New Initiative Calls for 30% of Climate Funding to Back Justice Groups led by People of Color

Michael Kavate
Colette Pichon Battle founded the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In the 15 years since, she has received just one multi-year grant large enough to pay for more than one staff person.

It’s made it hard to hold onto employees. It’s meant simultaneously serving as accountant, staff manager, communications director and more. And it also has not stopped her organization from making change, most recently helping form a five-state climate equity coalition that is soon to expand to cover the entire South and that has informed similar movements in New England, Appalachia, the U.K. and beyond.

“We were created out of complete disaster, necessity and need—and we’re still here, and we’re still fighting, and we’re leading the way around the Green New Deal and climate equity,” Pichon Battle said. “We’re leading that with no investment. What could we do with deep investment?”

To move more philanthropic dollars to such efforts, the Donors of Color Network has joined with movement leaders like Pichon Battle to launch a new campaign, the Climate Funders Justice Pledge. The effort calls on foundations—particularly the nation’s 40 largest climate funders—to commit to giving 30% of their U.S. grantmaking on climate change to environmental justice groups led by Black, Indigenous
and people of color, and to share those figures publicly.

The pledge launches in the wake of a year in which such giving has made unprecedented advances. Dozens of foundations committed to give tens and even hundreds of millions to advance racial equity, and prominent billionaire philanthropists such as Kat Taylor and MacKenzie Scott have prioritized leadership of color in their giving. And within the climate space, it comes close on the heels of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’s unexpected support for climate justice groups. Though the bulk of his initial grants went to the sector’s largest organizations, nearly 19% went to green intermediaries led by people of color.

Yet those advances are small steps in the face of a massive funding disparity. One of the few and frequently cited studies on the topic found that just 1.3% of the green giving from philanthropy’s top dozen foundations went to environmental justice. Other research has come to similar conclusions. A 2018 study found grantmakers greatly favor a small group of big—and typically white-led—green groups, with half of all grants from major climate funders going to just 20 nonprofits. Now that 2020 is in the rear view mirror, many in the field suspect the flurry of new commitments will pass and giving will return to typical levels.

“If we could scale the Sierra Club by 10 and win on climate, we’d already be winning,” said Ashindi Maxton, executive director of the Donors of Color Network. “We want to transform the climate movement into a winning movement. We know that at 1.3%, we can’t win.”
“We improve what we measure”

The effort has its roots in the initial conversations hosted by the Donors of Color Network, whose launch IP covered in 2018. The network’s high-net-worth members identified climate as one of their key priorities—and so the group set to work. To lead the effort, it brought on Danielle Deane-Ryan, an Obama administration veteran who has worked in a variety of roles in philanthropy and the private sector, including serving as a program officer at Hewlett.

People of color represent nearly 40% of the population, but the effort opted for a 30% level as their floor, aiming for “what’s doable,” Maxton said. “Let’s say we go from 5% to 30%. That’s a transformed movement.”

So far, 10 foundations have signed on to the pledge. The biggest among them is the Kresge Foundation, whose endowment is among the 20 largest in the United States. Two other top 40 funders, the JPB and Pisces foundations, are also on board. Several smaller grantmakers have also signed on, including the NorthLight, Surdna and Tides foundations and the Meyer Memorial Trust. One grantmaker, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has committed to transparency around its giving, but not to meeting the 30% pledge.

Others have already said no. Four of the country’s largest climate funders, the Gordon and Betty Moore, Ford and Margaret A. Cargill foundations, as well as the Kendeda Fund, declined to sign the pledge. The group says other major foundations are in
conversations about signing, while some have not responded to messages.

Even those who have opted in have ground to make up. “Some are definitely nowhere close at the moment” to the 30% floor, Maxton said. “In these conversations, it feels like we are really shifting the needle,” she said. In some cases, funders have “pulled up the number for the first time because they were on the phone with us.”

It’s not the only sphere in which the network has instituted such a pledge. Last June, the group’s 501(c) (4) arm announced it would limit funding to organizations that commit to spend at least 30% of their annual budget in communities of color, a move featured in Politico and adopted by the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee.

While their political arm is not affiliated with the Democratic Party, they wanted to influence the party—one study showed 98% of party committee spending goes to white consultants. “The base of the Democratic Party is people of color,” said Maxton. “You can’t win without us, but you don’t know how to talk to us, which says you’re leaving a lot of resources on the side.”

The political effort also called for increasing diversity among senior leadership—an area where philanthropy needs much improvement—but this effort chose not to make it a focus. “For foundations, there’s not a lot of leverage to change the leadership of the foundation or the board,” Maxton said. “We wanted to focus strategically on where we thought we could make the most difference—which is where the dollars go.”
The effort’s first goal is simply to get foundations to do the math, focusing on the top 40 largest philanthropies. “To have this number, that’s a huge win. We improve what we measure,” Maxton said. “If they agree to measure this number, we think they will persuade themselves.” The network is asking foundations to determine their figure themselves, but encourages partners to report their figures through Candid’s system.

Judging by recent reports from Green 2.0, the effort to get foundations to measure their internal staff and board diversity could be an uphill battle. But Maxton is no stranger to organizing within the philanthropic sector. In 2018, she was a co-winner of Inside Philanthropy’s Donor Organizers of the Year award for her leadership in expanding giving by donors of color.

