

# Systems, Not Just Symptoms: Bringing a Justice Frame to Climate Philanthropy and Finance

Climate and Forests 2030

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# Background

The Climate and Land Use Alliance (CLUA), with the support of Meridian Institute, is exploring the integration of climate and land use with justice, equity, health, and economic recovery through *Climate and Forests 2030: Resources for Funders*. This focus is intended to inspire innovation and investment in integrated work on forests, rights, and sustainable land use and will inform a new strategic plan for CLUA for the period 2021 to 2030.

To inform the thinking, CLUA commissioned a series of “thought pieces” to provide diverse inputs into developing a more integrated approach for forests and land use. These are meant to stimulate discussion and debate and are not intended to reflect the views of CLUA, its member foundations, or Meridian Institute. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They have been informed by commentary and input by a range of other experts, including Anthony Bebbington, Chung-Wha Hong, Dewi Suralaga, Gargi Sharma, Holly Baker, Inna Michaeli, Kevin Currey, Luam Kidane, and Mateo Nube.

## About the Authors

We represent public foundations working to resource and accompany grassroots movements globally. Solomé Lemma is the Executive Director at Thousand Currents, an organization that has resourced grassroots organizations working for climate justice, food sovereignty and alternative economies for 35 years. Lindley Mease is Director of the CLIMA Fund, a collaborative initiative founded and led by four public foundations (Global Greengrants Fund, Grassroot International, Thousand Currents, and Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights) to resource grassroots groups and social movements working for climate justice globally. The four organizations collectively work in 168 countries and have supported over 15,000 groups led by and serving Indigenous, women, youth, and peasant grassroots leaders who are putting their lives and livelihoods on the line each day to realize our collective wellbeing.

# Executive Summary

The ecological catastrophe afoot is a collective challenge that demands a collective response on a scale and in a timeframe never before seen by humanity. The choices we make or neglect today will reverberate across generations. To date, much of the discourse and action on the climate crisis have focused on symptoms such as rising temperatures, sea levels, and atmospheric carbon. As a result, strategies focused on technologies, market mechanisms, and top-down implementation have received the bulk of climate investment. Yet, those strategies are inherently limited in their impact unless the underlying drivers of the climate crisis are taken into account. At the heart of the climate crisis are issues of deep inequity and injustice that must be addressed in interconnected and strategic ways by all funders and donors in order to make lasting strides towards climate stability.

A changing climate and resulting, intensified natural disasters such as fires, floods, storms, and droughts are increasingly becoming common occurrences in all parts of the world (IPCC, "Climate Change 2014" 36). Despite the global reach of these calamities, neither the cause of climate change nor the impact is equally distributed. Ninety two percent of greenhouse gas emissions are generated from the Global North (Pardikar). Yet, Global South communities living on the margins shoulder the burden of impact while holding the least responsibility for the crisis. Additionally, frontline communities in the Global North such as Black and Indigenous peoples, other communities of color, cis and trans women, and girls, people living with disabilities, and queer and gender nonconforming people are often hit hardest by climate-related disasters as they lack the access to resources, systems, and structures to respond to and recover from crises (Gardiner). In addition, these communities often live in proximity to the polluting industries largely responsible for the climate crisis, and already deal with compromised health due to environmental contamination (Mikati *et al.*).

Vulnerabilities within frontline communities in the Global North and Global South are products of systemic injustices and inequalities that multiply the impacts of the climate crisis (Islam and Winkel 22). The scale of the challenges we face cannot be siloed to emissions nor can they be "solved" with money, technology, or government alone. Frontline communities have the greatest stake in the transformation of these systems, and thus are advancing the most bold, strategic, and effective solutions. Despite their efforts, frontline communities receive a dismal amount of funding and are often excluded from larger platforms where decisions about climate action are made ("Environmental Justice and Philanthropy: Challenges and Opportunities for Alignment").

