Everyday Climate Champions Podcast Transcript

Episode 02: People-Powered Solar as a Climate Justice Solution

Dalya Massachi (Host): Thank you for joining me, Dalya Massachi, your host for this episode of “Every-day Climate Champions.” Today’s topic is People-Powered Solar as a Climate Justice Solution.

As you know, solar energy is one of the climate-friendly keys to transforming our economy. While renewable energy is a hot topic in today’s climate movement, what about energy DEMOCRACY?

How can we make a shift to ensure that communities – including low-income and frontline communities -- can determine their own energy futures? And how can they lead in making decisions about their collective energy resources?

I recently caught up with Crystal Huang, Co-founder and CEO worker-owner of People Power Solar Cooperative, based in Oakland, CA. Crystal is a grassroots community-builder with an extensive background in solar energy. In addition to the People Power Solar Cooperative, Crystal is currently leading the nationwide Energy Democracy Project.

Thanks for being here, Crystal!

Crystal Huang (Guest): Yeah, thanks for doing this.

Dalya: So Crystal, the concept of energy democracy is new to many of us. I was wondering if you can tell me what you mean by it at the cooperative.

Crystal: Sure. Energy democracy, much like the concept of democracy, is … democratic. Energy democracy is the participatory action that people take to implement a decentralized energy model, in order to create energy justice.

The reality is that climate change is not a problem that you solve by recycling in your kitchen, or just simply cutting carbon. It is about the imbalance of power – an imbalance of democracy. So when it comes to energy democracy, it is about recognizing what energy really is, and changing our economy by engaging with energy in a very different way…so communities cannot just survive, but thrive.

Dalya: Got it. Okay. So what is it that you really wanna move away from?

Crystal: In 2018 People Power Solar Cooperative was founded so we can show people that we should not be relying on big corporations and then create this relationship where when big corporations fail and do not even do the things that they're accountable to do, they're too big to fail and we keep bailing them out and then hurting the people.

I think a lot of climate activists have this experience, where if you ask around, most people don't really think about energy around us. We live in a society where we take energy for granted. Of course, with increasing climate disaster, people start thinking about climate , and energy more now. But ultimately, if we're talking about wanting to get a mass number of people to be part of climate solutions, we have to get people to think about the very thing that we've been taking for granted.

So then we can start to participate in the – not just the source, how we generate energy – but how we govern it, how we consume it and how we relate to it.

Dalya: And in your cooperative, you focus on the solar part of that.

Crystal: Yeah, solar is one component. We generally focus on the people portion of it. So, solar is a good way to get people to generate electricity locally and start to practice governing. But ultimately, when we're talking about understanding energy more, we started to have people talking about battery storage and how to share batteries and really building that energy-sharing network, to take care of each other – when the system that we all blindly rely on collapses. So it's more than just solar. It's really about how we invest into the people to take care of each other.

Dalya: Right now, there's a lot of talk and a lot of energy going into the development of infrastructure. We even have the Inflation Reduction act that includes lots of tax credits for solar. And I was wondering how all of that fits in with your work.

Crystal: It fits in, in a way that, of course we're talking about infrastructure change and people's well-being is dependent on infrastructure. But we also live in a society where we've been told for more than a hundred years: “Don't worry about infrastructure. Don't worry about things as crucial as energy for your livelihood, just pay your bills and don't worry about it.”

And so when we're getting into an age of climate change where people are starting to freak out about and getting anxiety about what we need to do, we don't really have a grasp of what it is that is causing the imbalance in relationship with the planet earth. And so there needs to be an increased awareness of how we are using our infrastructure, how we are related to infrastructure so that we can get into how we govern our infrastructure.

So we're really looking at a certain type of metrics that ends up distracting us from building a real regenerative and sustainable and formative infrastructure that will actually take care of the people.

In the Inflation Reduction Act, there's actually direct cash that goes into nonprofits and low-income people, that would be very helpful. But it's really about how much more are we putting resources and attention and investment into the hands of the people, especially the communities that have been disproportionately impacted by our current extractive economy for them to start to build up their own community self-determination.

I think it's important to clarify that we're talking about an overall transformation of the system.

Dalya: Are there any examples in the Bay Area that come to mind?

Crystal: Yeah, a project that's being built out by our members. is this project called the “freedge”. So it's basically a refrigerator, that just sits on the sidewalk. And it's generally partnered with urban farms that will have fresh fruits and vegetables from the farm, and then will be stored in the refrigerator. And there are a couple of them being built in West Oakland. There's five blocks of houseless encampment, where people don't have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. So we're not just talking about offering fresh, healthy food, but really getting people to understand how to build that relationship and start taking care of each other, so that we have a safer community to live in. And, of course, we're using solar battery and refrigerator as technology to make it happen. But ultimately the innovation is really in people's connection to each other.

