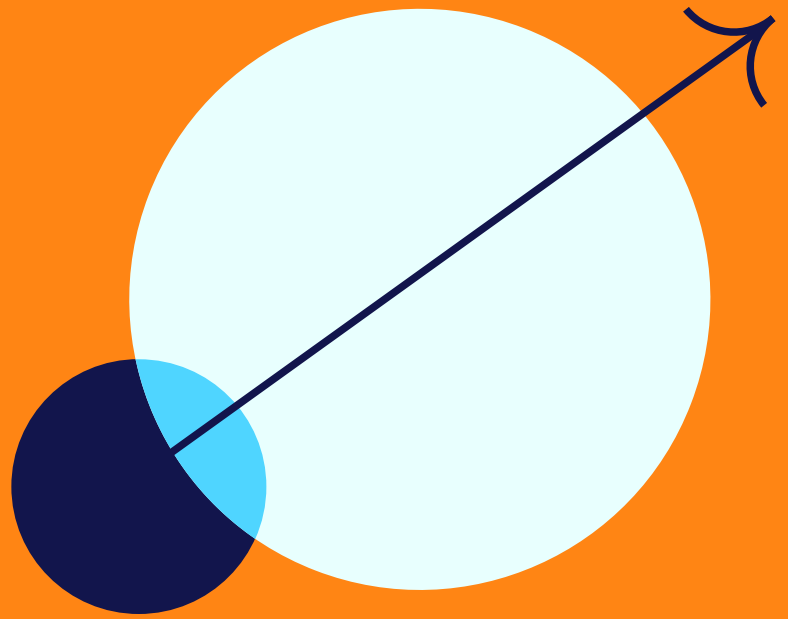
climate lead

August 2026

Climate Philanthropy

A Guide for Action



The World Is at a Crossroads

Climate change is an existential crisis hitting closer and closer to home. We see the consequences in our daily lives: devastating floods, droughts, heat waves, and wildfires that are more frequent and more intense; famine and food insecurity; air pollution that harms our health; biodiversity loss; economic instability; and many other challenges. Scientists and affected communities have sounded the alarm, and we cannot wait any longer to take transformative action. Climate change isn't only an environmental issue—it's a human issue that deepens existing problems like poverty and negatively affects our health.

The world needs massive transitions. We must cut our climate pollution significantly in the next few years and reach "net-zero"—the point at which there is an overall balance between greenhouse gases produced and taken out of the atmosphere—by mid-century to prevent even worse outcomes. Furthermore, we must better protect those already facing the worst of climate change impacts.

If we move quickly, we can change course to prevent and reduce the escalating harms of climate change. That's where philanthropy can make a huge difference. Tackling climate change creates a ripple effect, yielding positive benefits for almost every aspect of life on our planet, now and in the years ahead. The choices we make today can lead to two very different tomorrows. In one, continued unfettered emissions and destruction of nature will intensify harm to people and the planet. In the other, our transition away from the status quo will make the climate crisis more manageable and allow future generations to thrive.

Progress Is Underway

We have seen that change can happen quickly—especially when philanthropy steps up—and is well underway in some sectors:

>20%

Electric vehicles have surged from less than 1 percent of passenger car sales a decade ago to more than 20 percent today.[1]

3x

Since 2015, the share of solar and wind in electricity generation has more than tripled.[2]

~2x

In the past decade, clean energy investment has surged to nearly double that of fossil fuels.[3]

-50%

Since 2022, deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has decreased by over 50 percent.[4]

Climate Solutions Exist—We Need to Scale Them

By embracing and enabling proven, high-impact solutions, philanthropy can help improve air quality and reduce toxins, produce healthy food, provide reliable and clean energy, and protect nature, so that it can, in turn, sustain us. It can help build more-resilient economies and create new jobs. And by advancing solutions focused on adjusting to actual and expected climate impacts—adaptation—it helps to prevent potential losses and yields a wide range of other dividends.[5] When philanthropists support climate solutions, there are almost always additional benefits, such as reducing poverty, improving health, ensuring food security, reversing historic inequities, and conserving biodiversity, habitats, and Earth's natural beauty.

Finally, underscoring these solutions is the fundamental need to ensure that the transition to a climate-safe future is just and equitable. We can no longer stand by while disadvantaged communities bear the brunt of fossil fuel pollution and harms. When philanthropy scales solutions that benefit everyone—especially those most marginalized—we create lasting and long-term positive impact on climate change.

We are decarbonizing the global economy—but not fast enough nor at the scale we need. Philanthropy, which under other circumstances is considered patient capital, can act as the impatient capital that accelerates sectors that are not quite ready for commercial investment.

Christiana Figueres,
Founding Partner, Global Optimism
and Former Executive Secretary,
UN Framework Convention on
Climate Change

Philanthropy Accelerates Change

Achieving these climate goals requires significant transitions in every sector and corner of the globe—how we grow food, travel, produce things, power our lives, and build infrastructure. Philanthropy can be nimble and take risks, supporting organizations working to bring about the change we need.

Examples of Outcomes Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Win hearts and minds to push forward the changes we need.
- Generate the political will to effect changes in policy.
- Spark innovation that leads to new solutions, and bring them to scale at the speed required.
- Help organizations and communities develop and strengthen the skills, abilities, processes, and resources they need to achieve their goals.
- Inspire market action.
- Leverage funding and capacity from the government and private sector.
- Hold polluters accountable.
- Protect and restore nature.
- Ensure that transformation happens in a just and equitable way.
- Defend and advocate for people and communities in harm's way.

The good news is that more donors are engaging and funding for climate overall has increased; however, as of 2024, philanthropy for climate mitigation still comprised only about 2 percent of all global philanthropic giving.[6] A dramatic increase in climate philanthropy is necessary to move at the speed and scale this crisis requires.

Philanthropic Giving

In 2024, the total philanthropic giving by foundations and individuals (across causes) increased by 6 percent to $940 billion. This was outpaced by giving to climate change mitigation, which increased by roughly 30 percent to between $11.7–$18.4 billion.

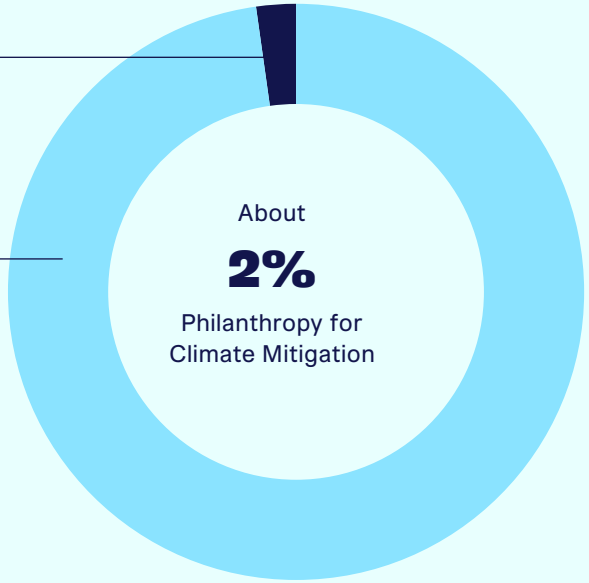
With growing interest in helping communities prepare for and respond to climate impacts, funders have begun tracking philanthropic giving to climate adaptation and resilience. In 2024, data from more than 40 foundations showed that giving in this area was estimated at $870 million—an historic high and more than twice the $400 million tracked in 2021.[7] While tracking this category of support is a major development, this is not a comprehensive reporting. The measurement process is still evolving and significantly more funding is needed to begin to move the needle.

Climate Change Mitigation Philanthropy

$11.7–$18.4 billion

2024 Total Philanthropic Giving

$940 billion



Source: ClimateWorks Foundation, "Funding trends 2026: Climate change mitigation philanthropy"

Photo: Ryan Lash/TED

Clean energy is efficient, it's cheap, and people will benefit. Every day we continue emitting greenhouse gases, climate change persists, so the faster we transition away from fossil fuels, the less pain we will have on the other side.

Johan Rockström, Scientist

Get Started Now

This *Guide for Action* provides a framework and considerations for getting started on your climate philanthropy journey quickly and with confidence. In the sections that follow, we will:

- Give an overview of the science.
- Illustrate how philanthropy can move the needle to effect systemic change.
- Provide sectoral and geographic perspectives.
- Offer best practices for high-impact climate philanthropy.

Inspiring stories from the field illustrate how these elements combine to promote change and create impact.

A better world is possible—but science tells us to move with urgency. Many solutions already exist, and people around the world are working to discover and create new ones. Together, we can slow climate change and ensure a more sustainable, healthy, and equitable future.

Leading With Science

Our Planet Is at a Tipping Point

Historically, the stability of our planet's climate has enabled humanity to evolve and modern society to flourish. However, the exponential growth in human-caused greenhouse gas emissions and the degradation of nature have threatened this stability and brought us to the brink of destruction.

Earth has many natural systems that regulate climate and support its stability. Tropical forests, permafrost, ocean circulation systems, mountain glaciers, and coral reefs are examples of these systems. When continued warming beyond a certain threshold happens, they are pushed into a completely new state, leading to climate tipping points—like the disruption of major ocean current systems or collapse of polar ice sheets. There's a lot of uncertainty around when these tipping points may occur, but science tells us they can happen abruptly, and cause dramatic, irreversible transformation and cascading feedback loops that accelerate the destabilization of our climate and ecosystems. For example, if Greenland's ice sheet melts substantially enough, it would lose the ability to re-form and then reflect less sunlight, trapping more heat and causing the Earth to warm even faster, while locking in several meters of sea level rise that would make coastal cities uninhabitable.

Avoiding tipping points—which can occur with 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming or less—and their catastrophic consequences is another key reason we must step up our action on climate change now. Crossing any of these tipping points will have profound impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity, food and water security, infrastructure, national security, economic stability, and social cohesion. Acting quickly and at scale to reduce emissions is the best way to ensure this does not happen.

