

Translation of the op-ed written for Stiftung und Sponsoring (6/20). Original German piece can be viewed [here](#).

WHAT EVERY FOUNDATION CAN DO ABOUT THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Climate change is not just a focus topic for climate action organizations – every foundation can and should get involved. A few irrefutable facts about climate change: It is real. It is manmade. And it is – still – reversible. Yet only two percent of all philanthropic funding worldwide goes towards climate action. This problem is just too big for a few major climate foundations to tackle on their own. We have to close ranks and consider how every charitable trust can make climate action part of its mission.

Intersections between climate action and other philanthropic missions

The climate crisis is clearly taking its toll all around the world. Germany has not been spared. As global warming melts the polar ice caps, sea levels are rising along our coast – slowly, but with potentially devastating consequences for port cities. Higher temperatures and changing precipitation patterns threaten entire ecosystems. Some forests are just too slow to adapt to these changes. Persistent droughts and heatwaves leave woodland soils parched. Entire plantations of spruce and pine monocultures are collapsing. The extinction rate is alarming with a species of animal or plant dying out every 15 minutes. Biodiversity has suffered heavy losses with around half the earth's animal species vanishing over the last 40 years.

One of the great misconceptions about climate change is the notion that it is strictly an ecological problem. Upon closer inspection, we can see that its effects extend into every reach of society, even touching on areas that would seem far removed from climate concerns. This is why potential solutions have to be explored in every avenue of human endeavor. The climate crisis is no one-dimensional problem; it has a direct adverse impact on many areas. It exacerbates social inequities, with brunt of the burden borne by the disadvantaged and most vulnerable in our global society. It poses challenges for democratic systems faced with rising populism and nationalism. And it threatens the health of us all. Air pollution is to blame for millions of premature deaths every year – it exceeds the World Health Organization (WHO) limits in 83 percent of the world's cities. Education is another key success factor for climate action. Only those who understand can act.

We call these touchpoints where issues overlap ‘climate intersections.’ With German foundations taking the initiative to redress the larger problems and associated secondary issues, they are becoming key “change-makers” of climate action, often without being aware of it. Every charitable trust can do the same to embed the climate cause in its agenda or activity. The time to start is now, for this is not a problem we can leave to the next generation.

Foundations and climate action – where do we start?

The power of philanthropy is great, its potential for combatting the climate crisis immense. Efforts so far have been meager, which is why it is crucial for every foundation, regardless of the nature of its activity, to get involved. So where to start? There are three actionable areas.

Knowledge: Develop climate competency

Many people – and not just donors and foundation staff – greet climate change with a measure of resignation. The issue is just too complex, too remote, too far off topic. Yet the cause of and remedies for climate change are easy to grasp. The first step towards climate action is for foundations to build climate competency within the organization. Online courses on climate change and virtual workshops can help. Knowledge leads to understanding; understanding to thought and ideas.

Networking: Seek and promote collaboration

Charitable trusts have to step up their efforts to connect and collaborate even more closely with actors in their field and beyond. The climate crisis leaves no room for competition. Pooling strengths and sharing ideas and knowledge is still the most effective way of countering this crisis. U.S. president-elect Joe Biden’s success at the polls has rekindled high hopes for multilateral action. And climate action does indeed demand multilateralism – that is, cooperation across the board and at all levels. Foundations can contribute on a scale both large and small. An open dialog and reciprocal learning are essential to setting the right course now rather than wasting valuable time.

The climate lens: Adjust the funding

The next step for funders, donors and foundations is to look at their grant portfolios from the climate perspective, using the aforementioned intersections as reference points. We have described these in detail in our guide, *Funding the Future - How the climate crisis intersects with your giving*. These intersections can be tied in with foundations’ other agenda points, without undermining their core mission. On the contrary – the climate crisis could actually undermine the impact and success of their efforts if they continue to ignore these risks and fail to incorporate climate action into their portfolios.

Daily to-dos: Getting started with routine deeds

Foundations can start making a difference and setting an example – not only for the outside world, but also for the people within the organization – by doing climate-friendly deeds every day. They could shrink their carbon footprint, change their mode of travel, work together in ways that conserve resources. Many issues remain to be addressed and embedded in the organizational culture. Foundations, funders and donors can go a step further by reviewing their financial investments and governance structures. Are they factoring the climate footprint of their investments into the equation? Or do they need to divest assets that are harming the climate? Charitable trusts can start going greener by simply changing banks. They can also facilitate climate-friendly decisions in their organization, for example, by managing potential governance conflicts. One factor is key to all these measures – communication. Foundations have to let donors and the public know how they are helping to combat climate change. Then the imitators that climate change so urgently needs will follow suit.

The bottom line

Just and democratic societies, public health, disadvantaged groups, education, nature conservation – foundations in Germany can find many intersections between missions like these and climate change. Every charitable trust can do something to advance the cause of climate action. They can invest financial resources, adapt their grant portfolio or put the climate on their agenda. The possibilities are many, but the important thing is that foundations take action today to help shape tomorrow and secure their future. Acquiring key climate competencies and knowledge can be the first big step down this path.

About the topic

Active Philanthropy's guide for foundations describes how every type of charitable trust can approach the issue of climate change. Active and the Deutsches Stiftungszentrum [*German Foundation Center*] have joined forces to offer several virtual workshops on this topic.

About the author

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