

Shifting the Momentum:

Reclaiming Civic Space for Climate Mitigation

A Primer for Donors

The Funders Initiative for Civil Society (FICS) was originally founded in 2016 as a donor network concerned with the trend of shrinking civic space. FICS is now a locus for expert analysis, collaboration, and strategic grant-making to support innovation in the field.

This briefing paper draws on our decade of expertise on both the manifestations of shrinking civic space and its drivers; conversations with climate donors from private philanthropy and intermediary funds, climate groups working at the international, national, and local levels; and research. It is the first of a series of publications designed to assist climate donors to understand shrinking civic space in the climate policy and advocacy field, and for those who are ready, to support efforts to reverse the trend.

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Executive Summary and Key Points

Executive Summary and Key Points

Shifting the Momentum seeks to assist climate donors to understand shrinking civic space in the climate policy and advocacy field, and, for those who are ready, to support efforts to reverse the trend.

The climate field is facing a growing and existential threat: shrinking civic space.

- **The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions**—through transition to clean and renewable energy, preservation of forests, transformation of our food and agriculture systems, and other strategies—relies on our broad rights to influence policy and practice by speaking, participating, and organising freely.
- **Climate donors are concerned that these rights are being limited**, through abuse of legal and regulatory schemes on cross-border funding, administrative harassment, criminalization, defamation, disinformation, SLAPP suits, surveillance, and violence and killings.

- **A broad swath of the climate field is being targeted**, including academics, affected communities, campaigners, intermediary and private philanthropies, lawyers, policy experts, scientists, and social impact entrepreneurs.

This trend is visible in both democracies and autocracies across the globe.

- **Without the space to advocate and operate, progress on climate goals stalls or reverses**, making shrinking civic space a fundamental issue for all working toward a safe, healthy climate.

Barriers to progress are striking at the very conditions needed for momentum and change in climate policy and practice:

- **Civic freedoms** such as the right to speak and publish freely, form and fund non-profit organisations, and dissent without fear of repression.
- **A healthy information** ecosystem.
- **Transparent and accountable government** that operates in the public interest.
- **Inclusive and participatory governance.**

This paper provides three entry points for philanthropy to counter these barriers—with an overview of some of the strategies employed by peer donors and excellent work being done across the globe.

PROTECTING INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS AND BUILDING THEIR RESILIENCE TO THREATS.

- **Holistic measures** to counter administrative harassment, digital threats and smear attacks, weaponised criminal and civil laws, and violence and killings, recognise that climate defenders face a range of risks and require proactive security as well as emergency response.

STRENGTHENING LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CIVIC FREEDOMS.

- **Freedom of association, expression, and assembly** underpin the strategies and day-to-day activities of donors and grantees.
- **These laws and norms allow academics, journalists, and scientists to publish without government interference**, give experts and advocates the right to press for policy change, enable communities to protest, and allow donors to fund across borders.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE FUNDING TO COUNTER THE DRIVERS.

- **The specific drivers being used to undermine and halt climate progress** include abuse of national security rubrics, disinformation and misinformation, unchecked corporate influence in government and politics, and exclusionary and unresponsive governance.

Climate philanthropy can play an active role in shaping policy and practice in each of these areas.

- **Strategies being used across the globe** to keep civic space open for climate mitigation include litigation, national legal and regulatory reform, support for international frameworks, communications, movement and coalition-building, and monitoring and documentation.
- **Cross-sector coalition efforts** are needed to push back against the trend of shrinking civic space in the climate field and beyond. There are ongoing coalitions that more climate donors can fund and climate advocates can join.
- **Local, national, regional, and international efforts** all play a part in ensuring that climate advocates can thrive and continue to push for progress.
- **Important lessons can be learned** from human rights, LGBTQ+, women's rights, and other sectors and movements that were early targets of shrinking civic space. Likewise, donors and advocates newly confronting shrinking civic space can learn from counterparts in countries with longer experience navigating and pushing back on these restrictions.

Examples of specific strategies and tactics currently underway to ensure that civic space is open and healthy are outlined in this primer for climate donors. Although a comprehensive mapping is beyond the scope of this report, we hope that it provides a helpful overview of the robust work being done and opportunities to engage.

This is the first in our *Shifting the Momentum* series for climate philanthropy, with in-depth resources on unchecked corporate power, informational integrity, abuse of national security paradigms, and other drivers of shrinking civic space, to be published in the coming months.

Perspectives from Climate Donors

Perspectives from Climate Donors

Over the last eighteen months, we have heard from climate donors that their goals—and the work of the academics, affected communities, campaigners, intermediaries, lawyers, policy experts, scientists, and social impact entrepreneurs they support—are being undermined by a threat that is growing at an alarming rate: *shrinking civic space*.

Funders report self-censorship and fear of speaking out publicly, as well as concern for the safety of their grantees and partners. Several funders acknowledged that reducing greenhouse gas emissions will only be possible if the necessary enabling political, legal and social conditions exist.

These concerns were reflected in the findings of a **survey conducted by an informal funder network of twenty-five private foundations** in April 2024:

WHAT IS CIVIC SPACE?

Civic space is a set of standards that allows people to organise, participate, and communicate freely and fully, and in doing so, influence political, economic, cultural and social structures without fear of reprisal. Grant making, the formation of non-profit and membership organisations, policy advocacy, publication of scientific information, journalism, digital outreach and education campaigns, protest—and much more—all rely on open and robust civic space.

The climate funders we interviewed are deeply concerned about

- **Failures of political systems** and climate governance to foster progress on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
- **The role of corporate actors** in preventing or rolling back ambitious climate frameworks.
- **Disinformation impeding public support** for climate policies.
- **Restrictions on the ability to leverage collective power** to push forward on climate mitigation.

Political developments in the U.S. have shaken the whole of philanthropy, including deep worry about donors' ability to even fund climate mitigation and adaptation amidst growing restrictions and intimidation.

88%

Reported concerns about shrinking civic space related to their climate strategies.

40%

Said their grantees had experienced intimidation including violence.

48%

Reported judicial harassment of their grantees.

25%

Reported concerns about use of surveillance.

40%

Reported criminalisation and detention of their grantees.

68%

Said their grantees faced administrative challenges, including restrictions on cross-border funding, banking, registration, and operations.

Barriers to Climate Progress

Barriers to Climate Progress

A growing body of evidence suggests that democratic governance and effective climate action are mutually reinforcing.¹

Governments with strong rule of law, low corruption, accountable institutions, and an enabling environment for civil society and independent media tend to engage more actively in international climate negotiations, support more ambitious commitments, and produce stronger climate policies (see text box below on *Is Democracy Necessary for Climate Mitigation?*). For climate philanthropy, this relationship is increasingly consequential: hard-won climate gains are being dismantled in many of the same places where democratic institutions and civic space are under pressure.

The reduction of greenhouse gases—through transition to clean and renewable energy, preservation of forests, transformation of our food and agriculture systems, and other strategies—is a goal that is squarely at odds with entrenched, powerful interests.

Barriers to progress are striking at the very conditions needed for momentum and change in climate policy and practice:

1. Civic freedoms such as the right to speak and publish freely, form and fund non-profit organisations, and dissent without fear of repression.
2. A healthy information ecosystem.
3. Transparent and accountable governance that operates in the public interest.
4. Inclusive and participatory governance.

This erosion is purposeful, and goes hand-in-hand with the weakening of democratic norms and governance.

Shrinking civic space is, of course, not just limited to climate action, but rather is a tool to shut down progress on a range of issues that question the status quo and upset power structures. Shrinking civic space is a world-wide phenomenon, reaching democracies and autocracies alike. As civic space narrows, participation declines, information becomes suspect, policy processes become less transparent, and governments are more susceptible to capture by concentrated interests. In this context, climate investments will struggle to translate into durable change in policy and practice.

