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Working on climate change and global justice

Germanwatch is a German-based development and environmental NGO with a focus on global justice. A key insight for us is that we must keep the opportunities and limitations of our actual democratic system in mind when seeking solutions for climate change.

It's the basic principle of a functional democracy, that those who are affected by political decisions need to be an active part of the decision-making process. But this principle does not hold in the case of climate change, which severely affects children, future generations and poor people, especially communities in the global south. None of them are adequately represented in the democratic system of those countries most responsible for climate change.

That is why Germanwatch supports climate litigation cases brought by poor and young people. We are convinced that successful litigation will not only bring justice to individuals – e.g. a Peruvian farmer at risk of losing his livelihood due to climate change effects caused in rich countries – but also, potentially, speed up the course of global climate policy.

The short-sighted horizon of the political system – driven by the election cycle – is another major problem. Given that results from climate decisions taken today will take decades to be seen, while the burden of transformation is visible today, there is no incentive for today's political leaders to act.

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Climate change can itself pose a threat to democracies: if we don't limit global warming below 2° – or far better 1,5°C – future generations' individual liberty will shrink dramatically. And the longer we wait with transformative actions, the higher the risk of political panic reaction which reduces or ignores human rights. Our Climate Change Performance Index shows a clear correlation between a weak civil society and high greenhouse gas emissions. This is of course partly because of the strong nexus between dependency on fossil fuels and authoritarian regimes.

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Civil society has a crucial role to play in positioning climate work in national and global discourse. Groups like Fridays For Future are the renewable energy for a society and push climate change on to every political agenda.

Unfortunately, foundations are not yet sufficiently engaged when it comes to climate – though this is beginning to change. For Germanwatch, cooperating with foundations is extremely important. For example, it was foundation support that allowed us to initiate an EU business pressure group for strong climate action at the UN Climate Negotiations as an alternative to the – at this stage – only other active lobby group, which was mainly driven by Big Oil, coal, and car manufacturers.

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Recommendations for funders

- Fund well-designed climate litigation. Litigation cannot be funded by government and it is difficult to motivate individual donors and keep up their interest over periods of several years.
- Fund relevant legislative and regulatory work. Supporting climate-friendly trade agreements or emissions trading without loopholes is complex work that is hard to explain to individual donors.
- Support successful, well-established work. Understandably, most funders like to develop new projects and approaches, but it is also vital to support existing projects with a proven track record, for example our flagship project, the Climate Change Performance Index.
- Integrate marginalised people. This is challenging and difficult and often requires an effort that cannot be aligned with many institutional funders' requirements.