



Systems Change Orientation to Climate Philanthropy

A Skoll World Forum Event

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ROCKEFELLER
Philanthropy
Advisors

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in pursuit of a just world

Introduction

Funding to remedy the various effects of climate change is on the rise, and that's unquestionably a positive development in the face of this existential challenge. But is that funding being directed in ways that can produce systems-wide, transformational change and what can we do differently to expedite action?

Those were the core questions at the heart of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors' (RPA) interactive panel discussion, "A Systems Change Orientation to Climate Philanthropy," at the 2024 Skoll World Forum in Oxford, UK. In hosting this event, RPA sought to support climate philanthropists in shifting practices and mindsets that will help them contribute to systems transformation.

The event was the latest in RPA's Shifting Systems Initiative, an ongoing and evolving initiative that aims to shift philanthropic mindsets and practices in support of transformational systems change. RPA launched the Shifting Systems Initiative in 2016, and since its founding eight years ago, the initiative has encouraged funders to place longer-term, more adaptive resources with grantee partners to scale their solutions and impact and enable sustained, positive systems change. Over time, its steering group has included the Skoll Foundation, Ford Foundation, Porticus, Chandler Foundation, Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation, and Jasmine Social Investments.

There is perhaps no global issue more interconnected, transversal, and ripe for a systems-level approach than climate change. With this knowledge, RPA gathered an expert panel of speakers from across the philanthropic sector to discuss nodes of interest as far-ranging as how comedy and art can shape climate narratives to the importance of strengthening women's leadership in the climate change arena.

Our Climate Philanthropy Discussion

While increased funding to combat climate change is crucial for the future of society and the planet, avoiding pitfalls of the past is essential for private and public funding and investments. Failing to center equity and addresses power dynamics will inhibit progress on the climate change crisis and prevent truly transformational, systems-wide change.

By gathering leading climate funders committed to transformational change and encouraging peer exchanges and collective strategizing, funders can advance both their individual and organizational practices and point the way for the field of climate philanthropy.

Moderated by Heather Grady, RPA vice president, the event was opened by RPA President and CEO Latanya Mapp and featured an expert panel including Marta Arranz, director, Climate SMILE Community of Practice; Tony Bebbington, international program director, natural resources and climate change, Ford Foundation; Benjamin Bellego, executive director, WINGS; and Alessandra Orofino, founder, PERI. The panel focused on how funders and partners can collaborate to work 'upstream' on the root causes of climate change and how to create pivotal strategies to counteract them, while being mindful a far-reaching blend of efforts on public policy, shifting narratives,



building movements, and research and development are all necessary for a truly systems-level, transformational impact.

Following the panel's moderated discussion, participants moved to one of 10 tables to delve deeply into a specific area of climate change philanthropy. Key highlights from each table are discussed below.

Table Discussions

The session was energized by dynamic table discussions that spanned an array of topics related to climate change and systems change. Although each of the 10 tables offered unique insights and takeaways, it's noteworthy many included shared themes.

These included fostering community-centric approaches and a dramatic shifting of power, incorporating diverse perspectives – especially different youth, gender and indigenous viewpoints -- simplifying reporting, and the need for increased collaboration. While the following summaries are not exhaustive, they provide a glimpse into each table's rich discussion and serve as a snapshot of the diversity of thought that characterized these vibrant breakout discussions.

Seeing the forest from the trees: How can measurement support climate philanthropy to engage with systems change?

Led by Marta Arranz, director, SMILE Community of Practice, this table discussed how measurement is not a purely technical matter. To assess if we've enacted transformative change, we must unpack how it's shaped by our values, culture, and mental models. This group also stressed the need to find and extend the use of frameworks and practices that are more conducive to understand systems-level change. Some of the most frequently used practices in climate philanthropy are not fit-for-purpose and progress may not always be linear.


Building together: Learnings across philanthropy from the Climate and Land Use Alliance

Led by the Ford Foundation's international program director for natural resources and climate change, Tony Bebbington, this table interrogated what it means to have truly equitable, decolonized partnerships. While having perspectives of Global Majority colleagues at the table is important, this group dove deep into how to go beyond representation toward a genuine balance of power, trust and resources. The group noted difficult conversations are starting to happen, but merely having a meeting does not equate to systems-level change. To create meaningful change, both individuals and institutions need to be bold and take risks, which goes against the risk aversion mindset that has historically been typical of the Global North. For example, funders who consider moving beyond multi-year funding to supporting endowments for grantee partners represent efforts to accelerate true decolonization and financial liberation.

Every funder has a role: exploring the intersections of climate and your philanthropy

This table dug deep into the observation that the idea of intersectionality has been narrower than ideal. Climate change touches everything. To truly solve this problem, philanthropy must engage





policy makers and voters to show how climate change connects to economic independence, jobs, inequality, and beyond. At the community level, philanthropists need to better show how climate change connects to core local issues like farming, water conservation, migration, etc. Led by Benjamin Bellegy, executive director of WINGS, this table also provided a call to action. Complex challenges and complex systems require us to be part of collaboratives and alliances. We can't do it all alone. We must work together to solve our world's problems.