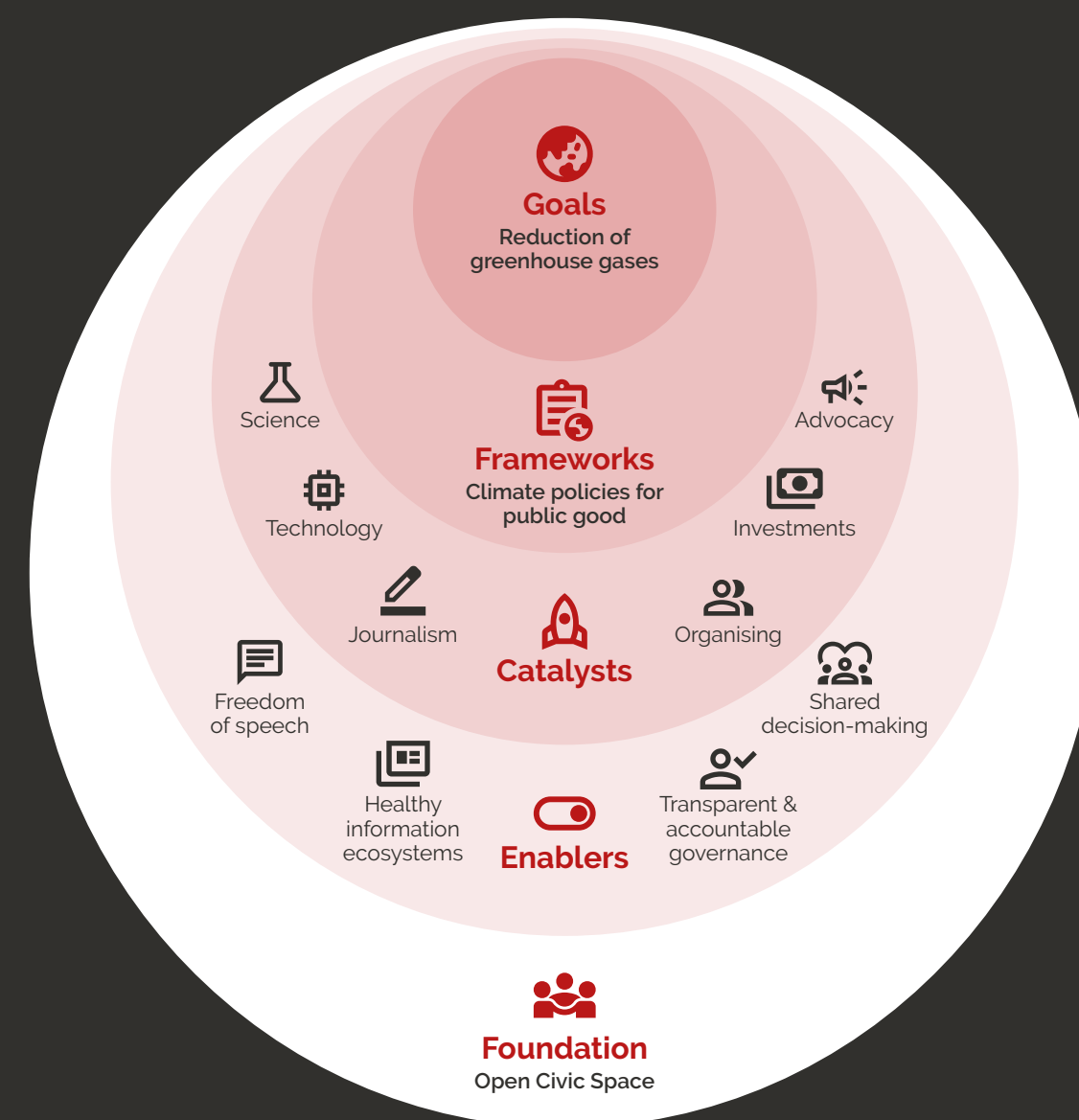


Durable climate progress depends on the ability of civil society leaders to speak out, organize, and shape solutions. We support efforts that protect and expand civic space so local leaders can do their work safely and effectively.

Nancy Lindborg, President and Chief Executive Officer,
David and Lucile Packard Foundation

¹ Asia Society Policy Institute's Center for China Analysis (CCA), "New Report: Climate Change in China's Governance", 17 June 2024; Pasquale Marcello Falcone and Cristian Barra, "The role of democracy and institutional quality on environmental performance: empirical evidence using a stochastic directional distance model", Economics of Government, 22 February 2026.

HEALTHY, OPEN CIVIC SPACE IS THE FOUNDATION FOR THE GOALS OF CLIMATE PHILANTHROPY



IS DEMOCRACY NECESSARY FOR CLIMATE MITIGATION?

China is an important and contested outlier: its centralised system has successfully deployed renewable energy, electric vehicles, and other clean technologies, while the country remains heavily dependent on—and continues to invest in—coal. But its achievements in the climate sphere are also an exception. Countries drawing on China as a development or governance model have not replicated its clean energy accomplishments. Its combination of state capacity, industrial policy, technological investment, and clean energy ambition is far less readily replicated than authoritarian governance itself.

Across a much broader range of countries, closed or shrinking civic space combined with concentrated and unaccountable power has obstructed climate mitigation. Russia and Gulf states combine highly concentrated political power and closed civic space with continued fossil-fuel expansion. In India, restrictions on civil society and protest exist alongside the substantial political influence of fossil-fuel and other industrial interests. Brazil offers an especially clear contrast: under Bolsonaro, attacks on Indigenous rights, civil society, and democratic institutions went hand-in-hand with sharply increased deforestation in the Amazon; the Lula government has sought to restore both environmental governance and democratic institutions. In Uganda, Museveni's government has pursued major new oil development while sharply constraining civil society and environmental defenders.

The pattern repeats in established democracies. In the U.S., attacks on climate policy, investment, and international climate cooperation have coincided with broader attacks on democratic institutions, civil society, and human rights frameworks. In Europe, weakening climate commitments have occurred alongside increasing restrictions on environmental protest.

Authoritarian and nationalistic governments are ill-suited to the sustained international cooperation that ambitious climate action requires. Governments that view international relations as a zero-sum competition pursue short-term national advantage rather than shared goals. This is visible in Africa, where China has expanded its strategic and economic footprint through energy and mineral investments and Russia has sought access to natural resources alongside its broad efforts to destabilise democracies and seed divisions. Such competition makes ambitious climate agreements harder to sustain and weakens the rules-based multilateral institutions needed to deliver them.

The linchpin is whether civil society can hold power accountable and ensure that government functions in the public interest. Independent organisations and media; meaningful public participation; protections for free speech, association, and assembly; and the ability of advocates to expose conflicts of interest and unchecked corporate influence matter, because the transition away from fossil fuels is not merely a technical policy challenge: it is also a contest over political and economic power.



Source: iStock | Photographer: Streetoncamara | G20 flags, Rome | 2023

The Drivers Blocking Successful Climate Action

The Drivers Blocking Successful Climate Action

As the survey above indicates, many climate donors are aware of the manifestations of shrinking civic space—from restrictions on cross-border funding to smear campaigns against experts to criminalisation of dissent to surveillance, arrest, and violence against activists. What may be less familiar are the drivers—as the contraction of civic space is shaped by political, economic, and informational dynamics.

