

# USC Price

Sol Price School of Public Policy

*Sol Price Center for Social Innovation*

## Social Innovation Conversations *A Southern California Symposium Event*

*Featuring Cecilia Muñoz and Roberto Suro*

*February 23, 2018*



*Social Innovation Conversations* are offered exclusively to participants of the Southern California Symposium.

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### *About The Program*

The USC Price Center for Social Innovation's executive education program—the **Southern California Symposium**—challenges local leaders to think deeply and collaboratively about the region's future and to develop long-term solutions to intractable local problems. Its annual cohort of 20-25 participants are selected from public service, politics, business, the arts, philanthropy and NGOs to represent a variety of interests, geographies, talents and experiences. Students bring issues they grapple with in their civic and professional lives to the Symposium and collaborate in the search for solutions.

Sessions feature interaction with nationally recognized NGO leaders and advocates, intimate exchanges with panels of local policy makers, and learning sessions with prominent scholars on housing, transportation, economic development, and health care. Upon successful completion of four weekend sessions, students receive an Executive Education Certificate in Social Innovation from USC.

The Symposium emphasizes a search for solutions that draw together the public, private and NGO sectors and that aim for scalability and sustainability and collective impact through social innovation.

For more information, visit [socialinnovation.usc.edu/education](https://socialinnovation.usc.edu/education).



**Cecilia Muñoz**  
**Vice President, Public Interest Technology and Local Initiatives**  
**New America**

Cecilia Muñoz is Vice President for Public Interest Technology and Local Initiatives at New America. Prior to joining New America in 2017, she served for eight years on President Obama’s senior staff, first as Director of Intergovernmental Affairs followed by five years as Director of the Domestic Policy Council. Before working in government, she was Senior Vice President at the National Council of La Raza (now UNIDOS US), the nation’s largest Hispanic policy and advocacy organization, where she served for 20 years. Muñoz is also a Senior Fellow at Results for America, a nonprofit that advances the use of data and evidence in policy making. She received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2000 for her work on immigration and civil rights, and serves on the Boards of the Open Society and Kresge Foundations, as well as the nonprofit Protect Democracy Project. Muñoz, a Detroit native and the daughter of immigrants from Bolivia, is also a wife and mother of two grown daughters. She lives with her husband in Maryland.



**Roberto Suro**  
**Director, Tomás Rivera Policy Institute**

Roberto Suro examines immigration with an emphasis on the Hispanic population, U.S. immigration policy, and U.S. public opinion regarding immigration — as a researcher, author, and journalist. His books include *Strangers Among Us: Latino Lives in a Changing America*, (Vintage, 1999), *Watching America’s Door: The Immigration Backlash and the New Policy Debate*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1996), *Remembering the American Dream: Hispanic Immigration and National Policy*, (Twentieth Century Fund, 1994). He is also the author of numerous book chapters, reports and other publications. Suro’s latest book is *Writing Immigration: Scholars and Journalists in Dialogue* (U of CA Press, 2011) co-edited with Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Vivian Louie.

Prior to joining USC, Suro founded and directed the Pew Hispanic Center in Washington, DC, where he supervised more than 100 publications that reported non-partisan statistical analyses and public opinion data chronicling the rapid growth of the Latino population and its implication for the nation as a whole. Suro collaborated with the Inter-American Development Bank, the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, and the Kaiser Family Foundation, among others, on conferences and other information-sharing endeavors.

Suro directs the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute, housed in the Price Center for Social Innovation. He holds a joint appointment with the USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism and is also a Non-Resident Senior Fellow of the Brookings Institution.

**Roberto Suro:** We want to start the main event of the evening, which is a conversation with our guest, Cecilia Muñoz, someone I'm proud to have known for over 20 years, through at least three different interesting incarnations.

When I first got to know Cecilia in Washington, she was vice president of what was then the National Council of La Raza and is now UNIDOS US, the nation's largest Latino civil rights organization, and an umbrella group of many, many local organizations, offering them a focus and a center in Washington, and managing this very diverse, very complicated network of Latinos who are close to the ground, also working at the very highest levels in Washington, negotiating, sometimes successfully, sometimes with a great deal of frustration, a lot of very important federal policy.

It's an interesting example of a kind of advocacy where somebody representing that kind of an interest group can be one of a handful of people in a room negotiating the final shape of major legislative proposals, but Cecilia was operating at that level through much of the 1990s and into the Bush administration. Then she went off in 2009 and joined the Obama White House and remarkably survived there eight years. There were probably just a handful of people. The president was definitely there all eight years.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Yes, he was one.

**Roberto Suro:** There were relatively few other such long-term office holders, and it's an unusual thing for Washington wonks to serve through the entirety of a two-term presidency. The last of that period was in the very significant job as head of the Domestic Policy Council and senior advisor to the president on domestic policy issues, touching over the entire scope of domestic issues in the Obama White House through the second term, and through a lot of controversy.

No White House administration is easy and no second term is easy, although all those things we are re-dimensioning now. In any case, Cecilia survived it all with a great deal of good grace, a sense of humor, and a great many friends and allies all over Washington and all over the nation, which is not an easy thing to do. That itself requires a level of political and emotional intelligence, which is quite rare.

In a third incarnation now, Cecilia is Vice President at New America, which would once have been called a think tank, and was kind of a think tank for a while, and is now in the process of reinventing itself in ways that are interesting to our endeavor here. When the idea for the Pew Hispanic Center was first born, the first person I looked to for advice about that was Cecilia; and when this idea was hatched, the first person I thought of to bring into this endeavor for some conversation was Cecilia. I'm incredibly happy she's here with us today.

