

# Putting justice in climate justice philanthropy

By Laura Garcia, Chung-Wha Hong, Kate Kroeger, and Solomé Lemma

The climate crisis is everywhere we look with record heatwaves, extreme cold snaps, floods, wildfires, droughts, and storms. Natural disasters continue to increase in frequency and scale, with hundreds of once-in-a-lifetime crises occurring with alarming frequency. The climate crisis is driven by and is vastly amplifying injustices, and philanthropy has the opportunity to act.

The climate crisis disregards borders, yet borders divide how impacts are experienced and how communities are resourced to respond. For the past few years, the Global North has contributed to 92 percent of total global emissions, with per capita emissions triple those in the Global South. Yet, Global South communities living on the margins shoulder the burden of impact while holding the least responsibility for the crisis. In the past decade, extreme weather events have displaced an average of 20 million people annually, mostly in the Global South, and displacement is only expected to worsen.

Importantly, the wealthiest 1-10 percent in each country now emit more than the remaining 90 percent of a country's population. The disparity in emissions between countries and now even more so within countries reflects a stark legacy of colonialism and global extractivism. And frontline communities, such as Black and Indigenous peoples, other communities of color, cis and trans women and girls, people living with disabilities, and queer and gender non-conforming people are often hit hardest by climate-related disasters as they lack access to resources, systems, and structures to respond to and recover from crises.

## THE STATE OF CLIMATE PHILANTHROPY AND SHIFTING POWER

Grassroots social justice movements are leading meaningful, ambitious, and equitable solutions to the climate crisis.



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Grassroots-led climate action mobilizes communities to resist and reduce fossil fuel emissions, hold polluters responsible, and create sustainable and regenerative food and energy systems. However, even as grassroots movements lower emissions and cool the planet, they are woefully under-resourced. Indigenous resistance to fossil fuel projects has avoided at least 25% of annual US and Canadian greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, Indigenous Peoples have the least access to funding. They only receive 0.03% of funding in the U.S. and 1.2% of international funding. Women's environmental initiatives receive less than 0.02% of funding. And less than 1% of international funding to grassroots organizations is unrestricted, highlighting how grantmaking practices undermine communities' sovereignty and self-determination.

When only 2% of philanthropic funding goes to climate mitigation, philanthropy has a clear mandate: dramatically increase investment in frontline-led grassroots movements that are building the post-carbon regenerative economies and communities we need to survive.

For philanthropy to make a relevant impact in this political moment, it must shift power. Many funders have the agency and resources to set the parameters around what and where to give, and prospective grantees position their projects within those confines. Grantmaking decisions are often based on the funder's strategic priorities. Restricted calls for proposals are based on a 'hypothesis' or theory of change that funders believe. Yet often funders fail to recognize this as

merely a hypothesis and, consequently, the calls for proposals and evaluation processes demand that grantees ‘prove’ the funders’ hypotheses. Instead, funders can shift towards practices that are more democratic, just, and trust-based. This includes recognizing the interdependence of people and the planet, and not separating ‘equity’ grants from all other grant-making.

We are the Executive Directors of the four public foundations that make up the CLIMA Fund. The CLIMA Fund enables large funders to make ‘big bets’ on bold and effective grassroots movements. We support tens of thousands of grassroots climate justice movements in 150+ countries and we use a justice framework to resource those that address the primary drivers of climate change, namely, extractivism, colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. The CLIMA Fund, as a collaboration based on global solidarity, is itself resisting the prevailing power norms in philanthropy, and we are committed to continual devolution of power from the Global North to the Global South.

## SPOTLIGHT: GENDER-SENSITIVE GRANTMAKING

Women are critical first responders to climate impacts and are on the frontlines of ambitious efforts to draw down emissions. Women-led movements are protecting land, territory, and waterways in every corner of the globe, yet receive disproportionately low funding because of philanthropy’s biases. Philanthropy has the responsibility to ensure that women leaders have the resources they need to make decisions at local, national, and international levels.

The CLIMA Fund has supported the Articulación de Mujeres de La Vía Campesina, the women’s delegation of the 200 million-strong, international peasant movement. This grassroots formation recognizes that women do the majority of peasant farming and are at the helm of creative climate solutions. The group’s work in centering care and integrating a zero-tolerance policy for violence against women across the global La Vía Campesina network has resulted in an increase in the number of women in decision-making roles on organizational boards.

