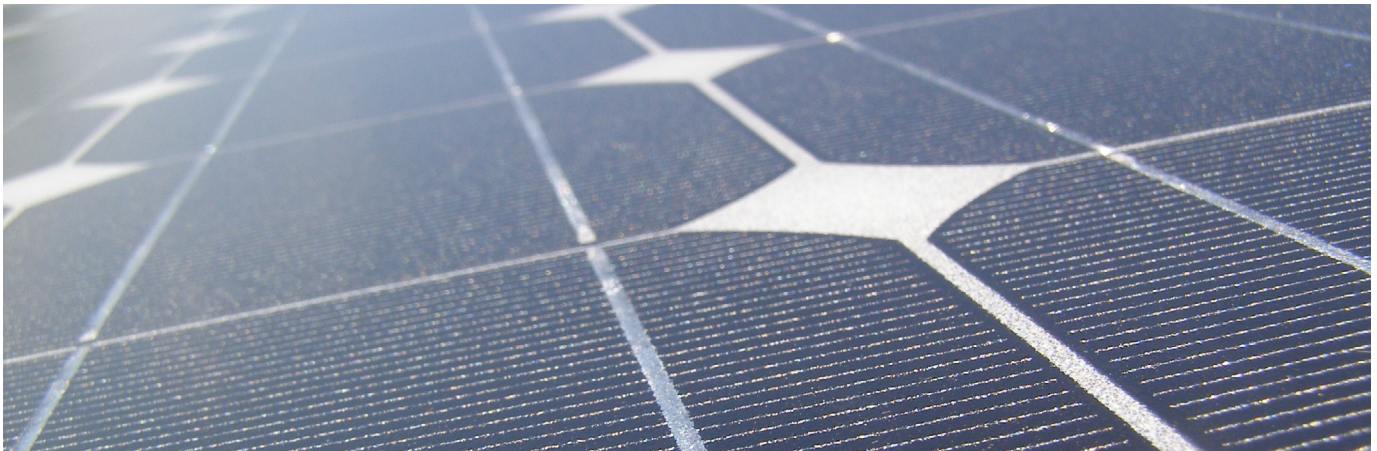


# 18. DEVELOPING CREATIVE ENERGY CO-OPERATIVES IN AN UNCOOPERATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Ashoka Finley, Projects Facilitator, EcoCity Builders



## PRESENTATION

Ashoka Finley introduced participants to this session by examining the framework under which we deal with climate change as a technological, but also a social problem, in terms of scale, speed, and risk. Rooted in justice, labour, and ecology, Finley described the rationale behind EcoCity Builders' Energy Solidarity Cooperative (ESC) and the role of renewable energy, more specifically solar.

*"We see renewable energy as a movement and solar energy is a tactic towards solidarity in communities and energy justice."*

Out of three spheres of influence—political will, economic incentives, and social engagement—Finley designed an interactive session parsed out into three categories:

1. *Regulatory capture*: working in a century old sector where the lines between utility and regulator are blurred and the political support is for the status quo
2. *Energy literacy*: raising public awareness and understanding of the energy chain, and how to gain agency by disrupting it
3. *Incentives for cooperatives*: how to lower the barriers to cooperatives, with specific reference to California's legislative environment

Finley asked participants about their experience with energy cooperatives, and participants indicated they are rare. Several things that are illegal in California—solar gardens, virtual metering, off-set trading—are regulatory barriers to community initiatives

like cooperatives, according to Finley, and he suggested some strategies around these:

- Set up a special purpose enterprise (SPE) to gain access to certain purchasing powers and tax credits
- Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) is one methodical way of allocating energy purchasing power
- Ask insurers to force the hand of the regulatory body: Make them more accountable and transparent
- “Campaign and Shame”: support the politicians who are making progress and create an environment of accountability
- Provide access to legal support to help people incorporate sustainability
- Leverage alternative lenders and motivate them to adopt non-carbon financial models with greater impact

Finley also recommend educating people about the effects of the existing energy system and about how to move toward self-sufficiency:

- Have an energy curriculum that explores efficiencies and control to chart an energy map of the relationship between physics and the political economy
- Create and train the cooperative members in operating the energy system

## TAKEAWAYS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Participants appreciated learning about cooperatives as a means to democratic energy systems and about how utilities could adopt cooperative models from other sectors, such as urban agriculture. Knowing how to teach energy and cooperative literacy and find support for cooperatives were key takeaways.