We're going to talk about a variety of subjects. One interesting place to start is to describe this extraordinary history of involvement in the upper reaches of Washington, affairs of

state, making decisions that affected the lives of millions of people and the dispositions of trillions of dollars of federal spending, whole agencies that she was directing; but there's one particular policy endeavor on the unlikeliest subject of diapers, for which Ms. Muñoz may go down in history. Tell us about the diapers.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** First of all, thank you for having me here - it's lovely to see all of you here, and I'm so excited about what you're doing. I asked Roberto to ask me this question. He was saying, "Can we start with, like do you have a good story to tell that can sort of warm us up into this conversation?" I said, "Ask me about diapers," which is-

**Roberto Suro:** You're not supposed to tell them that. It's supposed to be totally natural.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** It's sort of a funky place to start, but it's a thing that I'm actually very proud of, and I think that it speaks a little bit to what you're doing here. As you heard, I ran something called the Domestic Policy Council, and one of the things you get to do is come up with the proposals that end up in the president's budget and that hopefully maybe get enacted by Congress, if Congress were a functional place.

I worked for a president who was really worried about poverty and about the fact in particular that deep poverty in the country was a growing phenomenon that had been sort of unheard of. We now have about five million children living under the international definition of extreme poverty in the United States. That's new. We were, with the very good people that I worked with, kind of digging in on, all right, what policy tools do we have to deal with this?

One of the observations of the team was that poor families spend more on diapers than richer families do, because they're more likely to buy them at the local bodega as opposed to going to Costco to buy them by the case, which is what I used to do, or ordering them from jet.com, which is evidently what parents do now, if they have the means and if they have a place where cases of diapers can be delivered. When you're a policy maker, you look at what tools we have in the federal budget to help address the fact that poor families can spend as much as a third of their income on diapers, and they try to stretch, not use as many diapers, which can actually lead to health problems. The food stamp program doesn't allow it, but maybe we have the discretion to create pilot programs.

We stuck some stuff in the last president's budget, which everybody knew wasn't going anywhere, but my team didn't stop there because a couple of the members of my team were men with kids at home, and they were thinking about, "Well, where do we get our diapers from?" They order them from jet.com.

We worked at the White House, so if you call people, they take your calls, which is kind of cool. They called the people at jet.com and explained what I just explained, and the folks at jet.com then called their diaper supplier, who got excited about it, and they

figured out how to take the same diapers they were selling to my colleague, Luke Tate – who works at ASU now. They changed the packaging so that there were fewer colors on the box and somehow more diapers were wedged into the box. I don't know what they did, but they made it cheaper, and then they decided with jet.com to make those diapers available at cost to any non-profit in the country, which meant that if you ran a diaper bank or a church or whatever, you could get these diapers at cost and you could sell them to people at cost, or you could donate them to people who needed diapers.

Now there are quite literally millions of diapers that have been distributed in this way, which has a real impact on poor families and it's not actually a government policy. We didn't actually do anything except make some phone calls. We stuck a thing in the president's budget, but that didn't actually accomplish anything except kind of put a marker down.

We thought through, well, how does this work? And can we get other people to care about this problem, and can we come up with an innovative approach that will make a difference for some people? This is really two guys in the Domestic Policy Council and the Office of Science and Technology Policy who just sort of brought a different kind of thinking to this policy problem. Regular policy nerds like me would have stopped with the budget proposal, but we got something done that's making a difference for people, which I'm very proud of, because it literally just took people thinking about a problem in a different way, which is what I think you all are gathered here to do.

**Roberto Suro:** Right. There is a component of government in public policy, there's a private sector component, there's a non-profit component. It goes from sort of high level policy to very on the ground, almost to the neighborhood, in one very simple formulation.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Yep.

**Roberto Suro:** Now that you're at New America, tell us a little bit about the kinds of approaches you're taking to social justice issues. You don't have the power of the federal government anymore.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Nope.

**Roberto Suro:** You can't go in and say, "Here, just sign this."

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Nope, nope.

**Roberto Suro:** "It'll make a big difference if you do this," or "Let's add a zero to this budget."

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Yeah, I know.

**Roberto Suro:** What are you up to now?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Among the things I learned in the time that I was in government is that there are good people all over the country who are already solving our public problems. At some level, I think we all understand the changes that we're seeking that transform our community are not going to come from Washington, and they're not going to come from traditional think tanks.

New America, we're almost 20 years old. We started life as a traditional think tank, which means you gather people at tables, usually in Washington and you have researchers and thinkers and people who know stuff, and you sit them down with legislatures and people at the federal agencies and people who do stuff, and that's how ideas move from research into policy. That's still important, but it's not where we're going to solve all of our public problems, not even close.

My CEO, Anne-Marie Slaughter, is a network theorist among lots of other things. Her theory of the case, which I agree with, is that there are good people already solving our public problems all the time all around the country. But those innovations, there aren't incentives for them to move around across geographies or to go to scale, and they're not visible to the public, and they're definitely not visible to policy makers. What we're trying to do is build a national network of local innovators as a way of moving the stuff that they're doing around.

*We have the capacity to solve our problems. We don't always remember that we do, but we do. We collectively as a country are doing it all the time.*

We're investing in building this national network and actually working to transform what a think tank is. Our argument is: the think tank model is a century old. It's kind of Washington centric. We're flipping it on its head and focusing it locally because we think that's where the answers are going to come from.

