



Understanding the Landscape for Black, Indigenous, Women of Color-Led Climate and Environmental Justice Organizations



WE LEAD Fund

Acknowledgements

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To the donor community who provided feedback for this report, we appreciate your insightful input and thank you for your partnership.

And to WE LEAD’s funding partners who have contributed to the fund, we are grateful for your trust and support. Together we continue to shift resources to communities of color and other groups who have historically been denied power and justice.

As a social justice intermediary organization and collaborative philanthropic vehicle, with flexibility to adapt to the needs of the field, we believe the learnings contained within this report are vital to the impact of our work, our grantmaking practices, and to the sector at large. Progress toward racial, gender, and environmental and climate justice is needed now more than ever, and philanthropy has a vital role to play.

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Cover images: Maui Medic Healers Hui, Rise St. James, The Smile Trust – WE LEAD grantees

All images in this report are courtesy of the grantee organizations that WE LEAD supports.

Introduction

About Tides

We believe that a just and equitable future can exist only when communities who have been historically denied power have the social, political, and economic power they need to create it.

To make that a reality, we work in deep partnership with doers and donors to center the leadership of changemakers from these communities, connecting them to services, capacity building, and resources to amplify their impact.

Tides-led Initiatives

Established in 2019, Tides-led initiatives channel funding directly to the bold visionaries on the ground who are devoting their lives to addressing deeply rooted injustices. Their lived experiences and voices influence each fund's advisory council and inform the funding strategies we deploy: rapid response grants to cover urgent needs, multi-year funding commitments that foster growth and sustainability, and collaborative funding that shifts decision-making power to proximate leaders.

Our pooled funds are organized to support the most critical social justice work – whether it's nimbly responding to frontline climate justice leaders, organizing for the health of our democracy, investing in the storytelling power of immigrant communities, or making long-term investments in the power and voice of girls and women of color and their allies.

Through these initiatives, we leverage the collective power of multiple donors to supercharge their donation — and their impact. From 2019-2023, \$100M in funding has been granted through our six Tides-led Initiatives, supporting over 350+ grantee partners both within and outside of the United States.



Tides-led initiatives channel funding directly to the bold visionaries on the ground who are devoting their lives to addressing deeply rooted injustices.

¹ Climate Donors Pledge: <https://www.climate.donorsofcolor.org>

Introduction

About WE LEAD

In April 2020, the Tides Foundation launched the **Women's Environmental Leadership Fund (WE LEAD)**, a grantmaking initiative that supports women's and gender-diverse people's grassroots leadership on the frontlines of environmental disruption in the United States.

WE LEAD focuses on addressing historic inequities by directing resources to environmental justice organizations and climate-focused programs led by proximate leaders most impacted by these issues, including Black, Indigenous, and women of color-led organizations. Rooted in the conviction that those living closest to the issues have the best solutions, the WE LEAD grantmaking initiative has invested in dozens of groups advancing equity and justice through the individual and collective power of community-driven advocacy and action.

Why WE LEAD?

The New School concluded that of the \$1.34 billion distributed by national environmental grantmakers in 2016–2017, only 1.3 percent was awarded to environmental justice organizations.¹ The disparity is also gendered: 70 to 80 percent of philanthropic funding goes to organizations run by men.

WE LEAD exists because of the gap in philanthropic investment in women's leadership and women's leadership in communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by environmental injustice.

We prioritize driving resources to proximate leadership, including women of color, who are uniquely positioned to address both the symptoms and root causes of climate change, and develop successful community-led solutions to the harmful practices and destructive effects of polluting industries based on their own lived experience, cultural competency, and language fluency.

WE LEAD prioritizes directing resources to these leaders because of their effective community-based responses to environmental harm and climate change, which have profound impact on all of us. Through WE LEAD, we fund strategic leaders making bold progress on climate policies that will help solve the climate challenge writ large.



We prioritize driving resources to proximate leadership, including women of color, who are uniquely positioned to address both the symptoms and root causes of climate change.

Photo: Downwinders at Risk

Introduction

Who Is This Landscape Analysis For?

The intended audience for this landscape analysis includes all of the grant partners, women of color leaders in the climate and environmental justice space, and anyone supporting frontline climate justice work, including allies and donors. In addition, this analysis is intended to share the context and learning for donors and funders who currently invest in climate and environmental spaces and who may not have an understanding of why women² and what BIWOC leaders are experiencing as field leaders fighting polluters and building new solutions to address climate change and environmental justice. We hope to make the case for deeper investment in the sustainability of proximate leaders, including women of color, and their organizations, not because it's the just thing to do, but because they are making progress on the climate challenge.