The group also advocates for gender-sensitive policymaking at the national and international levels. It drafted a Comprehensive Law on Violence against Women for submission to the Honduran National Congress and presented to a United Nations Human Rights Council Working Group on the discrimination faced by women in rural areas. Its Access to Solidarity Credit program also promotes women’s economic independence and dignity. Funding the Articulación de Mujeres de La Vía Campesina’s work is a lesson for funders to look beyond grantmaking silos and resource movements as they respond to short-term crises and achieve long-term systemic change.

## APPLYING A JUSTICE LENS TO OUR GRANTMAKING

Funding grassroots climate justice movements requires changing norms, practices, and beliefs across philanthropy. We share here some recommendations, in part, from our most recent report, *Soil to Sky: Climate Solutions That Transform*:

- **Move funding globally.** The climate crisis does not end at nation-state borders, neither should well-funded, effective climate action. Most grassroots movements are advancing transformative action outside U.S. borders and our funding can support frontline groups globally, particularly in the Global South.
- **Provide unrestricted, long-term funding.** Flexible funding allows grassroots groups to be nimble, responsive, and self-determined. It allows funders’ own hypotheses to be questioned and provides space for grassroots movements to bring forward their expertise of what to prioritize, how to convene, or how to track their success. Unrestricted funding shifts power to grantees and supports the experimentation and creativity necessary to meet the uncertainty of this ecological moment.



The cover of CLIMA Fund’s *Soil to Sky* report.

- **Acknowledge the inherent conflicts of interest** present in the sector where philanthropy has benefitted from inequity. We must examine how our biases, norms, and assumptions show up in our theories of change, strategies, criteria, and evaluation, with an intent to shift toward greater equity. We also have the opportunity to shift away from traditional, top-down agenda-setting and give decision-making power to the communities our work serves. Embedding a power-conscious and reflexive lens into funding decisions means recognizing that our work is not apolitical and changing grantmaking practice is part of achieving our stated hopes of climate justice.
- **Provide holistic support.** Funders can provide non-financial support to grassroots movements by supporting movement connectivity and movement actors' access to other funders, media, and policymakers. Funders can also be open to examining prevalent biases, simplifying application and reporting processes, and receiving feedback.
- **Stop funding** false solutions and other top-down climate projects that undermine effective climate action and cause harm. In addition, divest endowments in extractive, polluting industries, which undermine the work of millions of grassroots actors around the world.
- **Resist Western models of success.** Funders have an opportunity to redefine what success looks like. Funders can emphasize collective organizing over single campaigns or individual climate actors, and systems change over technical measurements of emissions reductions. As funders expand definitions of success, greater recognition of climate injustices and calls for accountability would also be seen as victories.

Unequal power dynamics in society are reflected in inequitable funding practices, ultimately determining what kind of climate action receives support. Philanthropy can become much more impactful when it is able to step into the discomfort of examining prevalent assumptions within our practices and cultures. We may find that our grantmaking has a more significant impact when we lead with humility and trust.

The climate crisis is centuries in the making and will require a long-term response that centers justice and equity, instead of quick fixes. It will require transforming the systems at the root of the crisis: systems that harm people and treat the Earth as other (e.g., as separate from humankind or as a commodity). This work requires supporting movement ecosystems that advance communities and solutions commensurate with the scale of the challenge. The most innovative approach lies in trusting those who are working every day to address the crisis and holding harmful actors accountable to help us find our way through it.

*Laura Garcia, Chung-Wha Hong, Kate Kroeger, and Solomé Lemma make up the Leadership Committee of the CLIMA Fund.*

## Select Publications

*Building an Uncompromising Movement for Abortion Access*

June 2023

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A year out from the Dobbs decision, journalists and researchers and pundits everywhere are attempting to quantify the damage. Some 14 states have banned abortion, leaving tens of millions of people of reproductive age and capacity without legal access to abortion.

*Remembering Ambassador*

*James A. Joseph*

March 2023

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He was the Ambassador to South Africa during the end of Apartheid, but later I would come to realize his indelible mark on our field of philanthropy. For instance, about a year after graduating – and from third parties – I learned how he helped create, lead, or elevate such organizations as the Association of Black Foundation Executives, Council on Foundations, and National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

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