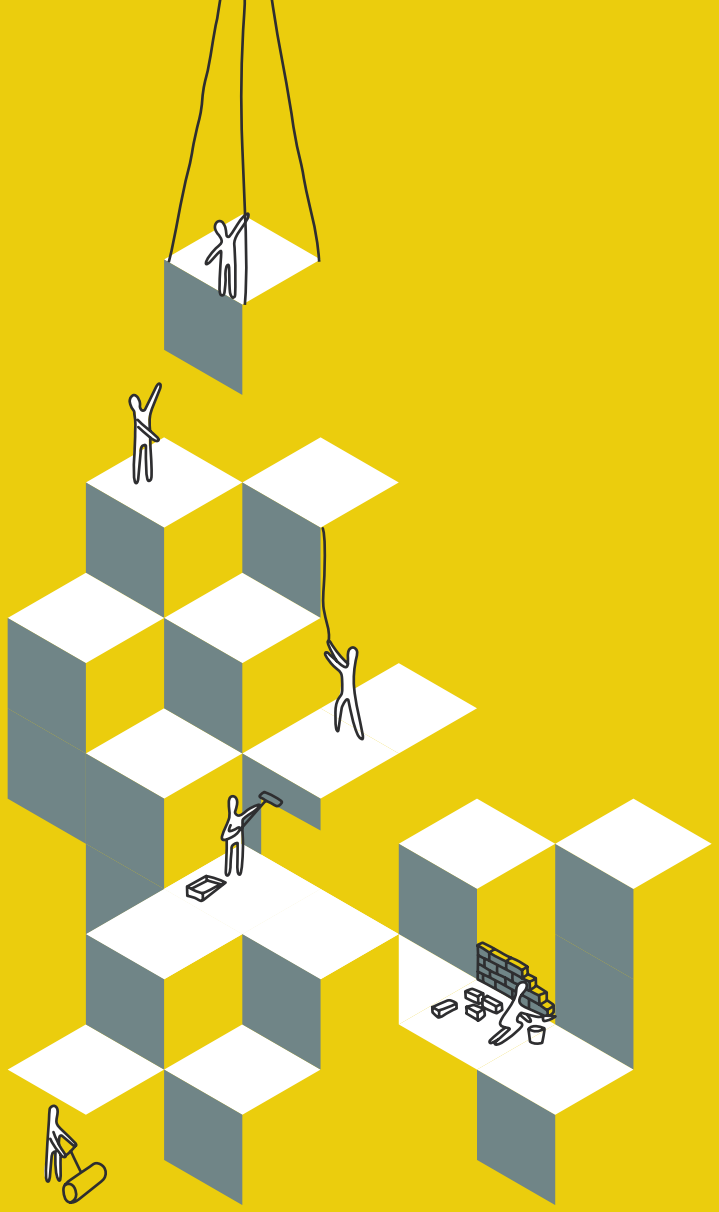


# GOVERNING TOGETHER

A Toolkit for Municipal Co-Governance, Advocacy, & Shared Power

by: Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico
Partners for Dignity & Rights
Central Florida Jobs with Justice

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# A Note on Language & Toolkit Navigation

**Municipalities**
When this toolkit uses the term “municipality” or “municipalities,” it refers to a geographic territory that encompasses a broader municipal ecosystem—including local government, communities, institutions, and other local actors—and not solely to an administrative unit.

**Mayor**
For brevity, this toolkit uses the term “mayor” to refer to the person holding the office of mayor, regardless of gender.



**Practical Tool Icon**
When you see this icon, a related practical tool is available to help you explore, apply, or work through the concept or exercise presented on that page. These tools are optional and modular and can be used whenever they are helpful to your process. They can be used both individually and/or collectively.



**External Resource Icon**
When you see this icon, there is a clickable link to an external website, source, or additional resource where you can learn more or explore the topic further.

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**Municipalities are where democracy is most tangible and where its failures are most deeply felt.**



# Executive Summary

Municipalities are where democracy is most tangible and where its failures are most deeply felt. Across regions, local governments face overlapping crises shaped by austerity, political preemption, privatization, colonial or centralized oversight regimes, labor precarity, and widening social and economic inequality. Traditional governance models—built on top-down decision-making and limited forms of public participation that rarely share meaningful power—have proven insufficient to meet these challenges.

This Co-Governance Municipal Advocacy Toolkit presents a distinct approach. Funded by the Ford Foundation and grounded in the integrated work of **Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico, Partners for Dignity & Rights,** and **Central Florida Jobs with Justice**, the toolkit positions co-governance as an urgent and necessary democratic practice—one that redistributes power, strengthens governmental institutions, and enables communities and municipalities to govern together.

Co-governance is not a fixed model. It is an adaptive, place-based process shaped by local history, culture, political conditions, resources, and organizing capacity. This toolkit offers a shared framework, practical tools, and guiding principles to support municipalities and organized communities in building durable, accountable, and transformative governance arrangements. It is intentionally designed to be adaptable to diverse contexts and remains flexible enough to be reshaped by the unique realities of each municipality and community.



# INTRODUCTION

## Co-Governance as a Living Democratic Practice

# Why Co-Governance

Municipal governments today operate under intense structural pressure. Austerity policies and fiscal control regimes limit local autonomy; state and federal preemption restrict municipal innovation; privatization erodes public accountability; and colonial or centralized governance structures undermine democratic self-determination.[1] At the same time, municipal governments are expected to respond to essential community needs – including affordable housing, climate disasters, public health emergencies, gender-based violence, and labor exploitation, among other urgent necessities – often with fewer resources and less authority.

When the perspectives of each organization are integrated into a common framework, it becomes clear that co-governance in this context is not aspirational rhetoric. It is a strategic necessity that must be intentionally designed, practiced, and sustained. Focused on shared power and decision-making, our perspective seeks to strengthen municipalities by expanding their governing capacity beyond formal institutions and instead anchors public decision-making in lived experiences, organized power, and collective responsibility in order to respond more equitably to local needs. Framing this from a human rights–based approach, people in local communities are viewed as rights-holders, not passive beneficiaries, and public institutions are accountable partners rather than distant administrators.

Finally, **co-governance is inseparable from power-building.** Meaningful shared governance does not emerge from consultation alone. It is built through organizing, negotiation, co-creating solutions, and building durable structures and strong relationships that allow workers, residents, and communities to influence priorities, budgets, and policy outcomes. This ensures that directly impacted communities, with a focus on marginalized voices made vulnerable by structural inequities, are involved in developing solutions to their needs. By centering these voices, we acknowledge a core truth: **the people living with the problem are almost always the ones best equipped to solve it.** When power is shared intentionally, governance becomes more legitimate, resilient, and effective.

# A Municipalist Perspective

We approach co-governance through a municipalist lens: the belief that municipal governments are not merely administrative units but democratic spaces capable of advancing justice, dignity, and collective problem-solving. Particularly in contexts shaped by austerity, oversight, and political constraint, municipalism asserts that local governments can still act as conveners, facilitators, and protectors of democratic life, with and for communities as central rights-holders.

Municipalities are where change is made tangible. Change occurs at the local level because it is here that communities experience, understand, and name their needs, resources, and possible solutions. Furthermore, the proximity of the municipal government allows for direct response. This makes it fertile ground for developing new ways of sharing power, testing, and changing quickly to meet emerging needs.[2]



# Project Scope & Intended Audience

This toolkit focuses on **municipal-level co-governance for advocacy, policy development, and implementation**. It is not a comprehensive manual for all forms of participatory democracy, nor a technical guide for legal reform. Instead, it centers on practical, political, and relational tools that support shared governance between local governments and organized communities.

## In Scope

- Frameworks for understanding co-governance and shared power
- Tools to assess readiness, power dynamics, and institutional conditions
- Strategies for building accountable partnerships between municipalities and communities
- Guidance for advocacy-driven co-governance initiatives

## Out of Scope

- Prescriptive legal templates
- One-size-fits-all governance models
- Short-term engagement or symbolic participation processes

It is designed for a mixed audience that includes:

- **Municipal staff and officials** seeking to strengthen democratic legitimacy, improve policy outcomes, and build durable relationships with communities
- **Community-based organizations, labor groups, and advocates** working to influence municipal decision-making and secure structural change
- **Intermediary organizations and facilitators** supporting co-governance processes

The toolkit assumes these audiences may read and use it together during training, working, or collaborative planning sessions.



# KEY DEFINITIONS

## Accountability

A shared commitment between local government and community to uphold transparency, mutual responsibility, and follow-through in public decision-making. This practice goes beyond mere process; it requires government to be responsible not only for how policies are designed but also for the actual outcomes they produce. By establishing clear mechanisms for oversight, the community is empowered to monitor, influence, and correct public action, ensuring that decisions are not only equitable in their design but effective in achieving tangible, positive impacts for those most impacted.

## Co-Governance

A participatory process, with a variety of tools and models, through which governments and organized communities work together, formally or informally, to share power, collectively shape priorities, make decisions, design policy, and establish mechanisms to make sure solutions are implemented effectively while holding each other accountable.

## Community

A broad group of people connected by shared geography (such as a neighborhood or municipality), identity, cultural heritage, or common interests. These groups possess deep, lived experience and are the primary stakeholders of all municipal actions, though they may not always have formal structures in place to interface with government.

## Convergence

The process of reviewing, organizing, prioritizing, and refining ideas, information, or possibilities in order to move toward a clearer, more focused, and workable solution.

## Divergence

The process of opening up a conversation to explore many ideas, experiences, and perspectives without judging or evaluating them too soon.

# Municipal Ecosystem

The network of people, institutions, and organizations that shape life, decision-making, and collective well-being in a municipality. This includes local government, residents, organized communities, civil society, academia, the private sector, and among other local stakeholders.



## Municipal Table / *La Mesa*

A co-governance space where stakeholders from across the municipal ecosystem come together to analyze a challenge or opportunity and develop collective solutions through a process of co-design and co-creation. La Mesa brings together diverse knowledge, experiences, and capacities to strengthen cross-sector collaboration and support more inclusive and effective municipal decision-making. To maximize its effectiveness and promote meaningful collaboration, La Mesa should ideally include five to eight members of the municipal ecosystem.

## Municipalism

A political and governance approach that understands municipalities as democratic spaces comprising local governments and their communities—not merely administrative units—capable of advancing justice, collective problem-solving, and shared power through proximity to residents, place-based knowledge, and local democratic practice.

## Organized Communities

Groups of people with collective power and experience-based knowledge, capable of sustained engagement. These may include community-based groups, labor organizations, grassroots coalitions, unions, or advocacy networks.

## Political Preemption

When a higher level of government, or a more powerful actor within a governance arrangement, unilaterally overrides or restricts the decision-making authority that a co-governance process has established, even informally.

## Social Fragmentation

The weakening of the relationships, trust, and organizational capacity among community members, civic groups, and local institutions that co-governance depends on to be legitimate and effective.

## Shared Power

The intentional redistribution of decision-making authority, not merely opportunities for input, for equitable solutions.

## Wicked problems

Complex, deeply embedded issues that resist simple resolution, not necessarily because they lack solutions, but because they are frequently ever-changing, involve multiple stakeholders, and do not present a single clear path forward, while also often challenging entrenched power structures. Their "wickedness" lies in the fact that while technical fixes may be clear, they are frequently stalled by political inertia, competing interests, changing conditions, or a lack of collective will to implement the necessary systemic changes.

# IS IT CO-GOVERNANCE?

- ☑ Are communities involved before decisions are made?
- ☑ Is decision-making authority shared?
- ☑ Are priorities shaped collectively?
- ☑ Are there accountability mechanisms?
- ☑ Is implementation jointly monitored?



# An Aspirational, Traveling Framework

This toolkit is modular and designed for non-linear use. It allows users to integrate and adapt each section based on their local context, capacity, needs, and goals.

- Municipal teams may use it to assess institutional readiness and design co-governance structures.
- Community organizations may use it to clarify demands, power strategies, and partnership conditions.
- Joint teams may use it as a resource for facilitation and alignment.
- Individuals interested in learning more about municipal governance and civic engagement may use it to deepen their understanding of the power of a municipalist approach and identify meaningful ways to advocate for and contribute to the future of their communities.

