

S2E5: Part 1

Nelson Colón [00:00:03] The notion of Decolonizing Power, it goes in both ways. Not only electricity, but also decolonizing from the colonial structure where we live in.

Mihskakwan James Harper & Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:00:28] Energy sovereignty, sustainability, and resilience are central components to global climate action, the protection of Mother Earth, and the safeguarding of generations to come.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:00:40] Tansi kakiyow. Hello everyone, my name is Mihskakwan James Harper and welcome to yet another exciting episode of Decolonizing Power. I am joining you from Treaty 1, my home here - bright sunny day - I am originally from Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation in Treaty 8 territory. And I'm happy to be hosting, co-hosting this space rather, with my good friend: Freddie.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:01:08] Taanshi kiyawow Freddie Huppé Campbell dishinikawshon Algonquin ototon. Hello, everyone. My name is Freddie Huppé Campbell. I am currently located as a guest on the unceded and unsundered territories of the Algonquin Nation. Originally born and raised in the Kootenays in so-called British Columbia. Very grateful to be here today for this amazing episode featuring two voices from Puerto Rico.

[00:01:40] We did record this episode before Hurricane Fiona hit the island. And we went into depth with our incredible guests about the rebuilding that has been ongoing in the Territory since the last hurricane. So, we can't even imagine what the communities are going through right now and we just want to send our most heartfelt love and support to everyone there. And we hope that in some way this story can be a bit of a light for everything that's going on.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:02:13] Thank you, Freddie. And I would just like to reiterate the heartfelt sentiments for our friends and fellow kin in Puerto Rico, sending all of our love, support and hope for you all. And indeed, our episode today focuses on strength, resilience and hope. And we have two experienced and passionate speakers from Puerto Rico who are embarking on this mission of building a stronger energy security for their communities.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:02:46] Today, we are speaking with Nelson Colón, who is the president and CEO of the Puerto Rico Community Foundation or *Fundación Comunitaria de Puerto Rico* – FCPR for short – a community foundation that wants to connect donors, individuals, families, organizations to community development projects.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:03:08] Also joining us is Feliciano Rodríguez Domínguez. Feliciano is a Catholic priest and the Secretary of the Board of Directors for the *Cooperativa de Energía de San Salvador*, or Pirucho Coop.

Pirucho Co-op started as a response to the energy crisis in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017. Today, Pirucho Co-op is known for the first solar community with the cooperative energy model in Puerto Rico.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:03:40] Just as a side note for folks: The audio is a little bit choppy within this episode. So, you can find transcripts online. There'll also be a Spanish version available soon. – **Without further ado, we'll hand it over to our amazing guests and let them introduce themselves.**

Nelson Colón [00:04:05] My name is Nelson Colón and I'm president and CEO of the Puerto Rico Community Foundation. I was born and raised in Ponce, that's a southern city here in Puerto Rico. And I've been the president of this foundation for 22 years. I was trained first in Anthropology, then as an educator. And I've been sort of alternating between being a college professor, a nonprofit organizer and work in philanthropy.

Feliciano Rodriguez Domínguez [00:04:42] I am Feliciano Rodriguez Dominguez. I was born and raised in Caguas in the central eastern part of the island of Puerto Rico. And I'm 62 years old, and I've been appointed five years now as pastor of this parish of Catholic Church that covers the communities of Borinquen and San Salvador in the southern part of the city of Caguas.

1: Energy Situation in Puerto Rico

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:05:11] All right. Thank you so much for your brief introductions. It's good to get to know you both. Let's dive in a little bit deeper here, **Feliciano, if you could, in your own words, perhaps give our listeners a bit more context on where you're coming from and what the energy reality is in Puerto Rico?**

Feliciano Rodriguez Domínguez [00:05:30] Yes, the situation of the energy system in Puerto Rico.. It has been privatized and there is an unparalleled crisis in the service provision of energy. Outages and increasing billing every month. So I think people are kind of desperate with this because it occurs often, and every day there are people that are having the the blackouts in their houses and losing their appliances and all that because of the energy fluctuations. And that affects my community, of course.

[00:06:14] We are a rural community and we have been hit by several hurricanes - the last one, the biggest one, Hurricane Maria, five years ago - and it was a complete destruction of the infrastructure of the energy system. And they sent, the government sent, a private company from the United States called Cobra, and they supposedly fixed everything. But we have found things that are incredible... Power lines that are attached to breadfruit trees and mango trees. And it was supposed to be something temporary, but it has been permanent.