At Tides, we actively work to shift and strengthen power through our grantmaking and through Tides partners. However, the threats to these values and this approach is real, as demonstrated by the current political and legal landscape.

As an organization, we intend to uphold and lean into our impact goal, and we will continue to advocate for a vision that centers proximate leaders, communities of color, and other historically excluded groups.

Funding leadership of marginalized and under-resourced communities who are most impacted by environmental injustice and climate change, including women of color leaders, is the right strategy to combat climate change and to drive community-led solutions that benefit us all. We see this as an opportunity for philanthropy and a call to action: to invest in leaders who are leading frontline, effective, transformative fights, shaping public policy, and advancing the promise for healthy and self-determined communities and a livable planet.

Since 2020, WE LEAD has moved more than \$8 million to women's and gender-expansive people's grassroots leadership on the frontlines of environmental disruption in the United States.



We invite you to stay connected to learn more. [tides.org/we-lead](https://www.tides.org/we-lead)

² Why Women <https://www.wecaninternational.org/why-women>

Methodology

In the summer of 2023, the WE LEAD Fund at Tides Foundation had just completed its third cycle of funding and wanted to learn more about how that investment was impacting their grantee partners and what else these organizations and their leaders might need to sustain and thrive in the climate justice space.

The team conducted 20 interviews with organizational leadership, had 13 funder conversations, and heard back from 36 grant partners who participated in a survey. Their collective feedback and insights are included in this report. A range of direct quotes from staff at WE LEAD grant partner organizations are shared in this document without attribution because the interviews and surveys were conducted with anonymity.

Lines of Inquiry

The landscape analysis focused on gathering information on these key lines of inquiry:

- In what areas do BIWOC leaders need support in their own leadership development and organizational capacity?
- What things accelerate the impact of BIWOC-led climate and environmental justice organizations?
- What are the barriers to impact for BIWOC-led climate and environmental justice organizations?
- What have been BIWOC-led organizational barriers to accessing resources and how have systemic issues around race and gender played a part?
- How can philanthropy support cross-learning and collaboration between BIWOC-led organizations?

WE LEAD grant partner organizations range from organizations with budgets under \$500,000 to multimillion-dollar organizations and organizations that are 1–3 years old to organizations that have 30-plus years in tenure. The majority of the organizations are BIWOC-led (95%) and the majority of the leadership tenures fall evenly between emergent, 1–3 years (46%), and seasoned, 10-plus years (46%). Only six of the 44 were founded between 2019–2021, four years or younger.

Some organizations in the grantmaking portfolio have received their first grant from a national funder through WE LEAD and shifted from being volunteer-led to having paid staff. And larger social justice organizations were able to start a new climate justice program within their organization or expand to another geographic location.

Building the New AND Fighting the Bad

Amid the timing of this landscape analysis, the climate and environmental justice fields are in this moment where it is simultaneously experiencing both the opportunity for deep investment from the federal government through the Inflation Reduction Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and Justice40, while also feeling the catastrophic impact of climate change and devastation of local environments in polluter-friendly states and regions. WE LEAD grant partners are attempting to do both/and work of building anew while fighting the bad. However, grant partners are up against well-resourced polluters who have significant influence over pro-industry policymakers. Given this context, the landscape analysis seeks to understand for BIWOC leaders in the environmental and climate justice space what have we learned about what accelerates systems change as it relates to climate justice, what are the biggest challenges for these leaders and their organizations, and how might WE LEAD support to meet the moment?

Toward refinement of its grantmaking and programmatic strategy, the WE LEAD team wanted to explore the following areas through the landscape analysis:

How can we continue to support the leadership of **communities disproportionately impacted** by environmental harm and historically denied power, including **Black, Indigenous, women of color leaders**, in the climate justice movement?

How can we support these leaders and their organizations to be able to **accelerate their impact**?

What things will help to **sustain leadership and build power** for systems change impact?