Our North Star: A Climate-Safe Future

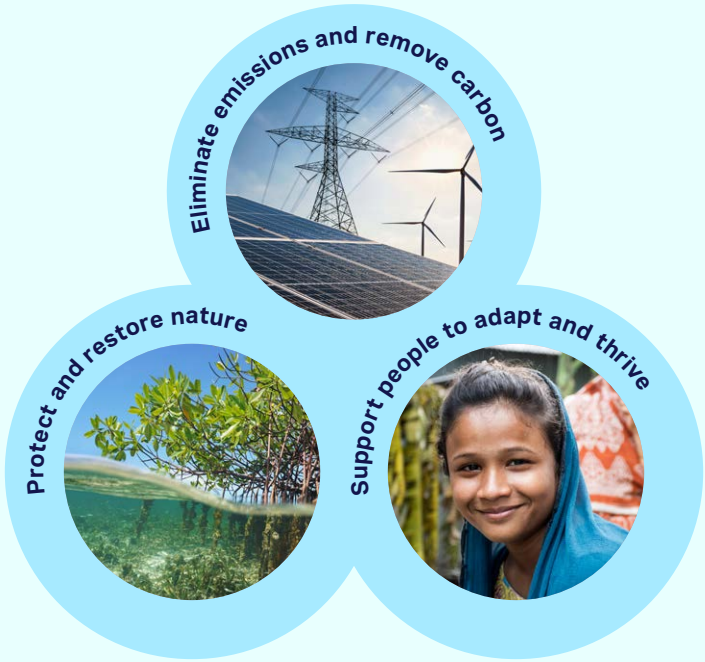
Acting now is absolutely critical to ensure we can avoid the worst impacts of our overheating climate and protect our future. The goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change, is to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels.[8]

We are likely to exceed the 1.5 degrees Celsius target in the next few years. However, achieving this ambitious goal is still possible in the future if we cut greenhouse gas emissions as quickly as we can and reach net-zero emissions by the middle of this century. We know we also must protect and heal nature, so it can continue to absorb what we do emit and help keep the climate stable.

Getting the world back into balance at safe temperature levels—1.5 degrees Celsius or below—requires removing carbon already in the atmosphere. And, because most of us are already feeling the impacts of climate change today, we need to take immediate steps to protect people from climate harms. These actions are necessary, mutually reinforcing aspects of addressing the climate crisis.

The Path to a Climate-Safe Future

Achieving a climate-safe future for people and the planet requires simultaneous action across three interrelated areas: reducing emissions to net-zero and removing additional carbon, balanced with the imperatives of protecting and restoring nature and supporting people to adapt and thrive in the years ahead.

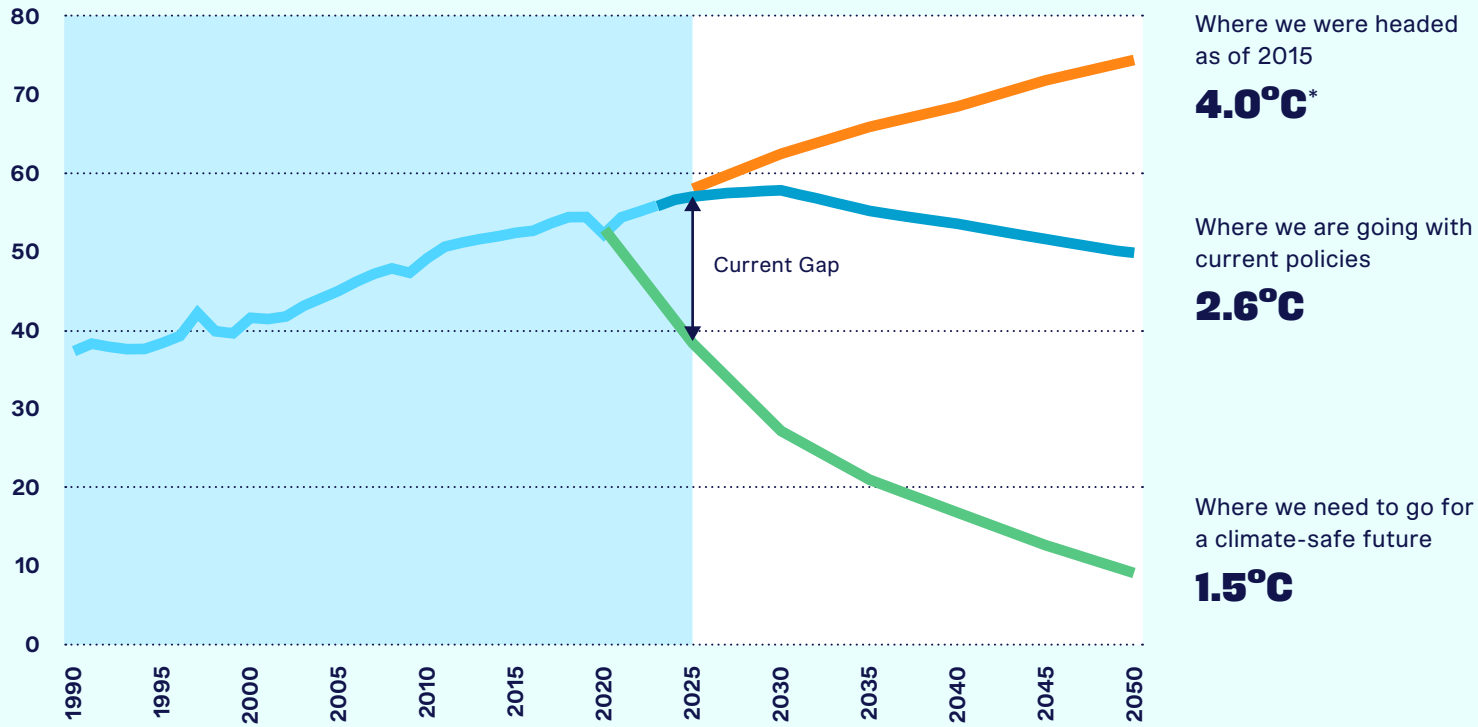


Bending the Curve

While we have slowed emissions growth, and there is evidence that emissions in many geographies have begun to plateau, we are still not on track with our short-term goals to reduce emissions rapidly and to the extent needed. Our long-term goal is to be on a trajectory to return to 1.5 degrees Celsius or below by 2050, a critical component of delivering a climate-safe future.

Each year of delayed action compounds the problem and makes it more difficult and expensive to fix down the road. Every tenth of a degree matters for the planet and for people—particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Global greenhouse gas emissions (billions of tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per year)



*Temperature outcomes projected by 2100

Source: Climate Action Tracker November 2025 and ClimateWorks Foundation 2020

Greenhouse Gases Are Driving the Crisis

From burning the fossil fuels that power our cars and electrical grids, to manufacturing steel for homes and buildings, to growing food that feeds an expanding population—these activities are some of the sources of greenhouse gas emissions that drive the climate crisis.

Greenhouse gases trap heat in the earth's atmosphere. Carbon dioxide is the largest contributor to greenhouse gases emitted through human activities—mostly through the production and combustion of fossil fuels (coal, gas, and oil) and deforestation. Some carbon can be absorbed by land, forests, and oceans, which act as nature's "sinks" to store carbon. However, carbon dioxide that is not absorbed can remain in the atmosphere for hundreds to thousands of years, blanketing the planet and trapping heat. We need to act immediately to reduce emissions, given how long they will continue to affect the climate.

There are many other greenhouse gases that are even more potent at heating the planet than carbon dioxide—they are known as "super pollutants." Fortunately, they stay in the atmosphere for much less time, so if we take action now, we can greatly reduce concentrations of these super pollutants and limit warming in the near term.

The most common super pollutant, methane, is primarily emitted across the energy, agriculture, and waste sectors; has more than 80 times the warming potential of carbon dioxide over a 20-year period; and remains in the atmosphere for roughly 10 years. Hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) used in air conditioners and refrigeration can be thousands of times more powerful than carbon dioxide, but are emitted in lesser quantities than methane.[9] Other super pollutants include nitrous oxide stemming largely from synthetic fertilizers and manure; black carbon from sources such as diesel vehicles and burning biomass; and ground-level ozone, which forms from other pollutants in the atmosphere.

Curbing super pollutant emissions is one of the fastest ways to reduce climate impact and a critical, high-impact path for limiting climate change in the near term, helping to prevent tipping points and creating benefits for both public health and food security.

Achieving net-zero means minimizing all these dangerous gases by addressing the sources of emissions, and protecting and enhancing nature's ability to store carbon. In addition to scaling existing removal technologies, new methods of removing carbon and other greenhouse gases from the atmosphere are also necessary to achieve the goals that will keep us—and future generations—safe.

How Change Happens

Philanthropy Can Accelerate and Amplify Solutions

Tackling the climate challenge requires many actors and major systemic transformations—fundamentally shifting and realigning how the world functions at all levels, from our economies to our institutions to our lifestyles.

Philanthropy can unlock systemic change by influencing governments, businesses, and markets, and activating people who can compel action. It can invest in ”levers”—accelerators that drive progress from all angles and catalyze the massive transitions we need to move beyond fossil fuels—politically, economically, and socially.

Levers for systems change may be deployed as cross-cutting approaches across greenhouse gas-emitting sectors or geographies. These focused efforts, targeted properly, can translate into powerful outcomes that bolster climate solutions. Because many levers are interconnected and can be mutually reinforcing, using them in combination is a particularly effective strategy. Following are examples of some of the most advantageous levers.

LEVERS:

- Capacity Building
- Finance
- International Diplomacy
- Legal Strategies
- Movements and Coalitions
- Policy
- Research and Innovation
- Strategic Communications

Capacity Building

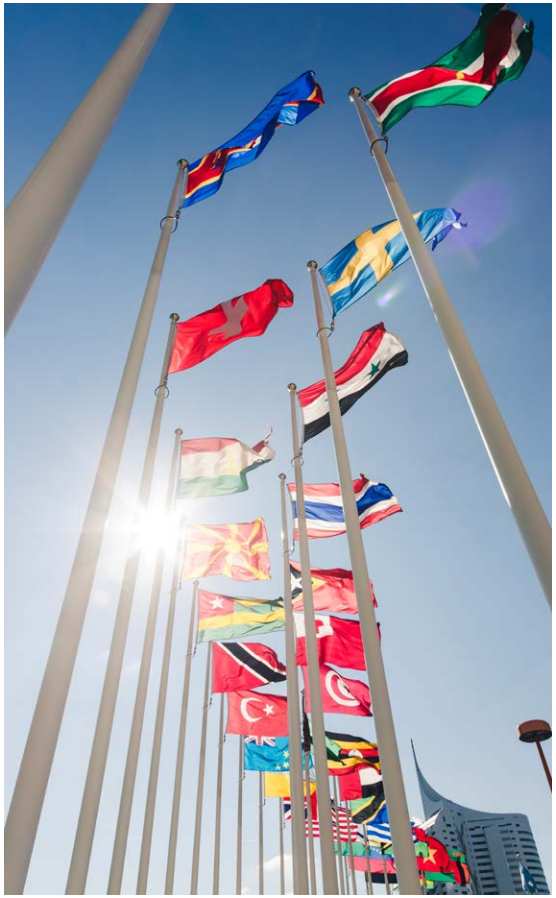
Building and strengthening the ability of an entity—whether an organization, group of organizations, movement, city, state, or an entire country—to deliver effectively on its mission is core to long-term sustainability. Activities that can enhance performance include leadership development and skill building, strategic planning, evaluation, and fundraising. Philanthropy—particularly long-term, flexible support—is especially valuable in enabling entities to build, scale, and pivot their work as needed. Technical assistance is a form of capacity building that may target specialized needs.