Co-governance is a living practice that evolves — and can also retreat. Establishing a co-governance approach once does not guarantee its continuity, as the conditions that made it possible can also unmake it. As such, it must be sustained, defended, and renewed, or it can quietly erode.

This toolkit does not prescribe a universal model. Co-governance must respond to local history, culture, economic and political conditions, and organizing strength. What matters is not replication, but **intentional adaptation.**

# Towards a Living Democratic Practice

Co-governance is not a destination or a static institutional design. It is a living democratic practice that requires continuous negotiation of power, strategies, sustained learning and transformation, and intentional care for the relationships that make shared governance possible. For municipal governments and communities alike, co-governance demands commitment, patience, and the willingness to adapt as conditions, actors, and priorities evolve.

For the partner organizations designing this toolkit, co-governance represents a pathway toward local governments that are more just, resilient, and accountable to the communities they serve. It offers a way to move beyond symbolic participation toward practical governance arrangements rooted in dignity, organized power, and collective responsibility.

At a time marked by democratic erosion, political preemption, and social fragmentation, co-governance offers a necessary alternative: one in which municipalities and communities govern together, learn together, and imagine together what is possible. This toolkit is not an endpoint but a starting point intended to support, strengthen, and evolve alongside the practices it seeks to advance.

While this introduction outlines the urgency and potential of co-governance, the question remains: what principles should guide shared governance between municipalities and communities?

Chapter 2 introduces a human-rights-based framework that positions communities as rights-holders and governments as accountable partners, providing a foundation for shared power and collaborative governance.

**What other questions come to mind when thinking about co-governance?**

**What has, and hasn't worked, in previous co-governance efforts?**

**What principles would be nonnegotiable for you?**

**What would be the primary ingredient to advance a co-governance initiative?**

01

# Co-Governance Framework: Dignity, Rights, and Accountability

# Human Rights & Government Responsibility

Partners for Dignity & Rights was founded using the principles of a human-rights-based approach. We believe that all of us have fundamental rights to education, healthcare, housing, work with dignity, and the other foundations of a decent life. But right now, all too many of us are denied those basic needs.

Government has the primary responsibility and duty to protect and promote human rights, as defined under international human rights norms.[3] Over the past half-century, however, there has been a concerted effort to weaken this responsibility. In the early '80s, U.S. President Ronald Reagan famously said, "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."[4] Reagan became one of the most visible advocates of a broader neoliberal project that has consistently vilified the public sector, portraying state action as ineffective and incompetent and using that rationale to curtail government powers and slash budgets, privatizing ever more functions. Instead of government regulation to ensure people's rights are respected and protected, the trend has been toward voluntary corporate social responsibility. Ensuring that people have a living wage and access to food, water, and a clean environment has increasingly been treated as optional rather than a fundamental government responsibility. And the burden has been shifted to individuals and communities to protect them from the corporations where money has been concentrated.

"The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."

# Municipal Constraints, Austerity, & Preemption

**This profit-driven mindset rests on a dangerous fallacy: viewing the foundations of a thriving society as a fiscal burden rather than as an investment.**

The problems are particularly acute on the municipal level. Under the U.S. Constitution's supremacy clause, both state and federal law can preempt or override city ordinances.[5] In Puerto Rico, often described as the oldest colony of the United States,[6] these challenges are compounded by a hollowed-out autonomy; the imposition of an unelected Fiscal Control Board[7]—which governs with absolute authority without a democratic mandate, often facilitated by the compliance or submission of the central government—exemplifies how austerity is forcibly institutionalized at the expense of local self-determination.

Unlike the federal government, cities are constrained by the need to balance their budgets, and their ability to raise revenue is often limited. After fifty years of neoliberalism run amok, the wealthy and powerful and corporate interests too often drive decision-making in our cities. There always seems to be enough money to fund a new stadium or pass a tax loophole for developers. Attracting and retaining corporations and the jobs they bring becomes a race to the bottom, driving tax cuts, deregulation, and increased policing to protect corporate profits and property. Meanwhile, the real, human needs of our residents are left with crumbs. Schools, housing, roads, sanitation, libraries, parks, and all the other needs we count on our local government to provide are underfunded and treated as opportunities for "public/private" partnership or outright privatization. This profit-driven mindset rests on a dangerous fallacy: viewing the foundations of a thriving society as a fiscal burden rather than as an investment. In reality, these services are the bedrock of our future, and treating them as 'expenses' is a fundamental failure of the corporate logic that prioritizes balance sheets over human dignity.

# Right-holders & Human Rights-based Budgeting

It doesn't have to be this way. By insisting on the government's responsibility to protect human rights and naming the people who live in a community as the central rights-holders, we can recenter the discourse and more clearly advocate for necessary community needs and services. We can view budgets as moral documents that reflect our collective priorities. A human rights-based budget begins by identifying the community's needs, determining what it would cost to fund them adequately, and building the budget from there. Good public schools, social housing, safe roads, robust public transportation and accessible public health infrastructure would move to the forefront of public investment. Meanwhile, stadiums for already-wealthy sports teams, real estate boondoggles, and opportunities for corporate capture of government services—think of the millions of dollars spent buying standardized tests for public schools—would no longer drive budget decisions. The result would be a budgeting framework grounded in human rights, equity, and inclusive democracy.

**We can view budgets as moral documents that reflect our collective priorities.**

But it cannot just be that we change ***what*** we budget. We need to change ***how*** we make decisions. Across the country, people are articulating shared visions for a just and truly democratic future. And to make these visions a reality, they are pursuing a range of strategies to build and shift power in their municipalities. Many of these strategies focus on co-governance, policy, and organizing models that work inside and outside of government to shift governing power toward people by creating opportunities for government and community to work together to design and implement policy. By centering the leadership and expertise of those most impacted and often left out, these models help build a society that works for everybody—including Black students, low-wage immigrant workers, and working-class neighborhood residents whose fundamental rights are often sacrificed.

Co-governance offers us a chance to break free of the austerity mindset. By bringing together community vision and knowledge with those who hold government resources and experience, we can create new approaches and new solutions together.

What would it look like if the community controlled who had access to a natural resource like water—and then agreed on pricing? What about if a city brought the community and experts together to figure out how to spend funds on green infrastructure? Or if a public school pulled together parents, teachers, students, and administrative staff to share decision-making power?

Municipalities and communities are already experimenting with co-governance models that share decision-making power. Below are just some of the examples of innovative municipal co-governance efforts happening across the country.

CO-GOVERNANCE
SCENARIO

# BUILDER

## Resource

what is being governed that we want to change?

## Decision

who currently decides?

## Shared-power Possibility

who should be at the table and what authority or role should they have?

# CO-GOVERNANCE IN PRACTICE



**Maui, Hawaii**

### Issue

Water access and pricing favored plantation interests over local farmers and residents.

### Governance Structure

Community water authority boards

### Who Is At The Table

- Residents
- Hawaiian Families
- Local Officials
- Environmental Groups
- Water Experts

### Outcome

The board gained authority to negotiate water leases and advance fairer local water access.

*Click here to learn more*

# Maui Water Authority Boards

In November 2022, residents overwhelmingly passed a ballot initiative to authorize the creation of community water boards in Maui County that would take back local control over water. Community members, generational Hawaiian families, local politicians, and environmental groups developed and passed the ballot measure largely out of anger over backroom deals that gave plantation owners cheap water while charging local farmers exorbitant prices. Once the ballot passed, the first community to create a board was in East Maui, where a Canadian Pension Fund owns half of a 74-mile water system. The County Council has approved funding for the board, and the East Maui Water Authority Board now has its members—some picked by the mayor, some by the council—and includes residents of the watershed area with a mix of water expertise. The Water Board now has the authority to negotiate the water leases and will hopefully focus on providing fair access to water based on traditional ahupua'a land management principles: “from the mountains to the sea.”



**Portland, Oregon**

### Issue

Low-income communities and communities of color lacked equitable access to climate investments and green jobs.

### Governance Structure

Community oversight committee for the Clean Energy Fund

### Who Is At The Table

- Residents
- Community Leaders
- Issue Experts
- City Staff
- Labor Unions
- Contractors

### Outcome

Community priorities began shaping major climate investments, grantmaking, and equity planning.

*Click here to learn more*

# Portland Clean Energy Fund

A coalition of community and environmental groups led by the Coalition of Communities of Color won a ballot initiative in 2018 to create the Portland Clean Energy Fund (PCEF). By 2023, the Fund had invested $145 million in energy efficiency, renewable energy, transportation decarbonization, the tree canopy, neighborhood climate resilience infrastructure, green jobs, regenerative agriculture, and nonprofit capacity-building. It draws its funding from a gross receipts tax on major retailers, and is projected to invest another $750 million by 2028. As required by the ballot initiative, the city convened a committee of residents, community leaders, and issue experts to help oversee the fund. This PCEF Committee has the power to make recommendations to the mayor, city council, and Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (which oversees the fund) on PCEF's funding strategy, grantmaking, a contractor equity plan, and any changes to the law. It also monitors and evaluates the Fund's operations and outcomes, and, in 2023, it worked closely with city staff to create a Climate Investment Plan that now guides the Fund's investment strategy. The city has also convened advisory councils and working groups to engage labor unions, contractors, and other stakeholders in shaping the fund's grantmaking strategy, and created a mini-grant program to help build organizational capacity in low-income communities of color.



## Sacramento, California

### Issue

City practices and policies lacked sufficient accountability to communities of color.

# Sacramento Racial Equity Council

The Sacramento Racial Equity Council (RE Council) is a multi-stakeholder body of community-based racial equity groups, organizations, and designated leaders who are deeply connected and in relationship with communities of color across the city. It works collectively to guide the City of Sacramento in establishing a plan to equitably partner with and be accountable to communities of color by shifting the culture of government so that it becomes a producer of racial equity in its practices and policies. The RE Council helps transform how the city governs and advances racial equity, establishes its own decision-making authority and accountability mechanisms, advises the City Council on the development of effective community engagement and partnership strategies, and supports the creation and implementation of racial equity assessment tools.

The Racial Equity Council works in close partnership with, takes leadership from, and is accountable to the Racial Equity Leadership Network, a network of representatives that constitute the various groups and organizations working for a shared, bold racial justice vision in Sacramento.

### Governance Structure

Multi-stakeholder racial equity council

### Who Is At The Table

- Racial Equity Organizations
- Community Leaders
- The Racial Equity Leadership Network

### Outcome

Community leaders gained a formal role in shaping racial equity practices, accountability, and assessment tools.

*Click here to learn more*



## Los Angeles, California

### Issue

The traditional top-down decision-making process from the district wasn't serving students or their communities.

### Governance Structure

Districtwide steering committee and school-level leadership councils

### Who Is At The Table

- Teachers
- District Leaders
- Families + Students
- Principals + School Staff
- Community Members

### Outcome

Schools created shared decision-making structures to support students, families and school communities.

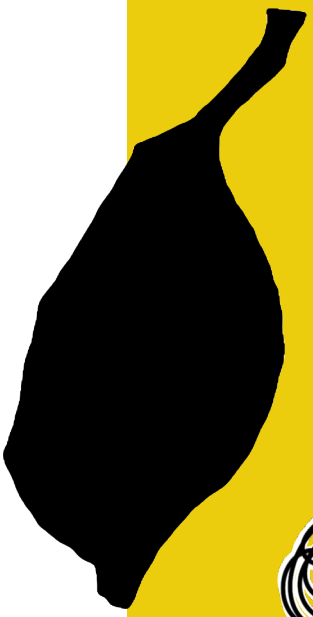
*Click here to learn more*

# Los Angeles Community Schools

The Los Angeles community schools initiative was born out of the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) strike of 2019. After six dramatic days of protests and rain, the UTLA emerged victorious and won a huge slate of demands that went well beyond better wages and benefits for their teachers. One of their most important victories was a memorandum of understanding with the district to create, in the following 5 years, 70 community schools using district and state funding. Community Schools include collaborative leadership and active family and community engagement while working to expand learning opportunities and wraparound services to their students. The resulting Steering Committee has acted as a model for how the district, teachers' unions, and the entire community can collaborate effectively to provide an outstanding education that addresses children's diverse needs through integrated support and extended learning time. Each school has created its own leadership council that includes the principal, the community schools coordinator, teachers, parents, students, and staff so that they can make critical decisions together. In the process, they have pushed back on a growing charter schools movement, showing LA and the rest of the country how a district and a union can work through a difficult history to come out on the other side with a model of collaboration and shared decision-making.