This paper proposes that an equity and justice lens is necessary to meet the scale of the climate crisis with effective and transformative solutions. Responding to the crisis will require tackling its root causes while adapting to its symptoms. A justice frame offers us principles, processes, and practices that connect the crisis to broader

interlocking systems that are at its root, such as colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism (“Women of Color Speak-Out”). A justice lens also ensures that solutions address interconnected planetary, humanitarian, and ecological impacts. We explore definitions of climate justice and grassroots, the root causes of the climate crisis, and the ways in which frontline communities and grassroots movements are tackling this existential challenge with scalable solutions, and we offer recommendations for how funders can better align their funding strategies with powerful solutions.

As the global racial justice movement and the unfolding climate crisis make clear, for philanthropy to make a relevant impact in this political moment, it must change. We outline key recommendations on where to start, including 1) interrogating and shifting assumptions that undermine frontline funding; 2) supporting grassroots climate justice movements directly or through public foundations accountable to the grassroots at an accelerated rate; 3) investing in political education and capacity-building inside philanthropic institutions; 4) supporting solutions that multi-solve for symptoms and systemic inequities; and 5) working to influence peers in philanthropy to shift practices towards those that are more democratic, just, and trust-based.

The climate crisis is centuries in the making and will require an integrated response that centers justice and equity, instead of quick fixes. It means supporting the growing formation of movements that engage large numbers of people and organizations, commensurate with the scale of the challenge. 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). And perhaps, the most innovative approach might just be trusting those that have borne the brunt of the intersecting crises worldwide to help us find our way out of it.

## Climate with Justice

The global community is on a race to reduce emissions to avert further catastrophic impact to human and non-human ecosystems (IPCC, "Global Warming of 1.5°C"). Public discourse and funding have been focused on emissions reductions, largely through market-based (e.g., carbon markets), technological (e.g., geoengineering), or top-down (e.g., government- and/or industry-led vs. community-led) strategies. The private and public sectors are key drivers and actors in addressing the climate crisis. Yet, isolating the climate crisis to its impact on planetary inputs and outputs, without taking into account broader social, economic, and political causes and implications, significantly limits our efforts towards ecological stability. By bringing a justice frame to the challenge, climate finance and philanthropy can shift structures and practices to better reflect and support solutions that are commensurate with the scale of the challenge.

We recognize that the climate crisis is part of and overlaps with the broader ecological crisis that threatens all living systems on Earth. We speak to the urgency of climate justice within the larger movement towards ecological justice. While there is no single definition of climate justice, we have learned a few characteristics from grassroots groups and movements advocating for it.

- First, climate justice is a set of principles, processes, and practices that address the root causes of the crisis, recognizing that a changing climate is about more than emissions and rising temperatures. The climate crisis is a result of intertwining systems with social, political, economic, cultural, and ethical considerations.
- Secondly, climate justice takes into account the disproportionate impact of the crisis on marginalized communities by multiplying and exacerbating existing inequities and injustices.
- Thirdly, climate justice recognizes that those who are directly impacted also have the greatest stake in solutions and they are able to multi-solve across the different layers of inequity and injustice.
- Finally, climate justice is an outcome. It is a more

just, livable, and vibrant world in which all beings can thrive.

### Systems, Not Just Symptoms

The challenges we face today are tied to deeply entrenched systems that for centuries have seen the Earth and its inhabitants as resources to extract and exploit. Rising temperatures and extreme weather conditions are caused by increasing greenhouse gas emissions from industries such as fossil fuel, agriculture, and livestock, as well as deforestation and forest degradation (Climate Change Indicators). These sectors are products of and sustain a neo-liberal economic system that prioritizes growth and profit over planetary and human wellbeing.

The confluence of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism laid the groundwork for — and continues to amplify — the existential crisis we are facing today. White supremacy is a system of domination, control, and separation that institutionalized a racial hierarchy with whiteness as superior. Coupled with patriarchy, which is organized around the personal, social, political, and economic domination of women, white supremacy helped create colonialism and capitalism. White supremacy has led to the genocide of Indigenous peoples, domination of Global South nations through colonialism, and enslavement of African peoples, all of which propelled the current socio-economic system (Dunbar-Ortiz; Bonds and Inwood; Saad). Capitalism sees Earth's resources as infinite and pursues growth at all costs, to the detriment of our very survival. An example of these systems in practice is the construction of large, colonial solar projects in the Global South to send energy to the Global North, such as the TuNur solar project in Tunisia (Hamouchene).