**Roberto Suro:** You're doing some interesting work regarding work. The interrelationship between employment and technology is something that we're increasingly concerned with here in Los Angeles. I'd be interested in hearing a little bit about these projects in Phoenix and Indianapolis that you're working on.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Focusing on the future of work is a project at New America. That's sort of our shtick. The thing which unifies all of the various programs around New America is that we look at the intersection of technology in the country, and the issues we work on tend to lie in

the intersection. We are in this moment, in an historical moment that's like the Industrial Revolution in terms of its scale and impact, the Industrial Revolution where we went from an agrarian society to the society that we became. It was a huge transformation in a relatively short period of time, and lots of stuff happened over a significant period of time that needed to be ameliorated.

We developed labor unions, but not until there had been lots and lots of problems affecting workers lives, which made it obvious that we needed some kind of change. We developed child labor laws, but not until 30 years after kids started working in the mills. We think we can anticipate what some of the changes are going to be and what some of the problems are going to be and try to get in front of them.

One of my colleagues led something called the Shift Commission, which took place over the last year, where we invested in six different places in scenario planning, kind of military defense department style scenario planning. We sat down with civic leaders in these places and helped them envision what the future might look like. What's automation and what's technology going to do? What might a future look like along a couple of axes, whether or not work is going to be more like it is now or it's going to be more task oriented, more like a gig economy, and is there going to be more of it or less of it? Then essentially it was scenario planning, and folks came up with four different scenarios of what the world might look like and what that might mean, which is a way of getting your head around, all right, what's happening and what are the implications.

We are now taking the next step, starting in Indianapolis and Phoenix, and hopefully in more places (if we can raise the resources to do it), we're going to do the same thing. But in addition to helping local civic leaders and people representing the sectors that are most likely to be affected, instead of just stopping with, "Let's envision what the future might be," we're going to take the next step and say, "What do we want the future to be? *What are we going to do to drive towards it?*"

Part of what we're trying to accomplish is moving the conversation away from the way it typically gets portrayed, which is like the robots are coming for your jobs and you're going to get screwed again, and you're helpless to do anything about it...to a conversation that's more focused on, all right, we are agents of change, technology is a thing that's happening. How are we going to leverage it to build the vibrant economy of our choosing, which is a much different conversation. It feels entirely different than, "We're going to get harmed yet again by some forces that we don't control."

It's based on the notion that technology itself is not inherently good or inherently evil. There are a lot of bad things which can happen for sure. There's also a lot of good that can happen. I think of it terms of inequality, which is something we struggle with, and I know you struggle with here in Los Angeles, big time. Technology is either going to have the effect of driving us further apart economically or helping us come closer together, but this isn't going to happen by itself. That's going to take some driving and some work. What we're trying to do is to help people recognize that they have the capacity to do that work and provide the tools, especially the technological tools to do it.

**Roberto Suro:**

*When you're talking about issues on that scale and drivers as large and as global as technological change, how do you organize the conversation on a local level so that people feel like they can actually have an effect on the outcomes?*

**Cecilia Muñoz:**

You have to break it down into “bite-size” pieces, but also, we're reminding people of the tools that they have. There are lots of things that we don't know about what's going to happen, but that's in part because one of the inputs that we're not able to measure is what we are going to do about it. What kind of investments are we going to make? How are we going to engage civic leaders, workers, companies, faith leaders, and mayor's offices in working together to make decisions about, all right, so we're an economy that has a lot of call centers in it. Call centers are likely to disappear. What are the skill sets that we have? What are the assets that we're going to build on?

One of the big questions is what kind of training are we going to need and how are we going to provide it? In some ways, training is the easiest of the avenues to go down. There are other big questions, like, okay, if retail is changing and we've got a lot of brick and mortar places, what is the conversion? What are we going to do with these assets? How are we going to convert them? What is the kind of labor force we're going to need to make that conversion? Let's think about those jobs, and let's think about how we make sure that the folks whose lives are going to change are prepared for that change.

**Roberto Suro:**

How do you envision taking those conversations from the diagnostic to actually formulating plans for action?

**Cecilia Muñoz:**

There are multiple ways to do this. In Indianapolis, we're already pulling together tables that include creative types, folks from the arts community, along with folks from the labor movement and other places that the conversation is beginning. We think we will probably emerge from that process with two or three pilot projects, and that we will have some resources to fund at least one. We're hoping to raise the resources to fund others. And we're hoping that those pilots are successful, and that we can build networks of other similarly situated, sort of industrial Rust Belt communities. Indianapolis is not unique. It has things that are unique to it, but it's ultimately not unique. Whatever lessons they learn in that process can be taken to other places, and you can inspire some more processes in other places, like what we're doing doesn't require vast expertise, but maybe we can pioneer something that won't be hard for somebody locally to convene on their own.

**Roberto Suro:**

Earlier this afternoon we were talking about pilot projects as part of the world of social innovation. What do you look for in a pilot project so that it's not a one-off, so it really is a pilot and not just, well, we did this cool thing and that was it?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** The typical model is: somebody does something cool, somebody writes it up, and there's a report; and the hope is, if there's a report, it's written down, other people can read it, other people can do it. None of that is bad, but I mentioned before that there aren't incentives necessarily for ideas to move around. The people in Indianapolis, the people in Los Angeles, everybody's busy.

*You have to be deliberate about creating networks of folks who are sharing ideas, and we're playing around with the notion that you have to be deliberate in helping people implement those ideas.*

It's not enough to sit people in a room and say look at this cool thing that we did, maybe you can do it, too. That is part of what we're trying to create. We're bringing together technologists, engineers, product developers, the kinds of people who go work at the Silicon Valley, to create SWAT teams.