# St Louis Housing Code Enforcement

Home is Where Our Health Is: Strategic and Supportive Code Enforcement is a collaboration between Tenants Transforming Greater St. Louis (TTGSTL), Vacancy Collaborative, and the City of St. Louis Buildings Division to enforce building codes in rental housing to keep tenants safe and healthy, and to protect them from being pushed out of their homes. It is illegal for landlords not to keep their units up to code, but some landlords, especially in St. Louis' Black neighborhoods, fail to keep up with maintenance and repairs, both to pinch pennies and to effectively evict tenants. Unsafe, substandard rental housing can affect the physical health and mental well-being of residents. But with hundreds of thousands of rental units across the city, the Buildings Division is not able to figure out which landlords are violating building codes on its own. TTGSTL and the Vacancy Collaborative partnered with the Buildings Division and university researchers to examine the relationship between housing quality and health outcomes, map existing enforcement processes, and identify promising practices. They also engaged residents in understanding key challenges and developing recommendations for the Buildings Division and city council to strengthen housing quality and enforcement efforts. The collaboration has worked together to pass legislation such as the Rental Registry, Impacted Tenants Fund, Safe Temperatures in Rentals, and a Mold Ordinance. TTGSTL has also coordinated technical assistance for the Building Division to implement new policy and employ their operations recommendations.



**Saint Louis, Missouri**



## Issue

Tenants faced unsafe rental housing, weak code enforcement, and displacement pressures.

## Governance Structure



Collaborative code enforcement partnership.



## Who Is At The Table

- Tenant Organizers
- City Staff
- Researchers
- Residents
- Housing Advocates



## Outcome

The partnership strengthened housing enforcement, tenant protections, and implementation support.

*Click here to learn more*



## Baltimore, Maryland

### Issue

Very-low and low-income residents lacked dedicated, community affordable housing funding.

### Governance Structure

Affordable Housing Trust Fund commission.

### Who Is At The Table

- Renters
- Homeowners
- Unhoused Residents
- Advocates
- Nonprofits
- Faith Groups
- Policy Experts

### Outcome

The city created a permanent housing fund with oversight weighted toward low-income residents and advocates.

*Click here to learn more*

# Baltimore Affordable Housing Trust Fund

In November 2016, Baltimore voters approved and initiated a city Charter Amendment to create the Baltimore Affordable Housing Trust Fund, which finances affordable rental and homeownership housing for very-low and low-income households. The initiative was spearheaded by the Housing for All coalition, which was coordinated by United Workers and included Baltimore renters, homeowners, persons without housing, community development advocates, nonprofit developers, community associations, faith institutions, policy advocates, lawyers, and academics. The Fund is overseen by a 12-member commission that is weighted to the low-income community, with four seats reserved for low-income persons and three others for advocates. The legislation provides a long-term source of funding through bonds plus an excise and transfer taxes on expensive properties that together raise $20 million a year.



# Minneapolis Worker-driven Enforcement

Starting with the need to enforce workers' right to paid sick and safe leave, labor advocates and organizers pushed for the creation of the City of Minneapolis Labor Standards Enforcement Division. This expanded the purview of an existing department to focus exclusively on workers' rights policy. But like all labor rights enforcement bodies across the country, the core of the work at the division is complaint-based enforcement of worker protections. A fundamental challenge is that the most vulnerable workers, including people of color and low-wage employees, are also the least likely to file complaints despite being the most frequently and egregiously exploited. One of the most effective solutions to this systemic challenge is collaboration between labor enforcement agencies and community-based worker centers, which raise awareness of workers' rights amongst those most vulnerable to workplace exploitation. In line with this collaboration, "standards boards" are industry-based standard-setting structures. In Minneapolis, the Workplace Advisory Committee was created, which is essentially an informal standards and enforcement board consisting of a minority of business representatives and a combined majority of worker, community, and public representatives. One of its key stakeholders and designers is the powerhouse organization Centro De Trabajadores Unidos En La Lucha (CTUL). The committee is in charge of outreach—the city talks to the bosses and CTUL talks to the workers—and was active in the push for an increase of the minimum wage to $15/hour. The ultimate goal is to build a worker standards board to make policy, whereas most others across the country just make recommendations.

## Minneapolis, Minnesota

### Issue

Low-wage and vulnerable workers faced rights violations but were least likely to file complaints.

### Governance Structure

Labor standards division and workplace advisory committee

### Who Is At The Table

- Workers
- Worker Centers
- Labor Advocates
- City Staff
- Community Representatives
- Businesses

### Outcome

Workers and community partners helped shape outreach, enforcement, and labor standards.

*Click here to learn more*



**Puerto Rico**

# Puerto Rico Pension Retiree Mobilization

**Issue**

Proposed pension reductions under PROMESA

**Governance Structure**

Coalition, National Pensioners' Assembly, working groups, and Benefits Council representation

**Who Is At The Table**

- COA
- Retirees
- Unions + Associations
- Professional Organizations
- Community Allies

**Outcome**

Accrued monthly benefits were preserved, proposed board nullified, and ongoing pensioner representation through the Benefits Council

*Click here to learn more*

When Puerto Rico's federally appointed Financial Oversight and Management Board—commonly known as La Junta—sought to reduce public pension benefits as part of the Commonwealth's debt restructuring under PROMESA, retirees identified leverage in the legislature's authority to approve the bonds needed to implement the plan. Construyamos Otro Acuerdo (COA), retiree unions and associations, professional organizations, and community allies organized through the Frente en Defensa de las Pensiones under the banner Cero Recortes a Nuestras Pensiones (Zero Cuts to Our Pensions). Through protests, cacerolazos, coalition organizing, and public assemblies—including a National Pensioners' Assembly of approximately 1,000 participants—the movement developed shared demands and pressured elected officials to reject further cuts.

The Legislative Assembly enacted the Ley para un Retiro Digno (Act 7-2021), which established a "zero cuts" policy and proposed a consolidated pension trust governed by a 17-member board with directly elected pensioner and participant seats. Although a federal court nullified the law and the proposed board was never implemented, legislative resistance ultimately helped secure the preservation of retirees' accrued monthly benefits, while future benefit accruals and cost-of-living adjustments remained frozen.

A narrower but continuing participatory governance structure remains. COA, the Frente, and allied groups continue organizing pensioners through working groups, and three campaign-endorsed representatives were elected to the Benefits Council of the Puerto Rico Pension Reserve Trust. Through this representation, organizing, and public accountability work, pensioners retain an institutional role in overseeing the retirement system. The case demonstrates how sustained organizing can turn a limited opening in an otherwise unaccountable system into meaningful influence over public policy and governance.



For more examples of co-governance across the country, check out our interactive map.

# Wicked Problems & Shared Power

These examples show what we are capable of when we center people and our inalienable human rights to water, housing, education, and a safe and dignified workplace. Cities are often grappling with "wicked" problems. **Wicked problems are complex, ill-defined social or cultural dilemmas that resist straightforward solutions because they involve interconnected systems, competing interests, and ever-changing conditions.**[8] Whether it's trying to create affordable housing in a profit-driven real estate market, protecting the rights of workers who are more often prosecuted than protected by the government, or shifting the burden of climate adaptation off those who are both least responsible and least able to afford it, these are complex problems that require challenging existing assumptions and power dynamics.

Many dedicated, hard-working municipal workers genuinely want to serve their communities well but are constrained by existing systems, longstanding practices, and limited opportunities—or reluctance—to try new approaches. Some would welcome the opportunity to partner with the community to better understand the layers of a problem and develop innovative solutions together. However, this kind of collaboration may have never existed within their department before, leaving staff uncertain about whether it is even allowed, who to partner with, or how to begin building those relationships. In some cases, their mayor or municipal legislature may also lack the political will to act. We need to proactively bridge government and community so they can identify priorities, build trust, and respond to challenges together.

Part of this work will require a cultural shift within government and community. Government representatives need to be more willing to understand that complex problems will more likely be solved when they include community in the design and implementation process. Community members can more proactively search out government workers within agencies and departments to forge partnerships. Crucially, this shift demands that we reclaim democracy as an active verb—a practice that transcends the electoral cycle. We must remember that elected officials, mayors, and municipal legislators are not the heart of our government; the community is. These officials are merely temporary stewards whose mandate is to serve and protect their constituents, prioritizing the common good over party allegiance or personal interest.

None of this is easy. Shifting how decisions are made requires changing long-standing habits, institutional practices, and expectations about who participates in governance. Co-governance challenges both governments and communities to rethink their roles and responsibilities, recognizing that communities already hold power and can provide valuable knowledge and expertise. Rather than transferring power from one group to another, co-governance creates structures and processes that allow that power to be exercised collectively in partnership with public institutions. Including more voices in the decision-making process can also slow it down, but the results are often better.

**We must remember that elected officials, mayors, and municipal legislators are not the heart of our government; the community is.**

Cities are vibrant, exciting centers of innovation and cultural expression. This is true of co-governance as well. Municipal co-governance can provide a lab for new ideas and new solutions: needs are seen more easily and directly, scale is small enough to iteratively test new ideas quickly, and relationships are more visible and easier to create connections within systems. We can bring community and government together to tackle difficult problems, as well as build out new ideas that meet the needs of our residents.

For co-governance to move from aspiration to practice, communities must be organized, connected, and equipped to participate as equal partners in shaping public outcomes. The next chapter explores how organizing and coalition-building help develop the relationships, leadership, and collective power needed to make shared governance possible.

# ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

01 Is collaboration allowed under current rules or practices

02 Who can convene + champion the process

03 Which department or office is responsible?

04 Which community partners are already organized around this issue?

05 What is the best starting point for collaboration?

**Without organized communities, co-governance risks becoming another form of limited participation. With organizing, it can become a pathway for shared decision-making, accountability, and long-term democratic practice.**

02

# Organizing for Shared Power

Chapter 1 established that co-governance requires more than consultation. It requires structures that allow communities and public institutions to exercise power collectively, make decisions together, and share responsibility for public outcomes.

This chapter explores the role of organizing in making that possible. Organizing builds the relationships, leadership, shared analysis, and collective power communities need to participate as active partners in governance. Without organized communities, co-governance risks becoming another form of limited participation. With organizing, it can become a pathway for shared decision-making, accountability, and long-term democratic practice.

Central Florida Jobs With Justice is a coalition of labor unions, community organizations, students, and faith leaders that lead campaigns to improve economic conditions. We strive to achieve a Florida where its residents have decision-making power in their neighborhoods, their workplace, and their government.

# Why Organizing is Essential to Co-Governance

To this end, our campaigns are power-building exercises rooted in a broader vision for community-centered change. We seek to build collective power by organizing people and mobilizing resources needed to sustain that work, including leadership development, coalition building, public campaigns, policy advocacy, and strategic partnerships. This work is both proactive and protective: it advances solutions that improve people's lives while resisting policies that deepen inequity, exclusion, and hardship.

