



FROM COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO OWNERSHIP

ILLUME's Principal for Marketing and Business Development, Victor Mercado, sits down with **Rosa González**, Founder of Facilitating Power, to talk about the ways that climate change and social and environmental injustice is inspiring all of us to become better energy citizens. González also explains how her model, the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, provides a new framework to co-create solutions.



AN INTERVIEW WITH

ROSA GONZALEZ



Community-based organizations (CBOs) possess the mission, drive, and connections to implement transformational solutions in their work with those most affected by climate change. Because of this, CBOs are often tapped as trusted ambassadors by utilities and program administrators hoping to connect with hard-to-reach communities. Yet this model can become transactive. Even well-meaning outreach work or stakeholder development can “otherize” communities, simply adding them to an engagement rather than truly leveraging their value. If our goal is to better engage communities, it is critical that we really understand community mobilization and the ways in which communities are already assessing their challenges and dreaming up viable solutions without us.

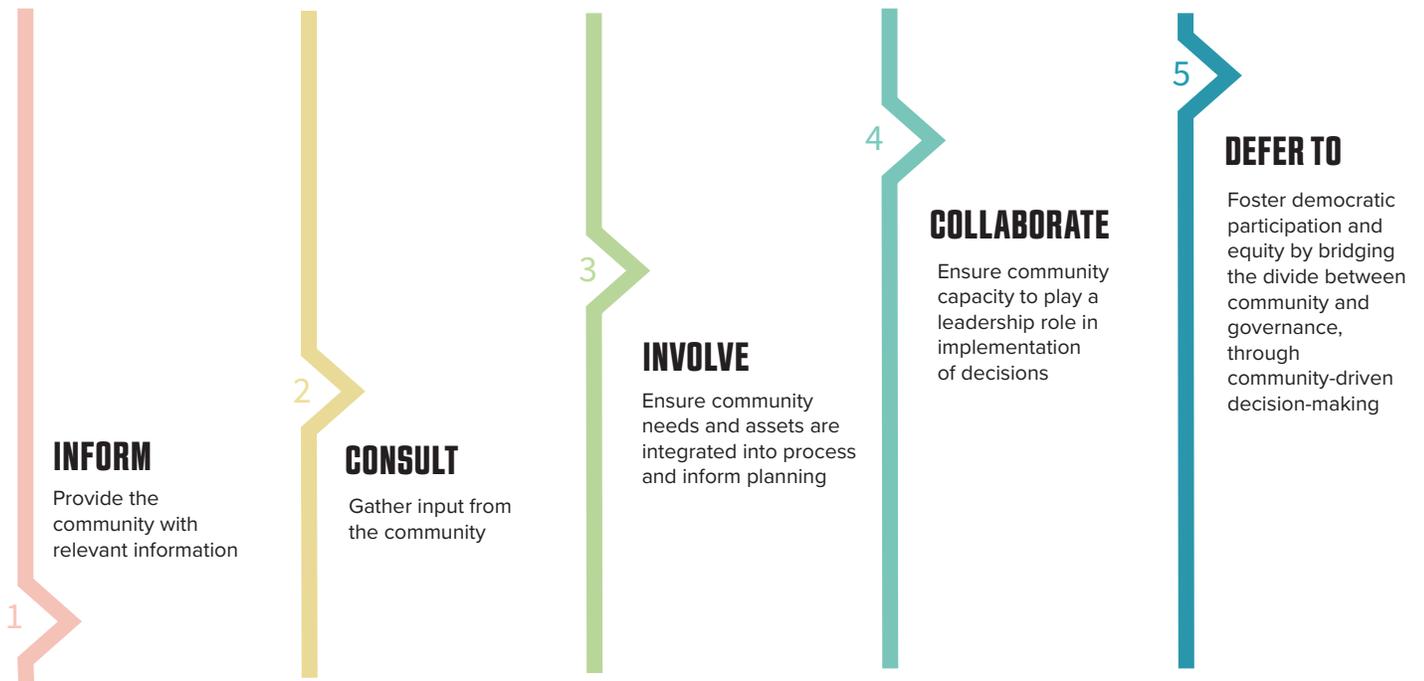
Is our industry ready to take on the difficult work of centering communities?

Victor Mercado: For our readers who may not yet be familiar with your work, can you tell us more about Facilitating Power?

Rosa González: Facilitating Power is transitioning from a one-person consultancy to a network of facilitative leaders focused on centering the voices and leadership of impacted communities and the decisions that impact them. The work has really evolved organically through supporting organizations around education, outreach, and participatory methods to engage communities. I was invited to the ACEEE panel by Chandra Farley through the Partnership for Southern Equity in Atlanta. We were working together on a process guide based on the Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership for the Greenlink Equity Maps that are being developed for 50 cities across the country. The process guide is to support city staff in collaborating with community partners on data analysis to advance equity goals.