Together, these systems have cultivated the unchecked exploitation of people, land, water, and the non-human world for profit. Because inequities and injustices are embedded in these socio-economic systems, certain groups of people have been made more vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis. For example, discriminatory policies and practices, as symptoms of these systems, are the reason why

people of color and many in the Global South still experience lower income; poorer health; inequitable access to quality education and healthy foods; disproportionate exposure to toxic chemicals and pollutants; and insecure housing, among many other social challenges (Wilkerson; Mohanty). Understanding the values, function, and impact of these systems and their symptoms is fundamental to identifying solutions that not only mitigate the climate crisis, but also ensure humanity doesn't make the same mistakes again.

## Global yet Unequal

Globally, 82% of wild mammal biomass has been destroyed and insect populations, the foundation of ecosystems, are plummeting (Media Release: Nature's Dangerous Decline; Carrington). The last seven years have been the warmest on record and sea level rise is accelerating each year (Climate Change: How Do We Know?). Earth systems are being pushed to their limits with 86% of land ecosystems becoming less efficient at absorbing increasing levels of greenhouse gases (Smith). While these impacts of the ecological crisis are felt across the world, they are not distributed equally, particularly as it relates to the toll the crisis is taking on human beings.

Generally, those who have the least amount of responsibility for causing the crisis carry the brunt of its impact. In this paper, we refer to frontline communities as those who are experiencing the greatest burden of the climate crisis, including both ecological impacts (e.g., climate-amplified droughts disproportionately displacing Global South communities) and the systems of extraction that are causing them (e.g., pollution from energy production disproportionately impacting Black communities) ("Unprecedented Impacts of Climate Change"; Donaghy and Jiang 7). Frontline communities to the climate crisis include Black people; Afro-descendent peoples; Indigenous peoples; immigrants; peasant farmers and other low-wage workers; women; youth; people living with disabilities; queer, trans, and gender non-conforming peoples; Global South countries; and communities on the margins in those countries.

The Global South is not a monolith, and frontline communities experience a tremendous diversity of

place-based drivers and impacts of the climate crisis. While four out of the top ten CO<sub>2</sub> emitting countries are in the Global South, over 90% of emissions are still caused by Global North nations (Friedrich, Hickel). Disparities in lower-income countries are experienced in similar ways to historically marginalized peoples in Global North countries (Wikler). The contexts and experiences of Indigeneity and Indigenous Peoples in Africa, Latin America, or Asia vary, as do political, economic, and social norms and policies throughout the Global South. Yet, there are also shared historical, political, and economic experiences amongst Global South countries that render them more susceptible to climate impacts and that marginalize Indigenous, resource-poor, or racialized communities within those countries.

*Isolating the climate crisis to its impact on planetary inputs and outputs, without taking into account broader social, economic, and political causes and implications, significantly limits our efforts towards ecological stability.*

Black and Afro-descendent communities suffer climate impacts worse because of historical marginalization. In the U.S., Black people are 75% more likely than white people to live in "fenceline" communities abutting commercial facilities that emit pollution (Patnaik). Black people are also disproportionately located in places vulnerable to climate hazards, and experience racism in receiving aid (Mayhew Bergman; Sturgis). Indigenous Peoples who are culturally, economically, and socially dependent on ecosystems feel the effects of the climate crisis acutely and impacts are amplified by the marginalization they already experience. Indigenous Peoples suffer from broken treaties, severe divestment and poverty, and lack of basic services, globally. More than half of the people living near environmental hazards are people of color and people of color are more likely to experience ill health or death from environmental causes ("Environmental Racism Is the New Jim Crow").