# Organizing as the Pathway to Shared Power

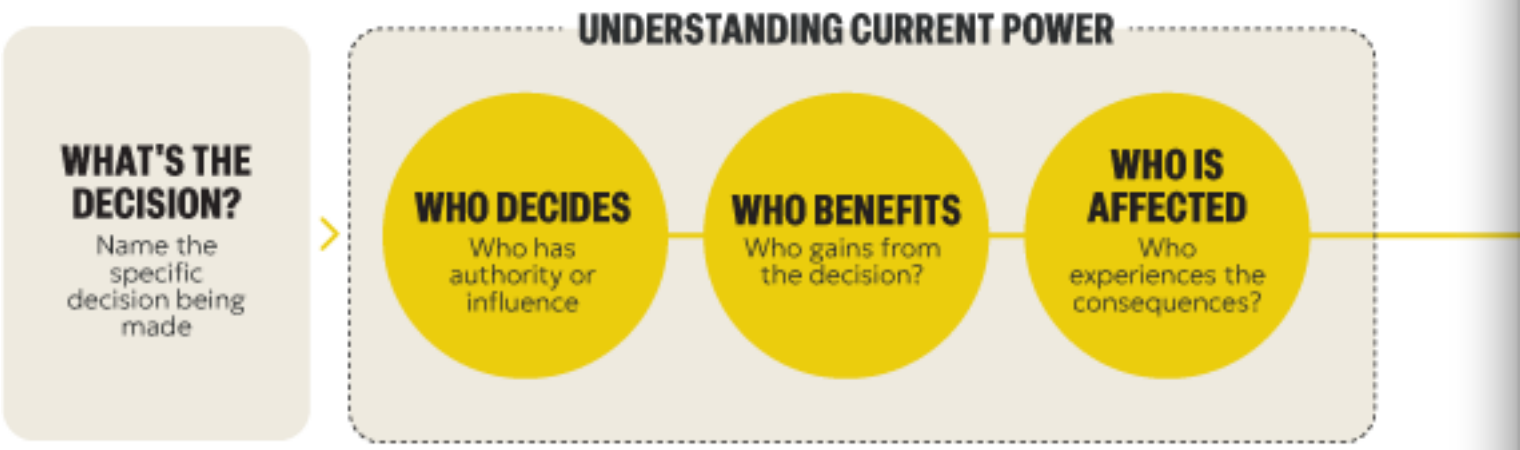
Co-governance must be understood as both an organizing project and a power-building project. It represents a shift away from traditional governance models, where residents are often invited to provide feedback only after decisions have already been shaped.

Instead, co-governance asks us to imagine a different role for residents: not as occasional participants on the periphery of decision-making, but as active partners in shaping the policies, budgets, and public systems that affect their daily lives. Democracy is more than just our civic ability to elect representatives. It also requires ongoing participation in decisions related to work, housing, neighborhood development, public services, and community well-being.

**Co-governance asks us to imagine a different role for residents: not as occasional participants on the periphery of decision-making, but as active partners in shaping the policies, budgets, and public systems that affect their daily lives.**

Organizing is essential to this shift in strategic and tactical outcomes. Relationship-building is foundational to co-governance because it creates the trust, accountability, and shared understanding necessary for collective action. Strong relationships alone do not constitute co-governance, but they create the conditions that allow communities and institutions to make decisions together and share responsibility for public outcomes. To be credible, these relationships must be transparent, reciprocal, accountable, and sustained over time. This is impossible without the commitment to organizing and the development of people's leadership. It requires intentional organizing through one-on-one conversations, committee meetings, assemblies, leadership development, and other practices that foster community members' sense of ownership, agency, and responsibility throughout the process.

# From Participation to Collective Power

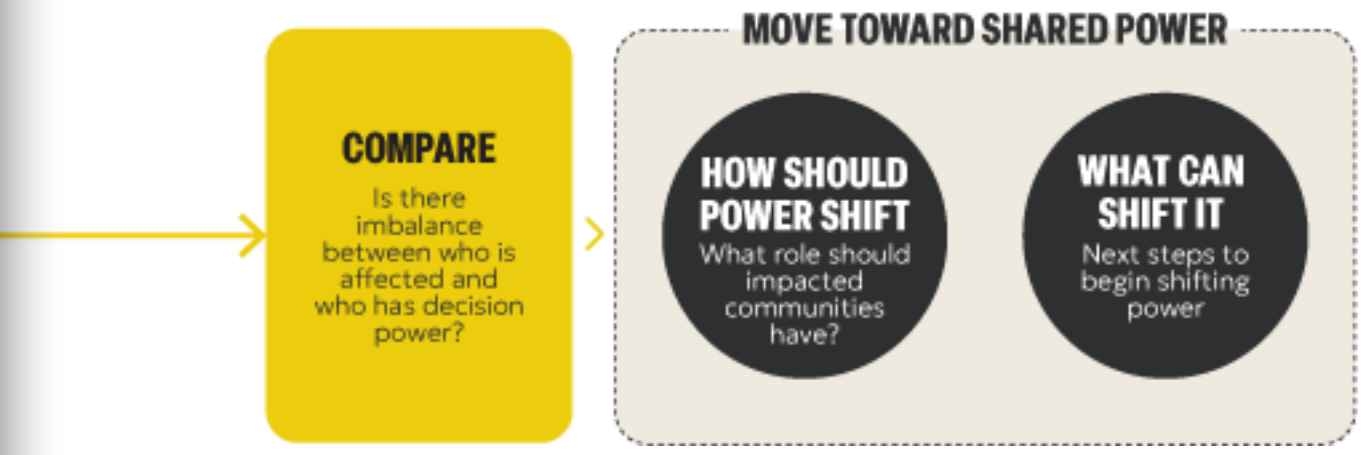



As with most powerbuilding projects and efforts that shift decision-making power toward the working class and historically marginalized communities, co-governance faces both internal and external challenges. Internally, communities may need time, support, and political education to build confidence, leadership, and a shared understanding of what they are fighting for. Externally, they may encounter institutions, political actors, or private interests that benefit from existing systems and are actively hostile to more inclusive forms of decision-making.

Organizing within co-governance should lead to concrete wins—such as shifts in public policy, governance practices, funding priorities, and public programs—that directly improve the material conditions of the majority while ensuring that individuals and communities are the active drivers of change. But co-governance is not only about achieving better outcomes; it is also about changing who has the power to shape those outcomes. Communities must believe in that change and develop a new understanding to approach it differently.

In the context of affordable housing, a hypothetical example might be to increase the number of affordable housing projects built. A co-governance approach asks deeper questions: Who decides where those projects are built? Who benefits from the jobs created? Are local workers paid living wages with benefits? Are residents trained for long-term employment opportunities? Do impacted communities help shape the design, implementation, and accountability measures for the project? By shifting the approach, organizing helps communities move beyond advocating for a single policy win. It ensures that community knowledge, lived experience, and leadership shape the decisions that determine how public solutions are designed and carried out.

This is one of the most difficult aspects of the work because it requires shifting the mindset of people who have, at times, grown resigned to our current system, one which many do not feel they are meaningfully part of. This can create distrust, or the belief that decisions will be made with or without them. Co-governance must therefore do more than design and implement new policies; it must also change our culture of




democracy so that everyday people claim their role as active participants in the decisions that affect their lives.

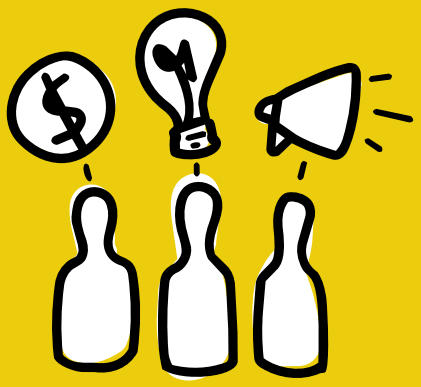
The new tools available through co-governance should be used to test different ideas that reinvigorate and expand our constituency, rather than simply putting new heads on old systems. A common challenge in organizing is balancing the pursuit of immediate victories with the longer-term work of building civic participation and leadership. It is often assumed that communities must first secure tangible wins, and that shifts in people's understanding of their role in democracy will follow. Co-governance requires a different approach: one that wins material improvements while transforming how people understand and exercise democratic power.

Organizing also helps communities build the collective power needed to challenge systems that consolidate decision-making in the hands of a small group—government, the wealthy, and corporate interests. Existing systems often reinforce established patterns of exclusion, and more inclusive governance rarely happens without sustained community pressure, clear demands, and organized participation.

Through organizing, communities can insist on decision-making processes that are more transparent, participatory, and accountable. As the policy design and implementation resulting from these relationships come to fruition, we force a shift in the status quo. Once officials and administrators witness the real-world effects of co-governance, they are no longer responding only to enthusiasm or goodwill; they are responding to a new collective standard for how decisions should be made. This is how we transform the culture of governance—transitioning from a model of exclusion to a sustainable, institutionalized partnership in which power is exercised collaboratively by government and the community.

## To work effectively, coalition partners need:



Clear Roles



Transparent Decision-making Processes



Accountability to Communities they Represent

# BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER with Municipal Partners

Organizing for co-governance happens at multiple levels. It includes organizing individuals who want to improve conditions, and building accountable relationships among organizations that represent or work alongside those communities. These may include labor unions, worker centers, neighborhood groups, parent associations, faith institutions, advocacy organizations, and municipal partners.

This cross-sector coalition work is essential because co-governance depends on more than individual participation. It requires organized groups that can bring community knowledge, political strategy, and sustained leadership into decision-making spaces. To work effectively, coalition partners need shared language, clear roles, transparent decision-making processes, and accountability to the communities they represent.

**From a municipalist perspective, these relationships are not just administrative partnerships; they are part of the political infrastructure that makes shared power possible.** They reflect a core organizing principle: communities are not collections of isolated individuals, but interdependent networks whose collective well-being is deeply connected.

Co-governance thrives on organized people working through powerful organizations, and making decisions that prioritize the common good and advance the well-being of all. Organizing is essential because co-governance is not merely a design on paper; it is a living, evolving project that requires committed and capable people who can adapt and respond as circumstances change.




**Co-governance represents a concrete and operational departure from conventional understandings of governance and democracy.**

# Participatory Design Tools from the Field

Central Florida Jobs with Justice uses a range of tools to help communities move from shared concerns to collective action. As stated, organizing is not just a material exercise, but a consciousness-shifting one. These resources offer the exact tools used daily to guide people through this transformation—a process that may be difficult to quantify, but is nothing short of essential. The tools referenced here are included in Chapter 5 as adaptable resources for organizing, outreach, campaign planning, and participatory decision-making.

Co-governance represents a concrete and operational departure from conventional understandings of governance and democracy. There is a fundamental tension between, first, individual civic participation and representation, and, second, the government's responsibility to secure public well-being—such as access to quality housing, gainful employment, and comprehensive healthcare. Co-governance does not treat the two as competing or separate. Instead, it recognizes that democracy is the ability and accessibility of both. Active participation in the governing process requires viewing neighborhoods and regions as interconnected communities working toward shared and mutually beneficial goals. This, in turn, demands a fundamentally different approach to community engagement-one that cannot be imagined or realized in, but must be built collectively through organizing.

Organizing and coalition-building help communities develop the relationships, leadership, and collective power necessary for shared governance. Yet power-building alone does not determine how communities and governments make decisions together. Once communities are organized and prepared to engage as partners, municipalities and public institutions must also adopt structures and practices that support collaboration.

The next chapter explores how municipalist approaches and co-creation methodologies can help translate collective power into co-governance in practice.

# 03

# Municipalism in Action: From Participation to Co-Creation

Chapters 1 and 2 establish that co-governance requires both a shared commitment to human rights and the collective power necessary to shift decision-making. Once these conditions exist, municipal governments and communities must determine how to govern together in practice and translate shared power into collaborative action.

This chapter introduces a municipalist approach to co-governance. It presents La Constructora, a structured methodology for co-creation, shared decision-making, and collaborative implementation designed by la Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico (La Liga).