I started out as an educator, but worked on the side doing this type of consulting with organizations in the nonprofit sector, and then increasingly started doing that more and more as my full-time work. Then I started working at Green for All and in other organizations in the climate space around leadership development, education, outreach, and bringing in the notion of the power of collective consciousness and action. Communities know what they need. Over time, Facilitating Power has grown, evolved, and is becoming more of a thought leader around how to do the work of getting to racial equity. This takes some core elements that boil down to a more living democracy, which goes beyond voting and representative democracy, to one in which the community is the unit of change. And so why is that important? Communities are groups that have a shared identity, a shared set of values and characteristics. Tapping into those values and having them drive the work is really critical. So is recognizing that communities are made up of relationships (and, as such, are systems) and we need to foster those relationships.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership¹



The Spectrum for Community Engagement and Ownership has its roots in Arnstein's Ladder, which we also cite in this issue. How did you arrive at this framework?

RG: It came out of two processes in which I was playing facilitative leadership roles. One was the development of the framework on community-driven climate resilience planning. I was brought on as a consultant by Movement Strategy Center in Oakland to design and facilitate that process and then to write the framework. We brought together leaders from around the country in the climate justice space who were involved in frontline communities, developing and setting forward their priorities around climate justice. Through facilitated dialogue and synthesis of what we were learning from the field and from what these leaders had to say, we boiled it down to some essential elements: community vision, community solutions, and community power—those three things working hand in hand.

Can you give us an example of this type of work?

RG: Often, planning is based on a certain set of priorities that may or may not be rooted in the community that will be impacted by that plan. The importance of communities having the opportunity to put forward their own priorities really happens via community organizing. Part of the weird silver lining of climate change is that it requires us to rethink our systems, requires us to step up and dream into solutions and ways of doing things that we may not have done. We need to rethink transportation, how we get our food, etcetera. Groups like UPROSE in Brooklyn, or WeAct in Harlem, or the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) in the Bay Area are leading around what that looks like. Because often, other interests influence the kinds of plans that cities and counties and states advance—and interests that may have more power behind them, like those of developer.





Power building and community organizing is critical to ensuring that a plan can actually move from an idea to implementation, and to building that community capacity to steward solutions.

The challenges that we face, from COVID-19, to police brutality, to the climate crisis are so big and they require innovative thinking. They require thinking that really holds those core values and principles at the heart. They're people-centered and they require capacity; it's beyond just building sea walls. It's about transforming how we access food and all of our energy and housing. And those solutions exist at the grassroots level. We need to unlock the capacity to scale those solutions. So, we put forward that framework partly in collaboration with the Kresge Foundation. Yeah, long story.

Can you tell us more about this?

RG: There were a number of folks in Kresge's ecosystem. I call them grasstops, as opposed to grassroots. Some of these folks in local government or in larger, green organizations or those more ecologically focused were looking at climate solutions, but weren't quite clear on how to "add the equity" to the work. I found myself in a number of phone calls with folks who were saying, 'we've got all the right solutions on the ecological side, and now can you help us sort of add the equity?' So, I would have to have these tough conversations to explain that that's not quite how it works.

How so?

RG: We need more fundamental shifts around power and resourcing. It's about building genuine, authentic partnerships and empowering impacted communities. Trying to explain that through those conversations, I found that there is a huge gap in understanding what community engagement really is and what the role of community involvement is in advancing solutions. At the grasstops I was hearing 'community engagement' as something in the to-do list, as opposed to being the core strategy to get us to the right solutions. Without the power and participation of communities who have been historically excluded, we're not going to have the right ideas and we're not going to have the right capacity needed to actually move solutions.

We said, Wow, there has got to be a framework that helps to bridge this gap in understanding and to facilitate more collaboration. There has got to be a framework that helps to move more capacity and resources towards how we scale and amplify solutions that are coming up from the communities most impacted by this crisis. So, I turned to existing tools within the planning field, and Arnstein's Ladder was one of the tools I found. It was phenomenal to read because she wrote that in 1969 based on research into three federal programs that were designed to address issues like housing and poverty. They all had community engagement at the core of their design. She documents some of the patterns that she saw and put words to them, describing pitfalls that were further tokenizing, or placating, or manipulating impacted communities. Particularly Black communities were the focus of some of these programs.

Do you think Arnstein was ahead of her time?

RG: Reading her descriptions, they were the same challenges with top-down engagement that you hear from grassroots groups today. They get engaged by public processes designed by groups that aren't rooted in community.

What other frameworks informed your work?

RG: The other tool was the Spectrum of Public Participation put out by the International Association for Public Participation, a rubric designed to help entities select what level of public participation is needed for a given project. And to be clear, they are both great tools! What I found by putting them together, is that we could help folks be explicit about the kind of engagement they were doing, and also about the impact that level of engagement has on the communities being 'engaged.' And then we built the framework out further with wisdom from grassroots movements, particularly working on the climate and environmental justice. Community ownership of what we need to live— particularly land, housing, and energy—is what's needed to address the vulnerability of impacted communities and achieve real equity. Within community development, 'sense of ownership' is key to successful planning processes. So, when we say community ownership in this spectrum, we're talking about the sense of ownership.