The climate crisis, as well as the perpetuation of extractive, fossil fuel-dependent economies which drive climate change, also produce harm disproportionately based on gender and sexuality ("Chasing out the Specter of Man Camps"). The

impacts of climate change include massive desertification and changing ecosystems. As a result, women are walking longer distances to access water and find fuel sources, experiencing heightened sexual violence during climate disasters, and sacrificing their education to care for increasingly ill family members (Fact Sheet). For example, sociocultural and institutional sexism means women and girls have less access to nutrition and medicine in geographies with rapidly increasing diseases and resource scarcity on account of climate change (Demetriades and Esplen). LGBTQ+ populations often face heightened risks from climate disasters because it is harder for them to find well-paid jobs, secure safe housing, and receive government services, especially in countries where homosexuality is a crime and discrimination against trans, intersex, and gender non-conforming people is widespread. Queer people are disproportionately impacted by poor air quality, with air-quality related cancer rates at 12.3% higher and respiratory risks from exposure to hazardous air pollutants at 23.8% greater than that of heterosexual people (Collins *et al.* 38).

One in seven people in the world have some form of disability, facing not only heightened risks in climate impacts, but also greater discrimination in aid and response. Those with disabilities may have less access to knowledge, resources, and services, and are more vulnerable to climate disasters and infectious diseases ("How climate change disproportionately impacts those with disabilities"; Wong). Disabled peoples must be at the table in designing equitable and accessible climate justice solutions. Any equitable formation of a climate justice solution must include people with disabilities and climate solutions must be accessible.

According to a study released in September 2020, the Global North is responsible for 92% of excess emissions as of 2015, yet the Global South faces the harshest consequences as a result of extreme weather conditions (Hickel, e403). For countries that are already facing resource and infrastructure challenges, the climate crisis makes it harder to respond to a climate-related disaster and recover from it. Over 2.5 billion people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, primarily in the Global South, yet the climate crisis is making it harder for them to produce, consume, and sell their products (FAO, "Increasing the resilience of agricultural livelihoods"). For people living in low-lying areas that are vulnerable to sea

level rise, such as Pacific Island nations, the climate crisis is threatening their homes and existence (Mellino).

## Land, Climate, and Roots

We see overlapping root causes of the climate crisis acutely in issues of land and territory. Land politics impact the lives of both rural and urban working peoples alike, and determine who controls what land, for how long, for what purposes, and for which beneficiaries. In our current economic systems, white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism have shaped land politics. This is seen in the amount of capital flowing from the Global South to the Global North, which peaked at 997 billion USD (not including illicit financial flows) in 2012, according to the United Nations (UNCTAD 2).

Land inequality threatens the livelihoods of the estimated 2.5 billion people that are involved in small-scale agriculture worldwide (Anseeuw and Baldinelli 7). Only 3% of land value is owned by the bottom 50% of owners, and 60% of land value is owned by the top 10% (Anseeuw and Baldinelli 10). Land inequality stems from differences in ownership, security of tenure, and control over resources. It plays out along lines of race; gender; and the positional power of Global North-based multinational corporations, international monetary institutions, and government policies. Patriarchal oppression leaves women at a particular disadvantage as less than 15% of landholders globally are women, while women constitute over one third of the agricultural workforce (FAO, "The gender gap in land rights"; FAO, "Women in Agriculture"). Land access and ownership is significant to women realizing their rights and autonomy, to ensuring their livelihoods and health.

The climate crisis is both a cause and consequence of land inequality, as more sustainable land use practices by peasants and Indigenous Peoples are threatened. Land inequality is also a cause and consequence of the climate crisis, as shifting land use displaces communities that were preventing emissions from deforestation or more sustainably managing the land ("New report shows Indigenous Peoples best guardians of forests"). As ecological destruction accelerates the dispossession of land and concentrates wealth, land is further concentrated in the hands of a few.

One potent example of land politics at the intersection of the climate crisis' root causes is land grabbing. The Transnational Institute refers to land grabbing as the “capturing of power to control land and other associated resources like water, minerals or forests, in order to control the benefits of its use” (3). In just eight years between 2008 and 2015, nearly 500 land grabs by industrial agricultural companies were documented, accounting for 300 million hectares (roughly the size of Finland) (“Land grabs expand the frontier”). There are multiple, overlapping demands that drive land grabs: food, feed, energy/fuel, and climate change mitigation strategies like carbon offsets (Ahmed). For example, in Haiti, multinational corporations are ramping up mega-projects, and resulting in land grabs (“Haitian Movements Denounce Land Grabs”). Peasant farmers have been kicked off their land under threat or infliction of violence. The corporate impunity and repression used in Haiti against small scale landowners and their resistance to land grabs are echoed across the globe (Transnational Institute).