Example: For new climate technologies to be deployed successfully and adopted globally, we must enhance our capacity for innovation—building skills and capabilities of people and communities that allow them to contribute to and benefit from climate technology transitions. To date, most efforts have focused on advantaged communities in the U.S. and Europe. Philanthropy can build a diverse and inclusive workforce and pipeline of climate tech leaders by ensuring equitable representation in the clean energy workforce; supporting underrepresented communities to drive local innovation; and funding incubators and accelerators to provide key services such as finance, legal expertise, and entrepreneurship coaching.

Finance

A broad set of norms, incentives, tools, policies, and regulations affect how finance flows. Capital allocation to climate solutions, research, and technologies speeds decarbonization, as does directing capital away from climate-misaligned funds, investments, and companies. Philanthropy can help accelerate the transition to climate-aligned finance and investments by supporting the enabling conditions for financial system actors to consider the costs of climate damage and holding them accountable. Philanthropy also can take on risk—both real and perceived—of early-stage climate investments, spurring private investment.

Example: Philanthropy seeded the development of voluntary sustainability- and climate-related financial reporting frameworks and standards—like those from the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board—which guide companies on how to disclose emissions and risks from a changing climate that could affect cash flows. Philanthropy has helped consolidate and streamline these standards into globally accepted, interoperable reporting norms, making it easier for investors and regulators to use in their investment and lending decisions. With this support, countries are integrating those standards—now endorsed by international finance bodies—into their laws, so they are mandatory. In only two years, regions representing over 60 percent of global GDP have committed to these standards.



International Diplomacy

Some of the biggest paradigm shifts on climate change come from international agreements among countries. Since the 1992 Earth Summit, which established the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), diplomacy has been a valuable lever for action at the transnational level. Forums like the U.N. climate conferences ("Conference of Parties" or COP) are effective venues for negotiating common targets, demonstrating leadership, and mobilizing financial and technical support. Philanthropy can fund research, analysis, and data, enabling organizations to engage in diplomatic arenas with needed information and build political support to drive more ambitious outcomes.

Example: The Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance is an ambitious diplomatic effort, supported by philanthropy, to end fossil fuel expansion and collaboratively work toward a managed phase-out of oil and gas production. Comprising national and subnational governments and stakeholders, the alliance models leadership and high ambition, provides technical assistance through a secretariat to member countries in oil and gas phase-out planning, and recruits commitments from new countries.

Legal Strategies

Greenhouse gas emissions can sometimes be reduced through enforcement of environmental laws, and litigation against polluters or government entities that don't live up to their legal obligations. Litigation can also be used to establish liability for climate impacts. There are now more than 2,000 climate cases in courts around the world, with parties pursuing a variety of legal claims. Cases that hold oil and gas companies accountable for deceptive practices related to climate pollution and the harm their emissions have on communities, for example, seek to redress the financial harm from climate-related impacts and establish corporate liability if they fail to stop polluting.

Example: In 2025, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) unanimously concluded that governments must phase out fossil fuels, rapidly reduce emissions, provide remedy to those facing climate damages, and provide climate finance to developing countries. This landmark opinion was the result of a years-long effort initiated by students at the University of the South Pacific in Vanuatu, who grew up seeing their homes flood at high tide. Early philanthropic funding helped students to organize and plan, and subsequently to convene, network, and mobilize additional funders.

Photo: iStock, chameleonseye

Movements and Coalitions

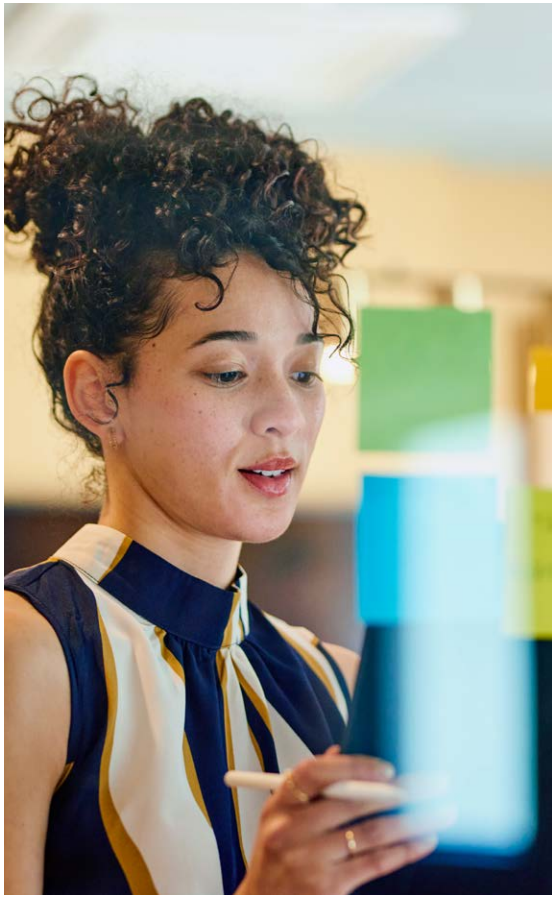
People-powered movements engage communities, generate political will, and push decision-makers to put equitable and just climate solutions at the top of their agendas. A key role for philanthropy is helping diverse groups and even unlikely allies join in support of common goals—like efforts that bring health professionals, labor unions, and corporations together with environmental groups and communities affected by climate change. By building collective power, these groups are better equipped to get the attention of policy makers, business leaders, and the public to inspire action. Philanthropy also helps groups move from one-off campaigns to sustained and transformative action.

Example: The coordinated actions of Indigenous communities supported by advocacy groups focused on transitioning from fossil fuels have helped cancel or stall numerous fossil fuel infrastructure projects across the U.S. and Canada (such as Keystone XL), preventing or delaying greenhouse gas pollution equivalent to at least one-quarter of annual U.S. and Canadian emissions.[10] Movement building, supported by philanthropy, was critical to making this happen.

Policy

Public policy is a core building block with the power to shift resources and investment at scale and bring about systemic change. Philanthropy can fund research that creates an evidence base for strong climate policies and advocacy efforts that marshal political will and inspire the confidence of people and governments. It can help build diverse, representative coalitions that broaden support and ensure that climate solutions are informed and supported by communities affected by pollution and climate impacts. Once adopted and implemented, climate policy can have a significant impact on greenhouse gas emissions at the local, state, provincial, national, and global levels.

Example: In 2021, the state of Illinois passed one of the most comprehensive climate laws in the U.S., putting the state on a path to 100 percent carbon-free power by 2045. The Climate and Equitable Jobs Act also expanded energy efficiency and other cost-saving opportunities for consumers and implemented tough ethics standards for utilities. Philanthropy resourced a diverse coalition—representing a range of issues—that was instrumental in pushing the policy over the finish line and accelerating implementation.



Research and Innovation

Innovation fueled by research and development is a lever that can accelerate progress. Nascent areas—like net-zero emissions aviation or removing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere—need more investment to become commercially viable. Coordinated philanthropic support can function as patient, risk-tolerant capital that can fuel discovery, tackle technical and institutional barriers that may slow progress, and mobilize the players who can fuel the change we need. Philanthropy also can support research that generates data and analyses to help strengthen policy, a legal case, or communications.

Example: Cement is the literal building block of cities and economies, but traditional cement contributes significantly to climate change. Philanthropy combined with public funding supported the development of a climate-friendly cement that reduces emissions by up to 40 percent compared to more carbon-intensive cement, while being cost effective and readily produceable in most geographies. Philanthropy has since moved this new cement into field testing and commercial deployment in several countries by shaping government incentives and forming industry partnerships for its uptake.

Strategic Communications

Engaging hearts and minds is crucial for climate transitions, which span the globe and touch every sector in the economy. Communications can engage and move influential audiences to build a strong social mandate for climate action as well as to weaken the social license of the fossil fuel industry. Philanthropy can advance the work of people, organizations, and networks who are creating new narratives to inform decision-making; employing media, digital communications, and entertainment to reach new audiences; waging issue-specific campaigns; and challenging misinformation and disinformation perpetuated by entrenched fossil fuel interests.

Example: One of Denmark's largest sources of emissions is agriculture, particularly livestock. Proposals to regulate agricultural emissions in Denmark historically have faced strong opposition due to a powerful lobby and the core role of agriculture in the country's identity. Philanthropy supported a networked strategic communications effort to reframe the debate by making a clear connection between intensive farming practices and visible environmental problems. The network helped align messaging, debunk misinformation, and present audience insights to key political stakeholders. This opened up the political space for the world's first carbon tax on agriculture to pass, which has the dual goal of reducing emissions while restoring natural landscapes and watershed health.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet: Success requires deploying many levers. While the impact of any one of these strategies alone can't always be measured in emissions reductions or lives saved, leading philanthropists have learned that attacking the issues on multiple fronts is essential to systems change. Used effectively, philanthropic levers can accelerate shifts, amplify solutions, scale innovations, and promote fair and equitable outcomes.

For a detailed look at how using levers can yield success, see our case study illustrations:

Electrifying Transport in Emerging Economies ▶
The Sunshot: How Germany Built the Market for Solar Energy ▶
Curbing Emissions From Tropical Deforestation ▶
Catalyzing the Global Effort to Clean Up Cooling ▶
Ending Coal ▶

PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

Electrifying Transport in Emerging Economies

Philanthropy is accelerating the global effort to electrify vehicles for health and climate benefits—advancing support for policies to make clean transport affordable and accessible. This is very important in emerging economies, where vehicle demand is growing rapidly.

Kenya is a great example of how philanthropy can make this happen. Motorcycle taxis, known as "boda bodas," anchor Kenya's gig economy. The country saw a surge in electric motorcycle sales, from just 4 percent in 2023 to 15 percent in 2025, as drivers took advantage of smart government import and purchase incentives to make the switch. To maintain this momentum, in 2024, the Kenyan government proposed the National Electric Mobility Policy, but it was stalled due largely to financial concerns.

Philanthropy countered concerns by funding research that revealed using electricity was cheaper than other fuels. Philanthropy also backed a diverse coalition of local and international organizations that used strategic communications to build the political will necessary to turn the policy into law. Central to these efforts is Drive Electric, a global philanthropic campaign that supports smart government policies, boosts business leadership, and mobilizes grassroots efforts to accelerate the transition to 100 percent zero-emission electric transport. Since its creation in 2021, the campaign has worked alongside countries like Kenya as they leapfrog fossil fuels and move directly to clean transportation.