Crystal: I would just say that these things that we really need is not about something new. It's really about remembering our way forward. And remember that our ancestors have had the harmonious relationship with the planet. And how can we remember that relationship and remember our connection with each other and with the land, in order to build something that is going to last for seven generations.

Dalya: Wow. I like that. Looking back and remembering and not just looking to invent something new.

You mentioned houseless encampments. What about folks who are renters? How can they get involved ?

Crystal: Oh, yeah, definitely. The benefit for renters in terms of energy can be more than just affordable energy, but really be part of the energy transition. We create a vehicle for renters to invest into their neighbors going solar. So when somebody goes solar with People Power Solar Cooperative, the upfront capital is crowdfunded by communities through purchasing shares of the cooperative, and then they get dividend return. But when the benefit of our energy is still focusing on financial returns through dividends, we're just perpetuating the same problem that got us into the climate crisis, and not allowing us to repair the relationships that have been broken between us, between each other, between our land and between the living system.

Dalya: I can imagine when people hear about your work, they might have some misconceptions or misunderstandings. So I'm curious, what are some of the most common ones that you've heard,

Crystal: The biggest barrier to our work is really people's relationship with energy. We have to remember that every moment that we're taking a breath, we're having a relationship with the plants that created the oxygen, and have interaction with the soil, interaction and relationship with the sun and the moon. And so, we just forgot

how – through the food we eat, the water we drink, the warmth that we get from the sun or from the heater – all of this is energy. I'm not trying to say in a metaphoric way, but really recognizing that energy is relationship.

So if we forget that energy is relationship and really look at energy as a linear extraction of something that you take from the planet, by damming our waters to mining for solar panels or mining for lithium ion batteries, all of this still continues to be an extraction of the living system. And we have to be back in relationship with the living system. And that starts with repairing our relationships with each other and recognizing how we show up in the world.

Dalya: Mm-hmm. Okay. So you're taking a much more holistic view of energy than is normally talked about. It sounds like what you're saying is that we've really gotten separated from the energy all around us, and we're looking at it as consumers, when that's only a fraction of what really is our experience of energy in our world.

Crystal: Yeah. And I mean, if we're talking about trying to build a sustainable future for seven generations, we have to look at everything holistically, right?

Dalya: Yes.

Crystal: And so a big part of what we do at People Power Solar Cooperative is about transformative learning, rooting the understanding of our energy system in the systemic understanding of the very thing we're seeking to change. It doesn't have to be about engineering and math anymore. It's about everyone's experience.

It's about people coming together and designing what the future could look like because ultimately energy is what determines our economy and the economy is how people come together.

Dalya: So in that vision that you're describing, what would it look like if people-powered solar energy were to go really big? Like, if it showed up everywhere and it became the new normal – the way that everyone does things?

Crystal: Yeah, It would be a lot of local economy being built out. We're looking at a network of mobile and permanent power-sharing stations that safely and reliably meet the needs of our communities. So then there's no such thing as the grid going down.

Dalya: I really like that idea. So just to wrap up here, how can our listeners get involved in creating the vision that we talked about, in their own communities?

Crystal: People Power Solar Cooperative is powered by our members. And we have an online platform that people talk about energy in this way, where we are really engaging with energy in a way that connects our lived experience and our deeper knowledge of what our economy could look like,

Dalya: Thank you. What a great note to end on today. And thanks for showcasing a way that communities can play a key role in bringing climate solutions to life - every day.

Hey, listeners, Crystal has shared some great resources on how to take the next step on this vital topic. Just check out the show notes to follow the links.

Related Websites:

People Power Solar Cooperative: Find out more about their work for a solar energy network

People Power Playground: A digital space for the People Power community to learn from one another, develop shared visions of the energy future, and cultivate a community of practice

Energy Democracy: Advancing Equity in Clean Energy Solutions: Edited by Denise Fairchild and Al Weinrub, this book is written by 10 different communities about their strategies of energy democracy

People's Utility Justice Playbook by the Energy Democracy Project: A summary of the history of utilities, and an examination of the tactics used by electric utilities to undermine community efforts

Solar United Neighbors: A national organization for solar co-ops

Through the Eye of a Needle: An extensive article questioning the foundation of the mainstream energy transition narrative.

Contact Us!

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