Land ownership by multinational corporations drives the climate crisis by concentrating land in the hands of a few and commodifying it. Corporations have narrow interests of profit maximization, at the expense of environmental, ecological, and human life considerations. This is at odds with how land stewardship is understood and held in many Indigenous cultures and Global South communities. They see land not as a property to be individualized and financialized, but as a responsibility to be safeguarded, protected, and shared for the common good. Land is largely governed by those who can capture it, rather than those best at protecting and safeguarding it, further exacerbating existing social inequities and fueling the climate crisis (O’Keefe; “New UN report”).

## Grassroots Climate Justice Movements

Frontline communities are organizing as grassroots groups and movements to tackle the overlapping oppressions and injustices they face. Grassroots solutions are those led by communities local to the problems they seek to solve, rather than those led by international policy, corporate, or government actors (“What does ‘grassroots’ mean anyway?”). Although

there is no singular definition of movements, they generally build power from the grassroots, are led by those who are directly impacted, are accountable to their communities, and work towards systemic change. Movements can take principled, collective, direct action to create targeted strategic pressure towards a shared goal and vision.

Grassroots movements led by frontline communities — intrepidly organizing locally and internationally — build political power. Movements create fundamental shifts in priorities, power, and social norms that result in multi-issue benefits. A keystone component of movement-building is the development of networks, alliances, and coalitions that provide an opportunity to broaden the tent of those advocating for climate change policy to include adjacent sectors such as health, faith, labor, and education. Resourcing grassroots and community-based organizations working within and as part of movements helps to build the public support needed to create lasting political will for climate strategies and initiatives. This broader base puts pressure on state and corporate actors to reduce emissions, and guarantees the political resiliency and enforcement of useful national and international climate policies when they are enacted. They also build the necessary energy, food, and governance alternatives, representative of and owned by the communities they work to support.

## The Role of Climate Philanthropy and Finance

Despite the effective and intersectional solutions that frontline grassroots groups and movements advance, they receive a dismal amount of funding. Philanthropy is a microcosm of the root causes of the climate crisis — just as land politics are — as well as a cause of those land politics. White supremacy and colonialism play out in the narratives that underpin decision making (e.g., who is funded and who is not) and the technical aspects of how funding is dispersed (e.g., how that funding is restricted, who is making decisions, eligibility requirements) (Level *et al.*). Shifting the principles and practices of philanthropy is part of achieving climate justice. Without learning how to share power and disrupt our biases, the democratic values that underpin systems change will not take hold, nor will climate justice movements have the resources they need to accelerate change.



*Despite the effective and intersectional solutions that frontline grassroots groups and movements advance, they receive a dismal amount of funding. [...] Shifting the principles and practices of philanthropy is part of achieving climate justice.*

In general, there is a need to integrate an equity and justice lens across all forms and climate financing institutions. Employing an equity and justice lens includes ensuring adequate funding for climate commensurate with the scale of the crisis; funding work advancing long-term systemic change, not just short-term wins; and the work shifts power and levels the field, regardless of whether it is climate research, policy, or advocacy. The lack of an equity and justice lens is most visible in the scarce funding made available to frontline communities, and that is where philanthropy has the most work ahead.

Indigenous Peoples are 5% of the global population and stewards of 80% of biodiversity, yet have the least access to funding, only receiving 0.03% of funding in the U.S. and under 1% of philanthropic funding moving internationally (Tierney). Of all development aid, Indigenous peoples and frontline communities receive less than 1% of climate funding (Gjefsen). Women's initiatives have been shown to most directly address climate change, especially defending land and territory, but receive less than 0.02% of funding (Chávez Ixcaquic *et al.*; Dobson and Lawrence 26). Only 1% of international funding from U.S. foundations is general support to local organizations, reproducing colonial tendencies of control. Project-based support, for example, undermines community self-determination and more holistic work that has the potential to drive deeper change of values and systems.