This groundwork provided the necessary momentum for Kenya's success. The Kenyan government officially launched its National Electric Mobility Policy in February 2026 to expand access to the economic and health benefits of electrification. The impact is local and life changing. Albert, a Nairobi boda-boda driver saw his take-home pay increase by over 40 percent after switching to an electric motorbike. For Albert and his passengers, the benefit isn't just financial; It's the dignity of a cleaner commute. Like thousands of others across the city, they no longer have to endure choking exhaust fumes or arrive at their destinations covered in soot.

LEVERS USED:

Policy

This major policy win includes timelines for the complete phase-out of fossil fuels, fiscal and non-fiscal incentives to accelerate EV adoption, from motorcycles to freight trucks, and measures to support job creation.

Movements and Coalitions

Local and international organizations backed by philanthropic support, came together to champion the policy for clean transportation.

Strategic Communications

The coalition effectively built the political will necessary for the policy's adoption through strategic communications.

Research and Innovation

Philanthropists financed research to promote the policy's adoption. This research examined the economic advantages of reduced gasoline import costs, which would be offset by locally-produced, clean electricity.

Toward a Climate-Safe Future

While levers can bolster solutions that move us toward a more climate-friendly future, philanthropists also need to determine which parts of the economy they seek to influence. This requires an understanding of the sectors that are the sources of emissions and the sinks (and emerging technologies) that can absorb greenhouse gases. Geography, discussed in the following section, also plays an important role, since regions contribute to and are affected by climate change in different ways and have different priorities for addressing and adapting to it.

Equitably achieving a climate in balance involves tackling the climate crisis on all fronts—stopping sources of emissions and protecting and restoring nature's ability to store carbon dioxide. Time is of the essence; climate impacts already affect most of the world's population, and every fraction of a degree of warming avoided is critical to reducing escalating harms, which affect everyone, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.

Avoiding emissions today is worth more than trying to reduce them down the road. The sooner we act, the sooner we can reap the economic, health, employment, and security benefits that a cleaner planet makes possible, and fulfill other development needs. And to ensure that everyone enjoys the rewards of the low-carbon economy, we must ensure equity and justice considerations are integrated in all solutions.

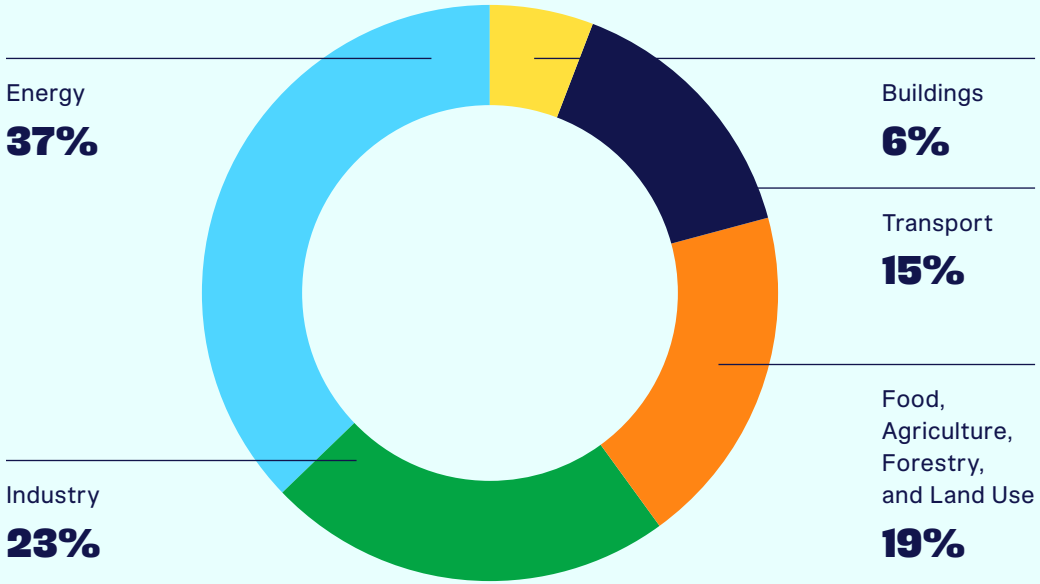
Climate Lead's *Impact Accelerator* helps philanthropists focus on the areas where significant headway is most urgently needed, identifying the strategies and solutions that are most critical in the next few years. Contact us for more information. ▶

Eliminate Sources of Emissions

Staying within safer levels of warming requires us to transition away from polluting fossil fuels that are used to generate power and fuel our transportation systems and most-polluting industries (like cement, steel, and plastics). And we must reduce emissions caused by cutting down forests, destroying peatlands and coastlines, and poor agricultural practices.

In 2024, total human-caused greenhouse gas emissions amounted to more than 50 billion metric tons worldwide.[11] Where do these greenhouse gases come from? Global emissions can be broken down into five major sectors. Meeting our climate goals requires us to drastically reduce emissions in each of the following sectors, now.

Greenhouse Gas Sources



Source: EDGAR and Global Carbon Budget, 2025

While the buildings and industry sectors are presented as standalone to the energy sector, electricity use by the buildings and industry sectors is included in the energy sector.

Note: The data on which this illustration is based represents one of many different estimates of greenhouse gas sources. While estimates vary based on methodology, all are directionally similar.

Greenhouse gases come from many sources, and solutions need to be equally wide-ranging to make a difference. Philanthropy can support many different groups who are working to reduce these emissions. The examples that follow are only a few of the many pathways to impact that may be pursued; innovation and discovery are especially important across all sectors.

Energy

Producing fossil fuels and burning coal or gas to generate electricity and heat are responsible for approximately one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions. To date, most climate philanthropy has been directed to this sector because renewable energy sources are foundational to other industries' transitions away from fossil fuels (e.g., transport and buildings). This area will continue to grow in importance, given that as of 2024, an estimate of nearly 730 million people worldwide lack access to electricity,[12] and more power will be needed as countries advance their economies and reduce poverty.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Create an enabling environment for renewable energy at national and local levels.
- Catalyze public and private financing for community-based solar in low-income communities and countries.
- Fund organizations calling for manufacturers, hyperscalers (large-scale data centers that deliver massive amounts of computing power and storage capacity), and regulators to use clean power.
- Mobilize frontline communities to fight new oil and gas extraction, pipelines, and infrastructure.
- Educate decision-makers on the economic and social benefits of offshore wind.

Industry

Fossil fuel-intensive industrial processes and manufacturing, as well as managing and processing waste, make up about one-quarter of global emissions, with certain industries—such as steel, cement, and chemicals—being particularly polluting (note that this is exclusive of emissions related to electricity used by industrial facilities). Philanthropy in this sector is in its early stages, and there are many opportunities to influence industrial operations at scale.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Transform manufacturing processes that emit carbon and promote policies that drive a clean energy transition for materials such as cement and steel.
- Build markets for low-emitting materials, green steel, and low-carbon cement through public pressure and government mandates.
- Promote innovative ways to reuse or use less of these materials.
- Oppose new construction of polluting infrastructure in all of the biggest industrial sectors—including steel, cement, and chemicals.

Food, Agriculture, Forestry, and Land Use

Collectively, these categories contribute roughly one-fifth of global emissions. Deforestation—burning and clearing forests to harvest timber, create new agricultural land, or raise cattle—is a major driver, turning ecosystems that could be natural carbon sinks into sources of carbon emissions. Meat- and dairy-intensive diets are significant sources of greenhouse gases, since cattle and other ruminants emit large quantities of methane, in addition to being a major driver of deforestation. Unsustainable agricultural practices, like excessive tilling of soil and fertilizer use, release greenhouse gases. Food waste is also a source of methane and other greenhouse gases, yet nearly one-third of the food we grow is wasted. There is growing public interest in sustainable food, which is a tangible, accessible climate solution that people interact with daily. Because philanthropic attention to food and agriculture is at an early stage, there is plenty of room to shape and scale the infrastructure needed for action.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Incentivize farming methods that benefit nature and climate, like cover crops and crop rotation, better use of fertilizer and manure, and enhanced soil health.
- Support small farmers by protecting them against climate risks like droughts and floods, and giving them timely access to market and weather information.
- Protect and restore nature by shifting food system subsidies and supply chains away from environmental degradation.
- Create the policies, options, and products to shift toward healthy, sustainable diets.
- Work with households, businesses, and governments to measure and reduce their food waste and loss by fostering innovation and changing policy.
- Support technologies, policies, and practices that eliminate food waste.

Photo: iStock, carstenbrandt

Transport

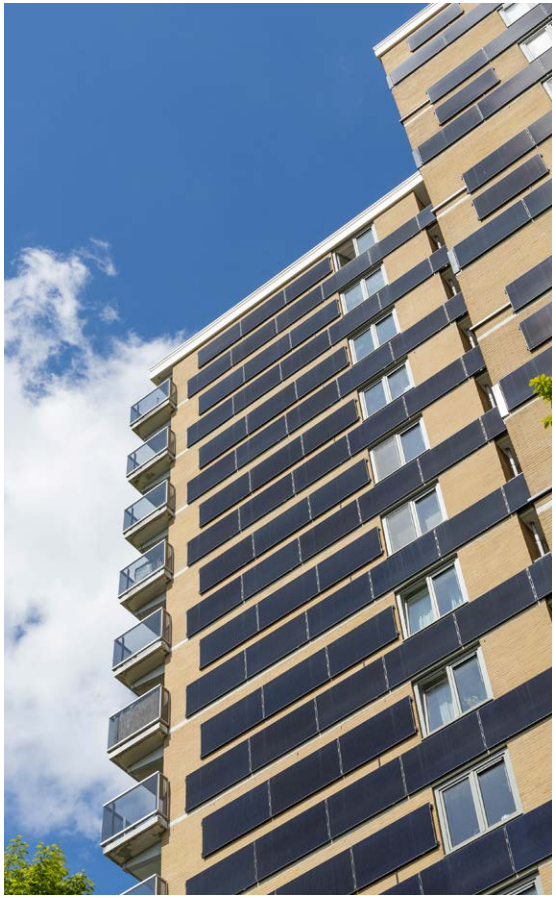
Transport is responsible for producing 15 percent of global emissions due to a reliance on oil and gas. About two-thirds of these emissions come from road transport to move people and goods. The balance (slightly under a third of all transport emissions) comes from airplanes, ships, and trains—also largely powered by fossil fuels—and is growing rapidly. From a philanthropic perspective, some strategies (e.g., transition to electric cars, trucks, and freight vehicles) are ready to scale while other means of long-haul transit—like shipping and long-distance aviation—have some solutions but require more research and development.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Accelerate the transition to zero-emission transport by increasing the adoption of electric cars, freight and delivery trucks, buses, and two- and three-wheelers.
- Mobilize diverse people-powered coalitions to demand a cleaner transportation future.
- Advocate for the necessary infrastructure and zoning to make cities more walkable and public transit-friendly.
- Accelerate development of cleaner aviation fuels and transition shipping to zero-emissions fuels and ports.

