

Community Power: What's In A Name?

by Guest Contributor

July 1, 2013

26 Share 30 Tweet 9 Share 81 81 Share



Below is an excellent guest post about one of the most exciting yet underacknowledged opportunities of our time. I hope you enjoy it and share it with others so that we can get this dream moving!

By Jasmine Shepard and Linda Barrera

If “eating is an agricultural act,” as Wendell Berry once famously said, then flicking on a light switch is an electrical act.

Through the simplest and most habitual activities of our everyday life, we are all inextricably linked to a monolithic, centralized, investor-owned electricity grid. Unlike food, most of us are consuming energy most hours of the day. Yet, while questions around access, affordability, and localization of resources are now commonplace for food systems, they are slow in migrating to our discussions on energy. Community renewable power has the potential to bridge this disconnect.

Community power refers to multiple individuals pooling resources (such as space, money, and skills) in order to mutually benefit from a shared renewable energy project. Whether the power generated is sold to the grid or used on site to offset electricity usage, community power generation is locally owned and collectively operated. The impacts have already been felt by communities worldwide, especially in Denmark and Germany. Nearly half of all German renewable energy installed capacity is [owned by individuals](#), while local ownership has been crucial in building 4,000 megawatts of community-owned wind power in Denmark.

While the benefits of increasing installed renewable energy were highlighted in a recent federal climate plan — President Obama’s [“Climate Action Plan”](#) — initiatives more specifically related to community power have been well underway at the state level. In recent months, there has been a surge of activity surrounding community power policy and initiatives in the United States. This year alone we can expect 200 megawatts of community solar, up from just 10 megawatts a year ago. In Colorado, the Community Solar Garden Act has resulted in a flurry of community-owned solar projects, while, more recently, [Washington and Vermont](#) have begun developing these projects on the heels of community solar legislation. Such policy has sprouted new business models in many different states, including ‘solar gardens,’ solar crowdfunding, and clean energy revolving loan funds. Among these initiatives, an organization based in California called the Energy Solidarity Cooperative ([ESC](#)) has emerged as a grassroots, cooperative voice to the community power chorus.

But what’s in a name?

Solidarity & Energy

Energy, when most of us hear the word, often conjures up thoughts of electricity, which is then accompanied by the expectation, if not the hope, that we will have uninterrupted and affordable access to it at all times, in all places. The energy resilience of a community is characterized by how it [transitions away](#) from non-renewable energy sources — fraught with frequent price volatility, environmental degradation, and insecurity of supply — to more sustainable and climate-friendly sources of energy. Diversifying energy lifelines instead of deepening society’s dependence on centralized generation involves a renewed culture of [community energy planning](#). Although there are concerns for interconnecting distributed generation of renewable energy and [smart grid](#) development to ensure stability and flexibility in an electrical network, these issues have already begun to

be addressed by [grid operators](#), utilities, and communities. Ensuring that these power systems are being developed and managed in the most economically and socially relevant way (customized to the needs of local communities) can be embodied by a single word... solidarity.

Solidarity means coalescing around a shared set of community interests. The [solidarity economy](#), broadly defined by civil society groups in Brazil, refers to economic activity motivated by “safe and sustainable individual and collective self-development... It is an ethical, reciprocal and cooperative way of consuming, producing, financing, exchanging, communicating, educating, developing which fosters a new way of thinking and living.”

Applied to energy systems, solidarity entails a commitment to cultivating community involvement and technical capacity in electricity generation; reinforcing horizontal modes of social and economic organization throughout the energy supply chain; and engaging communities situated most disproportionately downstream from hydrocarbon-based industries (i.e., low-income neighborhoods and communities of color).

Cooperatives are organizations owned and managed by individuals who use the group’s products or services, and whose practices are socially and economically defined according to the cooperative’s principles. The [Sustainable Economies Law Center](#), an advocacy group providing legal tools to [facilitate the transition](#) to localized, resilient economies, supports cooperatives such as ESC because “cooperatives put wealth and decisions into the hands of workers and consumers, building community well-being and transforming local economies.” Cooperatives in the energy sector have proven to promote [affordability](#) and accessibility by allowing individuals in a community to collectivize resources while sharing benefits. While solar photovoltaics have experienced grid parity in certain electricity markets, financing of such systems is still seen as cost prohibitive at non-utility scales. Models such as [bulk purchasing](#) and virtual net-metering through a cooperative have eased financial barriers and attracted diverse community participation. In addition, the member-owned and member-operated nature of cooperatives ensures knowledge transference and skills sharing, while serving as a key transitional element to a localized, resilient economy.

A multi-stakeholder cooperative involves different member types in a mutually beneficial arrangement. In the case of ESC, worker members provide assistance with the planning, design, and financing of community power projects, while consumer members are the direct beneficiaries, owners and managers of power production. Sustainers are community investors who provide additional project financing.

Taken as a whole, the Energy Solidarity Cooperative is not only about shifting how communities engage with electricity, but how they engage with a new economy. When power relations in resource management are so heavily skewed away from local communities, what better way to define the new economy than through re-evaluating our relationship to power?

Clean Break for Community Power

To get the ball rolling, the ‘[Clean Break for Community Power](#)’ Campaign provides community solar supporters with the opportunity to be founding contributors of ESC’s initial projects. Funds from supporters will be used to finance up to five community-owned, cooperatively-run solar power projects in traditionally disenfranchised areas of California. Partnering with schools, non-profit organizations, and community groups in the San Francisco East Bay, a portion of the money generated from these projects — after community investors are repaid — will be re-invested in future community power projects.

Gina Hill, incoming principal at Oakland-based Street Academy High School, one of ESC’s school partners, says a collaboration like this “not only provides the students with real world skills, but empowers them to take ownership of their schools and their communities.” Hill adds that the opportunity is “an invaluable way of contributing to the next generation of urban ecological warriors fighting for access to affordable, clean energy.”

So what's in a name? In the case of ESC, it encompasses community solidarity and engagement: keys to building more sustainable local economies and an alternative to the current centralized power system. Community power ensures that money invested stays in the community while producing clean, affordable, and accessible energy.

How much is your roof worth with solar panels?

To find deals on solar in your area through our partner One Block Off the Grid, enter your full street address below.



Guest Contributor ([337 Posts](#))