### Why Aren't Grassroots Groups Receiving Funding?

Philanthropy can bring a more just and equitable lens to our internal practices and external actions. We have spent too much time trying to fund climate strategies that fail to integrate a systemic analysis, and thus do not multi-solve for interlocking crises. In our work, we have heard consistent skepticism from funders about grassroots movement-building as a

strategy for confronting the climate crisis. These narrative frames and their embedded assumptions determine how billions of dollars in climate philanthropy and finance are spent, and how justice is or is not integrated into grant making. Here are a few of them:

**1. Mitigation first.** The crisis is broadly interpreted as an emissions and temperature issue, as opposed to a reflection of systemic injustices and inequities. Large climate philanthropies and bilateral funders have made a concerted effort to invest in strategies to lower emissions as soon as possible. This has often resulted in solutions that are limited in scope and sometimes counter to achieving climate justice (e.g., carbon offsets that incentivize continued pollution in the Global North and may compromise Indigenous sovereignty in the Global South) ("Hoodwinked in the Hothouse"). Ironically, these strategies end up slowing down climate mitigation efforts, as those best positioned to protect high carbon landscapes are pushed off their land or carbon policies enable, rather than stymie, fossil fuel companies ("Hoodwinked in the Hothouse"). In their hurry towards drawdown, the strategies have often increased social inequities. Frontline communities have been advancing strategies that contribute significantly to climate mitigation for decades, and the time for funders to invest is running out (Elliott *et al.*).

**2. "Grassroots movements are working on too small a scale to matter."** There is a general misconception that grassroots is an indicator of size and is synonymous with small. Some funders believe grassroots groups and movements can't advance solutions that meet the scale of the climate challenge. Movement-building is often underfunded because of the cognitive dissonance associated with a desire to secure an incremental win "now," as opposed to investing in conditions and solutions that can provide systemic shifts in the long run. The work of La Via Campesina shared above is just one among many examples of grassroots-driven movements advancing critical work at a global scale. Moreover, as more localized solutions become networked, these "trans-local" efforts are having cumulative impacts.

**3. "Grassroots work is not the highest impact strategy for meeting emission reduction targets."** The CLIMA Fund's report, "Soil to Sky: Climate Solutions That Work," demonstrates that grassroots solutions such as agroecology, protecting Indigenous

Peoples' land and territory rights, direct resistance of extractive industries, and investing in community governance of renewables, could cool the planet — and advance social justice — more than most top-down policies receiving the bulk of climate investment to date (Elliott *et al.*). As the climate crisis becomes more acute, more research demonstrates the power of community-driven mitigation strategies, compared to risky engineered strategies under monopoly control.

**4. "Grassroots work does not have metrics with which we can easily track success."** Indeed, grassroots movements — and social change itself — are inherently nonlinear and many movement outcomes are not quantifiable. The work of shifting

social, cultural, political, and economic power takes decades and cannot be attributed to a single entity, nor can results be realized as quick wins. What if we asked: "What are the important metrics that grassroots groups are using for themselves?" We have found that grassroots groups understand the systems they are trying to shift and are advancing multi-pronged strategies for doing so that are rooted in the communities they serve (Elliott *et al.*). Their work has multi-sectoral reach and impact and they track their progress against their big picture goals as well as achieving incremental gains. Applying an equity lens and supporting grassroots and movement formations requires a shift in funders' erroneous emphases on linear metrics.