Buildings

Through gas-fired furnaces, boilers, and hot-water heaters, as well as refrigerants, buildings represent 6 percent of global emissions. In addition to these direct emissions, buildings today are responsible for roughly one-third of global electricity consumption,[13] as well as one-third of global steel and 60 percent of global cement use. Retrofitting existing residential and commercial buildings and making new buildings more sustainable are key priorities. Avoiding gas for heating and cooking and using less-harmful chemicals for cooling are also critical. Buildings solutions can complement industry solutions by creating demand for less-polluting forms of steel and cement. Climate philanthropy in this sector is not at the scale of other sectors and is ripe for attention and investment.



Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Work with state and local officials to require new buildings to be carbon neutral, using low-carbon materials and on-site renewable energy generation.
- Promote policies and incentives to decarbonize existing buildings—for example, by eliminating gas appliances—and drive continued efficiency improvement in building operations.
- Increase access to clean and efficient cooling, particularly for vulnerable populations, thus advancing racial and social justice in an overheating world

PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

The Sunshot: How Germany Built the Market for Solar Energy

In the early 1990s, coal dominated German electricity generation, and solar power—widely disregarded as expensive and marginal—played a minimal role in the country's energy mix.

Philanthropy has worked alongside civil society to create the conditions for deploying solar power across the entire electricity system. Over 30+ years, Germany's solar capacity grew by nearly 40x and the country now has one of the world's largest installed solar fleets. This mirrors global trends, with successes elsewhere in Europe, the U.S., Australia, China, and India.

How did this happen? As Germany sought new industrial growth opportunities, solar emerged as promising, shaped by long-standing mobilization from civil society and the anti-nuclear movement. Framing solar not purely as environmental policy, but a sector in which Germany could lead, was a powerful economic and political argument. But a system designed around centralized fossil and nuclear generation made it challenging for solar to gain traction.

As part of a wider movement behind the energy transition, philanthropy contributed to efforts to establish regulatory conditions that made solar's wide-scale expansion feasible. It supported economic analysis and modeling, legal frameworks, advocacy, and communications that engaged policymakers and the public as policies took shape. New law facilitated large-scale expansion through predictable revenue streams—unlocking private capital and accelerating commercialization. As deployment expanded, solar costs fell by nearly 90 percent between 2000–2015.

Policy enabled households, farmers, cooperatives, and municipalities to become energy producers, with rooftops, barns, and public buildings turning into small power plants. Communities and local actors drove this shift, with philanthropy helping ensure they actively participated in designing this energy model, so it was truly community led. These citizen-energy initiatives have made renewables central to the local infrastructure, transforming solar from abstract policy into tangible economic benefits.

LEVERS USED:

Policy

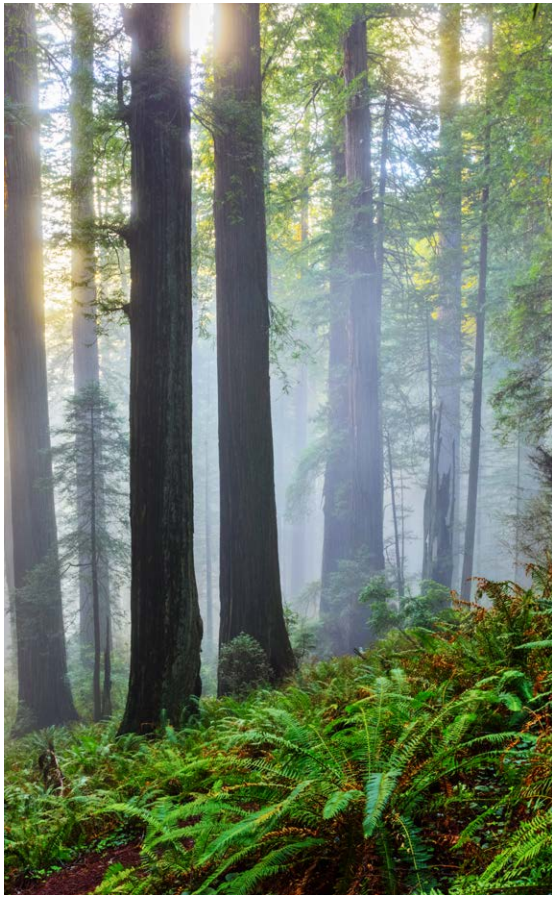
By providing for "feed-in tariffs"—which guaranteed compensation for renewable energy operators for 20 years—and preferentially feeding electricity from renewable sources into the grid, the Renewable Energy Sources Act (EEG) successfully stimulated expansion of clean energy.

Strategic Communications

Ensuring that journalists, decision-makers, and society at large had access to clear reporting on the rapidly evolving sector helped develop a strong narrative that inspired public support.

Movements and Coalitions

The Bürgerenergie—or citizen energy—movement brought together a diverse coalition of interests, including not only environmental groups but farmers, local businesses, municipalities, and conservative constituencies, many of whom became direct investors or owners, supporting solar as community economic development.



Protect and Restore Nature's Ability to Store Greenhouse Gases and Buffer Climate Impacts

Approximately half of all carbon dioxide emissions caused by human activity have been absorbed by nature—in vegetation, soils, and oceans. Removing these gases from the atmosphere thins the blanket of climate pollution surrounding the planet and slows global warming. Enhancing sinks—for example, by restoring forests—can, over time, enable the absorption ("sequestration") of significant amounts of greenhouse gases.

When nature thrives, it can support a variety of species and the services upon which humanity depends—such as the provision of food, pollination, purification of air and water, and flood control. Increasingly, countries are recognizing that conserving these complex, fragile ecosystems is important to achieving climate and health goals. Recently, in a rare display of consensus, more than 190 nations reached a landmark agreement—the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework—that aims to reverse the unprecedented destruction of nature. One of the agreement's targets, known as 30x30, is an ambitious effort to protect at least 30 percent of the planet's land and water by 2030, helping to mitigate and adapt to climate change and prevent widespread loss of species.

There are two categories of natural sinks:

Land Sinks

Land sinks naturally absorb and store human-caused carbon emissions in the soil, grasses, plants, and trees in ecosystems throughout the biosphere—from forests and peatlands to wetlands and tundra. By protecting and sustaining these vital ecosystems, philanthropy can reduce emissions, protect biodiversity, and promote sustainable livelihoods for Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Philanthropy can help to halt the clearing of these vital resources—all of which store carbon—and restore and protect them.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Pressure companies to prevent deforestation within their supply chains.
- Support land tenure rights for Indigenous Peoples and local communities.
- Equip advocates with the evidence base to expose harmful practices and impacts on people and nature.
- Drive learning and business models that accelerate land restoration for climate, nature, and livelihoods.

Oceans and Coastal Sinks

Oceans and coastal sinks absorb and store human-caused carbon emissions through natural processes like photosynthesis and by directly dissolving carbon dioxide in seawater. More dissolved carbon makes the water more acidic and decreases the amount of carbonate—which sea organisms like oysters, sea urchins, and corals use to form calcium carbonate, their major mineral building block. As the planet warms and oceans become more acidic, it is more difficult for these creatures to build their shells and parts of their skeletal structures.

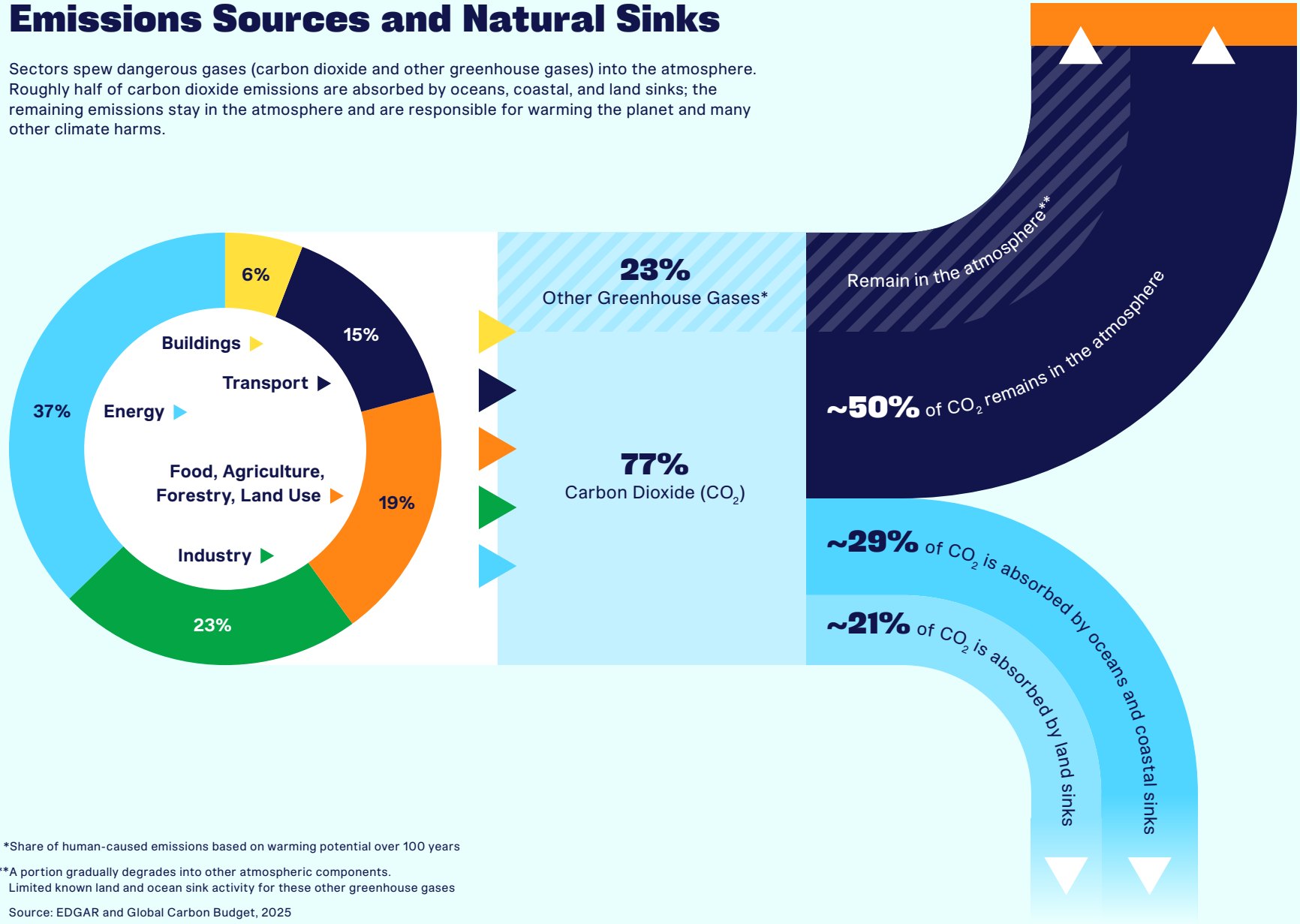
Warmer temperatures and increased sea levels harm important ecosystems like mangroves, coral reefs, and sea grass, which both naturally store carbon and nurture aquatic life. In the Arctic, sea ice—which helps regulate the sunlight that enters the Arctic region—is rapidly diminishing, accelerating warming for the entire planet.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Halt the expansion of offshore oil and gas production and instead advocate for offshore wind.
- Restore and protect ocean and coastal ecosystems that store carbon, such as mangroves, salt marshes, and seagrass beds (known as “blue carbon”).
- Accelerate the transformation of the global shipping industry.
- Support efforts to protect and preserve the integrity of the Arctic Ocean and invest in solutions that can help avoid triggering Arctic climate feedback loops.