That includes deference to community-driven processes, as well as community ownership of essential resources. The Spectrum of Engagement to Ownership helps us to be clear that we need to move beyond 'otherizing' communities and see them as a target of engagement. We need processes in which programs are owned, designed, and carried out by communities.

I want to make sure that people don't see it as a binary kind of thing: either it's all community ownership and therefore truly equitable, or it's not. One of the things I think is important about the Spectrum is that it articulates a developmental pathway towards community ownership. Creating authentic involvement, that really takes community organizing. But at the systems or utility level, those in power can partner with community-based organizations to help create more transparency. They can identify where communities can actually have a say, and can design processes that allow for that. It's more equitable, it's getting us in the right direction, and it's also building that muscle of genuine participation. Those different stages also have their pitfalls. Part of the work around the Spectrum is to be clear about those pitfalls and help people navigate them while planning for increased community ownership. Identifying those pitfalls helps participants avoid unintended consequences and helps entities save time in the long run.



What do you mean by unintended consequences?

RG: I was a part of the national team of technical assistance providers that supported cities like San Francisco in the development of roadmaps towards electrification of buildings. As part of a strategic compass that centers equity, we looked at how we support those planners within cities that are participating in the zero cities effort. How can they partner with community-based organizations early in the process to center equity and avoid unintended consequences. Some examples of unintended consequences when it comes to electrification of buildings and decarbonization are gentrification and the rising cost of housing, or alienating small contractors. How do we really ensure that small contractors, minority-owned contracting firms, are really able to meet the moment and not get left behind? Or ensure low-income homeowners are not getting priced out as a result? One of the findings from the process was that more work needs to be done to more effectively engage labor. There were some stakeholders from labor, and a big focus of the engagement was around how to ensure that jobs were created in equitable ways and that training was in place for folks to make that transition.

What place does community organizing have in bringing about a just transition?

RG: I think community organizing is key. Organizing can mean a lot of things to a lot of different people and can sometimes be more focused on mobilizing or getting people out to protest. But we think about mobilizing in

the sense of the work to bring members of a particular community together to assess their challenges, develop their vision, identify the right solutions, and then devise strategies for how to get there. This is so core to having a healthy, functioning democracy, particularly in a country with a long history of race-based exclusion of large communities. It really has been movement building for racial justice that has helped keep the hope alive that this could actually be a democracy that represents all people. That's so critical at the local level. It's critical that residents feel that they have a space they can create in the community that is right for them, and their children and have a sense of agency and self-determination around how we get water, how we access food. It's folks in active community who can see those intersections and help move us from the myth of individualism and personal responsibility to a sense of a collective, sacred responsibility for the health of the planet, and the health of our children.

What are some ways that the Spectrum can shake things up in the energy space?

RG: Well, for one, those practices that you just named are all great practices if done well and done genuinely. Doing so could help utilities see those practices among broader fundamental shifts that may be needed to ensure energy equity, or equitable access to energy to reduce disproportionate energy burdens. They could move away from the kinds of energy efficiency models that imagine consumer changes as the only kind of solution, toward utilities seeing themselves as a partner within a larger ecosystem.





This is a fundamental shift towards the kinds of structures and ways of organizing energy access that center communities and help to restore and repair relationships between the utility and communities who have been under resourced. If the utilities are interested in that, I think this can be a very powerful tool. We can ask: does the utility have racial equity goals to achieve more equitable access to energy? How is it creating those goals? How can it partner with community groups and local governments? If utilities engage other agencies and groups in achieving their goals, we can dramatically change what it looks like to put communities at the center.

You said agencies get to pick and choose at which level they want to engage. What types of choices do communities have when it comes to how they are engaged with?

RG: One of the ways we've been using the Spectrum is as a collaborative reflection and evaluation tool. One example was here with the Community Development Department in the City of Salinas, California. At the urging of community organizations, the city adopted the Spectrum to create a resident-driven planning process around a neighborhood revitalization effort. I've done a number of these types of Spectrum-based reflections and it serves a number of functions. One is to put those groups into active dialogue with each other around questions of what level of engagement makes sense.

Another is to celebrate successes. If a utility is engaging in the kinds of practices that you just named, that tells me that engagement is important to them and their bottom line. We can say they're actively seeking to improve how they do that work, and then celebrate the progress that's been made as a result of those kinds of efforts. We get to hear that from residents who've been impacted by it, and then set goals for where they want to be. It's a two-way thing. We've been able to use it to set collaborative goals and ask, 'what would it specifically take to get from here to there?' What would it take to make that shift from having the community on the outside, saying, 'hey, you're not doing this right,' and 'we're demanding greater voice in this process?' That input is really important that can push on systems and agencies to make shifts. But once the door has opened, then it's about us collectively asking 'what are OUR shared goals and how are we going to get there, together?'

I love that! On that note, I want to thank you for taking part in this conversation.

RG: Thank you so much for the conversation. I also learned a ton and really appreciate the work you're doing.



Facilitating Power works to create a thriving culture of participation in which communities work together to solve social, economic, and environmental challenges.

Learn more at www.facilitatingpower.com