## How Grassroots Movements are Addressing the Climate Crisis

### CASE STUDY 1 | La Via Campesina Organizes for Peasant Rights & Food Sovereignty

An example of a grassroots climate justice movement is La Via Campesina (LVC), a global movement of 200 million peasant farmers advancing agroecology — the science, practice, and movement to return our food production to natural, ecological processes. Our industrialized food system creates roughly half of global emissions, consumes 70% of freshwater withdrawals, is responsible for 70% of biodiversity loss on land, and has taken out 80% of forests ("Food and climate change"; FAO, "Water for Sustainable Food and Agriculture"; "UN Report: Nature's Dangerous Decline"; Kissinger *et al.* 11). To put a finer point on it, our compete-and-control industrial agricultural system only produces 30% of the world's food, yet uses 70% of the world's agricultural land. Agroecology, on the other hand, if globalized, could mitigate the same amount of carbon dioxide equivalent as China would emit from now until 2050 (Action Group on Erosion, Technology and Concentration; Elliott *et al.*). That's the difference between crisis and a livable future for many human communities.

LVC, working in 81 countries, is coordinated via decentralized and democratic leadership. The movement does not have access to the policy spaces that industrial agriculture does. Instead, they are able to organize at the local, regional, and global levels to propagate agroecology, advance policy reforms, and push global policy shifts, from the bottom up. Their coordinated, decentralized approach organizes peasant farmers to build place-based, sustainable food systems and agroecology schools to spread these practices. They confront industrial agriculture's land grabs and efforts towards seed privatization through direct action and advocacy from the local to global levels. They were instrumental in passing the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas in 2018 and their members are reclaiming vast tracts of land for sustainable food production (e.g., 7.5 million hectares of land in Brazil) ("What is the MST?").

What makes LVC's work an equity-based climate justice solution? It is addressing the root causes of the crisis. The movement is reversing colonial practices by returning land to peasant farmers to ensure food sovereignty, rather than turning it over to multinational corporations. Food sovereignty means peasant farmers have the right to Indigenous seeds, culturally-relevant foods, and localized supply chains, directly countering food colonialism. And LVC is constructing a peasant farmer-led food web, instead of relying on corporate monopolies.

## CASE STUDY 2 | COMUNDICH Reclaims Ancestral Lands

Indigenous communities manage roughly 25% of Earth's land, and 80% of Earth's remaining biodiversity lives on those lands (EGM; IUCN). Recent research has overwhelmingly demonstrated the importance of Indigenous land tenure in protecting critical, high-carbon landscapes globally and the superior expertise of Indigenous communities in safeguarding forests and other natural areas ("New UN report"). Ensuring and strengthening the rights of Indigenous Peoples is one of the most important steps towards cooling the planet and protecting the cosmovisions of those who hold traditional knowledge of living in greater balance with our Earth.

In Guatemala, 80% of Indigenous rural dwellers remain poor and landless due to a long history of colonization and the resulting theft of their lands, political repression, and cultural loss. Coordinadora de Comunidades y Asociaciones por el Desarrollo Integral del Pueblo Ch'orti' (COMUNDICH) is a grassroots organization working to reclaim rightful title to their lands so they can grow their own food and take adaptive measures in the face of the climate crisis. Alongside their political and legal struggle to reclaim land title, COMUNDICH builds Indigenous political power through regional councils, backing Ch'orti' leaders for local elected office, and revitalizing their traditional cultural identities.

Despite immense repression, including imprisonment and murder of Ch'orti' leaders, COMUNDICH has used Guatemala's Constitutional Court to reclaim their ancestral lands. They've secured Indigenous land title in 48 communities across the country. They have also inspired communities across Honduras and El Salvador to engage in litigation and political advocacy to secure land title (Cojti). Through this work COMUNDICH has ensured that many different Indigenous tribes can sustain their traditions and communities, and continue to protect the forests and landscapes so vital to their and our collective wellbeing.

**5. "Grassroots work does not have the capacity to absorb large grants."** Often community-driven work is "small" because it is funded with small grants. Grassroots groups and movements have plans and ideas that could absorb billions of dollars, but are not funded because they are deemed too "risky." Often those deemed too risky or unable to absorb capital are those led by frontline communities further reflecting and entrenching racial and gender inequities. What if we funded grassroots movements like we actually wanted them to win (Hernández and Jobin-Leeds)?