Emissions Sources and Natural Sinks

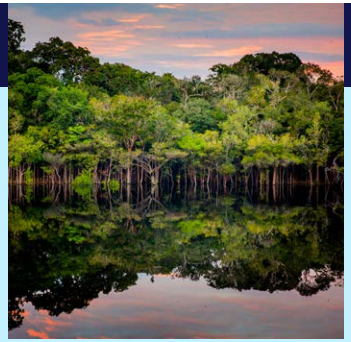
Sectors spew dangerous gases (carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases) into the atmosphere. Roughly half of carbon dioxide emissions are absorbed by oceans, coastal, and land sinks; the remaining emissions stay in the atmosphere and are responsible for warming the planet and many other climate harms.



*Share of human-caused emissions based on warming potential over 100 years

**A portion gradually degrades into other atmospheric components. Limited known land and ocean sink activity for these other greenhouse gases

Source: EDGAR and Global Carbon Budget, 2025



PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

Curbing Emissions From Tropical Deforestation

Deforestation contributes 10–15 percent of global emissions by releasing carbon stored in soils and trees into the atmosphere while simultaneously harming critical natural carbon sinks. In 2025, 4.3 million hectares of tropical primary forests were destroyed—an area the size of Denmark. Philanthropy has supercharged efforts to protect and restore forests by funding work in high-impact regions, including Brazil, Indonesia, and the Congo Basin.

Leveraging decades of coalition building in Brazil, philanthropy capitalized on a window of opportunity in 2023 with a supportive new administration in place to accelerate action to halt deforestation in the Amazon. This spurred progress on multiple fronts: improving governance, recognizing Indigenous land rights, and bolstering legal commitments to deforestation-free production. As a result, deforestation in Brazil dropped by 50 percent between 2022 and 2025, reaching its lowest rate since 2014.

Philanthropy was critical to fund research leading to improved law enforcement and government monitoring systems based on real-time data. Exposing the negative impact of sectors like cattle and soy raised investor and private sector awareness and interest in financing low-carbon production instead. At the same time, philanthropy helped create viable economic alternatives for communities through a sustainable “bio-economy” aimed at ensuring entrepreneurs and local businesses can thrive while protecting forests.

Additionally, a growing body of evidence shows that lands stewarded by Indigenous communities have greater biodiversity and lower rates of deforestation and degradation than those left undesignated and unprotected. This is true in Brazil, where recognized Indigenous territories account for just 1 percent of overall deforestation. Sustained philanthropic support of frontline community efforts to secure tenure rights led to Brazil strengthening land demarcation policies that increased legal recognition of Indigenous territories. Since 2023, 21 new Indigenous territories were officially recognized throughout the country—a major win for forests and people.

LEVERS USED:

Research and Innovation

Philanthropy funded innovations in data and monitoring tools as well as high-resolution imagery to provide real-time deforestation alerts, pinpointing hotspots and raising national awareness that catalyzed advocacy for forest protections.

Finance

Philanthropy strengthened efforts to grow a sustainable bio-economy by scaling market access and rural credit solutions, and establishing an impact investment platform to promote sustainable development programs and partnerships with community businesses.

Legal Strategies

Philanthropy supported the legal and governance tools necessary for Indigenous and local communities to push for land demarcation, leading to an increase in recognized areas.

Movements and Coalitions

Philanthropy provided civil society with long-term funding, building capacity and public support for better law enforcement and improved monitoring systems.

Photo: ClimateWorks Foundation

Photo: ClimateWorks Foundation

Remove Carbon Remaining in the Atmosphere

Eliminating emissions from fossil fuels and natural systems is the essential first step to avoiding dangerous climate change. However, because carbon emissions remain in the atmosphere for so long—for hundreds to thousands of years—we will still experience warming from the emissions that have been accumulating since the start of the Industrial Revolution. The field of carbon dioxide removal (CDR) is working to identify and deploy natural and technological systems that can draw large amounts of carbon from the atmosphere and store it. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), CDR is necessary to achieve global and national targets of net-zero carbon dioxide and greenhouse gas emissions.[14]

Many new approaches are being developed for CDR. In addition to nature-based CDR solutions that seek to restore degraded landscapes and create new forest and blue carbon (i.e., coastal and marine) sinks, there are also more permanent engineered CDR solutions, which capture carbon dioxide directly from the air or ocean and either transform the carbon into a product or store it in geological formations. There are different types of engineered CDR, in varying stages of maturity, and none has achieved full commercial deployment thus far.

Philanthropy is important to create the policy conditions and foster the private sector confidence necessary to sustain the field of CDR to reach market maturity. It is also essential to shape *how* the field develops—as more public- and private-sector funding is directed toward research, development, deployment, and scaling, philanthropy can ensure that CDR is providing additional climate benefits, not replacing efforts to transition to non-polluting technologies. Finally, more resources are needed to ensure that approaches that scale are environmentally sound and benefit local communities.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Accelerate scientific understanding of and technology development for ocean alkalinity enhancement.
- Build capacity for local communities to participate in decision-making around CDR facilities.
- Scale funding for locally driven landscape restoration.
- Monitor and scrutinize carbon removal claims to ensure the market drives toward quality.
- Create demand for new, rigorous CDR approaches through public procurement and private buyers' clubs.

Photo: iStock, carstenbrandt

Support People to Adapt and Thrive

Climate change is here, and the impacts on people and communities continue to increase, not as isolated disasters, but the result of cumulative pressures eroding decades of progress and pushing millions of people toward poverty, hunger, and chronic illness. Between 32 and 132 million people could fall into extreme poverty due to the impacts of climate change in the next five years; nearly eight million deaths were attributed to air pollution in 2023; and in 2024 alone, climate disasters internally displaced 46 million people.[15,16] That same year, the U.S. experienced 27 individual weather and climate disasters collectively amounting to roughly $182.7 billion.[17]

For frontline communities, climate change is a daily reality. Reducing emissions to mitigate climate change remains critical, but many impacts are now unavoidable. Early action to protect people saves lives and prevents far costlier humanitarian crises later. The question is not whether adaptation matters, but whether we can act quickly enough to protect lives and livelihoods.

Adaptation refers to changes that countries, businesses, and communities can make to ecological, social, and economic systems in response to actual or anticipated climate forces and the resulting impacts. It can take many forms, depending on the context, and focuses on building resilient societies and economies—a critical part of the long-term response to climate change to protect people, livelihoods, and ecosystems. Effective adaptation must be grounded in the best available science and, as appropriate, the traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, who understand their risks best yet are often excluded from power and funding.

Solutions Philanthropy Makes Possible:

- Build resilient systems and infrastructure, like energy grids that can withstand heat waves and farms with drought-resistant crops.
- Protect people from the most severe consequences of climate change by scaling up heat action plans, cleaning up and preventing air pollution, and more.
- Provide financial protection—like insurance—for those who are most vulnerable.
- Catalyze capital flows through mechanisms that de-risk investments for adaptation and help close the gaps in adaptation funding.

PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

Catalyzing the Global Effort to Clean Up Cooling

Extreme heat has made expanded access to air conditioning and refrigeration essential to keep people healthy and safe. This need is most urgent for over a billion people—primarily in lower-income countries and communities—who lack adequate cooling. Cooling appliances are often energy intensive and rely on super-polluting HFC refrigerants. Without intervention, cooling could account for 10 percent of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Philanthropy has catalyzed a global effort to transition to clean, energy-efficient, affordable cooling and reduce HFC emissions. Over the past 20 years, it funded research on their dangers and potential alternatives, laying the groundwork for international diplomacy and the 2016 Kigali Amendment. Signatories committed to phasing down HFCs by more than 80 percent by 2047 or earlier.

To ratify the amendment, many developing economies needed resources to meet its goals. A coalition of funders pledged $52 million to create the Kigali Cooling Efficiency Program, now the Clean Cooling Collaborative (CCC). CCC supported improvements to appliance efficiency, making it more economical for countries to shift to climate-friendly refrigerants. It continues to build capacity, advance policy, and mobilize financing to accelerate clean cooling. It informs and influences global and national climate agendas, appliance efficiency standards, markets, and innovation. Initiatives include scaling passive cooling solutions like sun-reflecting roofs, leveraging government purchasing power to make energy-efficient fans cheaper, helping commercialize super-efficient air conditioners, and shaping policies that mandate safer refrigerants.

CCC has invested over $70 million in key markets, which in turn has mobilized over $1 billion in public and private funds to advance these solutions. Its work to date has locked in 10 billion tons of avoided emissions and laid the foundation for preventing 100 billion tons by 2050. Additionally, CCC's efforts increase climate resilience and decrease vulnerability to heat-related health risks.

LEVERS USED:

Capacity Building

Technical assistance has helped countries, industry, and communities accelerate solutions, such as developing business cases to phase out HFCs, testing new cooling technology, and building cooling shelters.

Finance

Over a billion dollars in public and private sector investment have been catalyzed for scaling clean cooling adoption and reducing HFC use.

International Diplomacy

Convening stakeholders around the risks of extreme heat and need for clean cooling has generated political will and collaborative action such as the Global Cooling Pledge, signed by more than 70 countries committing to cut cooling-related emissions.

Policy

Countries have developed new standards for energy efficiency and safer refrigerants and addressed clean cooling in their national climate plans.

Why Geography Matters

The places where philanthropists choose to focus are also very important. Countries experience climate change in different ways and take varied approaches to the climate challenge. Some nations are championing more aggressive strategies while others must be pressured to act. Climate impacts are often felt most acutely by the people least responsible for creating the problem. This is particularly true in developing countries.