FOUR DRIVERS ARE PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO CLIMATE ACTION:

1. Repression of civic freedoms, particularly through abuse and misuse of national security frameworks:

Counter-terrorism and national security measures have granted governments wide authority to regulate funding, expand surveillance, and restrict association and expression. Vague definitions and pre-emptive security allowances have enabled the abuse of these powers against civil society. Climate defenders have been labelled security threats; financial regulations have tightened scrutiny of non-profit funding; and protests have been framed as felonies or domestic terrorism.

These trends increase operational risk for civil society and climate philanthropy.

- A September 2025 presidential memorandum directed U.S. federal agencies to investigate and prosecute nonprofit organisations and the institutional and individual funders that support them, under the rubric of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and other national security and anti-terror schemes. In February 2026, 19 state Attorneys General called for investigations into 150 climate organisations, alleging violations of FARA, due to their receipt of money from five prominent donors registered outside the U.S.
- In January 2026, police raided the home of one of India's leading environmental activists, claiming that campaigning for a treaty to cut the use of fossil fuels undermines the national interest. India has used a ranged of laws to silence dissent.

2. Capture of information ecosystems:

Powerful actors, including corporations and political networks, spread misleading narratives about climate science and solutions. Digital platforms amplify polarizing and false content, while activists and journalists face coordinated harassment. The result is declining public trust and halted or delayed policy coordination.

Among those who had published more than 10 articles, the percentage rose to 49%, and among those who were in the media at least once a month, the figure rose to 73%. Female scientists were more likely to have been threatened with sexual and physical attacks.

Informational integrity in climate science and solutions requires a reliable information environment where facts can be accessed, trusted, and used in decision-making.

- Evidence presented in lawsuits, exposés from journalists, and reports by civil society show that fossil fuel companies had accurate information about climate change yet actively engaged in campaigns to deceive the public and block climate action.
- Fearing consequences like those faced by the tobacco industry—which included a payout in the hundreds of billions of dollars from a landmark 1998 settlement—a “Roadmap” memo produced that same year by the American Petroleum Institute explicitly outlined how fossil fuel companies could promote uncertainty among the public and policymakers about the realities of climate science.
- Climate scientists have described on-line harassment's impact on their professional and personal lives. A poll showed that 39% of climate scientists had faced online abuse.

3. Unchecked corporate power:

Undue corporate influence over policy making is a structural barrier to cutting greenhouse gasses. Through lobbying, litigation, political financing, and narrative shaping, high-emitting industries have delayed regulation and weakened accountability. Corporations have also supported tactics that deter opposition, including Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) and restrictive protest laws.

Outsized corporate power leads to climate policies that favour corporate interests.

- A recent civil society investigation discovered that the gutting of the EU's landmark Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) was in part a direct result of systematic and covert lobbying of EU member states and European Parliament political blocs by an alliance of eleven largely US-based fossil fuel companies and investors. The business group encouraged centre-right parliamentarians to ally with the far-right block to reach the needed majority to undo many key CSDDD provisions.
- Pipeline company Energy Transfer sued Greenpeace over its role in protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline, forcing construction delays and costing the company money. Greenpeace has said that the lawsuit was baseless and designed to silence it, and that the verdict undermined free-speech rights in the U.S. In February 2026, a judge approved a \$345 million verdict against Greenpeace. The group is appealing the verdict and countersuing.



Source: iStock | Photographer: luoman | Amazon deforestation | 2010

4. Exclusionary and unresponsive governance:

When climate policies are created and implemented through closed, unaccountable, and non-participatory processes, and fail to address livelihood, health, food security, and inequality, they provoke backlash and resistance, and are less likely to endure over time.

Top-down policymaking and persistent inequality fuel distrust and cynicism by ordinary people, which populists can exploit, often by centralising authority, weakening democratic institutions and multi-lateralism, and narrowing civic space.

Democratic institutions and governance that is inclusive, participatory and accountable creates the trust and legitimacy needed to tackle complex problems, a key condition making climate mitigation possible.

- Anger at climate policy that is perceived as being out of touch with livelihood issues has delayed votes and prompted rollbacks. In the EU, farmer protests across the continent triggered a rollback of ambitious rules aimed at cutting greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture. In Canada, public anger at a consumer carbon tax was a major campaign issue in the most recent race for prime minister. Prime Minister Carney rescinded the tax, calling it poorly understood and divisive.
- Indigenous peoples are protesting and taking legal action against the extraction of transition minerals, from South America's Lithium Triangle to Arizona. The Business and Human Rights Centre's Transition Minerals Tracker shows how failure to meaningfully engage people can lead to social unrest, conflicts, and litigation that delays energy transition.

Donor Strategies to Reverse the Trend

Donor Strategies to Reverse the Trend

Some climate donors are already engaged in work to counter these trends, either by funding climate-specific intermediary and advocacy groups or broader civil society efforts. Others are interested but not sure where to begin, or how to secure internal buy-in from foundation leadership and boards. This report identifies three complementary sets of approaches that climate funders can use as entry points to ensure that climate action is able to succeed in meeting its goals.

- The first is most well-known to philanthropy: **protecting individuals and organisations**.
- The second is **protecting and strengthening the laws and norms** that allow journalists and scientists to publish without government interference, give advocates the right to press for policy change, enable communities to protest, and allow donors to fund across borders.
- The third is systemic-change funding to **counter the specific drivers being used to undermine and unravel climate progress** – abuse of national security rubrics; disinformation and misinformation; unchecked corporate influence in government and politics; and exclusionary and unresponsive governance.

Democracy, environmental, gender equality, and human rights donors are supporting many of these efforts. They are keen to join forces with other impacted sectors, in order to scale the response to match the scope and urgency of the problem.

ENTRY POINTS FOR DONORS TO RECLAIM CIVIC SPACE FOR CLIMATE MITIGATION



1. PROTECT INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS AND BUILD THEIR RESILIENCE TO THREATS.

Holistic protection strategies recognise that climate defenders face a range of risks including physical, legal, digital, psychosocial, and collective security.

Emergency response forms part of a holistic approach, with the emphasis on rapidly avoiding and mitigating emerging threats, but can create sustainability challenges, for example, when a climate defender is relocated away from their families and support systems.

Holistic efforts include a focus on strengthening the capacities of defenders while also influencing the behaviour of potential perpetrators, improving the context for climate activism, and tackling the root causes of risk.



The current political climate has exposed a serious need for field-wide organizational resilience support around cybersecurity, compliance, document and data retention, crisis communications, legal support, and ongoing risk management. Demand has grown steadily, and we must recognize that risk and resilience support are a required condition for our sector to succeed.

Adrianna Quintero, Vice President, Programs and Equity,
US Energy Foundation, Climate Ready Project

In this sense, protection and resilience are intrinsically linked to the up-stream-focused sections of this report on strengthening legal protections and systemic-change funding.

There is a large, established ecosystem of organisations that provide support for civil society, including climate groups and defenders facing threats and attacks. As needs are local and context is critically important, donors should carefully consider how to most effectively support protection and security where partners are based, including prioritising efforts led by affected communities and defenders.

a. Administrative harassment

through foreign funding restrictions and targeted deregistration is widespread—and growing.

Environmental organisations from all across the globe—including Australia, Bolivia, China, Ecuador, Egypt, Germany, India, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Russia, Uganda, the U.S. and Venezuela—have faced shutdowns, funding cuts and blocks, or onerous registration requirements.

These restrictions pose an existential challenge to the ability of funders to support climate work in important ecosystems and markets—because the majority of private and public funders that support work in the Global South and East are registered in the U.S. or Europe.