## Recommendations

Climate funders and donors can take concrete actions now to move their organizations, strategies, and own behaviors towards centering equity and justice. This is not a solo journey. There are philanthropic institutions across the sector reckoning

with questions of justice related to staff representation, grantmaking protocols, theories of change, and vision. Here are a few places to start:

**1. Support grassroots climate justice movements.** Grassroots movements that are led by frontline communities are ready to absorb large capital, and it is time they were given the resources to enact their greatest visions for political change. Without movements, there will not be sufficient political will to make the bold moves climate justice requires. Funders can support grassroots movements in experimentation, innovation, and connectivity globally, particularly in the Global South given the Global North's climate debt. Funding needs to consist of flexible, long-term, core support to enable grassroots groups to build and pivot their work as needed. Funders can reach these formations directly or indirectly through equity-based intermediaries that are working with them such as public foundations, community-controlled capital mechanisms, and grassroots alliances. Public foundations accountable

to the grassroots are uniquely positioned to support large funders in moving large capital towards grassroots groups efficiently and effectively, based on decades of relationship and experience ("Why Fund Intermediaries?"). Finally, funders can consider making public goals to support them in being accountable to those goals (e.g., redistributing 50% of funding towards grassroots groups).

**2. Invest in your and your staff's political education and capacity-building.** Funders need to strengthen their analysis of the climate crisis as a systemic challenge that multiplies existing inequities and injustices. They need to reflect and develop their own practices of accountability, including how they are perpetuating bias and understanding "risk" (e.g., what is the risk if movements don't win?). There are ample resources to learn about the history and current context of grassroots climate justice movements and the systemic change models they use. Entities like the CLIMA Fund, the Thousand Currents Academy, and Grassroots International's donor engagement groups provide tailored learning opportunities for funders to unpack how movements are creating change and how philanthropy can support them.

**3. Ask questions that help discern whether the work you are supporting is grassroots-driven or undermining grassroots movements.** As shared above, climate justice solutions are those that are led by frontline communities and address the root causes of the climate crisis. As funders work to expand their support for climate justice, it is critical they also examine whether existing strategies harm grassroots movements. It Takes Roots, a U.S.-based alliance, created four simple questions that help discern whether strategies are real, systemic solutions to the climate crisis: 1) Who makes the decisions? (those most impacted); 2) Who benefits? (frontline communities); 3) What else does this impact? (does it multi-solve across injustices); and 4) How will the solution build or shift power? (towards those historically marginalized) ("The People's Orientation").

**4. Work to influence peers in philanthropy to shift practices towards those that are more democratic, just, and trust-based.** Research shows that funders shift practice through peer influence. We are each other's most effective teachers. Philanthropic institutions often work in silos, and change in one organization may inspire others. As we face this

global crisis, it becomes even more imperative that funding institutions not only advance equity-based funding approaches and move more money to the grassroots at an accelerated rate, but that we are learning and coordinating together. It is our collective work as funders to share our growth and learning with others.

## Conclusion

The scale of the climate crisis requires innovation in all sectors, including finance and philanthropy. For far too long, we have clung to what we know. We have funded what we deem "large-scale" solutions at the expense of frontline strategies, and moved resources through siloed funding streams. The climate crisis is a product of interlocking systems that have pushed us towards the edge of our planetary boundaries. Responding to it requires that we do our work differently. We can't solve for emissions if we don't tackle the systemic inequities and injustices that render frontline communities more vulnerable to the climate crisis, while holding the least responsibility for the problem. We can't continue to support, or replicate, systems that perpetuate injustice. Fortunately, those who are affected the most by the crisis have effective and scalable solutions that are also building political power at the grassroots. They are organizing as groups and movements to build political will; hold corporations and governments accountable; and promote behavioral shifts and systemic change. They are advancing transformative solutions to address the land inequities driving ecological catastrophes such as agroecology, Indigenous-led land conservation and forest protection, and community-controlled renewable energy that keeps carbon in the ground. If we are to support a more ecologically vibrant and balanced world, it is imperative that we shift our focus and resources towards climate justice.

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**AUGUST 2021**

## Systems, Not Just Symptoms: Bringing a Justice Frame to Climate Philanthropy and Finance

Lindley Mease and Solomé Lemma