We call the teams together and send them on discovery sprints. If something cool comes out of Indianapolis, and Flint, Michigan, wants to try it, we can designate a team to help them figure out if we can implement this and help them get it started.

**Roberto Suro:** Discovery sprint?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Discovery sprints.

**Roberto Suro:** I love that.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Yeah.

**Roberto Suro:** What is it?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** I'll tell another story that will explain where this comes from. Remember healthcare.gov, the website that failed, which gives me trauma to talk about it?

**Roberto Suro:** Take a deep breath.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** So we fixed it.

**Roberto Suro:** Yeah, you fixed it. *(Eyebrow roll).*

**Cecilia Muñoz:** 20 million people got healthcare, don't forget. So the way we fixed it is we brought in a guy named Mikey Dickerson who worked at Google. He had been one of our tech guys on the campaign, so he was like a tech guy that we knew. We convinced him to come from Google. He took a little leave of absence. He thought it would be a couple weeks. It turned into three months. He kind of lived in the operation center, but what he concluded and what we collectively learned was, we didn't have an engineering problem. It wasn't like some complex thing that you needed magical engineering powers to solve. We had a management problem. Government doesn't do this terribly well.

He set up the kinds of structures, which are present in like every complex thing that Silicon Valley does, which everybody in this room uses probably every day. Those structures were just not present in government, and government didn't have that know-how, so by bringing in that know-how, that's how we fixed the thing.

*We needed to give government the capacity to do what the Silicon Valley does every day, and the way we did that is we created the US Digital Service.*

We recruited several hundred hotshots from the Silicon Valley. We convinced the chief technology officer of the United States, Todd Park, to go to Silicon Valley where he lives, and he spent years doing nothing but recruiting people. His recruiting pitch was to these fancy Silicon Valley people, some of whom describe themselves as post-economic, which means that they'd already made more money than they were ever going to spend.

**Roberto Suro:** That's my aspiration.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Todd would go to rooms full of these people and say, I want you to drop what you're doing and take a gigantic pay cut to come work in a windowless room somewhere with people who totally don't understand what you can do, and fight like crazy to get in the door, because what you'll be able to do when you do that is transform the way veterans get their benefits from the federal government, and you'll have huge impact. The people who found that enticing were the people who came, hundreds of them.

I was sitting in the seat that got to place these digital teams in the federal agencies. Often the way we would get started was with a discovery sprint. We would convince one of the agencies to accept a team with technologists and let them under the hood of their operations. They would do a deep dive into how everything worked. Most of the time the recommendations they came back with were not, "We're going to engineer you some sexy app that's going to solve all of your problems." Frequently, what the discovery sprint unearthed were just sort of the simple bureaucratic problems that you imagine government has.

They would come back and say, "The first layer of stuff you've got to fix is that you don't know what you are doing every day, and you need a standup meeting every week where you spend half an hour just downloading information."

Not rocket science.

They call it “bureaucracy hacking”. This is a really important insight, because the tech skills that they brought were really just a different way of thinking that is not present in government. By making it available, it had a transformational impact on what the federal agencies did.

That’s what a discovery sprint is, and we road tested it, because I was working with a team focusing on urban communities and poverty. We road tested it in Flint, Michigan. Remember the water crisis in Flint, which is still happening, by the way. Flint is sort of my archetype of a place with terrible problems, but that’s just so off of everybody’s grid that, for all the problems in LA, there are good people focused on what’s going to happen in LA and a lot of resources being brought to bear. That’s just not happening in Flint. We were just bound and determined to care about Flint, and the team that was working on that, some of them came with me to New America, and we’re still at it.

Flint is like Fresno, and lots of other parts of the country that are just kind of not in the pathway of the foundation resources and the corporate resources and the government resources and that kind of innovation and ingenuity. Our discovery sprint team was led by the former mayor of Philadelphia, Michael Nutter, and the most talented people from his administration. They spent several weeks in Flint doing a deep dive and providing advice to the mayor and her team on what they needed to put in place and how they might change to get their arms around the water problem, and a variety of other things.

Some of the recommendations, again, were not super sexy or complex. They were bureaucracy hacks. They were like, “You need a team meeting with this level of frequency to make sure that you’re sharing information and that folks in your different agencies are talking to each other.” That stuff turns out to be tremendously important.

*Sometimes the solutions or the beginnings of the solutions are really simple things. We live in an age where people think what you really need is somebody who’s going to build you the app that’s going to solve the thing. Very frequently, it’s not that complex. It’s much simpler, but it requires stepping back, looking at a problem fresh, bringing different kinds of thinking to a problem, like bringing tech thinking to a water problem, and getting creative about how can you really do things differently.*

**Roberto Suro:** A common theme in all of the cases you've described involves bringing together unlikely or unexpected combinations of talents and people, different than the ones who were typically responsible for whatever the issue was that's being addressed. That's certainly a departure from the normal forms of governance in which people in rigid hierarchies address issues. You've described vividly how that kind of interaction, bringing in fresh eyes, can point to problems, can point to simple solutions, can do the sprint. How do you do the marathon?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Yeah, we're still figuring that out, honestly. Look, I've switched hats. It's easier when you have the whole resources of the federal government at your disposal. I have considerably less than that now. We're trying to figure that out, and the bet that we're making is part of the answer to that lies in networks, in actually connecting people and investing in their capacity to stay connected with each other.