Nelson Colón [00:06:56] Yeah, I just wanted to provide some context for the energy prices in Puerto Rico, and I just want to mention, we are paying close to \$0.35 a kilowatt here in Puerto Rico. The lowest rate in the U.S. is \$0.10. The highest is \$0.30. That is Hawaii. So we're paying \$0.05 per kilowatt over Hawaii... So by all means, we are the most expensive energy jurisdiction in the in the U.S. and that is quite significant considering that Puerto Rico's per

capita income is way below the lowest average in the U.S. So it's more expensive in Puerto Rico and less income.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:07:57] Thank you so much for giving us that context. I think it really puts into perspective of what the reality is like, and that disparity is very stark. And, you know, to make matters even worse, climate change is putting places like Puerto Rico and other islanded nations and coastal areas in very vulnerable positions, particularly in extreme weather events, as you mentioned. So it's especially important to discuss how we can design and build more resilient infrastructure for our communities in the future. – **So, Nelson, on that note, I was wondering, in your work, in your organization's work, what kind of things are you looking to achieve for some of these pieces that we mentioned?**

2: FCPR mission

Nelson Colón [00:08:44] So we support several nonprofits in Puerto Rico who are working towards the goal of creating a more equitable, present and future. Within that, the mission of this foundation is to develop capacities in communities for self-reliance, self-development and self-transformation.

[00:09:14] So we use two tools to accomplish that. One is we make grants. We are a grant maker. So we do social investment in several communities in Puerto Rico, but also provide technical assistance. So after Maria, we decided to incorporate the route of solar energy, community solar energy. The relationship with local communities like San Salvador, Pirucho, Toro Negro, and Esperanza Village in Juncos...

[00:09:52] Those three communities are communities where the Puerto Rico Community Foundation has made significant investments to acquire equipment and acquire the basic infrastructure for solar communities. So that is a way of making real the notion of decolonizing power. It goes in both ways. Not only electricity but also decolonizing from the colonial structure where we live in.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:10:37] Well, that's really amazing to hear, Nelson. And thank you so much for sharing. You know, I think this is exactly the theme that we discuss on Decolonizing Power. Essentially, you know, communities designing their own energy futures and this, you know, community-led work for communities. You know, starting from the grassroots, this is exactly what we're about. And it goes to show how powerful, to say the least, both metaphorically and actually solar, things like solar and wind act as tools to really decolonize, decentralize and provide power to the people, essentially. So you got it right on point here on exactly the kind of story that that we're trying to share on Decolonizing Power, so I just wanted to thank you for that. – **Feliciano, I was just wondering if you could share a bit more about the process of the mini grid or the microgrid that you have been working on with the community. What is it like to build capacity in the community and learn together?**

3: Pirucho Coop Project

Feliciano Rodriguez Domínguez [00:11:45] We come from an organization of the community that is called Comunidad Organizada de San Salvador, C-O-S-S, Organized Community of San Salvador. It was that organization that started the response to the hit of the Hurricane Maria. There were some 20 leaders and volunteers that started meeting immediately after the hurricane to look for a solution. And I was part of it because I was appointed as pastor of this community just a month before the hurricane.

[00:12:20] So with the help of three organizations, one from the Catholic Church, *The Movement for a Better World*, and also a group called *Voz Activa*. They are friends that dedicate themselves, engage themselves in helping community-based organizations and also a private sector energy solutions of Puerto Rico. They joined forces and they offered us training so that we could orient our community on how to go on from there because we didn't know. Not even what a microgrid was. We had heard that word but we didn't know anything about it. And so the process has been an incredible school for us.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:13:05] Thank you so much for sharing. It's really interesting because I feel that both of your journeys sound similar to a lot of the realities for rural and remote indigenous communities in this country. And kind of following that path of learning to work together and building capacity in order to hopefully create a more sustainable future and an energy ownership future for the communities. So it's really amazing to kind of make those connections. – Speaking of which, **I was wondering what type of obstacles you both have faced since you started this work. And if you could tell us a bit about how you've maybe overcome some of those challenges.**

4: Overcoming Challenges

Feliciano Rodriguez Domínguez [00:13:49] Yes... The first model that was created was a suggestion made by one person that belongs to the community but moved to the United States and works there. So he suggested to capture some investors from the U.S. that would benefit from the federal tax exemptions, that were available for those who invest in solar systems.