- **Find flexible ways to overcome the barriers grantees face**, including informal banking processes, increased willingness to modify grants and budgets, and funding grantees registered as businesses or consultancies.
- **Build the capacity of grantees to navigate challenging legal and regulatory environments**, such as grants to local partners for auditing and expert advice on compliance as well as grants to national, regional, and international groups for information and analysis on the enabling environment for civil society and philanthropy, including guidance for how NGOs can register in other jurisdictions.
- **Invest in mechanisms that enable funders to share or lighten the load of due diligence requirements, costs and risk**, including intermediary funds, pooled and aligned funds, and community foundations. (Please see note on Intermediaries and Shrinking Civic Space, below).

b. Organisations and advocates face a growing range of digital threats, including surveillance, hacking, data theft, and the interception of sensitive communications. Smear attacks, including online, are often the beginning of a larger assault—and lay the foundation for a range of restrictions.

Tactics include coordinated campaigns, bots, doxxing, threats, manipulative memes, and disinformation. Social media platforms exacerbate these risks through divisive algorithms, weak moderation, and resistance to accountability.

Women are disproportionately targeted through gendered abuse and sexual threats.

- **Help grantees be proactive about digital security**, by investing in and facilitating ongoing support from digital security experts, particularly those in the non-profit sector who understand local context.
- **Support opposition research as a tool to enable climate defenders to respond to online smear attacks**. Investigative work seeks to identify the perpetrators and funders of smear attacks and those responsible for amplifying them. Some organisations working on holistic security include communications and joint advocacy as a component of their protection strategies.

Smear attacks exemplify several drivers of shrinking civic space—abuse and misuse of national security laws by labeling climate defenders national security threats, unchecked corporate power by labeling them anti-economic development, and capture of information ecosystems via the use of disinformation and coordinated online harassment.

Source: Panos Pictures | Photographer: Sylvain Cherkaoui | Worker watering a palm sapling planted to help prevent climate-related beach erosion.



Several philanthropic initiatives and intermediaries in the climate field and beyond are engaging in civic space work—including the following examples.

HOLISTIC PROTECTION AND SECURITY

The [Climate Ready Project \(CRP\)](#) provides free expert resilience support to climate and clean energy organisations across the U.S., including on cybersecurity, crisis communications, legal preparedness, and organisational risk management, as well as field-wide threat monitoring and coordinated rapid response through its Rapid Response Hub. The [Environmental Defenders Collaborative \(EDC\)](#) uses a Protect, Prevent, Reveal, Redress framework to support environmental and human rights defenders globally in urgent crises and promote longer-term change. Global Climate Legal Defense ([CliDef](#)) provides legal and strategic advice, funds for legal representation, and coordination for defenders facing SLAPP suits, arrests and detentions globally. The [Urban Movement Innovation Fund \(UMI\)](#) has created an internal network security hub for youth climate defenders.

In addition, many human rights and civic space philanthropic initiatives and intermediaries include climate as a major focus of their work. [Frontline Defenders](#) gives grants and provides extensive expertise to climate organisations and individuals at risk. The [Indigenous Peoples' Rights](#)

[International's Legal Defense and Sanctuary Fund](#) offers emergency support for Indigenous leaders, defenders, and communities needing legal support or security protection measures. [Urgent Action Fund for Feminist Activism](#) supports women, trans, and non-binary climate movement activists.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Several funders work on both holistic security and strengthening legal frameworks, including [Forests, People, Climate \(FPC\)](#), which has an enabling conditions strategy with a dedicated pillar on safeguarding space for civil society action. The [Fund for Global Human Rights \(FGHR\)](#) supports groups and coalitions pushing back against a range of restrictions and abuse of national security paradigms globally. The [Lighthouse – Global Protection Fund](#), launched in January 2026, is a pooled fund to provide protection grants for rapid support; movement protection response grants to support collective protection strategies; and ecosystem strengthening grants for longer-term support to local and national protection initiatives.

SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

[Foundation for International Law for the Environment \(FILE\)](#) funds litigation at the intersection of climate, governance, and unchecked corporate power; [Sage Fund](#) seeds new approaches to corporate accountability with a global economy lens. The [European Climate](#)

[Foundation \(ECF\)](#) funds several strategies to counter shrinking civic space, including on informational integrity, corporate power, and participatory governance. [Nura Fund](#), launched in 2026 and based at the [Meliore Foundation](#), seeks to rebuild the architecture of the global information economy to serve the public interest.

The [Digital Freedom Fund](#) advances digital rights through litigation, and the [European AI & Society Fund](#) seeks to influence AI policy debates in the public interest. The [Iswe Foundation](#) supports innovations in participatory governance. [Vibe Fund](#) works at the nexus of climate, energy, democracy, and politics.

Global South-based intermediaries, territorial funds, and regranting alliances that treat climate action as inseparable from self-determination and democratic accountability include [Alianza Socioambiental Fondos del Sur](#), which brings together locally rooted socio-environmental funds across Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia, [Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund \(IPAS\)](#), [Mesoamerican Territorial Fund](#), [Network of Community Funds from the Brazilian Amazon](#), and Indonesia-based [Nusantara Fund](#).

Several global, movement-facing funds support democratic renewal and power-building of marginalized voices developing their own solutions to climate change, including [CLIMA Fund](#), [Climate Justice Resilience Fund \(CJRF\)](#), [Global Greengrants Fund](#), and the [Youth Climate Justice Fund](#).

c. Governments are increasingly weaponising criminal and civil laws

to target and chill activism. Tactics include criminal charges under anti-protest or anti-terror laws, civil SLAPP suits, injunctions to block demonstrations, and administrative harassment such as asset freezes, audits, or office raids.

- **Invest in local legal capacity** to combat attacks on environmental defenders and front-line communities.
- **Support coordinated advocacy** as a critical line of defence to protect activists and deter frivolous lawsuits aimed at silencing climate action.

d. Global Witness and UN-affiliated analyses report that over 2,253 environmental defenders were killed or disappeared

between 2012 and 2024, at a rate of over three people per week. Most fatalities are linked to conflicts over land, forests, water, and extractive projects.

The loss of life of these primarily Indigenous and rural people is abhorrent on its face—as is the pervasive lack of accountability for these crimes. These environmental defenders are targeted because they are standing up to entrenched interests of corporations, corrupt governments, and organised crime.

Their murders, as well as the violence, harassment, and threats that halt climate action, also directly undermines on-the-ground protection of carbon-rich ecosystems. Indigenous-managed lands have significantly lower deforestation rates and store more carbon.

2,253

Environmental defenders were killed or disappeared between 2012 and 2024.

3+

At a rate of over three people per week.

One analysis of the Brazilian Amazon suggests that deforestation and the associated carbon loss would be approximately 45 percent higher without the protective role of Indigenous-managed territories.

- **Resource anti-impunity and accountability work.**
The countries with the highest rates of killings of defenders are often those with the lowest rates of prosecution, showing that impunity is not only a consequence of violence, but a driver of it. U.N. and regional human rights mechanisms, including “Special Procedures”, have been among the most important tools for climate and environmental defenders, especially in national contexts with weak justice systems.

INTERMEDIARY FUNDS AND SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

A large and diverse set of intermediary funders, supported and often created by private philanthropy, play a vital role in the climate field. They are a locus of expert grant-making on a variety of mitigation strategies. They maintain public profiles, including on-line, to foster attention by the public and policy makers. They publish reports and disseminate information and analysis.

Some intermediaries are created specifically to help manage civic space challenges. Many engage in cross-border funding to national and local efforts in the Global South and East, as well between the U.S. and Europe—exposing them to risk in the countries where they fund as well as where they are registered.

Shrinking civic space can have an enormous impact on these intermediaries, as the strategies and activities described above fall squarely within the crosshairs of the drivers. Administrative harassment, halting cross-border funding, on-line surveillance, and smear attacks are the most likely impacts of shrinking civic space on intermediaries themselves.