Current Landscape for BIWOC-Led Climate and Environmental Justice Organizations

While all of the United States is feeling the impact of climate change — record-breaking temperatures, devastating weather events, poor air quality — communities of color historically and increasingly experience disproportionate negative impacts of climate and environmental destruction. A confluence of where sites of pollution are and where majorities of people of color work and live means that communities of color are more likely to experience illness³ and disease related to pollution, more likely to live near polluting factories, and waste sites⁴, more likely to have land and property decimated by industry, as well as infrastructure that puts them in harm's way for weather events (floods, fires, tornados, and hurricanes).

Despite the data making clear that BIPOC communities are hit hardest by climate change and pollution, only 1.3% of philanthropic dollars in the US go to environmental justice-focused organizations with leaders from impacted communities. And while the Biden administration has committed historic amounts of resources to climate justice through programs like the Justice40 Initiative and the US Environmental Protection Agency's new Environmental Justice office, those resources also come with challenges for smaller BIPOC-led organizations. For example, the reimbursable nature of federal contracts means organizations with small budgets have a hard time fronting the resources for these larger contracts. The paperwork alone for grant applications is enough to deter any organization, let alone organizations that don't have staff familiar with the heavy lift of government applications.

This leaves even the more seasoned BIWOC-led organizations with narrow sources of funding, either compelled individual donors or the handful of institutional funders who are focused on investing in organizations that are led by and serving communities of color. But as we learned from the women of color leaders we interviewed, promises of increased funding to BIPOC-led and -serving organizations post-racial uprisings appear to be on the decline.



³ Studies of adults have found evidence of racial disparities related to climatic changes with respect to mortality, respiratory and cardiovascular disease, mental health, and heat-related illness. Racial Disparities in Climate Change-Related Health Effects in the United States.

⁴ Cutting-edge analysis of fine particulate levels by area reveals shocking disparities: 'The underlying variable that is most predictive is systemic racism' - US Neighborhoods with More People of Color Suffer Worse Air Pollution.

Key Findings

Chicken and Egg: Big Bets vs. Presumed Risk

Even though women of color have been leading in environmental justice spaces for decades, resulting in substantive legislative and regulatory wins, they are still grossly underfunded and unsustainable. In the shadow of the Big Greens, BIWOC-led environmental and climate justice groups are present on the frontlines simultaneously fighting back the bad while also building the new but finding themselves up against deeply resourced polluters. Women of color leaders articulated in a myriad of ways how they are on the receiving end of bias that keeps them from accessing larger, multiyear investments that would allow them to grow and sustain their work. Education and professional experience (scientists and lawyers) are often valued over the lived experience of women of color leaders on the ground organizing, disrupting, and holding polluters and policymakers accountable.

“Funders only think of folks like me in terms of community engagement and not valuing, I think, the real expertise of every single thing that actually gets implemented in a real-world scenario in a community. And you know that experience really matters because that’s why stuff doesn’t work. Because they don’t know how that law, regulation, or policy is gonna actually hit the ground, and when it does hit the ground, it often falls apart. There’s no implementation. There’s no watchdogging of the agencies themselves to make sure that there’s follow-through. We do that! We sue the polluters. We bring the issues to the attention of policymakers.”

“We’re trying to build leadership and build a collective grassroots movement, but of course, we need funding to ensure that what we’re doing is sustainable for everybody. So I would say that’s the biggest barrier. And then I think just personally, I would love to build more capacity in our organization to hire some more administrative roles, so that way it’s not like me or our program director managing all of our foundational grants. It takes away from some of the other work that we want to get done. And so I think if there’s ever opportunities for funders to lend us more opportunities to learn how to develop the organization operationally, I think is always really beneficial too.”

“I’m not concerned about the solutions. I’m very concerned about us having the capacity to enact them and also have the power to battle and get the interference out of the way of governance structures and companies that are really interfering with the solutions that we have.”

Key Findings

Growth and Sustainability Means Investing in Organizational and Leadership Development

Being able to strengthen their institutions' capacity and have the mental and technical support for their leadership are both the most significant barriers and the most significant accelerators for BIWOC-led EJ and CJ organizations. Ultimately, when EJ/CJ organizations and their leaders have more capacity they are equipped to better organize and have an impact on communities that are disproportionately affected by climate change.