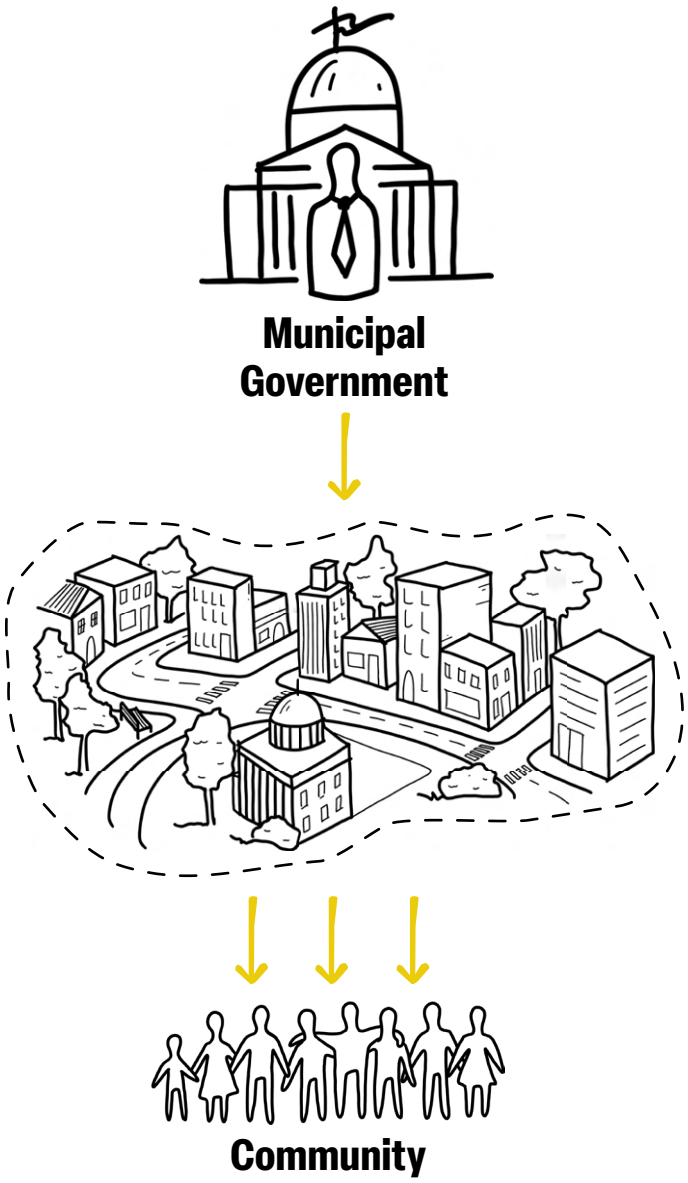
# MUNICIPALISM 101

## Why Municipalism Creates the Conditions for Co-Governance

Municipalism, as a governance model, strengthens democratic processes by transforming how decisions are made, solutions are developed, and change is implemented. Going beyond traditional political and public processes that lean toward top-down approaches, municipalism introduces co-governance by prioritizing community participation in transforming their realities. Informed by local experiences, municipal priorities are shaped by what communities identify as essential to their collective well-being. By centering local leadership and impact, governance is understood as a network of collaboration in which local government goes beyond administrative functions to bring in people for shared power, accountability, and responsiveness in stewarding public services and infrastructure.[9]

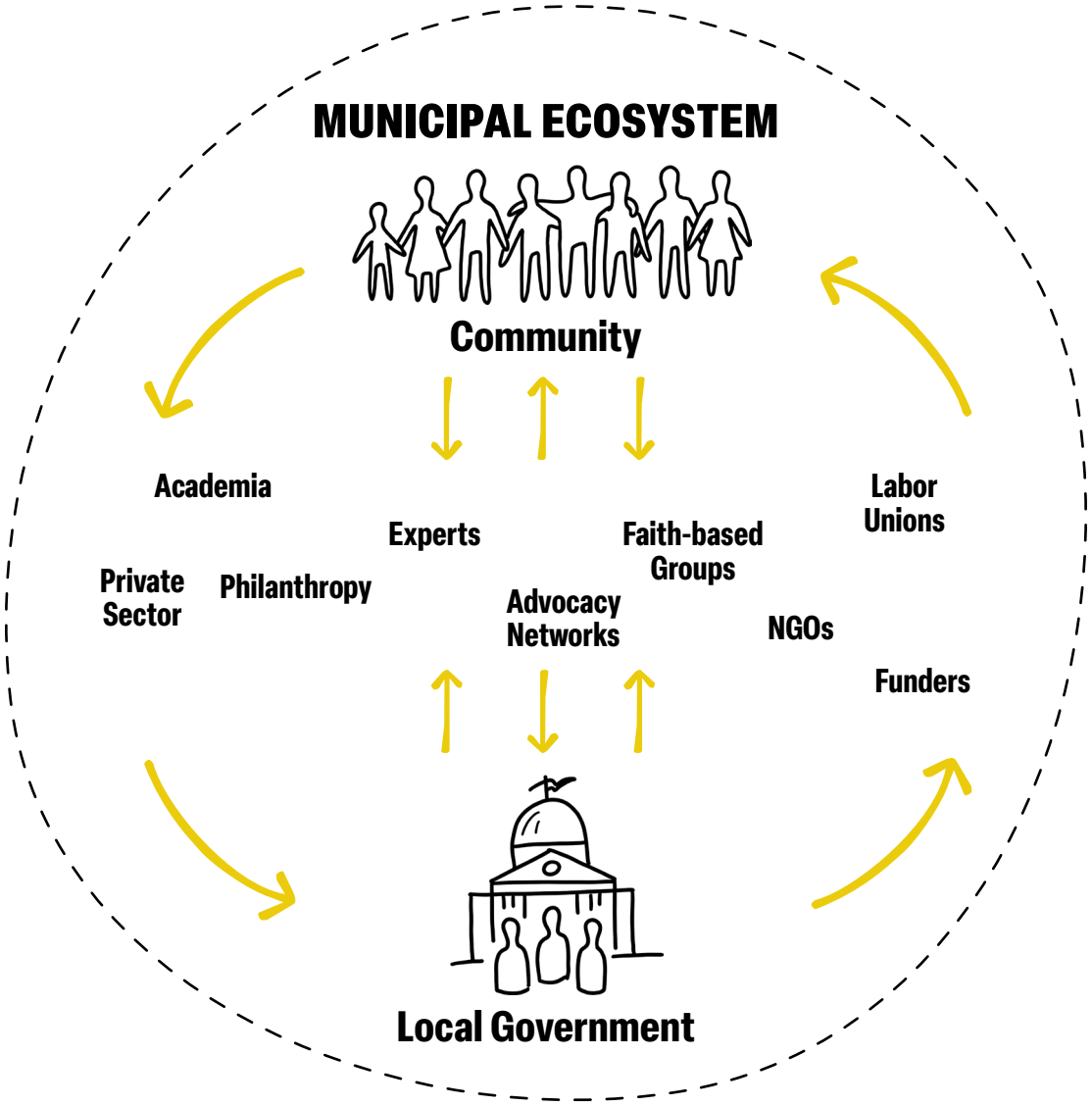
La Liga's approach operationalizes this collaborative network by engaging the entire municipal ecosystem, intentionally bringing together institutional leaders—the mayor, municipal staff, and the legislature—with community residents, academia, the private sector, and NGOs. This ensures that those most harmed by structural inequities have a meaningful role in shaping change toward more just and equitable outcomes.

## Traditional View of a Municipality



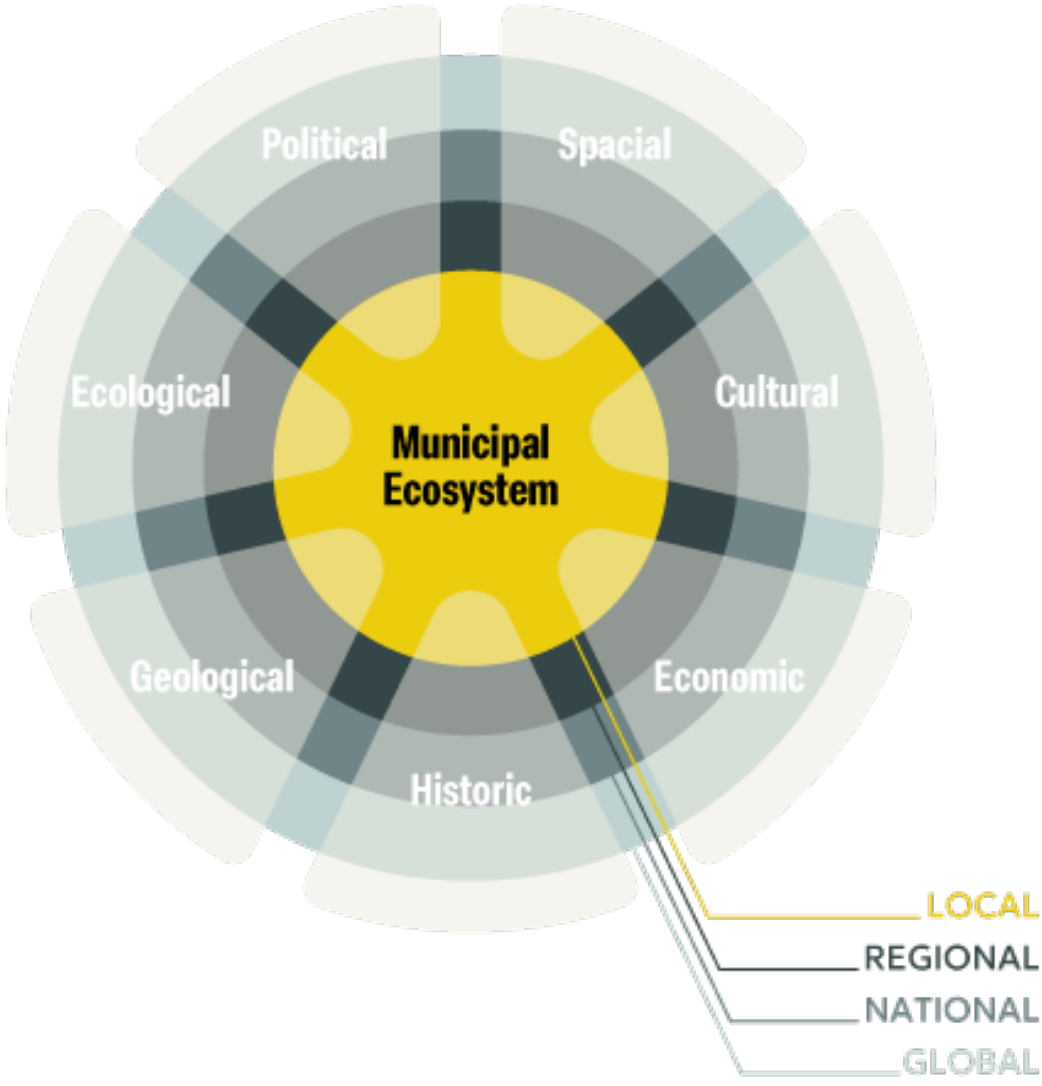

- Administrative Unit
- Geographic Territory
- Government/Mayor-centric
- Top-down Decisions
- Residents as Recipients

# How Co-Governance Shifts Traditional Dynamics




- Interdependent Actors
- Community + Government + Institutions
- Shared Responsibility
- Collective Problem-solving
- Residents as Right-holders + Co-creators

While municipalism centers the local as the space where needs are experienced and solutions can become tangible, municipal ecosystems do not operate in isolation. Political, economic, cultural, historical, spatial, and environmental conditions intersect at the local level, while decisions and forces operating at regional, national, and global scales can shape what municipalities and communities are able to do. Co-governance must therefore remain rooted in place while recognizing and responding to these broader systems of influence.




*Adapted from NatGeo Education*

**El Lab and the Municipal Ecosystem**
To operationalize this approach, La Liga developed its Municipal Innovation Lab (El Lab) as a space for learning, innovation, and developing co-governance in Puerto Rican municipalities. Considering that municipalities provide fertile ground for developing new forms of governance—given their direct relationship with residents, clearly identifiable needs, and capacity to develop, test, and adapt new ideas without incurring significant risk—El Lab transforms ideas into structured, practical, and replicable solutions through tailored tools and methodologies. These tools and methodologies advance co-governance by strengthening local governments while intentionally connecting them with the broader municipal ecosystems in which they operate.

Across its different areas of work, El Lab, it builds the infrastructure needed for participation, responsiveness, and innovation:

- Municipal Assessment: This bridges how the government operates with the needs of communities through our Municipal Good Governance Standards, highlighting both areas of strength and opportunities for improvement.
- Case Studies: These build institutional memory and capacity simultaneously by capturing successful responses to emerging needs and identifying practices that can be adapted and replicated in other municipalities.
- La Constructora: Transforms participation from a one-time event into a sustainable, action-driven system. By applying a municipalist framework to "wicked problems," it provides a rigorous process for identifying stakeholders, co-designing solutions, and piloting them through iterative feedback loops. Rather than relying on endless consultation, this approach shifts the focus to tangible impact. It ensures that participants see concrete, incremental results in real-time, thus effectively countering participation fatigue, fostering genuine excitement, and sustaining the collective momentum required for long-term governance.