It is also important to note that because intermediaries sit between private foundations and civil society, they must prevent risk transfer upstream and downstream—on compliance, reputational risk, ensuring that funds can reach locally-rooted groups responsibly and effectively, and many other potential risk factors. Financial resources to ensure that intermediaries have the proactive legal, administrative, compliance, and communications support they need will help them prepare before a crisis comes.

2. STRENGTHEN LEGAL FRAMEWORKS FOR CIVIC FREEDOMS

The second approach for funders seeking to ensure that shrinking civic space does not undermine their goals—or make their work and that of their grantees impossible—is to strengthen the legal frameworks that enable that work to happen.

Freedom of association, assembly, and expression underpin the strategies and day-to-day activities of donors and grantees.

These laws and norms allow academics, journalists and scientists to publish without government interference, give experts and advocates the right to press for policy change, enable communities to protest, and allow donors to fund across borders.

“

The operating environment for civil society is becoming increasingly difficult because of the political regimes in power, but also because of the regulatory and institutional systems they have put in place. My concern is that these structures will outlast particular governments. Even if progressive, centrist, or centre-left governments come to power, they may continue to use these restrictive structures instead of reforming them. We need a more coordinated effort to build and sustain the wider civic infrastructure necessary for climate action.

Confidential interview, South Asia

Durable protection for climate and environmental civil society depends on broad, consistent safeguards across the whole civic space.

- **In India**, a broader crackdown on civil society first targeted human rights organisations through raids, funding restrictions, and harassment, and then extended to environmental groups and climate activists, leaving climate groups exposed within a weakened civic environment.
- **In Poland**, climate activists were directly targeted around COP24, but the response from women's groups and other civil society actors demonstrated the value of solidarity across movements in resisting repression.
- **In Uganda**, arrests of climate and anti-pipeline protesters took place in an already restrictive context that had curtailed women's rights and LGBT+ defenders, illustrating how suppression in one sector can rapidly undermine the operating environment for others.

a. Freedom of association

Freedom of association protects the registration, operation, and funding of civil society, and safeguards philanthropic activity and investments. It ensures that NGOs, grassroots organisations, and coalitions can organise freely, receive funding, and engage in advocacy without fear of arbitrary restrictions or government interference.

Where such frameworks are weak or absent, organisations face barriers to collaboration, lose funding and operational stability, and can be forced to operate underground or curtail high-impact activities—undermining the effectiveness of philanthropic investments and slowing progress on climate mitigation.

The trend is clear: International Center for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL) identified more than 80 measures proposed or enacted between 2020 and 2025 restricting NGO operations, and more than 30 measures over the same period that aimed to restrict NGO access to foreign funding.

These restrictive measures have been found in every region. We once again see the drivers of shrinking civic space manifesting in these laws, which often prohibit vague “political” activities and grant authorities broad discretion to target organisations, while delegitimizing advocates as “foreign agents” or “threats to the state.”

- **Support mechanisms that spot early warning signs.** Several groups have publicly-available, on-line monitors.
- **Invest in local civil society infrastructure and action**, which has often been the most effective response to restrictions on freedom of association. Recognising that restrictive laws are often copy and pasted from other countries, funders have also supported global peer exchanges. Defending civic space requires sustained, cross-sector coalitions, as governments repeat efforts to impose restrictions on civil society. The Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) program evaluation is informative for donors seeking best practices.
- **Fund international norm-setting on NGO laws, cross-border funding, and other freedom of association issues**, alongside national and local efforts. The focus on standard setting has expanded from mostly human rights to sustainable development, climate change, internet governance, and counterterrorism, where there may be new opportunities to strengthen norms that support climate action.

b. Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression allows scientists, journalists, affected communities, advocates, campaigners, lawyers, filmmakers, and artists to expose climate harms, contest false narratives, and demand stronger action from governments and corporations. It underpins the circulation of climate-related information, including evidence of environmental damage, corporate misconduct, policy failures, and proposed alternatives.

Free expression is being increasingly restrained through censorship, intimidation, and criminalisation. Governments and corporations also restrict access to environmental and climate-related information by censoring or removing climate content from official channels, limiting or delaying disclosure of emissions and impact data, weakening transparency rules, and pressuring scientists and public officials not to share findings, depriving communities and movements of the evidence needed for informed debate and oversight.

These tactics—combined with the misuse of legal and economic pressure by powerful corporate actors—silence climate-related speech, enable climate denial and greenwashing, and undermine public trust in climate action.

Tackling these harms through case-by-case interventions is not sufficient; sustained work is needed to change the underlying structures, especially legal and regulatory frameworks, that currently enable censorship, limit access to environmental information, and prevent public-interest expression.

- **Prioritise freedom of expression in digital spaces.** *This area of work is robust and growing; it is anchored by a few key international organisations alongside national groups and local coalitions. The work includes critical safeguards for climate action, including privacy, online organising, anti-shutdown campaigns, helping movements communicate and mobilise under repression, capacity-building of local partners, media freedom, anti-cybercrime and disinformation laws, and rights-respecting rules on AI, data protection, and surveillance. A growing area of digital rights work asserts that access to climate information and participation in climate policy are part of expression rights.*

- **Help end frivolous litigation, known as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs),** which is proliferating globally. *Civil society coalitions are mobilising to secure stronger legal protections for climate and environmental defenders who are being sued into silence. Successful efforts to counter SLAPPs have coordinated legal advocacy across sectors linking climate, environmental justice, labour rights, press freedom, anti-corruption, and other movements. There are legislative and regulatory efforts in the U.S., E.U., U.K., Southeast Asia, and Latin America.*
- **Invest in whistleblower protections** to shield those who expose climate-related harms from retaliation. *Most efforts are led by general whistleblower NGOs and environmental anti-corruption groups. Climate-specific organisations are also emerging.*
- **Strengthen international frameworks on the rights of citizens and affected communities to participate in environmental decision-making.** *Central to this evolution is the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), which derives from Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and is now embedded in international law through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Civil society has had some success in getting the private sector to adopt FPIC processes.*

Two major regional agreements, the Aarhus Convention in Europe and Central Asia and the Escazú Agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean, enshrine rights to environmental information, public participation, and access to justice. The Escazú Agreement, which entered into force in 2021, is the world's first legally binding treaty to guarantee protection for environmental defenders and require governments to investigate violence and intimidation against them. In Costa Rica, NGOs used the Escazú Agreement to demand government transparency on climate adaptation plans. Climate networks used Escazú to demand transparency in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement.

Efforts are also under way in other regions, including ALLIED's Environmental Rights Agreement in Africa (ERA) Initiative.

- **Safeguard and expand the right to participation in multi-lateral fora.** *Participation by civil society helped push the Paris Agreement's ambition and accountability logic. It has also been crucial in bringing climate justice, human rights, and the voices of affected communities, including greater recognition of Indigenous Peoples, into the process, especially in response to heavy fossil-fuel industry influence. A recent report indicates that despite being labelled the People's COP, COP 30 was marked by increased surveillance and use of force by UN security officials.*

c. Freedom of assembly

Freedom of assembly is essential for global climate movements, enabling action where politics lag. Climate movements, including feminist, Indigenous, and racial justice movements, remain highly active and have secured important victories, such as stronger fossil-fuel language at COP28 and landmark climate-rights judgments, largely because protests and allied tactics have kept pressure on decision-makers. In part due to the success of these tactics, governments and corporations are increasingly employing a mix of legal, policing, and smear attacks to restrict assembly.

Donors can proactively work to secure protection for freedom of assembly in climate contexts.