**Roberto Suro:** Investing in their capacity to stay connected.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Yes. The Irvine Foundation invested in what they framed as a leadership development for civic leaders in Fresno. But, it wasn't actually a leadership development process, because what they found was that there was a lot of civic capital. The housing people were doing good housing stuff, and the job training people were doing good job training stuff, but they didn't know each other. The way that this team got people to the table was by saying, "We're going to give you a scholarship to come to this leadership training." But the leadership training was actually entirely about helping them get to know each other across sectors and helping them connect consistently outside of these special moments when they were in this leadership training.

One of the things they found was when they gave people time to talk to each other and share ideas and share expertise, they were coming up with new stuff. Every time two or three folks got together or would check in regularly by phone, in between the sessions, they would come up with new stuff. New projects emerged out of this that would totally not have happened because everybody was in their lane doing their stuff, but when you step out of it, it gives you the capacity to see things in different ways and to bring different tools to the table.

*It turns out that when you bring different skill sets to a problem, especially unusual ones, there's a toolbox at the table that wasn't there before.*

I'm having trouble conjuring up a great example of this, but I'm convinced that some of that involves having people from the arts in these conversations, creative folks, because they see problems from a completely different direction.

**Roberto Suro:** It's part of the genius of Los Angeles, and certainly when you look at some of the successes this city has had in the last couple of decades, the involvement of the arts has been at the center of it. Seeing the arts as not only a cultural benefit, but a social, economic, political force, it can make an extraordinary difference at the neighborhood and city level. We were talking about potential examples of bringing together a set of different actors. One of the examples we were talking about were the Promise Zones, which is close to home to a number of people who are directly involved with the Price School and the Center of Social Innovation. Could you take us back to how that idea was hatched?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** I'm really proud of this and excited that there are people associated with the Promise Zones here. It was hatched when President Obama asked his team to really dig deep in thinking about how we were going to, without a lot of budget dollars or new money, address problems of opportunity.

That was my team. We spent a whole summer digging into lots of different kinds of ideas. The process began in the spring, in anticipation of the next year's budget and the State of the Union address. We came out with this beautiful deck of options.

At the very beginning of the administration, before I was Domestic Policy director (so I could take no credit for this at all), we thought really hard about what it's like to be a mayor of anywhere. If you're the mayor of anywhere, the federal government is 18 different departments, and you go after housing money from HUD, which is one door, and you go after health money from HHS, which is another door, and the Department of Education gives you money through this door. And you, the mayor, have to navigate all these different federal bureaucracies, and they all get money from Congress for different purposes, and frequently the laws which gives the agencies that money have strings attached, so it means that if you're the mayor of Los Angeles, you have folks who do that navigating for you. If you're the mayor of South Bend, you don't really have the team that Mayor Garcetti has. If you're the county executive of wherever, of a smaller place, you definitely don't have that kind of team.

The federal government is this bewildering labyrinth of a place. We tried to think about, well, let's put ourselves in the mayor's shoes, and what if we did all that negotiating on our side of the table? What if we tried to create one doorway in rather than 18? What if we talked to each other about, what's the Department of Energy doing in San Antonio? What's the Justice Department doing in San Antonio? Because the agencies don't know, they don't share that information at all. There isn't a strategy. There wasn't until we got there to say, "Well, all right, we're going to think about San Antonio, and everybody's going to put what they're doing on the table, and we're going to see how it might intersect."

**Roberto Suro:** Wow, radical.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Right?

**Roberto Suro:** Yeah, crazy, crazy, crazy.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** And so much harder than you think it's going to be, because it's very complicated to get everybody to coordinate. We invested in that very heavily. One of the first programs that came out of that kind of thinking was this little tiny program called "Strong Cities, Strong Communities," and we convinced the agencies to cough up one or two people. This was the Domestic Policy advisor at the time whose name was Melody Barnes, begging the Secretary of Education, "Give me one person, or maybe two."

What we did with those people was we sent them to places. Fresno was one, Detroit was one. The first cohort went to six places. It was really tiny. We picked places that had strong mayors, that had serious problems, but looked like they had some wherewithal to address those problems where we might be able to help them reach a tipping point. What we said to this federal staff was, "You're on the mayor's team. You belong to that mayor, and your job is to help that mayor navigate."

The mayor of Fresno, whose name was Ashley Swearingin, she's a Republican, she treated this team like her staff, which is what we wanted, and what she said was, "You know what this nut that I'm trying to crack here is, I have this area where I'm trying to create a transit center, but there's all these empty unoccupied spaces, like we have these buildings but they're kind of empty." The federal person who was on her team thought, "You know what? EPA has a handful of people and the Department of Energy has a handful of people. Why don't we all locate them in your building?" So we moved. It didn't cost anything. We just changed where everybody worked and created a federal complex in the vacant office space in Fresno, and it became the economic basis for the revitalization of this transit quarter that she was trying to create. Again, not rocket science, but it took a different way of thinking and for the federal staff in question, they not only came up with a super cool idea that was transformative, but they fell in love with the notion that we, as a federal government, were going to work in service of the local leadership.

Instead of saying, "We're the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and we know what you should be doing. If you can prove to us that you're going to do what we think you should be doing, we'll give you a grant and then good luck," we said, "We, the department of whatever, think you know what your tipping point is going to be, and we're going to work in service of you and your team." That became the seed of Promise Zones.

If you're a Promise Zone, it means that you came forward with a proposal where you said to the federal government, "Here's the tipping point we're trying to reach, here's the agency who's the lead." It could be the mayor's office, it could be a neighborhood association, you get to decide who's your lead. You decide who your partners are, you

decide how you're going to measure progress, you come up with the plan and your partners and the goals and the metrics, and 20 of you will get a designation. What that designation will give you is points on your federal grant proposal so that you'll get an extra lift when you're trying to raise the money from the Department of Energy and whatever.