To get funders’ attention, the group aims to leverage its network. They’ve lined up allies including financier and philanthropist Tom Steyer, legendary environmental justice leader Dr. Robert Bullard, and Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez of New York. Academics and prominent philanthropists like Freada Kapor Klein and Farhad Ebrahimi are also involved. Several funding intermediaries, including the Solutions Project and NDN Collective, have also signed in support.

The network even has a bit of genuine celebrity on its side: Actress Rosario Dawson narrates the video created to announce the pledge—and Maxton said they hope her significant other, Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey, will share it.

“It’s about, ‘where is the money going?’”
Kresge Foundation’s focus on cities and equity has led it to fund outside of the major green groups that dominate the portfolios of many environmental grantmakers. Yet even the Troy, Michigan-based grantmaker has only recently met the benchmark established by the new pledge. As recently as three years ago, the foundation was closer to 20%. Currently, the institution is “very close” to 30%, and has been for the last few years, said Lois DeBacker, managing director of the foundation’s environment program.

The foundation’s efforts show that philanthropy, even when committed to these issues, does not always take all the necessary steps. Advancing equity has long been a foundation-wide priority at Kresge, with a focus on supporting leaders of color, and it recently committed $30 million to racial justice organizations. For the past 15 years, the foundation has gathered data on the composition of the boards and staff of the organizations they fund, according to DeBacker, but one key element was left out. “We’re not currently getting numbers about the composition of senior staff,” she said. So to run the numbers for the pledge, the foundation had to ask each program officer about their grantees.

“There’s a big opportunity for the field to do better about tracking this, and I think there’s a lot of interest in doing so,” said DeBacker, noting that one of their priorities in the coming year would be collecting the demographic data that will allow them to track such figures in their database. A supporter of GuideStar, the foundation is also asking organizations to use that system to track board, staff and senior leadership makeup.
DeBacker sees the pledge as a new push to move a long-running conversation in philanthropy—one that affinity groups like the Environmental Grantmakers Association have advanced—into action. “It’s about more than talking about it, it’s about more than managing your internal practices—as important as that is—it’s also about, ‘where is the money going?’” she said. “The extra nudge is really productive.”

Kresge knows the value of a pledge. In 2019, the grantmaker committed to investing one-quarter of its $3.8 billion endowment—one of the 20 largest in the United States—in firms owned by women and people of color, becoming the first private foundation to accept a challenge issued by ABFE, the philanthropic support organization focused on Black communities.

DeBacker hopes peers realize that despite the historically low investment, there is a wide range of organizations active in this space, from policy shops and communications campaigns to researchers and academics. “The opportunities for funding are vast,” she said. “I think that’s not always the perception, and I think it’s important to correct that misperception.”

If more people take on the pledge, it would not only begin to shift the dramatic underfunding of both environmental justice efforts and green groups led by people of color, it would also contribute to correcting the longstanding imbalance between philanthropic support for scientific pursuit versus movement building in addressing a changing climate.

“A lot of funders began with a technical orientation to what we need to do to combat climate change—and there are things we must do technically—but it’s a
social problem, as well,” DeBacker said. “Funding justice-focused groups that work on climate change, it’s not just the right thing to do, it’s really essential to do if we want to win on climate change.”

“There’s a lot of Colettes out here”

Philanthropy committed millions of dollars to racial equity in 2020, but the question remains whether it marks a passing trend or a deeper shift. The Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, for instance, received first-time grants from six foundations last year, growing the group’s budget more than 60% to $800,000. The group only had one foundation supporter at the beginning of the year.

Pichon Battle saw funding to her region spike after Hurricane Katrina, but fall while recovery efforts were still underway, and she doesn’t see a new normal yet.

“I’d like to think that our country was awakened by the imbalance in our society, especially when it comes to Black people, how we value Black communities, how we value Black voices. But I know it was most likely not that,” she told me. “I think folks didn’t want to be up next for their portfolio to be critiqued in public. The right thing was done, and I think it was for the right reasons, but I’ll never know.”

If the Climate Funders Justice Pledge succeeds in a sustained way, it will mark a more fundamental shift in philanthropic values and policies. For Pichon Battle, it will mean philanthropy accepting the way organizations like hers use funding and build power. It will mean, she told me, philanthropy develops “a better understanding of structural racism” and how it
has given better-funded, white-led counterparts the scaffolding and support to scale. And it will mean understanding that for nonprofits like hers, regional political dynamics might mean “you can’t say climate,” but that doesn’t mean people do not uniquely feel the issue’s urgency.

“The philanthropic world, and many people in places of privilege, don’t have to contemplate what climate change really means, but that’s just not our reality in Southeast Louisiana,” she said. “It’s here already. We’re losing land at one of the fastest rates in the country.”

Her organization takes a local focus, but its influence reaches beyond its own backyard. In addition to leading the Gulf Coast for a Green New Deal campaign, the organization is staffing the Movement for Black Lives’ national Red, Black and Green New Deal effort. Recently, the organization presented its work during an international gathering organized by frontline groups in lieu of the cancelled Conference of Parties climate talks, as well as advising efforts in South America and beyond.

“The folks who took the time to invest in our organization have actually invested in regional, and national, and global change,” she said. “And there’s a million of us. We’re not special. There’s a lot of Colettes out here.”
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