- **Resource legal reform** to repeal or amend laws that restrict freedom of assembly and embed participation guarantees in frameworks, including climate and the environment. Ongoing work has helped block or soften several restrictive bills, including in Armenia, Ukraine, the U.K. and the U.S. In parallel, the Aarhus framework has made public participation a legal norm in environmental decision-making and national climate planning.
- **Support monitoring and documentation of violations** to help expose crackdowns, build solidarity and legitimise climate protest in the public eye, and provide the empirical base that courts, parliaments, and UN bodies rely on.
- **Include coalition-building across sectors**, which has been critical to resisting restrictions and amplifying impact, in grant-making strategies.



Source: Unsplash | Photographer: Clay Kaufmann | The Burlington Climate Strike, USA | 2019

3. SYSTEMIC CHANGE FUNDING TO COUNTER THE DRIVERS

The third approach for donors is systemic -change funding to counter the specific drivers being used to undermine and halt climate progress: (1) abuse of national security rubrics; (2) disinformation and misinformation; (3) unchecked corporate influence in government and politics; and (4) exclusionary and unresponsive governance.

a. Civic freedoms restrictions, particularly abuse of national security frameworks

Climate activists around the globe face abuse of national security and counter-terror financing rubrics that impede legitimate activism and funding.

Where civil society activity is labelled as extremist and funding is framed as “material support,” it is critical that funders understand how these measures affect grantmaking, programme design, and risk management so they can clarify their legal obligations, develop compliance strategies without undermining their missions, and support strategies vital to their ability to operate over the long term.

Funders have been engaged in supporting a sophisticated ecosystem of groups and experts. The following are a few entry points.

- **Familiarise your foundation with resources for nonprofits, funders, and civil society actors.** The Charity and Security Network focuses on the U.S., while ICNL provides analyses on the use of domestic and international counter-terror measures on philanthropy and civil society in the U.S. and globally.

- **Leverage Financial Action Task Force (FATF) reviews to prevent the introduction of restrictions on cross-border funding to civil society.** Over the next three years, several nations critical to the future of climate mitigation and climate adaptation financing will be reviewed by the FATF, the global body that sets the norms on countering terrorist financing and money laundering. These include the U.S. Mexico, China, Australia, South Africa, the U.K, Denmark, Bangladesh, The Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Spain. The Global NPO Coalition on FATF has a track record of using FATF reviews to expose abuse of NGO laws to restrict civil society, and prevent further restrictions, including in Nigeria and Serbia and behind the scenes in India.

This work is critical, as governments have in the past introduced cross-border funding restrictions following FATF review. Funders have a role to play in supporting the Global NPO coalition as well as climate groups' participation in cross-sectoral advocacy.

- **Support work to push back against the weaponisation of anti-terror and security laws** at the international and national levels. The 2025 landmark Global Study on the Impact of Counter-Terrorism on Civil Society, by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights, is an entry point to understand how states misuse counter-terrorism laws to criminalise climate advocacy and wider civil society, as well as advocacy for legal reforms.

Much of the pushback by civil society is focused on the U.N., which is a standard-setter. Groups are promoting the U.N. Human Rights Committee's guidances on peaceful assembly, providing states with best practices for balancing security interests with human rights, advocating for the E.U. and U.N. to introduce remedies for defenders facing weaponisation of criminal and civil laws, and pressing for U.N. recognition of criminalisation as a human rights abuse.

- **Fund organisations working to expose and challenge the use of public security to protect private companies** Public security forces and private industry, especially oil, gas, and mining companies, are increasingly working together to deter, control, or suppress climate activism. Left unchecked, these arrangements distort public security and deepen the alignment of state power with extractive industries.

Abuse of security powers is also diverting attention and resources from tackling genuine security threats, including the impact of organised crime and illicit finance on climate action. According to Interpol, environmental crimes are the third largest type of criminal activity in the world, and yield as much as US\$281 billion in illicit proceeds every year.

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If we build roads, people drive. If we build rails, they take the train. If our cities are designed around cars, no amount of information about emissions will make people walk. And if our information systems are built for outrage and dopamine hits, that is what they will produce. This is the environment in which climate misinformation thrives. When a global leader calls climate change “a scam,” it is not (just) ignorance: it is strategy.

Laurence Tubiana, CEO,
European Climate Foundation

b. Threats to Information Integrity

A healthy information ecosystem is characterised by a broad spectrum of ownership and voices; transparency of algorithms, editorial decisions, and funding; integrity of information provenance; and resilience against manipulation. For climate action specifically, a healthy information ecosystem is one where scientific consensus, community and Indigenous knowledge, and real democratic debate shape public understanding and policy preferences.

There is extensive evidence that disinformation is driven by overlapping anti-rights actors, ranging from political movements to industry-aligned networks, who simultaneously target climate action and science, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, immigration, and democratic institutions. They frequently share funding sources and outlets, and deploy similar tactics, including coordinated harassment, misleading narratives, bot amplification, and attacks on journalists, scientists, and activists. By framing clean energy and rights-based policies as threats to economic stability, national identity, or personal freedom, these networks seek to mobilise political opposition and weaken regulatory action.

The mis- and disinformation these actors spread thrive in a global communications architecture that is largely privately governed, optimised for user-engagement and advertising revenue, and fragmented across jurisdictions. A handful of corporations built to profit from outrage and doubt control online information, debate, and activism. Responses limited

to challenges in one sector are unlikely to address the underlying driver. Philanthropies increasingly see that information integrity requires a cross-sector approach that links climate, human rights, gender equality, media freedom and digital rights communities—reaching all those harmed by information manipulation, in countries and communities across the globe.

- **Support groups and coalitions putting climate information integrity onto the international agenda.** A major coalition success is the launch of the *United Nations Global Initiative on Information Integrity on Climate Change at COP30 in November 2025*, which gives countries a basis to push back against disinformation spread by fossil fuel companies and amplified and monetised by Big Tech.

A related initiative, the *Scientific Panel on Information Integrity about Climate*, was launched by the independent *International Panel on the Information Environment (IPIE)* in 2024, urging policymakers to mandate transparent, standardised climate-related disclosures from corporations and public institutions; strengthen public science literacy; regulate deceptive climate communication; and address the opaque advertising systems, platform incentives, and political-economic interests that drive misinformation. Civil society also contributed to the landmark *Mutirão Decision*, which recognised that information integrity is essential for effective climate action.

- **Fund advocacy to hold corporations to account for mis- and disinformation.**

A variety of issue-specific groups are seeking to tackle mis- and disinformation by different actors and sectors and there is scope for climate-focused groups to build on the successes of child safety and human rights organisations in holding platforms to account for social and human rights harms. Groups track investments by fossil fuel companies in digital advertising and contrast their greenwashing claims with actual clean energy investments. NGOs have taken legal action against companies for greenwashing, for example in the U.K. and Australia, and documented wildfire disinformation in Canada.

- **Disrupt the profit motives for climate disinformation.** Coalition efforts have helped pressure Google to adopt a policy for advertisers, publishers, and creators prohibiting monetization of content that contradicts established scientific consensus on climate. Groups are actively pressing other digital platforms and advertisers to remove or demonetise climate disinformation; exposing how disinformation is monetised and amplified; and pushing for regulation and transparency around ad-tech tools and placements.

Ultimately, curtailing corporate power in the digital sphere also involves strengthening independent media, investing in civic digital infrastructure, ensuring algorithmic transparency, and reclaiming the digital commons as a space for democratic participation rather than corporate control.

- **Fund groups that demand internet governance in the public interest.**

Because climate disinformation is enabled and driven by the handful of corporations that control online spaces, strengthening information integrity requires moving beyond voluntary content moderation toward governance models that embed public-interest standards—transparency, accountability, human rights, and scientific integrity—into the rules and technical design of the digital ecosystem itself.