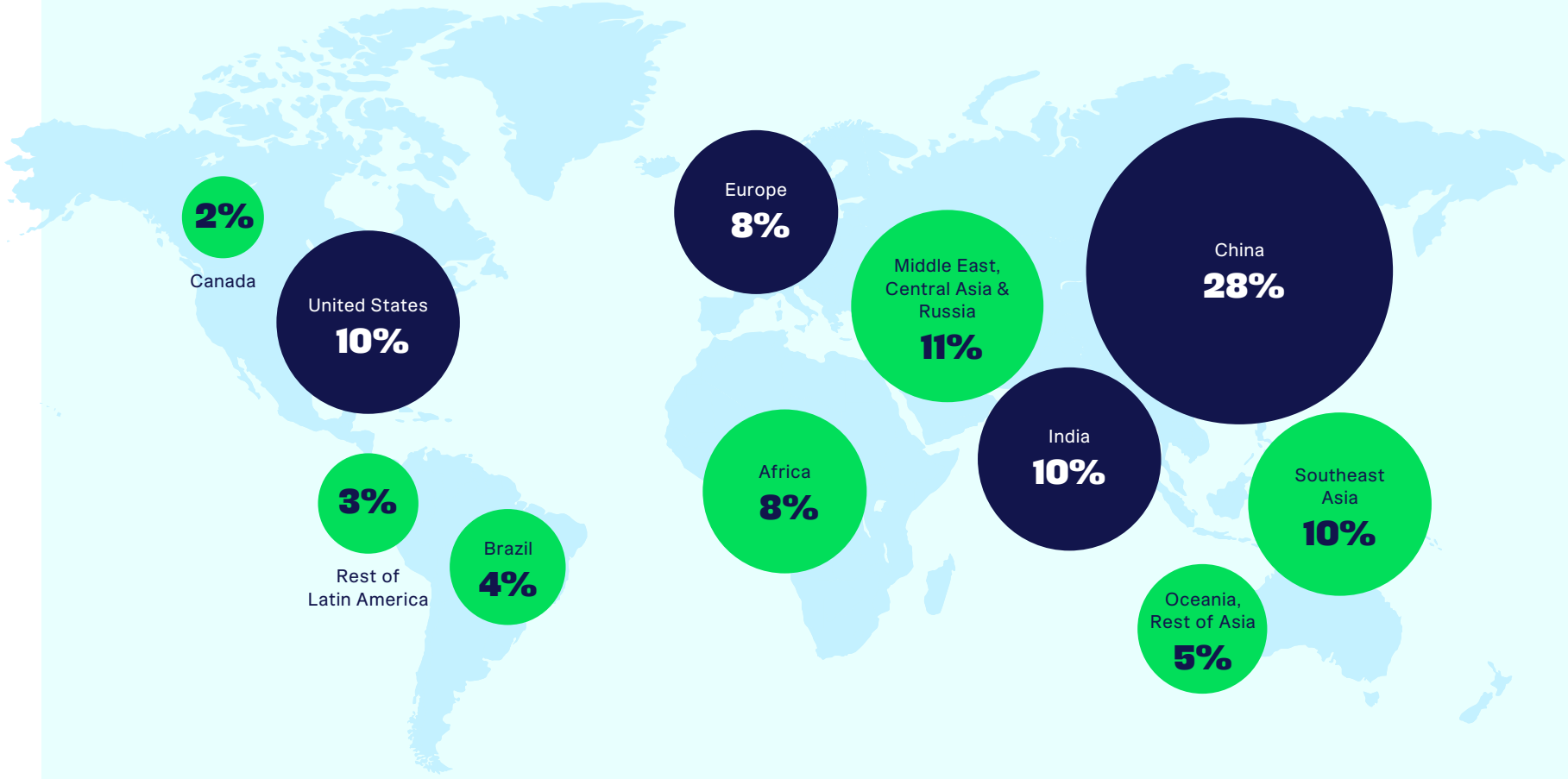
Currently, more than half of the world's climate emissions come from four economies—China, the United States, the European Union, and India—so philanthropic investments in these regions can result in outsized impact in reducing pollution. However, our ability to achieve our global climate goals also depends on emerging economies and developing countries—especially in Africa, Brazil, and South and Southeast Asia, which are expected to see tremendous growth by 2050. These geographies need a path to prosperity that is not based on fossil fuels, and philanthropic support can help them embrace innovative new models of development that do not lock in emissions as they develop.

For example, between 2015 and 2019, philanthropy enabled local civil society organizations to bring new coal plant construction in Southeast Asia almost to a standstill.[18] Increasingly, coal plant developers are having more difficulties finding financing and insurance for new facilities, and banks from Singapore and Japan have enacted policies eliminating support for new coal power plants. In addition, philanthropy can assist developing countries in creating the policy and financial tools to quickly and equitably shift to a clean energy future. However, there is still much work to be done to bring the region's energy sector in line with global climate goals.

Share of Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Geography

There is an immediate opportunity for emissions reductions in the regions where emissions are currently the largest (dark blue shaded circles). However, as other geographies develop, philanthropy can help them pursue development strategies that are different from existing models and not reliant on fossil fuels. For example, India is anticipated to have a significant increase in energy demand over the next 10 years, highlighting the potential for policies and investment to accelerate the clean energy transition.[19]

Source: EDGAR 2025



Figures exclude international aviation and shipping.
Total is slightly below 100 percent due to rounding.

Photo: iStock, Nikada

Geography matters to advancing equity. Despite lower shares of current emissions today, the United States and European Union are responsible for roughly one-third of the current warming based on historical emissions. Yet the impacts of climate change are often felt most acutely in poor, developing countries and island nations—countries that have played a minimal role in causing the crisis. These nations need global support to reduce their emissions, grow clean energy economies, and adapt to the impacts of climate—more reasons for philanthropists working in climate to consider giving internationally.

Global giving can easily be done in collaboration with others and through vetted organizations including regional climate foundations, which have extensive geographic knowledge and relationships, which allow them to support many smaller groups.

Regional Climate Foundations

These organizations take a regional approach to climate solutions and operate as grantmakers. Because they are led by local teams, they are well positioned to fund strategies that take regional contexts and needs into account. They can help donors navigate the complexities of international giving, such as legal requirements, and identify local organizations, connections, and movements.

African Climate Foundation ▶
africanclimatefoundation.org

U.S. Energy Foundation (United States) ▶
ef.org

The Energy Foundation* ▶
efchina.org

European Climate Foundation ▶
europeanclimate.org

Iniciativa Climática de México ▶
iniciativaclimatica.org

Instituto Clima e Sociedade (Brazil) ▶
climaesociedade.org/en

Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation (India)** ▶
shaktifoundation.in

Tara Climate Foundation (East, Southeast, and South Asia, excluding India and China) ▶
taraclimate.org

ViriyaENB (Indonesia) ▶
viriyaenb.org

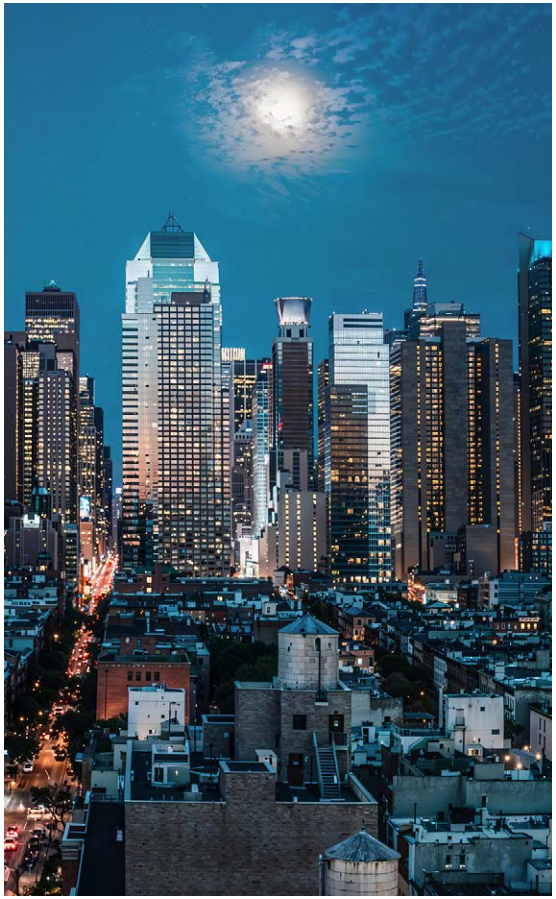
For more information on approaches within each region, please reach out to Climate Lead. ▶

*Commonly known as Energy Foundation China
**Able to receive funding from donors in India.

Philanthropist Insights

Achieving a climate-safe future by mid-century requires disrupting “business as usual” and charting a bold new path forward at this crucial moment. A collective, global transformation is needed, and philanthropy can catalyze this change.

During the past decade, funders have learned a great deal about how to most effectively deploy philanthropy to tackle climate change, including what works and what does not. Based on their experience, here are some considerations to guide new climate philanthropists.



Act quickly while continuing to learn

Philanthropists must act expediently. You don't have to be an expert to begin giving. Pick a path that interests you and get started, learning and iterating on your approach along the way. There are strategies at many different phases of evolution. You may choose to invest in nascent areas where there is tremendous need for research, innovation, and discovery. Early contributions can seed important work and leverage additional resources. Alternatively, some philanthropists focus on existing, high-impact strategies or proven solutions that can immediately deploy new funding to scale results—like electric vehicles, which are close to a tipping point toward mass adoption.

Make a long-term commitment

Donors empower meaningful change when they commit to multi-year, core support that allows organizations to set ambitious goals, hire great people, pursue long-term strategies, and attract additional funding. Highly restricted, short-term investments typically produce highly restricted, short-term ideas and outcomes, especially given how little philanthropy has invested in this work so far.

To solve complex challenges, look at multi-faceted solutions

Comprehensive strategies—reflecting diverse contributions of organizations and individuals who are thinkers, financiers, scientists, practitioners, communicators, and movement builders committed to shared goals—can more effectively solve problems and achieve greater impact than individual organizations working on their own. Consider supporting a range of stakeholders and organizations working together on solutions that incorporate communications, education, and advocacy.

Join forces to bolster impact

Collaboration is key to making the massive transitions required to protect our future, and the growing community of new and experienced climate philanthropists can be a valuable resource as you chart your path toward climate action. Working with other philanthropists can help get solutions to scale faster. There are decades of shared experience and success to build upon and deep knowledge about where to go from here. As a new climate donor, you can bring fresh perspectives and new ideas that will benefit existing funders.

To learn more about how philanthropists can join together to maximize impact, see *The Power of Collaborative Philanthropy: Giving Together to Address the Climate Crisis*, produced in partnership with the Gates Foundation. ▶

Philanthropy can not only accelerate just transitions to a low-carbon future—it can enable resilient societies and amplify the voices of the most vulnerable, so no one is left behind.