We found dozens and dozens of federal programs that were willing to provide points to Promise Zone designees. We said, "You'll get this designation for 10 years." Promise Zones are still getting points for these grants even though I think the new administration may not have discovered that this is happening.

It did two things. For the places that got the designation, they're getting more resources, they're executing their plans, and some interesting things are happening. The East Side in San Antonio, which is one of the first designees, was focusing on influencing the lives of children on the East Side, and they got their Housing people and their Public Safety people and their job training people all working on the same set of goals around what happens to the lives of children. There are all kinds of interesting results, but the most immediate was that the graduation rate went way up at the high school on the East Side, so very good signs of progress.

We also got some benefit certainly for the 20 communities, which ultimately were designated Promise Zones, but hundreds came forward with plans. There's no reason you can't implement a plan even if you don't get the designation, and so there are communities beyond the 20 that picked a tipping point, built a team, set up some metrics, and whether or not they got the designation, a number of them are going forward and doing it. We hopefully bought a lot of impact without new money.

**Roberto Suro:** I've got one more question and then I'm turning Cecilia over for our audience's questions. You described in this process that one key element is the ability to define what you describe as a tipping point, that thing you're trying to reach, which is different than defining a problem, and it's not exactly just defining a specific objective. What are the key elements of the successful articulation of that thing, being able to say this is where we're trying to get to?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** I think the most important thing is that it's clear, that you know what the world looks like if you get there.

**Roberto Suro:** You know what the world looks like when you get there.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** And everybody on your team can articulate it. The example that I got to know the best is from San Antonio, because they were one of the earliest Promise Zones and I had a chance to go visit. The Housing folks on the East Side of San Antonio knew that they were after changing the graduation rate and changing other factors in the lives of these

kids, and they understood how their piece of the work intersected with the other pieces. So, the Childcare people, for example, because they were at the table with the job training people, figured out that when a family went to register their kids for preschool, they were getting asked about their training needs. In a couple cases that I witnessed, the parents ended up in a training program because they had taken their kid for school, and then ended up actually volunteering at the school, getting training, and ultimately becoming a teacher.

Everybody was working towards the same thing and they were kind of layering their various pieces towards a very clear North Star, and it didn't matter that in different communities the North Star was different.

*We weren't looking for a particular North Star. What was important was that you had one and that people could explain what it was, and they had some sense of how they were going to get there, and they knew how they were going to measure their progress towards the North Star. They would be able to tell, have we taken some steps that are bringing us closer, and they knew what the world would be like if they got there.*

**Roberto Suro:** Great. So, questions. We'll go around.

**Audience Question:** Do you think that in a place like LA County or Southern California, we have such a wealth of innovators, ideas, and resources, that it kind of dilutes the opportunity for success because there's so much out here? Whereas if you compare to San Antonio or other communities, Flint, where that's the one program, and everyone gets on board and you can really measure the success of that program or the impact. In LA there are so many competing efforts and ideas. How do we collect it all and make sure that we're all moving in the right direction?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** That's a great question. One way to think about it, and this I think is especially true now, I have a sense that everybody's trying to fix everything, which is not possible. The energy is going from everybody outward towards everything, and I think what I'm describing is exactly the opposite of that. It's gathering a group of people who are willing to focus on one particular thing, understanding and accepting that there are lots of other things that need to be fixed, but we're going to focus on something specific. It helps to understand how that thing might intersect with other things, but I think I'm describing the energy actually flowing in the opposite direction from everybody trying to do everything. It's about focus.

The team in San Antonio picked a particular thing they knew if they could turn it around, lots of other good would flow from it. They let go of what are our Housing goals going to be and what are our Public Safety goals going to be. The Housing folks and the Public Safety folks got focused on this one particular thing. Does that make sense?

**Roberto Suro:** Yes.

**Audience Question:** Good evening. I'm so excited to hear you say that you brought arts to the table with labor as a part of the solution. I actually moved here seven years ago with that concept. I firmly believe in particular that media and entertainment can be a platform and a tool for social change and should be at the table along with all others across sector models to come up with solutions that impact change in our communities. I wanted to hear a little bit about how that idea came to be. What was the impetus for it? What kinds of problems were you solving by bringing arts and labor and any other entities to the table?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** I'm so glad you're here and you are part of this, because I deeply believe in what you just said. We had this table of all the federal agencies who would come in. This is the way that we were trying to share information and create a map of everything everybody was doing. Some of the most effective, innovative, and just some of the coolest, work was happening at the tiny, tiny, tiny National Endowment for the Arts, which does not have the resources of the Department of Education, not even close, but they got focused on, what are we going to do that's going to connect with inequality?

They recruited superstars to adopt schools. There was coverage of Kerry Washington, who would go once a year to the school. She helped promote arts programs and carry out arts programs in the school that she adopted, so that the students felt like they were part of something. It transformed their attitude about school. It made them want to be there in a different kind of way. You can see what kind of impact that might have.

There was an education focus program, which was awesome, and then programs focusing on the public square. If you think about it, I know it's true of neighborhoods in Los Angeles, I know it's true of neighborhoods in other parts of the country that I've lived and visited, that if you create a common space that people feel ennobled by, proud of, and that lifts them up, that it can change everything about what you believe is possible in your life. The spaces that you see when you walk out your door have an impact on you and what's possible. Art and creativity and the creation of space, the connection between that and addressing inequality is actually huge.