This strategy points away from soft, multistakeholder bodies toward both harder accountability standards, such as those that the EU has begun to develop (but is now threatening to roll back), and entirely different digital entities and infrastructure than what the handful of Big Tech companies currently control. Effective standards would keep these actors from systematically amplifying denial and doubt over science, and from monetising disinformation as noted in the previous section.

- **Support work that makes the connection between concentrated, unchecked corporate power, mis- and disinformation, and climate.** Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD) has called on governments to “fundamentally change the structures, business models and incentives” behind disinformation, and to pair “Big Carbon and Big Tech” as twin forms of concentrated, unaccountable power. Countering this concentrated power requires exposing and fighting the out-sized influence these companies exercise via lobbying, revolving doors, and, increasingly, direct fusion with governments. (See *Unchecked Corporate Influence* section, below.)



Source: Getty Images | Photographer: JOHN THYS/AFP | Margrethe Vestager Thierry Breton give a joint press conference on the Data Act at the EU headquarters in Brussels | 2022

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND NARRATIVE CHANGE: SHIFTING MINDSETS

Strengthening communications capacity can help organisations and movements respond to misinformation while effectively conveying a solutions-oriented narrative. Several climate-focused initiatives are active, and much more can be done to build capacity in critical yet under-resourced geographies in the Global South.

Complementary to strategic communications is narrative change, which seeks to reshape cultural mindsets and deeply held societal beliefs. While anti-rights movements have invested heavily in influencing public opinion and culture over the last two decades, progressive funders have been slower to use narrative change as a serious tool for driving change.

Over the last five years, several philanthropies, particularly those that work on women's rights, sexual and reproductive justice, LGBTQ+ rights, migrants' rights, racial justice, and civic space, have begun to experiment with grant-making on narrative change. They are funding an emerging ecosystem of experts to support grassroots movements to use social listening tools, develop alternative narratives and frames, and test messages with target audiences. Meeting people where they are and responding to real life concerns can build solutions and constituencies that are more durable. Important lessons can be learned from Ireland's Repeal the 8th movement, which moved public debate on abortion rights from an abstract, polarised moral argument to a personal, empathy-driven conversation focused on lived experiences. Narrative shifting, alongside movement and power building, created public, collective momentum that resulted in a forceful win.

Debunking misinformation has been quite useful in litigation and other accountability actions, but has been less successful in changing public perceptions. "Pre-bunking"—forewarning audiences about misinformation techniques before they spread—including through gamified, humour-based formats designed to hold attention, builds resistance to climate misinformation specifically.



Source: Shutterstock | Photographer: David Gyung | Team members evaluate charts and data. 2026

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The delegitimization of collective climate effort, the quiet implication that it is performative and will not bear fruit, is a real psychological and political force.

Saliem Fakir, Executive Director,
African Climate Foundation

c. Unchecked corporate influence

The climate field increasingly recognises that unchecked corporate power, especially that of finance, extractive, and agricultural firms—alongside the Big Tech companies described above—is a central obstacle, enabling companies that are driving climate change to block action.

This excessive power depends on links that fuel conflicts of interest. Individuals move seamlessly through revolving doors, from politician to regulator to corporate executive. Companies fund political campaigns, building access and influence. Government officials own companies and shares. State-owned enterprises exert pressure. It is not a coincidence that narrowly-defined “pro-business” narratives undermine the public interest in effective climate policy, laws criminalise protest and speech, and governments devolve authority to company control such as voluntary, self-regulated compliance.

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If climate funders don’t address some of their systemic issues some of their major investments won’t land. People they are funding to do good work re being derailed– legislation is the anchor for normative change, and corporate capture is derailing that. It is money down the drain.

Climate funder,
Confidential interview, Europe

ENTRENCHED CORPORATE CAPTURE IN KEY HIGH-EMITTING COUNTRIES

Corporate influence on public policy has been a feature of politics in the U.S. for decades, particularly since the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision allowed unlimited levels of political financing by companies. The fossil fuel industry spent almost half a billion dollars in the 2025 presidential election: it now has allies leading key government agencies and “anti-climate” figures pack the cabinet. Following the declaration of an “energy emergency” and withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, a series of executive orders have: stripped away environmental regulations; expanded oil, coal, and timber production; ended renewable energy initiatives; and gutted funding for an array of programs, including those monitoring climate change impacts on vulnerable populations. Tariffs threaten adoption of renewables while exempting fossil fuels. Emissions in the US are expected to rise by up to 36 percent by 2035, with the 2025 budget reconciliation likely to add a further 315 to 574 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions.

U.S. trends mirror those in China, India, and Russia, where corporate influence over climate policy has intensified. In China, state-owned energy companies such as Sinopec and CNPC have resisted the implementation of renewable targets and shielded carbon-heavy industries, while politically connected private firms evade regulation. India’s coal, cement, and mining sectors, dominated by state enterprises and conglomerates like Adani and Reliance, benefit from close political ties that drive deregulation and weaken oversight. In Russia, state-controlled oil and gas giants such as Gazprom and Rosneft are so central to presidential power that there is minimal commitment to renewable energy or climate action.

36%

Expected increase in emissions in the U.S. by 2035.

To break the corporate grip on climate policy, all sectors need to challenge unchecked corporate power over public agendas, utilising interlinked strategies.

- **Support analyses of how corporate influence operates**, exposing lobbying, revolving doors, conflicts of interest, and regulatory capture—keeping in mind that exposure is much more effective when linked to actors who can impose consequences, such as regulators, aligned legislators and investors, media, and mass movements. For example, EU regulators withheld funds from Hungary under the Rule of Law mechanism based on data from civil society.
- **Experiment and invest in narrative-shifting on corporate influence.** Climate defenders have had much success educating the public on the harms of fossil fuels. Yet corporate capture persists because underlying narratives, such as blame-shifting to personal choice of consumers or the primacy of competitiveness and shareholder value protect corporate influence. Narrative work on broader values and framings, such as democracy, sovereignty, and public interest, should be developed and tested in specific national contexts.

QUANTIFYING HARM: LESSON FROM SOUTH AFRICA

A South African model provides important lessons for climate advocates to build resistance to capture in other countries and regions. Over 100,000 leaked emails and documents from 2017–2018, known as #GuptaLeaks, exposed political corruption, state capture, and the heavy influence of the wealthy Gupta family over former South African President Jacob Zuma.

Research by a coalition of civil society groups estimated that state capture cost the country 4 percent of its GDP. Quantifying the economic catastrophe created evidence that, when brought to prosecutors, contributed to pushing out President Zuma, forced the establishment of the Zondo Commission, and led to the retrieval of over ZAR 1 billion (US\$61.5 million) in fees from McKinsey and other consultancies.

These collective efforts continue to ensure evidence feeds into policy reform, and can play a critical role in pressing the government to adopt measures that prevent corporate interests from undermining climate action.

Other entry points for narrative shifting include:

- **Debunking the 'voluntary' myth:** Delay tactics like voluntary measures undermine legal and systemic change. Several groups provide evidence to undo the myth, and challenge ineffective auditors, ratings agencies, and certifications.
- **New methods and media:** Training for journalists on what corporate capture looks like, how to unearth it, and its implications, so they recognise shadow lobbying as a news story not 'business as usual', has been effective.
- **Use storytelling and humour:** Climate donors can join efforts to expose corporate influence and reach a broader audience on-line.
- **Fund strategic litigation as a key tool for confronting impunity, setting legal precedents, gaining attention, and building public support.** Successful litigation has directly countered influence—for example, a 2015 landmark Brazilian Supreme Court ruling banned corporate donations to political campaigns. It has hardened voluntary commitments—as in the *Lidl* case, which penalized the company for making exaggerated claims about ineffective ESG audits, and used consumer protection laws to treat the claims as deceptive marketing. Litigation's discovery process also forces internal documents into the public. It can shift views, such as the privacy litigation by Max Schrems against Facebook that helped build the global digital rights movement and contributed to passage of the EU's landmark data protection regulation (GDPR).
- **Fund climate accountability litigation targeting fossil fuel corporations themselves.** More than 30 lawsuits have been filed by US cities, counties, states, and tribal governments, modelled on the tobacco litigation that produced major corporate settlements.