Yamide Dagnet,
Senior Vice President, International,
Natural Resources Defense Council

Empower those closest to the challenges

The best solutions are informed—and often led—by those closest to the problem. Some organizations prefer to receive funding directly from philanthropists. Another option to get funding to a broad array of groups is giving through regional climate foundations and collaborative funds, which serve as hubs in geographic or focus areas and help donors learn together and align with others for greater impact. These entities have deep geographic, cultural, and issue-specific knowledge and can help donors strategize on how to support the diverse landscape of climate players. These include many groups working at the intersection of climate and other areas such as health, poverty, equity, and education.

Integrate equity and justice in your giving

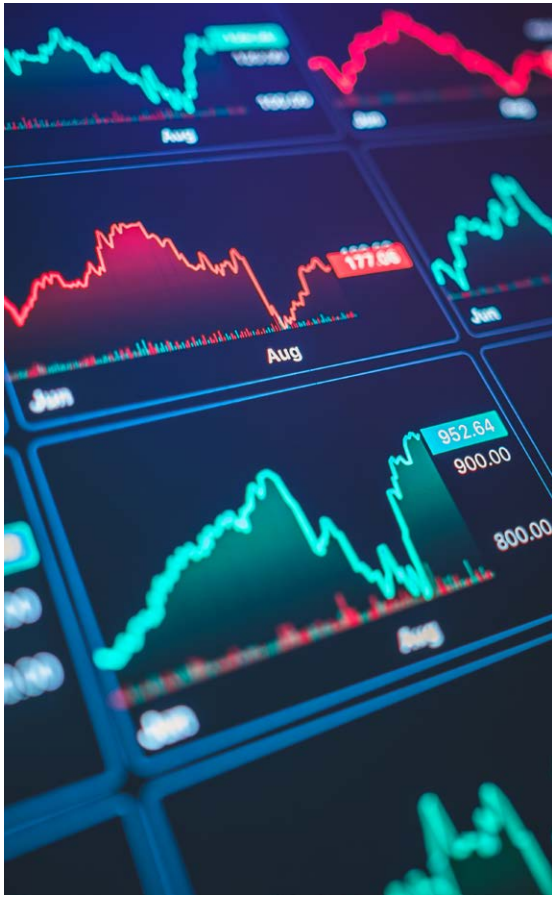
In the past several years, more than half of all foundation funding for climate went to groups in the U.S. and Europe despite significant and rapid scaling needed in the Global South.[20] Within the U.S., only 1.3 percent of funding from 12 of the largest environmental funders went to Black, Indigenous, and people of color-led justice-focused organizations.[21] Understanding these inequities is important for new climate donors, so as not to perpetuate the status quo and continue to exclude people of color, grassroots groups, and communities that are low-income, marginalized, or based in the Global South.

There is growing recognition that achieving lasting, transformative change on climate will require deeply investing in the power and capacity of communities that historically have been left behind. This means funding grassroots solutions, movement building, and organizations with leaders who are women and people of color.

Actions Philanthropists Can Take to Make Equity and Justice Guiding Principles for Their Giving:

- Diversify your spaces and conversations.
- Redefine "impact" and how it is measured. Greenhouse gas emissions are important metrics that only tell a partial story. Consider indicators such as economic gains, jobs, reduced energy poverty, lives protected, and community engagement as measures of impact.
- Trust and fund those who have borne the brunt of climate change and other intersecting crises to innovate solutions and paths forward.
- Acknowledge that money is power and fund grassroots, Black-led, Indigenous-led, people of color-led, women-led, and Global South-led organizations like you want them to win—enabling them to scale to achieve visionary outcomes.
- Support self-determination and the redistribution of power. Community-directed funds flip the power dynamic between philanthropy and grantees, enabling experienced community experts to determine where funding goes while donors learn.
- Take as many concrete steps as you can, as fast as you can, toward a more equitable and just future.

Climate Lead's *Climate, Equity, and Justice Guide for Philanthropists* delves into these ideas in detail and provides many practical examples. ▶



Beyond philanthropy

While giving is the focus of this guide, philanthropists have the flexibility and are uniquely positioned to strategically deploy all types of capital toward solving the climate crisis. A portfolio approach can augment and leverage philanthropic investments to achieve even greater impact. Potential considerations include the following:

- **Invest for impact:** There are many opportunities to accelerate climate action through impact investing across asset types. Patient, risk-tolerant capital is needed for early-stage research and development, bringing transformative clean energy and adaptation innovations to market and scaling solutions. Additionally, aligning portfolios with "climate-safe" principles and seeking positive environmental and social impact as well as financial returns are critical to meeting the climate challenge and fueling the climate transformation we need.

- **Engage in politics:** Passing, implementing, and ensuring the durability of public policy requires elected leaders and policymakers who are committed to climate action. In addition to directly supporting candidates across all parties who make tackling climate change a priority, individuals can support groups engaged in issue advocacy, political organizing, and voter mobilization (in the United States, 501(c)(4) or 527 organizations). And elected officials at the national level are not the only focus; subnational leaders, like governors, mayors, state officials, and city councils also wield influence over climate policy and are accountable to voters.

- **Ensure your business's practices support a cleaner, healthier planet:** Businesses are stepping up by adopting science-based targets, assessing carbon footprints, using renewable resources, reducing their emissions, and eliminating harmful environmental practices. Increasingly, companies are factoring climate risk into decision-making and playing a role in the policy arena.

- **Use your voice and connections:** By strategically tapping networks, connecting people, and engaging peers, philanthropists can be effective influencers and advocates. They also have the ability to exert power and inspire change as customers, shareholders, board members, and citizens.

PHILANTHROPY IN ACTION

Ending Coal

Coal emits toxic pollutants that make people sick, contaminate water, and drive planet-heating emissions. To respond to this threat, a diverse coalition led by the Sierra Club launched the Beyond Coal Campaign in 2002 to stop proposed new coal plants, retire the existing dirty fleet, address the impacts of coal mining, and replace coal with clean energy.

What was initially a state-based effort in the U.S. seeded by a group of small foundations grew to a national campaign and collaborative philanthropic investment of more than $250 million as more people joined the fight.

Philanthropy enabled campaign activities at all levels, including grassroots organizing, legal strategies, finance, and research. Advocacy was critical to influencing policy and leaders—especially locally. So was ensuring a just transition that supported workers and local economies.

Since 2010, the campaign has stopped more than 350 coal plants from being built and helped retire two-thirds of the coal fleet. U.S. plant closures have prevented disease and thousands of premature deaths and saved billions of dollars in healthcare costs. Retiring plants and transitioning to renewable energy helped reduce 605 million metric tons of carbon from the air between 2010 and 2020—roughly three-quarters of U.S. greenhouse gas reductions in that decade—and improved air quality and health outcomes nationwide. Coal's share of electricity in the U.S. has fallen from 50 to less than 20 percent, and the U.S. now gets more power from renewable energy than from coal. This work has scaled and is now part of a series of global coal campaigns.

LEVERS USED:

Movements and Coalitions

Activists and organizers representing diverse groups united against a common enemy: coal.

Legal Strategies

Permits were challenged and clean air and water laws enforced to restrict coal projects.

Finance

The divestment movement led coal-financing institutions to recognize risks.

Capacity Building

Lawyers and volunteers learned how to block coal permits and about health and economic impacts. Learnings were shared with other communities.

Research and Innovation

Research helped determine that many coal plants were no longer economically viable and highlighted coal's negative health impacts.

Act Now, Change Tomorrow

The evidence is irrefutable: Human influence has warmed the climate at a rate that is unprecedented in at least the past 2,000 years. The negative impacts of climate change are already severe and widespread, and they will continue to escalate the longer we delay acting.

If we move quickly, we have the power to change course. The more we can expediently and proactively support the changes we need, the more we can reduce and prevent the disastrous harm of climate change on countries, economies, communities, nature, and people.

We have the knowledge we need, and solutions are increasingly affordable, but our greatest threat is inaction. The most impactful thing we can do is to act now. Philanthropy has an important role to play by effecting incredible positive change in all aspects of life, and the actions you take today will determine our future.

Additional Resources

For more about the science of climate change, the role of different sectors and geographies, and how we can reduce emissions sources and support sinks, please refer to the following resources:

World Resources Institute (WRI): State of Climate Action 2025 is a roadmap toward achieving the Paris Agreement and an assessment of progress across sectors. ▶

WRI: 10 Findings From the Latest IPCC Report is a helpful digest of the latest climate science and needs. ▶

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: Summary for Policymakers summarizes the state of knowledge of climate change, its widespread impacts and risks, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. ▶

United Nations Development Programme: The Climate Dictionary is a helpful resource of climate change terms and concepts. ▶

ClimateWorks Foundation, "Funding trends 2026: Climate change mitigation philanthropy" provides an overview of overall philanthropic funding for climate mitigation from foundations and individuals in 2024, and foundation funding trends from 2020–2024. ▶

2040 (2019, Damon Gameau) is a hopeful, solutions-focused film that imagines a best-case scenario future by implementing existing technologies. ▶

Breaking Boundaries: The Science of Our Planet (2021, David Attenborough & Johan Rockstrom) shows the vast, amazing life on our planet and how climate change factors in. ▶

Project Drawdown Explorer provides clear information on dozens of possible climate solutions such as installing heat pumps and protecting tropical forests. ▶

Climate Lead Resources

The Power of Collaborative Philanthropy ▶

Climate, Equity, and Justice Guide for Philanthropists ▶

NOTES

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[8] UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, The Paris Agreement

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[19] International Energy Agency Global Energy Review 2026, Global Trends

[20] ClimateWorks Foundation, "Funding Trends 2024: Climate change mitigation philanthropy"

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About Climate Lead

Climate Lead empowers philanthropic leaders everywhere to take immediate and far-reaching climate action. As an impartial and trusted guide, Climate Lead equips new climate philanthropists with the information and insights they need to drive transformative solutions. We cut through the complexity by curating roadmaps, in partnership with a diverse network of experts, to help you make a bold impact on climate from day one.

Climate Lead provides specialized services to help new climate philanthropists give with confidence and make influential, game-changing contributions to address the climate crisis. These include:

- One-on-one advising
- Curated portfolios of solutions that have been vetted for impact
- Connections to a diverse, global network of climate experts and peer philanthropists
- Learning events and resources

Climate Lead guides donors toward urgent and high-impact climate giving. Our approach provides:

- **Specialized Expertise:** We translate credible and current insights from a global, diverse network of climate experts and leaders to help you deepen your climate learning and make informed choices that create tangible impact.

- **Impartial Advice:** We offer our services free of charge, prioritizing philanthropic leaders' interests and climate impact above all.

- **Networked Community:** We connect you to a built-in global community of advisors, field partners, climate funders, and other luminaries who are interested in maximizing impact through partnership and collective action.

- **Tailored Support:** We meet you where you are and provide holistic support along every step of your climate journey.

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