identify the mix of energy efficiency and renewable energy that would enable the USVI to achieve its goal. They used the data gathered during the assessment phase to develop the USVI Energy Road Map.

To allow for open discussion, the workshop was closed to the media but a press conference immediately followed the event.

The initial planning workshop was held at the University of the Virgin Islands St. Thomas campus in June 2010. Of the 100 people invited to participate in the two-day workshop, approximately 60 attended. The USVI vision-setting exercise benefited from input from attendees who were essential or highly motivated, as well as from public and private stakeholders who were eager to do the work. It led to the development of five working groups to execute data gathering and to identify the necessary tactics and strategies to achieve the vision.

Key Takeaways

The USVI project demonstrates that an inclusive approach at the outset, with champions from the community and in the executive level of government, is important because successful energy transformation requires buy-in—not just from the local government, but from the entire community.

Identifying whom to include, inviting them to participate, and motivating them to contribute to the process are common challenges for those leading a community energy planning process, because energy transformation involves overcoming apathy and skepticism, and changing the status quo. It also involves stakeholders—with vastly viewpoints and agendas—coming together to reach a consensus about a vision for the project or initiative.

Overcoming apathy is challenging because it involves changing deep-seated attitudes and beliefs that are often rooted in cultural and societal norms and/or spawned by community experience. Likewise, changing the status quo is a significant barrier to success. Any threat to the established order carries with it an element of social, political, and economic risk, and thus there are bound to be people who resist change for a variety of reasons.

Finally, bringing together people with divergent perspectives and agendas—social, political, and economic—to shape a common vision is always an uphill climb. At this stage, it is important to recognize that although some individuals and groups will already have an understanding of and a vested interest in defining a sustainable energy future, others may not yet be engaged in the conversation or moved to action.

In the USVI, involving a broad cross of public and private stakeholders—potential opponents included—in setting the vision created an opportunity for civil discourse that was critical to the project's long-term success. Although inclusiveness was not necessarily the easiest path, it proved an effective strategy for securing a sense of community ownership and brought all the benefits of transparency to the process. Involving detractors in the early planning stages gave project proponents a chance to understand and assess barriers to project success, address opposing views, assuage objections through thoughtful and reasoned arguments backed by hard data, and ultimately reach a consensus.

Finally, identifying a local energy champion was a critical piece of the puzzle. Involving a respected and well-connected community leader helped establish credibility for the project locally. Furthermore, the right person in this role can generate excitement and optimism, motivate key stakeholders, and rally grassroots support throughout the project.

Key Lessons learned for setting the USVI clean energy vision include:

- Obtain executive sponsorship of the vision from public and private leadership.
- Form a public-private partnership to achieve aspirational goals. The public sector cannot establish a vision for energy transformation in a vacuum.
- Engage a broad cross-section of local stakeholders – even naysayers – to reach a consensus and secure community buy-in on the project.
- Identify and involve local energy champions throughout the process to pinpoint challenges and gather successes.