Many of the organizational leaders interviewed for this report are taking up long intractable regulatory and legislative fights, and in order to win they have to be able to sustain pressure on corporate polluters or policymakers for five- and 10-year increments. But if you are a thinly staffed organization and the executive director is holding four and five jobs — organizer, strategist, people manager, fundraiser, accountant — two things are inevitable: 1) you're going to burn out pretty quickly, with your physical and mental health suffering, and 2) you're not going to be able to give each of those roles the full time and attention they need to be effective. Despite these facts, BIWOC-led organizations in the CJ/EJ space continue to be the victims of the nonprofit starvation cycle. On a modest budget and with few full-time paid staff, they are producing monumental wins for their communities and reciprocally for the nation and the world, but at a significant cost to their personal health and well-being.

From our survey, respondents said that areas of growth and learning in leadership were 44–55% management skills and 47% fundraising. For organizational growth, 88% of the top needs were for organizational infrastructure (systems, policies, internal practices), 58.8% for human resources (hiring, personnel policies and practices, compensation philosophy), and 50% for organizational culture and team building.

"I definitely feel that pressure of the possibility of generational change and what it means for any of us frontline leadership to slow down at this moment. I figure I'll give it all I got until I got no more. I can't separate my identity from the work because I am involved in so many spaces. But it's still tough out there. I had a call with a white mainstream organization, and the condescension, the real reduction I was made to feel because I'm not a lawyer or a scientist. There was a devaluing of the real work that it takes to read permits, to write laws, to be in the work — real lived expertise that's not theoretical."

"Healing justice is extremely underfunded. We need to be able to support our community and our own team in the continued practices of ceremony and healing. Without healing justice support we are building on shaky foundations, and the possibility of complete meltdowns is a threat. Particularly because most of the people we work with or most on our staff are folks who are coming from generations of trauma and dismissal, we are constantly advocating for our right to dignity and the right to be; this can take a toll on individuals and communities."



Photo: Fenceline Watch

Key Findings

Growth and Learning Areas for BIWOC-Led Organizations

“Salaries, which may not exactly fall under the realm of my leadership development, but as the leader of the organization I rely on my staff team to implement meaningful programming, and regularly need to fight to provide them the pay and hours they deserve. The truth is we need more help in the form of more full-time staff positions (I am currently the only full-time staff), and full-time salaries are the biggest budget item, but most funders either don’t prioritize this or only provide enough funding for part-time positions or program costs. Programs can’t happen without well-paid people!”

“Training on managing staff and internal conflicts, and creating a framework for staff goals — taking a sabbatical, after having served 13 critical years with our 29-year-old environmental nonprofit — strategic planning on setting staff goals, work portfolio goals, needing a deputy director to help manage the day-to-day affairs so that I can be free to formulate policy, and relationship-build with key stakeholders to help change the system and political status quo in our region.”



Deep and Meaningful Impact with WE LEAD Funding

With its flexible and general operating support, WE LEAD grant partners articulate the flexibility to make investments in their work that have substantive impact from being able to hire and pay full-time staff to being able to move legislation and organize bases to advocate for environmental protections. Below are some examples of what grant partners articulated in terms of WE LEAD's investment leading to impact.

"This grant came at a critical time during the height of our David vs. Goliath battle against attempts to build a border wall along our river lands that called for confiscating and destroying 71 miles to create an off-limits Security Enforcement Zone and 30-foot tall steel bollard fence. WE LEAD support allowed us to fight a relentless battle and build a diverse grassroots coalition with a hyper-focused strategy that led to the historic withdrawal of four border wall contracts to confiscate and destroy those 71 miles after the new administration came into office."

"Our climate campaign has made significant progress on several items with the resources from WE LEAD. We held multiple 'climigration' meetings to educate the community about the intersections of climate and migration. A model heat protection legislation has been introduced in Miami Dade County and we are rigorously organizing to engage the community in the county hearings for awareness and testimonials. We also entered the hurricane season more prepared. We quickly organized a response to Hurricane Idalia and helped our members deliver resources to rural communities impacted by the storm. This work supports a broader organizing strategy by centering climate justice and bringing new people into our movement and work."

"The WE LEAD grant allowed us to focus on leadership and capacity building within our community, a critical aspect of community empowerment that was sometimes overshadowed by more urgent disaster response and campaigns in our work."

"We were first awarded funding in 2021 through WE LEAD. That funding allowed me to sustain the organization during the pandemic and helped me maintain our work on the local and state level. That year we successfully got a water shutoff moratorium statewide and started a coalition called the People's Water Project. In 2023, we continued on the same path with our funding to redevelop and redefine the People's Water Project into a Water Justice Learning Institute. That funding has allowed us to complete an in-person convening, and we are working toward the development of a new institute set to be released publicly in December."