I'll just say for folks who are interested in place-making, which is a whole field that we were engaged in, there's a book that's about to come out by somebody who's on our board, a journalist named Jim Fallows. He and his wife flew to communities all over the country and documented cool stuff going on. One of his theories about communities that are coming back, that are becoming vibrant, is that they tend to have craft breweries.

Seriously, think about what that communicates. We are a community where we care about creating a quality thing. There's a communal experience associated with it. It sends signals about what kind of place this is to live. Those signals are not signals of downtrodden-ness or hopelessness. It turns out craft breweries is a sign of hope, right?

**Audience  
Question:**

It's great to listen to what you had to say. I'm curious, Los Angeles is unique in some regards, and one of those regards I believe that makes it unique is it's 88 cities in one county, 191 jurisdictions in 6 counties, and that's not including our friends in San Diego. So, if you look at Southern California, you leave one neighborhood and you don't know you're in another city. It presents a series of problems and challenges and opportunities. The examples you provided were very much about a specific city, a specific mayor, that had the ability to control the relationship between the federal government and their community. Have you experienced or have examples of multiple jurisdictions working together to find that North Star? I think that's one of the challenges that we face, is that if South Del Monte takes on a problem, Del Monte may not, and its other neighboring cities around there may not, and they become an island unto themselves. That in itself creates both a competition challenge and sometimes conflict in terms of moving forward as a region, and as a community. What are your thoughts on that?

**Cecilia Muñoz:**

We did have folks in a variety of contexts developing what they described as "metropolitan goals." Denver was one. If you're dealing with an issue like transit, for example, it's really helpful if you're approaching it as a region rather than as the particular town or the particular county outside of the city. Each county can't fix that on its own. The jurisdictions that money flows to and that authority flows to don't necessarily have the capacity to fix particular kinds of problems individually. It's much more effective to develop mechanisms so that they can develop regional goals and regional strategies. It's not easy to do, and sometimes it helps to start small.

Sometimes that's just about coming up with the thing, which could feel like a tiny inconsequential thing, the goal of which is actually to build the set of relationships so that you can then leverage those relationships to get towards the next thing, which is bigger. It could be some kind of community event, a parade, or something small that people can collaborate on, because when you start to collaborate on stuff, even if it feels pretty inconsequential, you build relationships that create the basis for more.

*I don't think whatever it is you're going to take on has to be huge. Sometimes actually, and I learned this with the tech teams and the discovery sprints, sometimes the innovation which catalyzes the thing seems really small and really not so consequential, but becomes the basis for the foundation on which you build towards the bigger thing.*

I'll give you an example. A woman who came, she works with me now at New America, her name's Vivian Graubard. She actually lives here in LA. She's my director of strategy for the public interest tech project. She was part of the US Digital Service. She went to DHS, the US citizenship and immigration services, which is the agency which processes immigration visas and naturalizations. It's a big agency, lots and lots of complex tasks.

They did a discovery sprint, they did a deep dive. I was all excited about what are they going to come back with. She came back with, "You know what we want to do? We want to digitize the Green Card replacement application." I thought, "That's it?"

**Roberto Suro:** It's a big deal.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Right? The application you file when you lose your Green Card, seriously? What she said was, "Yeah, because I need the agency to work with me. If I take on a big thing, that's going to be hard for them. I'm going to take on a minor thing that feels smaller to them because I need to build relationships. What I want is to digitize the naturalization application, but I'm not going to start there."

That's what they did. They digitized the process on both sides, what the applicant sees so that they could do it online, and what the adjudicator on the government side sees so that they could do their part of the job also online. That then created the sense of, "Oh, wow, look at what's possible here," which then got her to the naturalization application. Starting small is not bad, and it's often very good.

**Roberto Suro:** Especially getting people to adopt new technologies in all bureaucracies.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** New technologies are just different ways of doing their stuff.

**Roberto Suro:** Yeah, I know, but people get very scared.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Oh, yep.

**Audience Question:** My question is two parts. One, I heard you refer to the "aha" moment of bringing techs to the agencies and the "aha" moment of just how different businesses communicate, be more transparent and work collaboratively. On the other side of that, I heard you mention when you were with the government, you had the resources and the funding, but not as much of the progressive, innovative, forward thinking of New America. When you're at New America, you had the minds, but maybe not as much of the big budgets and the funding. Within that, I'm in construction, and one of our biggest models now is public-private partnerships. Can you speak to that and how that plays in the whole platform of social innovation? How do you see public-private partnership playing in this whole paradigm of social innovation?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** I think that can be tremendously important. The biggest question though is what you organize partnerships around. They're really, really important to local governments because in an area the scarcer the resources get, the more you have to find other ways to accomplish your goals and other partners to help you do them. I actually think they're tremendously important.

Among the things I've learned, again because we were in a situation when I was in government where the usual mechanisms for getting stuff done were just not happening. We figured out how to provide pre-K to every four-year-old in the country. We figured out how to do it, we figured out how to pay for it. We needed Congress to actually get it done. Well, we all know how that story ends.

Like the diaper thing, we didn't stop there. We found partners who were willing to take it on state-by-state, and we made progress in 30 states. That was just a question of having a goal, understanding how to convey the goal in ways which different kinds of people would understand for different reasons. The return on investment of providing early childhood education is out of control. The most conservative estimate is that you save \$8 for every dollar that you spend on early childhood education.

You take that logic to folks who understand return on investment, and it turns out that in red states as well as blue states, folks were willing to make progress.