Using culture, comedy, and media to sway public narratives on climate change

Do jokes about impending doom and climate woe move us forward or are they mere coping mechanisms? Increasingly, research has shown the transformative effects of culture and comedy to shift the overarching narrative on climate change. In this discussion led by Alessandra Orofino, the founder of PERI, participants noted how humor helps us process and relate to information. Climate-related comedy can help the public feel more optimistic and even more committed to acting on it. And while it might not seem like a laughing matter, adding humor to the debate might just help us find a collective solution.

Strengthening women's leadership on climate action

Climate change poses a unique risk to the wellbeing of women and girls. As such, their viewpoints and leadership in this area are crucial. While we understand the negative impacts of climate change, society has still not discussed enough the critical role women play in climate action leadership. For example, when extreme weather strikes a community, parents often disproportionately pull girls out of school to help their families recover. Led by RPA CEO Latanya Mapp and Mallika Dutt from the Hewlett Foundation, this group pointed to research that says female leaders are more likely to support climate action and that countries with a bigger share of women in their parliaments are more likely to adopt policies that address climate change. To solve our climate crisis, clearly, we must adopt a more equitable gender-based lens.

Inclusive and equitable strategies in unlocking climate finance

This table's discussion, led by Kirsten Dunlop, CEO of Climate-KIC, yielded several key ideas in how to unlock the potential of climate financing. These included implementing project financing models like Enduring Earth that coordinate layered financing from local to global levels based on locally developed conservation and livelihood plans; creating landscape development banks that take an integrated approach to investing in agricultural, economic, social, and ecological systems; and pooling philanthropic funds to provide working capital for climate entrepreneurs and activists.

Shifting power through long-term unrestricted grants

Nonprofits need flexible, unrestricted money to grow sustainably and at scale. While the prevalence of unrestricted grants is growing, it's not yet pervasive enough. This table, led by Brittany Boettcher, the lead on climate philanthropy at the Skoll Foundation, as well as the Skoll Foundation's Edwin Ou, posited why this remains the case and how to rectify it. Unrestricted funding removes many burdensome, time-consuming processes from the grantees, giving them the flexibility to determine where dollars are most needed. However, some funders remain hesitant to relinquish this level of





control, power and reporting – oftentimes at the detriment of the communities they seek to help. A power shift from grantors to the grantees themselves would drastically expand an organization’s long-term ability to enact robust change.

Culture change for transformative impact

Led by Gita Sukmani, from the Earth-Centered Economy Coalition, and Savannah Ferguson, from Climate Breakthrough, this table stressed the importance of centering people and communities in the climate change narrative. To unleash a cultural change, we must unlock institutional funding available to tell the stories of climate change. Although key players with the capital to tell these stories, they also may be some of the most responsible for the climate crisis. We must invest in local communities to help them ascend to the levels of power to tell their own stories.

Youth and NextGen leadership in climate action -- essential to transformational change

Today’s youth will inherit the Earth and the climate crisis we have created. We must involve younger generations in reimagining solutions to mitigate it. Led by Nathan Méténier, development director at the Youth Climate Justice Fund, this table emphasized the need for community-centered grassroots leadership paired with accountability measures for policymakers. Empowering global youth in becoming active participants in this fight is crucial as is youth-to-youth capacity development. This fosters peer trust and understanding, countering hierarchical approaches of larger institutions.

Indigenous leadership for systems change on climate

This table explored why more funding supporting climate change solutions isn’t being directed to indigenous communities. One reason, this table posited, is ingrained systemic racism that directs funds to NGOs rather than to the indigenous communities themselves. To enact transformational change, a dramatic shift of power is necessary. Guided by Nicole Yanes and Janene Yazzie from NDN Collective, this table also discussed the need to hire indigenous staff members and the importance of decolonizing language to support the goal of mutual liberation.

Key takeaways and calls to action

Climate change is one of society’s most interconnected, complex and daunting challenges. It is also the challenge that presents society with the most potential. To achieve a lasting, sustainable future, there are certain imperatives we must quickly adopt. While this is not an exhaustive set of solutions, it can serve as a North Star for where we must head.

- A greater number of funders must pool their funding to support the necessary and complementary components of transformational change, including funding narrative and mindset change, building networks and movements, and influencing policy.
- Climate philanthropy must understand the intersectional dimensions of climate change philanthropy and how it applies to low-income communities, communities of color and also how it applies to gender differences.
- We must adapt and apply equity-centered mindsets to address power dynamics. Marginalized communities have been and will continue to be the most affected by the existential threat of climate change.





Conclusion

While complex issues may cloud visions of our shared future, the good news is that we have the collective know-how, lived experience and funding to create a more sustainable world. The philanthropic sector must be urgent in our adoption of these community-centered and power-shifting solutions to truly enact systems-level change.

We invite you to watch this space for updates and remain engaged. For more information on the Shifting Systems Initiative, please visit the [Shifting Systems Initiative homepage](#).