Every state supreme court so far that has reviewed these claims has allowed them to proceed, but these cases face an existential test, as the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear the Suncor case in the coming term. A ruling for Suncor could foreclose this avenue.
- **Include grant-making to prevent power imbalances before they happen**, such as advocacy for stronger campaign finance and lobbying laws to keep corporate donations and lobbying from skewing policy. Support efforts to break up monopolies, which is particularly vital for challenging Big Tech. Other efforts include reforming global debt systems, increasing government resources by closing tax havens, and exposing and reforming unfair trade agreements.



Source: Shutterstock | Photographer: I.am_zews | Group of young women engaged in a discussion.

d. Exclusionary and Unresponsive Governance

Climate donors increasingly understand their work as not only a technological or financial challenge, but a governance challenge shaped by power, inequality, and institutional legitimacy. The scale of transformation required extends far beyond energy systems alone. The question is not only how ambitious policies are, but whether they are made through institutions that can absorb disagreement, represent diverse interests, and manage trade-offs transparently.

This is particularly important in land use, infrastructure siting, renewable energy build-out, mineral extraction, food systems, and adaptation planning, where decisions can easily reproduce exclusion if they are made without meaningful participation—and in turn trigger resistance and backlash.

Populists exploit discontent, centralizing authority, further weakening democratic institutions and norms, and narrowing civic space. Resistance to the extraction of transition minerals and backlash against clean energy measures can show how narrow, top-down, or technocratic processes reinforce unequal patterns of economic and political power, which provokes distrust, and ultimately slows the clean energy transition.

Democratic energy transition governance emphasizes transparency, shared decision-making, distributed ownership, and institutional checks on corporate and state interests. It recognises that open, accountable, and participatory institutions are more likely to command legitimacy and endure over time. For climate funders, the implication is that support for a clean energy transition includes ensuring that those most affected have a say in how the energy transition is imagined, governed, and financed.

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Indigenous peoples’ right to self-determination and leadership is key to actually achieving climate goals in both policy and practice.

Jenifer Lasimbang, Executive Director,
Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund

ADVANCING JUST TRANSITION FRAMEWORKS

Climate mitigation that ignores livelihoods, poverty, and inequality fuels resistance and deepens mistrust by the public. The European experience illustrates how climate policies focused narrowly on emissions—such as vehicle taxation or EV incentives—can provoke backlash when they fail to improve everyday life. A just transition ensures workers, marginalised communities, and affected regions shape and benefit from change through social protection, retraining, improved services, and development pathways. Funders play a critical role in aligning climate policy with justice and development agendas, ensuring transitions deliver better health and food, water, and economic security alongside emissions reductions.

Control over transition minerals and renewable energy is already a frontline justice issue. An estimated 50% of transition minerals lie on Indigenous territories, while much renewable potential is on marginalised rural land. Co-ownership and Indigenous-led models—grounded in FPIC and agreements such as Escazú—are emerging globally, from community energy projects to Indigenous-led mining initiatives. These approaches accelerate the clean energy transition, reduce conflict, and strengthen self-determination by aligning climate goals with local benefit and consent.



Source: Shutterstock | Photographer: Rawpixel | Diverse group in a circle, 2024

- **Support accountability and justice orientated approaches**, which have become central to democratic legitimacy in climate governance, and are often movement-led. Justice-centred approaches have strengthened mitigation targets, accelerated coal phase-outs, blocked or delayed fossil fuel infrastructure, embedded Indigenous sovereignty and inter-generational equity into policy debates, and cultivated pro-climate constituencies even in polarised contexts. Landmark cases such as *Urgenda* and *Neubauer*, alongside global mobilization, push institutions to articulate stronger duties, clearer timelines, and more credible pathways for climate mitigation.
- **Resource youth-led, Indigenous, feminist, labour, and other cross-field grassroots networks** that are linking climate mitigation to economic justice, historical responsibility, and democratic renewal. Through strategic litigation, public mobilization, and norm-setting, they are expanding the boundaries of what climate accountability looks like in practice. They connect local struggles to national and international arenas, so that concrete impact and lessons from frontline communities inform climate policy and implementation.
- **Experiment with approaches to re-imagine and reform governance**, a deeper leverage point that provides space to articulate and build alternatives to extractive, corporate-led, conflict-riddled, top-down systems. It recognises that climate mitigation is more durable when it shifts not only policies, but underlying rules, norms, and assumptions. Examples of this approach already exist in the form of community ownership models, municipal and cooperative governance, Indigenous consent and co-governance arrangements, and participatory planning processes. These models ensure that transitions are not imposed on communities, but rather, shaped with them. They improve implementation by surfacing local knowledge, reducing conflict, and building durable constituencies.

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Backlash is not an obstacle but social intelligence—feedback essential for designing transitions that are just and durable...

Iswe Foundation,
People in the Lead, 2025

Conclusion

Conclusion

Climate donors whose goals are being undermined and thwarted by shrinking civic space have many entry points to reverse the trend. We hope this briefing note gives you a sense of the multi-faceted work happening all across the globe to strengthen conditions needed for momentum and durable progress in climate policy and practice.

This is the first in our Shifting the Momentum series of briefing notes for climate philanthropy, with in-depth resources on unchecked corporate power, informational integrity, abuse of national security paradigms, and other drivers of shrinking civic space, to be published in the coming months.

For more information, including recommendations on how to support promising work, please do not hesitate to contact FICS at FICS@global-dialogue.org



Source: Unsplash | Photographer: PRASANNAPIX | Indian school child watering tree on a plantation, 2021

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE SUPPORT OR TO CONNECT WITH PEERS?

FICS convenes learning and education briefings, curated for small groups of donors on the latest trends on civic space, both in person and on-line.

Several funder networks offer resources and closed spaces in which funders can keep abreast of legal developments, anticipate threats, and develop aligned and informed responses. For example the Better Preparedness Initiative, hosted by the Human Rights Funders Network, has learning labs for funders to identify how major political shifts are reshaping civic space domestically and globally.

The **Climate Regrants Support Group's security hub, Pangolin**, provides resources and expertise to regrants to support immediate and long-term risk, response, and resilience measures. The Council on Foundations offers analysis and briefings specifically for foundations registered in the U.S., and engages in advocacy efforts, including the Unite in Advance campaign, aimed at safeguarding and strengthening the legal and political environment for philanthropy.

The International Centre for Not for Profit Law (ICNL) produces regular briefings on legal frameworks governing civil society and philanthropy globally; its sister organisation, the European Centre for Not for Profit Law (ECNL) does so for Europe. GIFE aims to build a healthy legal environment for the operation of civil society organisations in Brazil. The National Council of Nonprofits provides resources for U.S. civil society which can be accessed by funders.

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This briefing paper is designed to assist climate donors to understand shrinking civic space in the climate policy and advocacy field and, for those who are ready, to support efforts to reverse the trend.

It is the first in the Shifting the Momentum series of briefing notes for climate philanthropy, drawing on conversations with climate donors and FLCs' decade of expertise on both the manifestations and drivers of shrinking civic space.

fundersinitiativeforcivilsociety.org