By centering concrete, equity-driven participation rather than symbolic engagement, it begins to create a functional system from parts that were once siloed. In doing so, El Lab gradually cultivates new forms of co-governance, helping municipalities evolve from top-down hierarchies into more interconnected and collaborative systems.

**Municipalism, as a governance model, strengthens democratic processes by transforming how decisions are made, solutions are developed, and change is implemented.**

## Guardrails for Shared Power:

# STANDARDS FOR GOOD MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

Co-governance requires clearly defined principles that guard against tokenism, ensure accountability, and build trust. In response, La Liga developed a framework for good municipal governance, informed by research, best practices, and local leaders with firsthand experience in Puerto Rican municipalities.[10]

Through a participatory process, La Liga developed its 10 Standards of Good Municipal Governance and ensured that each standard:

- Was locally informed and had a clear definition based on research, best practices, and local experience.
- Provided criteria that a municipal government would need to meet to achieve a transformational state and tend to community needs.
- Aimed to nurture justice and equity in its communities.

The Standards are not intended as a deficit-based or punitive measure of municipal performance. Rather, they provide a context-based framework that recognizes the different conditions, capacities, resources, and constraints within which municipalities operate. Their purpose is to identify existing strengths, opportunities for growth, and areas where additional support may be needed, while providing a practical pathway toward more just, equitable, and effective governance.

Assessing municipalities against these standards and providing them with tailored recommendations based on their performance strengthens local governments and enhances their ability to serve as effective stewards of public resources while delivering reliable, equitable, and responsive services for more just communities. The assessment also helps identify and document best practices and lessons learned that can be shared across municipalities, allowing successful approaches to be replicated or adapted according to local needs, resources, and capacity. In doing so, it also helps shift the narrative around municipal capacity by making visible what local governments are already capable of accomplishing. In many cases, the capacity exists; what is missing are the resources, tools, and support needed to activate and sustain it.




*10 Standards for Good Municipal Governance developed by Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico*

# Sharing What Works: Case Studies on Innovative Practices

Developing and strengthening co-governance requires a shift in perspective that invites communities not only to scale practices but also to reflect on what works and could work to enhance equity and justice in their communities. Given the context of centralized power characterized by austerity, lack of transparency, and inequitable resource distribution, a view of passive, individualistic citizenship, resource scarcity, and a disconnected government dominates. In response, the second component in El Lab seeks to change this narrative by documenting counter-narratives to this viewpoint.

Through La Liga's Case Studies in Innovative Practices methodology, we identify good governance standards where a local government has shown transformative and innovative execution, and systematically document their process with two purposes:

- Document local government strengths and local-based knowledge with guidelines that can be easily adapted and scaled to similar contexts and municipalities, and
- Nurture a counter-narrative that highlights co-governance qualities that are already being practiced in municipalities, demonstrating that it can be done.













*Click here to read more on the above Case Studies*

# LA CONSTRUCTORA

## A Method for Co-governance

Many participatory methods have emerged to advance co-governance in municipalities,[11] [12] [13] [14] many of which respond to three structural issues:

- Centrally imposed austerity measures have significantly constrained local governments' capacity to perform core administrative functions and provide essential services.
- The relationship between local governments and their residents has often been shaped by paternalistic rather than collaborative models of governance.
- Increasingly volatile political and climate conditions demand more adaptive and responsive forms of decision-making.

In response, these approaches provide tools for building relational infrastructure, facilitating shared decision-making, and fostering cross-sector collaboration and agreements.

Puerto Rican municipalities experience these structural challenges firsthand. A Fiscal Control and Management Board imposed by the US Congress has shaped municipal budgets with limited regard for local priorities. Meanwhile, recurring natural disasters and prolonged fiscal instability have intensified community vulnerabilities, even as a rapidly aging population increasingly turns to municipal governments to fulfill basic needs and sustain everyday well-being. Acknowledging these structural pressures and resource limitations confronting most Puerto Rican municipalities, La Liga has designed La Constructora ("*The Builder*"): a participatory methodology that responds to the reality of our municipalities while fostering deeper collaboration between communities and local governments.

**La Constructora Methodology**

Designed by La Liga in direct response to Puerto Rico's current needs and resources, La Constructora is a structured yet adaptable methodology that helps municipalities move from passive participation to active shared decision-making. Adapted from HUMANTIFIC's Strategic Co-Creation methodology within its Complexity Navigation Program,[15] and layered with a systems lens and participatory design practices attuned to the Puerto Rican context, La Constructora seeks to overcome structural barriers and engage broader municipal ecosystems in co-designing solutions alongside local governments.

The process begins with the formation of "La Mesa" (the municipal table), a collaborative body composed of members of the municipal ecosystem and expert partners. Through three distinct phases, La Constructora lays the foundation for intentional relational work, open communication, co-design, joint decision-making, and transparent governance—transforming fragmented actors into a more interconnected municipal ecosystem.

La Constructora is a seven-step method organized into three phases: Clarify, Co-Create, and Implement.[16]

Phase 1 | Clarify

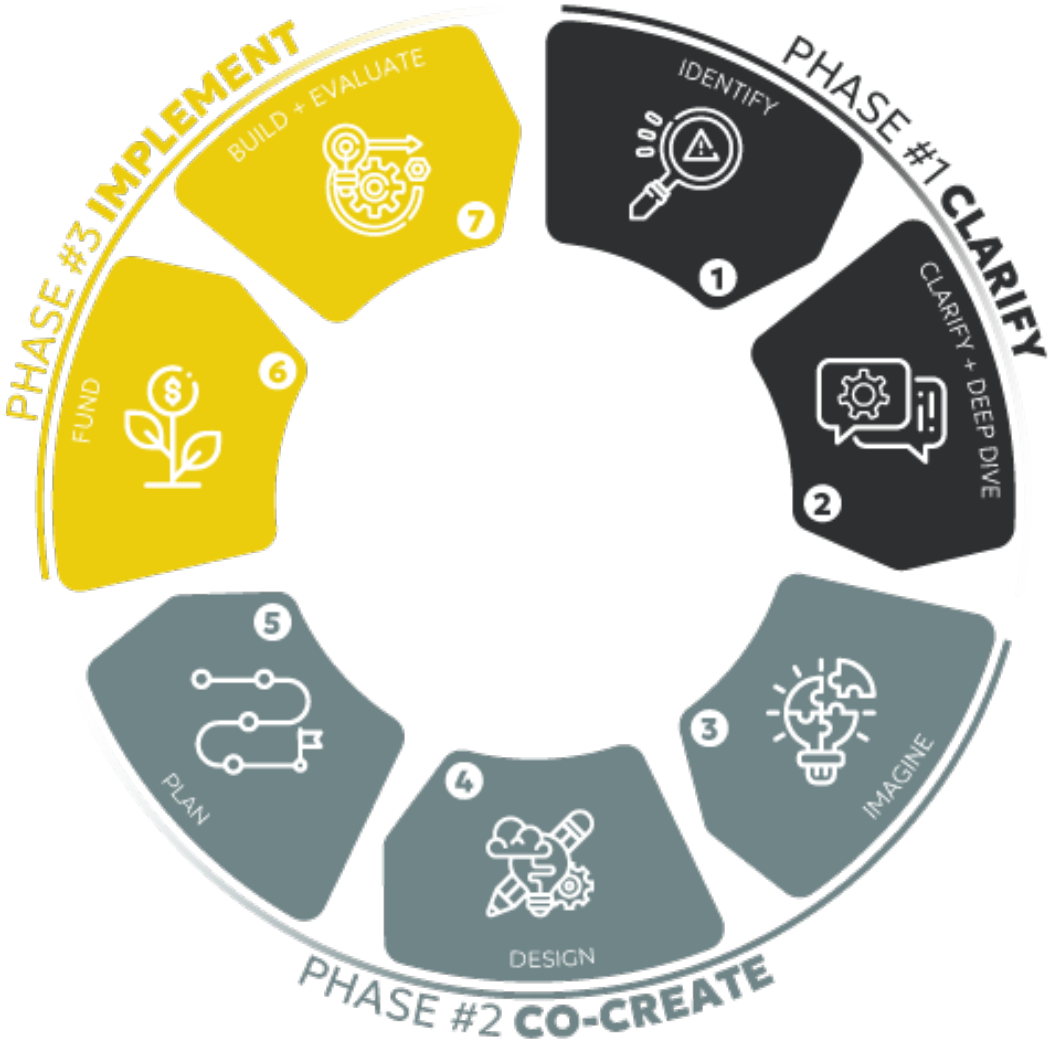
This phase brings the municipal table (La Mesa) into being and builds a shared understanding of the challenge. It names the problem to be solved, maps who is affected and who has been left out of the conversation so far, and identifies the local expert partners who will consult on the issue. By the end, all members of La Mesa share a baseline understanding of the problem and its root causes.

Phase 2 | Co-Create

This phase moves La Mesa from open ideation to a concrete, actionable proposal. Local expert partners advise throughout, but do not hold decision-making power — that stays with La Mesa.

Phase 3 | Implement

This phase supports La Mesa in identifying and securing resources, piloting the solution, and assessing its impact to inform future iterations.




Across all seven steps, the process alternates between two complementary practices: Divergence, where the group generates the widest possible range of ideas, perspectives, and facts without judgment or filtering; and Convergence, where the group analyzes, prioritizes, and synthesizes that material into a shared decision. This rhythm — open first, then narrow, repeated at every step — is designed to surface a genuine diversity of knowledge before any decision is made, and to ensure that no single sector's perspective dominates the process.

La Mesa itself is intentionally sized at 5 to 8 members representing the relevant sectors of the municipal ecosystem — community leadership, municipal staff, nonprofit organizations, and others directly connected to or impacted by the problem. La Mesa members hold voting and decision-making power throughout the process. Subject-matter experts may also be invited to specific steps (primarily Steps 2, 3, and 5) to inform and contextualize the discussion with technical knowledge—but their role is strictly consultative; they do not vote or hold decision-making power during Convergence. This distinction is intentional: it ensures that technical expertise strengthens the conversation without displacing the authority of those with lived experience of the challenge.

Throughout the process, La Liga's facilitation team plays a deliberately limited role: it provides methodology, materials, technical assistance, and support in identifying funding—but La Liga does not propose the solutions. That responsibility belongs entirely to La Mesa. This constraint is not incidental; it is what keeps La Constructora a co-governance tool rather than a consultation exercise dressed up as one.