To me, that's a corollary of what a public-private partnership can achieve. We were sitting down with not just legislators, but with business leaders and philanthropies and faith leaders and all kinds of different kinds of folks as a way of making sure we were still accomplishing the goal when the regular avenue was closed off to us.

**Audience Question:** I'm curious to know some of your thoughts on the balance of making social innovation sustainable. I'm defining sustainability in the sense of addressing the needs and wants of future generations while preserving lessons learned from the past. My exact example is, most people perceive Obama's policies to be too progressive when he was in office, and there was a backlash toward that; and now we see in Trump's current administration, he's really undoing a lot of the things Obama has done. Really it's just a reiterate process, two steps forward, five steps back, so I'm curious to know, there's that motto of "don't fix what's not broken." What's your comment on how to keep it sustainable?

**Cecilia Muñoz:** It's true, and believe me, I'm deeply aware of regulations that I spent years of my life on that have been rolled back; but at the same time, I'm also deeply aware of stuff that we accomplished that is alive and well and happening, Promise Zones being among them. It was something that we designed in such a way that it's still in place and can't be undone.

My favorite example, and it's important and the reason I think it's an answer to your question is because we designed some incentives to make the change happen that was

just never going to be reversed. I'll give you two examples. One is clean energy. We made huge investments in the Recovery Act from the very beginning, and essentially created industries and markets, which have market forces driving them now. Solar and wind and geothermal, those markets were not there before, or there were questions about their viability before. Now they're just not going to get dismantled because they're real. They're not undoing that.

Another thing I'm hugely proud of is that we created a program called "Race to the Top," where we allocated billions of dollars and basically said to states, "Any of you can compete for this education money, but here's what you have to do in order to qualify to compete for that money: you have to create college and career ready standards." This is a huge problem that as a result of the previous education reform had been a lot of states dumbing down their standards, so that their students could pass the tests that were required, and you can't prepare a work force if you have terrible standards.

We basically said some states are going to get grants, but you don't even get to be in the pool to ask for this money unless you adopt college and career ready standards. We won't even tell you what the standards have to be, but we will tell you that your higher education system has to approve them, has to say that they're college and career ready, so it's not even a federal decision. 47 states completely reformed their education standards, and that's not getting undone either.

*Shoot for things that are sustainable over a longer time horizon. This is really important.*

Look, I'm ferociously proud of what we accomplished in eight years, but I also am deeply aware, and this is because I worked for a guy who knows the long game. That's how he became president was he played the long game and that's how he's focused.

These are moments in time. The eight years that I was part of is a moment in time. You won't be surprised to know I'm a little partisan. What I hope is that the four years of this current moment is just a moment in time. What matters is the longer time horizon, and what we do with this moment is going to determine the result of that longer time horizon. It's important to think in those terms rather than in the, holy mackerel, we just took this terrible loss. I don't succeed all the time in doing that, but most of the time I do, and it's really important. One, because it keeps you from jumping off a bridge in moments like this, but two, because that's how change happens and how it gets sustained.

**Roberto Suro:**

One last question, although very tough to top that as a finale, but you're going to try and prompt it.

**Audience  
Question:**

Thank you for all that you've been doing. I really wanted to just kind of move the spotlight to Gen-Z for a moment, as we talk about the long game. I am so astounded by the leadership of these young people coming out of this nightmare in Florida, and to your point, out of these moments, some really great things can occur. I'm curious, just picking your brain on this notion of the kind of engagement we're seeing naturally and organically come out of the situation. Looking at building structures for these young people, even at a high school level, to become more engaged civically and to create some long game structures. Just as a quick example, the very powerful statements about the recognition, and I don't think I've ever heard this before, the recognition of young people saying, "Well, we'll be able to vote soon."

**Cecilia Muñoz:**

Yep.

**Audience  
Question:**

The power of that statement and the power of that long game that they're already owning. I'm curious if you see anything and for all of us walking into this incredible program to not forget those young people who, again, will be ready to vote in a very short period of time.

**Cecilia Muñoz:**

Yeah, this is a great question. There is so much going on right now that is reason for hope, so much. Look, there's a lot that's in danger and a lot that ... I have daughters who are 25 and 22. They understand that the institutions of our democracy are fragile in a way that I only came to understand very recently.

They understand their ownership of this democracy in a way that I feel like I didn't understand in the same way until quite recently. That's a profound asset.

I think it's important to help young folks in particular who are active see the signs of victory along this longer time horizon, because the long game is really hard when you're 22. It's hard to see, but you can see if there are even small victories or signs of progress around you that helps keep you motivated around the long game. I think that's tremendously important.

I've learned from having gotten kicked around enough that there are seeds of victory in every defeat. I firmly believe that that's true. Sometimes they're terrible. Parkland is a great example. The seeds of whatever victory we're going to arrive at, the price was really, really, really high. But the motivation to make sure that the tragic turns into something that benefits everybody is also a profoundly powerful force. It's really important to harness it. It's really important to acknowledge it.

I'm finding, especially since my kids are very much in my face, like I've been in the Civil Rights Movement my whole life and my kids think I'm an old person on matters of race and gender. It's amazing. I don't know how I got on the wrong side of these issues, but you know what? I'm thrilled that my kids are in my face about this. It's really important to lift up that energy and honor.

*Look, it's social movements made up of young people that have transformed this country, that led to the founding of this country, and the big transformations that we all learned about. We are in such a moment now. What we all do to lift it up, help people see signs of victory, help people remember they're agents and ownership of this democracy, is pretty important right now.*

**Roberto Suro:** Thank you so much.

**Cecilia Muñoz:** Thank you.

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