[00:14:15] That was the point where the problem started, because there was a legal framework that was difficult to cope with and how to collect the investments and transfer them to Puerto Rico. And who was going to direct that? Was it from here or there? Speaking of decolonizing... When you had a whole island almost destroyed and people were looking for help for emergencies and first aid things. We were working with something very complex and difficult to cope with. And finally, we decided that we couldn't go along with that model.

[00:15:01] Thank God we had been connecting with the people we knew from the cooperative movement. And they started talking to us about the alternative of creating a cooperative. And I myself I have a cooperative background because my father was one of the founders of the cooperative in my city, and also I am a member of that cooperative since I was young, and many

of the residents in San Salvador as well. So we knew about the the the benefits and the advantages of having a cooperative model.

[00:15:40] And that community is really cooperative by itself. It is close relationships and immediate volunteer service when there's an emergency. So those were the ingredients that we had at hand to start with the new project. So, on October, 8th of 2019 we started Pirucho Coop. Pirucho is the name of the mountain, the emblematic mountain of our community, it is a big mountain. So we saw that it was no use of of having this model where the community was not in charge of everything. We wanted to take care of everything and understand and learn from it.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:16:26] Appreciate you sharing this, Feliciano. And I think it's great to hear that in this kind of model – as opposed to, you know, the traditional way of doing energy projects – this enters it on community. Learning exactly what the community needs and and wants essentially to move forward in making sure that everybody is on side and a part of every single step and realizing to that that changes inherently happen in these kinds of processes and being dynamic enough and adaptive enough to to accommodate those changes. So I really do appreciate you sharing this with us. And again, it goes to show how important changing the whole narrative is on energy projects, especially clean energy projects, and truly making them authentically community centered. **And so speaking of of, you know, changing and adapting – Nelson, I wanted to know a little bit more from your side on the kind of barriers and challenges that have come up in your work and how you've had to change and adapt in order to overcome them?**

Nelson Colón [00:17:36] Yes, the foundation as a social investor has limited resources. The energy problem in Puerto Rico is a collective problem. So we have funded three solar communities so far but we have close to 300 communities that are viable candidates to develop solar communities. So there is a huge gap between what the foundation is capable of doing and the extend of the demand.

[00:18:20] So a huge challenge is, one, public policy for solar communities and, two, funding. So we are looking at the possibility of federal funding for local communities. We have been able to get some additional funding from the federal government to work in a one of Puerto Rico's neighboring islands. But we want to develop the green energy corridor in Puerto Rico, which is basically provide solar community access to those 300 communities in Puerto Rico. The huge challenges are: Public policy to make that possible and funding in the magnitude that the federal government has the resources to provide.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:19:20] Yeah. Those are very common, unfortunately. And Nelson, thank you so much for outlining them. I think that that's something that many communities here also continue to face barriers against. And luckily, there have been some shifts in policy in this country and some opportunities to reduce barriers to funding. But it's definitely an ongoing issue and in my opinion, an evolving process. So I hope there's some movement on both of our ends and maybe this podcast can open more discussions around that too.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:19:57] Yup, definitely, Freddie, and I couldn't have said it any better. You know there continues to be quite a lot of barriers in front of us for community-led clean energy work. And I mean this podcast and sharing stories from folks across the globe hopefully instills quite a bit more productive conversations in the local jurisdictions and in communities worldwide on how we overcome these barriers together.

[00:20:32] I just think about that classic phrase, "Think globally, act locally." And I think this podcast definitely tries to underscore how important that is in these conversations – So, Nelson and Feliciano, I just wanted to thank you again for sharing candidly on the work that you are doing and the barriers that are in front of you.

[00:20:57] And for our listeners, we will wrap up this episode here. However, we do want to note that there are definitely way more upsides and positive and hopeful messages to share about the work that Nelson and Feliciano are doing in Puerto Rico. So if you could please join us in our next episode to continue on this very awesome dialogue, that would be greatly appreciated. Stay tuned.

Freddie Huppé Campbell [00:21:30] Indeed! It is not over. Part 2 of this episode is on whatever device you are listening to us on. So please click on the next episode as soon as its released and be sure to follow us on social medias, on the icenet.work and feel free to connect with us anytime. So, Maarsii for listening.

Mihskakwan James Harper [00:21:51] Take care.