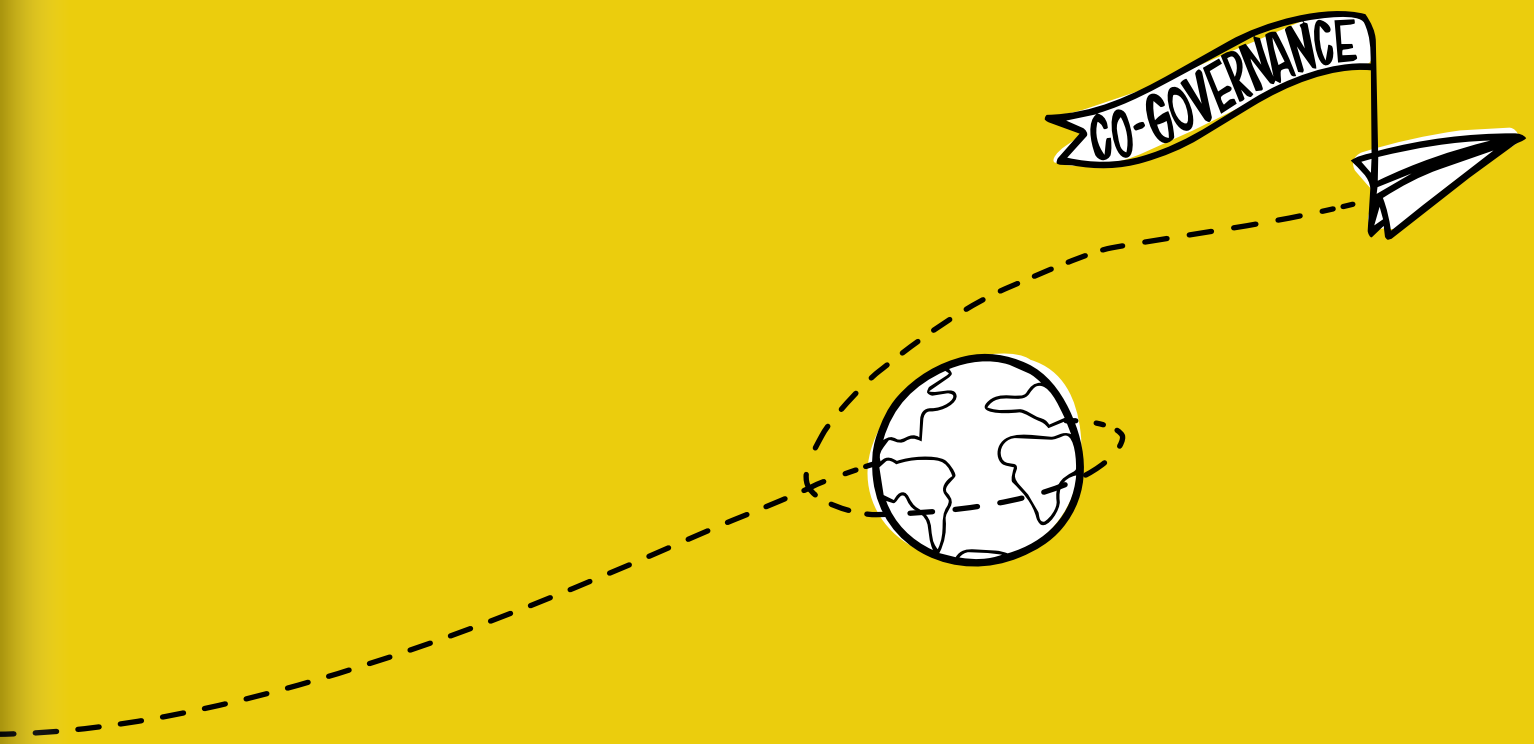
La Constructora can be facilitated in different formats depending on a municipality's capacity and needs—most commonly either a six-week process with one three-hour session per week, or a more intensive format compressed into a half day, two full days, and a closing half day. Regardless of pacing, the depth of the process—and La Mesa's authority over its outcomes—remains constant.

## What This Can Look Like

# ELSEWHERE

Municipalism is inherently adaptable; co-governance must respond to local context, and successful models must be adapted rather than simply replicated.

Co-governance is neither the work of institutions alone nor the work of movements alone. It is forged in the space between them—through relationships, negotiation, and shared responsibility. Once municipalities and communities have begun to build the collective power, methods, and structures needed for co-creation, the next challenge is sustaining the relationships, accountability practices, and governance arrangements that allow that work to last. Chapter 5 explores how co-governance can move from project-based collaboration to long-term democratic practice.


CO-GOVERNANCE

# 04

# Sustaining Co-Governance: From Practice to Long-term Change

# Co-Governance as an Ongoing Practice

Co-governance is not a single initiative or a fixed structure. It is an evolving practice. As relationships deepen and new challenges emerge, governance structures must adapt to reflect changing needs and priorities. This requires flexibility, continuous learning, and shared accountability between municipal governments and communities.

Chapters 1 through 3 introduced the principles, power-building strategies, and methodologies that support co-governance. However, sustaining shared governance requires intentional effort beyond initial implementation. Municipalities and communities must continue to build relationships, adapt to changing conditions, and strengthen collaborative structures over time.

Viewed through a municipalist lens, this is where co-governance becomes more than a project or process. It becomes part of how local democracy is practiced. Municipal governments are close enough to communities to understand needs, test new approaches, and adapt quickly. But this proximity only becomes transformative when communities are organized, public institutions act openly in shared decision-making, and both sides have structures that enable collaboration to continue over time.

This chapter highlights key considerations for sustaining co-governance and strengthening partnerships between municipalities and organized communities, with examples and lessons woven throughout to show how these practices can be adapted across different local contexts.

**Co-governance is not a single initiative or a fixed structure. It is an evolving practice. As relationships deepen and new challenges emerge, governance structures must adapt to reflect changing needs and priorities.**

# Building Trust & Shared Accountability

Trust is foundational to co-governance. Building trust requires transparency, clear roles, and shared responsibility. Municipalities and communities must establish processes that allow for ongoing dialogue, mutual accountability, and collaborative decision-making. As trust deepens and relationships strengthen, municipalities and communities can begin to design shared governance structures that support long-term collaboration.

Within municipalism, trust is also built through consistency. Communities need to know that their time, knowledge, and participation will be taken seriously. Municipal governments, in turn, need clear processes that help them engage communities in ways that are organized, transparent, and actionable. This means being honest from the beginning about what decisions are open for discussion, what resources are available, what limitations exist, and how community input will influence next steps.

A co-governance initiative often begins with a meeting. A few community members might meet with government representatives, and a relationship begins to form. Or a government official reaches out to a community group, and they begin to talk. The immediate questions arise: “Are these the right people to be working with on this project?” and “Can I work with them?” and “What could we accomplish together that we can’t do on our own?” And then the real work begins: building a working relationship based on trust and accountability.

For municipal governments, this early stage is also a time to clarify. Staff and officials should be able to explain why the process is being convened, who has decision-making authority, what information will be shared, and how participation will be reflected in action. Without that clarity, even well-intentioned engagement can reproduce frustration or distrust.

“Working at the speed of trust” is a cliché because it’s true. Often, when community groups are working for the first time with government, there are painful histories and past harms that need to be acknowledged and addressed. Sitting at a table together, working on a project with goodwill and respect, does not erase the past. On the community side, pain, distrust, and anger can be sitting at that table alongside them. On the government side, arrogance, skepticism, and impatience often manifest as institutional pushback. This resistance shows up through specific doubts regarding community capability and timeline efficiency, raising questions such as: How can technical responsibilities be shared without dismissing community expertise? Will collaborative efforts simply slow things down? How can community members effectively engage with dense technical or legal information? And why revisit past harms when there is urgent work to move forward?

Once the seeds of trust have been planted, there are often mismatches in pacing and bandwidth. A government agency will hand a thirty-page resolution to an all-volunteer coalition and expect feedback in days. Meanwhile, the coalition members are meeting during their free time on evenings and weekends, painstakingly going over the wording sentence by sentence, trying to reach consensus fist-to-five style. It takes three hours to go through three pages, but the government folks are wondering what is taking them so long.

Or a community group is raring to go on a project, but they are waiting for the city council office to okay the language. The city council office is short-staffed and in the middle of budget negotiations in city hall, and isn’t responding to texts and emails. Everyone is frustrated, and nerves are frayed. If the trust doesn’t already exist, if there aren’t solid relationships already established, this is when the project peters out and dies.

Experience working with municipal partners shows that these pacing challenges are not always signs of resistance. Sometimes they reflect real differences in capacity, legal requirements, budget cycles, staff availability, or administrative procedures. Naming these conditions early can prevent misunderstanding. It also helps communities and municipalities create realistic, transparent timelines that are respectful of everyone’s labor.

If possible, it helps to have a group, often a nonprofit, that is skilled in facilitation and is viewed as a neutral party who can act as a mediator for the initiative. When tensions rise or things get stuck, the group can talk privately with both sides and keep things moving. One of the key examples examined in Chapter 1 illustrates these dynamics in practice through the Community Schools initiative in Los Angeles. This initiative has embraced shared decision-making through a steering committee that includes all the major stakeholders. The district and the teachers' union sit on the steering committee together, but there is a rocky history and some residual distrust. Because of this, the steering committee is co-convened by UNITE-LA, a trusted non-profit that can help everyone work through conflict and tensions and keep the initiative moving forward.

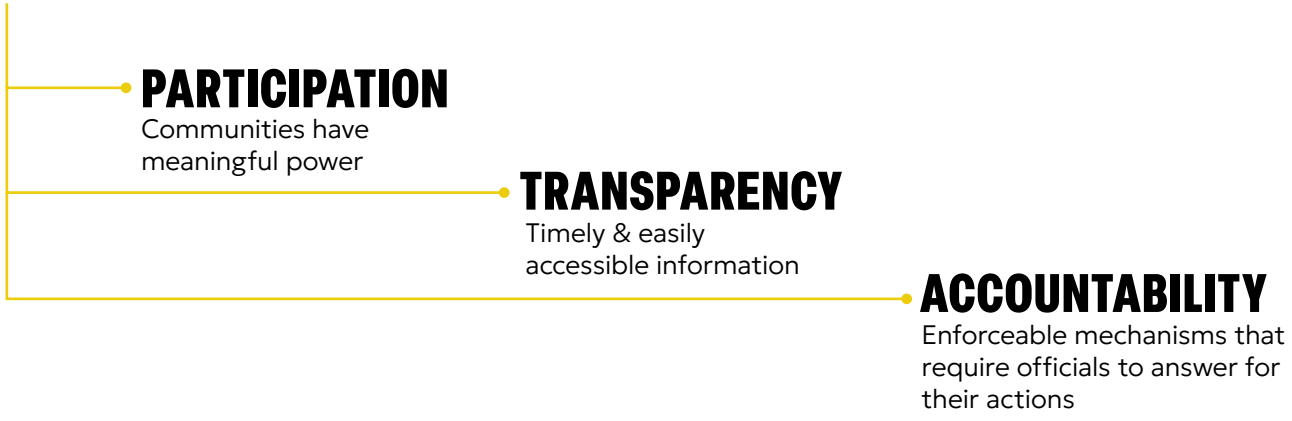
In Puerto Rico, intermediary organizations often support municipalities and community actors create structured spaces for dialogue, shared analysis, and co-design. This kind of facilitation can help translate between technical information, municipal processes, and community priorities so that all participants are better positioned to engage substantively.

While relationship building and trust are important aspects of any co-governance approach, they are not enough on their own. Co-governance must also be rooted in the values of participation, transparency, and accountability. It should be participatory in that community members have a real ability to shape decisions that affect their lives, including having meaningful, institutionalized power to co-determine the policies and laws that affect them. It should be transparent such that community members are provided with timely, accessible information to enable them to identify problems and solutions, and to engage in decision-making with real influence. And there should be accountability, with enforceable mechanisms that hold officials accountable for their actions (and inactions) and trigger changes in their approach when failures occur.

**Co-governance must also be rooted in the values of participation, transparency, and accountability.**

Accountability is often one of the most difficult aspects of co-governance to achieve. Still, it is vital because successful co-governance requires an iterative process of learning, correction, and adaptation. When a new project is getting off the ground for the first time, there will inevitably be mistakes, obstacles, and miscalculations. Sometimes, good policy initially stumbles at the implementation stage. Another case study detailed in Chapter 1 examines how collaborative governance can adapt to rapid scaling, as seen in the implementation of the Portland Clean Energy Fund. In Portland, a ballot initiative created the Portland Clean Energy Fund, adding a 1% tax on retail sales of large corporations in the city, with the money going to address social, racial, and environmental justice gaps. As required by the ballot initiative, the city convened a committee of residents, community leaders, and issue experts to help oversee the fund. The tax was expected to raise $60 million a year; instead, it raised $200 million. With so much more money than expected, the committee overseeing the project had to rethink how—and how quickly—they allocated it. The PCEF Committee worked closely with city staff and created a Climate Investment Plan in 2023 that now guides the Fund's investment strategy. The city also convened advisory councils and working groups to engage labor unions, contractors, and other stakeholders in shaping the fund's grantmaking strategy, and created a mini-grant program to help build organizational capacity in low-income communities of color.

This kind of accountability requires access to reliable information and a process for adjusting when conditions change. For municipalities, that means creating feedback loops that enable community members, technical experts, and public officials to review what is working, identify what is not, and revise strategies without abandoning the larger commitment to shared governance.



# Designing Shared Governance Structures

Establishing co-governance often begins with designing shared governance structures such as working groups, advisory bodies, steering committees, or co-design tables. These structures create space for collaboration, clarify roles, and support shared decision-making between municipalities and communities. From a municipalist perspective, these structures are most effective when they are not treated as symbolic participation spaces, but as working spaces where community knowledge, technical expertise, and municipal capacity can come together to shape decisions and implementation.

These structures may begin informally and evolve. Early collaboration spaces help build trust and shared understanding, which can later develop into more formal and sustained governance arrangements. The goal is not to create rigid systems, but to establish collaborative mechanisms that reflect local needs, capacities, and decision-making cultures. A useful structure should be clear enough to build trust, and flexible enough to adapt as conditions change.

One early step may involve agreeing on a written resolution or memorandum of understanding (MOU). These documents can clarify key issues such as decision-making structures, roles and responsibilities, funding, communication practices, timelines, and even shared values. If strong agreement already exists in another context, adapt it carefully to reflect local needs, authority, and accountability structures. For example, when San Diego was establishing its own community schools initiative, it adapted much of the language from Los Angeles' MOU into its own resolution.

When creating decision-making structures, such as steering committees or co-design tables, it is important to make sure directly impacted rights-holders are included, especially those who have been historically

marginalized. The Baltimore Affordable Housing Trust Fund, described in Chapter 1, is overseen by a 12-member commission weighted to the low-income community, with four seats reserved for low-income persons and three others for advocates.

At the same time, these structures also need municipal representatives who are positioned to move the work forward. This may include staff or officials with relevant information, implementation responsibility, or enough authority to connect the process to municipal decision-making. A strong structure can also bring together actors with different perspectives or competing priorities. The purpose is not to eliminate disagreement, but to create a process where disagreements can be surfaced, negotiated, and addressed in ways that lead to more informed and legitimate decisions.

**From a municipalist perspective, these structures are most effective when they are not treated as symbolic participation spaces, but as working spaces where community knowledge, technical expertise, and municipal capacity can come together to shape decisions and implementation.**

# Sustaining & Institutionalizing Collaboration

Over time, collaborative structures may become institutionalized through policies, regular convenings, or formal agreements. This helps ensure that co-governance continues beyond individual leaders, political cycles, or specific initiatives. Sustaining co-governance is what transforms collaborative initiatives into lasting democratic practice.

Institutional memory is another critical condition for sustaining collaboration. Municipalities and their ecosystem partners need mechanisms to capture what was tried, what worked, what did not, and what should be adapted so that learning is not lost across projects or administrations. This is especially important in contexts where leadership changes, staff capacity is limited, or communities are repeatedly asked to participate without seeing continuity between efforts.

As intermediary organizations mature, their governance and relationships with municipal leaders often evolve from being primarily mayor-led to becoming more mayor-informed and centered on the broader municipal ecosystem. Mayors and municipal leaders remain essential partners, but they are not the only holders of municipal knowledge or authority. A stronger co-governance approach recognizes the full municipal ecosystem: residents, community organizations, municipal staff, institutions, and other local actors who shape collective wellbeing.

This evolution reflects a key lesson: public leadership matters, but it cannot be the sole foundation for shared governance. Collaborative structures must be strong enough to include elected officials while remaining accountable to communities and resilient through political transitions.

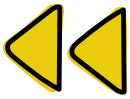
Sustaining collaboration also requires resources. Co-governance takes time. It requires facilitation, coordination, communication, access to reliable information, translation of technical concepts, follow-up, and evaluation. If these responsibilities are not resourced, they often fall on already-stretched community members, nonprofit staff, or municipal workers. Long-term collaboration becomes more realistic when municipalities and partners identify the required capacity and plan for it from the outset.

From an organizing perspective, sustaining co-governance also requires community continuity. Formal structures are important, but they are only as strong as the organized communities that can participate in them over time. This requires ongoing leadership development, base-building, political education, coalition maintenance, and clear accountability to the people most affected by the issues at stake. Without that organizing infrastructure, co-governance can become dependent on a few individuals or organizations. With it, communities are better positioned to remain engaged across leadership transitions, policy cycles, and implementation challenges.

The tools that follow in Chapter 5 are designed to help readers move from concept to practice. They can be used individually or together, depending on where a municipality, community organization, or coalition is in its co-governance process.

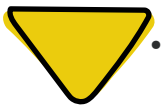
Before moving into the tools, take a moment to look back across the arc this toolkit has traced so far — from naming the problem to organizing power to co-creating solutions to sustaining them over time.

## LOOKING BACK



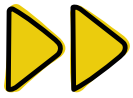
- Which idea challenged your current thinking the most?
- Which questions were hardest for you to answer honestly? What did that difficulty tell you about where your co-governance work actually stands right now?

## TAKING STOCK



- Based on your answers so far: do you have a wicked problem named, a coalition forming, a methodology in mind, and a plan for sustaining it — or are there still gaps? Where are they?
- If you had to start using the tools in Chapter 5 tomorrow, what's the one relationship, agreement, or piece of groundwork you'd want in place first?

## MOVING FORWARD



- What would it look like, six months from now, to know this co-governance effort is working — not just that a project got done, but that power is genuinely being shared?
- Who else needs to read this toolkit, or be part of this conversation, before you take the next step?

# 05

# Tools, Templates & Resources

# How To Use This Toolbox?

Use these tools your way.

The practical tools in this toolkit are modular. Use the tool that best matches the question, challenge, or stage you are working on. The PT numbers loosely follow the arc of a co-governance initiative, but they are not required steps and do not need to be completed in order. You may follow that path when useful, skip tools that do not apply, begin wherever your current needs take you, return to earlier tools as conditions change, or complement them with other resources.

Some tools are designed for ongoing use or for specific situations, and not every project will need every tool. Used together, they can support a more comprehensive co-governance process; used independently, each can help address a specific need.

When you reach a question you are not yet ready to answer, look for the “Need help with this?” note, which points to another tool that may help.

## Understanding the Issue, Power & Readiness

- PT01 - Is This a Wicked Problem Quick Scan
- PT02 - Who Worksheet
- PT03 - Municipal Readiness & First-Step Scan

## Organizing People & Aligning Partners

- PT04 - Coalition Alignment Checklist
- PT05 - Monthly Organizing Practices

*Additional Organizing Resources*

- Action in a Box Template
- Campaign Planning Worksheet

## Building the Co-Governance Structure

- PT06 - La Mesa Formation Guide
- PT07 - Shared Governance Agreement Builder

## Planning, Implementing, & Learning Together

- Human Rights-based Budget Worksheet - *Specialized tool*
- Action & Learning Tracker - *Ongoing tool*

## Field Examples & Further Resources

- Education Justice Alliance Engagement Form - *Sample engagement infrastructure*
- Education Justice Alliance Parent Survey - *Sample outreach/listening tool*
- EJA Timeline 2021 - *Historical example*
- School to prison pipeline - *Issue education & facilitation deck*
- Organized Labor Deep Support - *Narrative power-building guide*
- Co-governing Map - *Interactive case study map*
- Coalition Membership Toolkit - *Coalition-building resource*

# ENDNOTES


1 Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico, *Legislating Under Fiscal Oversight: A Public Policy Report Reviewed by the Fiscal Oversight Board* (2026), https://www.ligadeciudadespr.com/general-8.

2 Ismael Blanco and Ricard Gomà, "Nuevo municipalismo, movimientos urbanos e impactos políticos," *Desacatos: Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, no. 61 (2019): 56–69, https://doi.org/10.29340/61.2132.

3 Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998, the *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (commonly known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders) affirms the right of everyone to peacefully advocate for human rights. It establishes that while individuals and communities have a vital role in advancing these rights, the State holds the primary responsibility to protect them from violence, retaliation, or discrimination as they do so.

4 Ronald Reagan, "The President's News Conference," August 12, 1986, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/presidents-news-conference-23.

5 Congressional Research Service, "Modern Doctrine on Supremacy Clause," *Constitution Annotated*, Article VI, Clause 2, Congress.gov, https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/artVI-C2-3-4/ALDE_00013402/; National League of Cities, *Principles of Home Rule for the 21st Century* (2020), https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Home-Rule-Principles-ReportWEB-2-1.pdf.

6 Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until 1898, when the Treaty of Paris ended the Spanish-American War and Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States. Puerto Rico has since remained under U.S. sovereignty as an unincorporated territory. The phrase "oldest colony" reflects scholarly and decolonial framing of Puerto Rico's continuous colonial/territorial status, including José Trías Monge's *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*. See U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, "The Spanish-American War, 1898," https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/spanish-american-war"; Library of Congress, "The Changing of the Guard: Puerto Rico in 1898," https://guides.loc.gov/world-of-1898/puerto-rico-overview; and Yale University Press, *Puerto Rico: The Trials of the Oldest Colony in the World*, https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300076189/puerto-rico/.

7 Under the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), the federal government imposed an unelected fiscal control board over Puerto Rico—an explicit instrument of colonial governance available only against U.S. territories, such as Guam or the U.S. Virgin Islands. While PROMESA is territory-specific, the broader model of stripping elected officials of fiscal authority through unelected oversight bodies has also been used by states against marginalized, low-income, and minority-led municipalities in the mainland United States. Puerto Rico serves as the testing ground, but PROMESA's statutory framework—including Sections 3, 5, and 101—shows how such a structure can be imposed on other U.S. territories. Framing PROMESA as an exportable tool of disenfranchisement underscores why dismantling it matters beyond Puerto Rico.

8 Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1973): 155–169, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01405730.

9 Juan Mérida and Imanol Tellería, "¿Una nueva forma de hacer política? Modos de gobernanza participativa y 'Ayuntamientos del Cambio' en España (2015–2019)," *Gestión y Análisis de Políticas Públicas*, no. 26 (2021): 92–110, https://doi.org/10.24965/gapp.i26.10841; Juan Mérida Conde, *Nuevo municipalismo y gobernanza participativa en España* (2015–2019): *Un análisis desde el enfoque estratégico relacional* (doctoral thesis, Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea, 2022), https://addi.ehu.es/handle/10810/57288

10 HR&A Advisors, "Proposed Operational Approach to La Constructora's Ten Good Governance Standards for Puerto Rican Municipalities," memorandum prepared for Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico, September 1, 2023, updated September 24, 2023.

11 IdeaScale, "The Innovation Brief | Ep. 28: What Is Participatory Government?," YouTube video, June 20, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHEBgEX8RBs.

12 People Powered, *Participation Playbook*, accessed July 30, 2026, https://participationplaybook.org/

13 Partners for Dignity & Rights, "Co-Governing Toward Multiracial Democracy: Co-Governance and Participatory Democracy in Action," February 25, 2023, https://dignityandrights.org/2023/02/co-governing-in-action/.

14 Sahadev Gautam and Salina Lamichhane, "'Co' as Governance: A Framework for Participatory Public Policy," *Asian Review of Public Administration* (ARPA) 34, no. 2 (2026): 103–116, https://doi.org/10.64423/arpa.v34i2.91.

15 HUMANTIFIC, "Complexity Navigation Program," accessed August 20, 2026, https://www.humantific.com/complexity-navigation-program-1.

16 Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico, *La Constructora: Guía de Facilitación* (2026), internal document.

## CONTINUE THE WORK

Governing Together is intended as a starting point. Explore the work of the organizations behind this toolkit and continue adapting these ideas, tools, and practices to your own context.

We'd also like to learn from you. If you use this toolkit, *tell us* how you adapted it, what worked, what didn't, and what could make it more useful. Your experience can help strengthen future versions and inform how these tools continue to evolve across different communities and municipal contexts.

Liga de Ciudades de Puerto Rico
www.ligadeciudadespr.com

Partners for Dignity & Rights
www.dignityandrights.org

Central Florida Jobs with Justice
www.cfjwj.org

# Governing Together

A Toolkit for Municipal Co-Governance,
Advocacy, and Shared Power

LIGA DE CIUDADES
DE PUERTO RICO

PARTNERS FOR
DIGNITY & RIGHTS

CENTRAL FLORIDA
JOBS with JUSTICE

with support from the Ford Foundation