"Because of the WE LEAD funding, we were able to pay two additional women of color staff people to come onto the team."

"Support from WE LEAD provided funding for us to: work on a strategic plan for the first time in the organization's history, conduct an audit for the first time in the organization's history, and support the health of our team with wellness activities."

Deep and Meaningful Impact with WE LEAD Funding

“We leveraged this valuable resource to empower and support the incredible women leaders who were part of our climate justice fellows initiative. Our climate justice fellows are addressing the critical intersection of immigrant issues and the escalating challenges posed by a warming world. By providing a platform and support for women leaders from diverse backgrounds, our program strives to create a more sustainable and equitable future for all communities across the nation.”

“WE LEAD funds supported our Action and Advocacy work, specifically for our Gender Justice, Climate Justice, and Environmental Justice work. Our work in Alaska is often overlooked by funders and so this funding was able to go a long way in supporting the projects and some staffing time.”

“Present and throughout 2024 Georgia WAND has co-convened an Environmental Justice (EJ) Workgroup with Eco-Action in Atlanta, GA, to serve as a framework for our 2024 EJ Act & 2025 statewide Climate & Clean Energy Agenda. The EJ Act will demand an EJ commission for corporations, industry leaders, and developers to report on new developments in EJ communities. The EJ Commission will also cover regulatory, permitting, and compliance issues and EJ & nuclear mapping tools. Co-convening will include grass-roots organizing, creating local jobs, community engagement and canvassing with door knocking, mailings, community postings, community-led EJ workgroup facilitation, and participatory hybrid activities.”

“We were able to hire a program manager working both internally and externally around Black women’s well-being and healing; resources to staff her coming on full time so that it is not on MY plate solely. We’ve been able to do certain activities such as the convening of Black women EDs from across the country; convening of Black women mayors from across the country; resources on our website for Black women.”

“We were able to bring on a transportation and energy policy expert. A state legislative person. We were able to hire someone who was an associate professor at a university to run our Dept. of Environmental Health. There were never funds for me to hire an executive assistant. This is only the second year I’ve had an assistant in 30+ years. Before I was doing everything myself: scheduling, emails, letters, all of those administrative things. What a difference it makes to have administrative support.”



Photo: West Virginia Rivers Coalition

Accelerators and Barriers

We asked grant partners what they saw as the main strategies that helped to accelerate the impact of their work. The following are the most consistent themes we heard:

Peer-to-Peer Learning and Collaboration

Grant partners find that opportunities for peer-to-peer political analysis and shared strategy development at the movement level helped to move the work toward a collective agenda. This includes the ability to share the learning from winning strategies and approaches so that colleagues in the EJ/CJ space don't have to reinvent the wheel. Women of color leaders, in particular, found that spaces where they could just be in the company of other women of color leaders were highly valued as safe spaces to compare notes and share what is challenging them without judgment. **88% of grant partners say "yes" to a WE LEAD-supported peer learning space with the caveats of having time to participate and the proposed agenda.**

"Having space to be with other leaders and form our own agenda, a space to kind of reflect. Being able to have the space with other EDs. I would like more spaces like that where there was no agenda, just space to be with other leaders and form our own agenda, think about the movement and things we see on the ground, and be able to also vent in an open way. As EJ leaders, there's a lot of scrutiny of what we're allowed to express. We don't always express the frustrations we might have that are internal to our movement or our organizations."

"We practice and participate in direct action as a tool for people power mobilization and base building. And then, of course, all of the coalitions that we're a part of help amplify that reach. And then we're also members of international and national climate justice formations, like the Indigenous Environmental Network and Global Grassroots Justice Alliance. So that way we're also aligning with the international narrative on climate justice as well."

Leadership Development & Well-being

As many movement organizations are experiencing, there is not a lot of support for building culture and managing people, and resources for leaders to be well and sustain in EJ/CJ movements. Grant partners said when they have time and resources to invest in themselves and their teams these things can lead to sustainable and healthy work environments. Being able to have support for coaching, people management, and health and wellness is critical for building new leadership and sustaining tenured leaders in the field.

"Coaching is a key element to be able to have a sounding board and additional eye and ear for myself as well as my team. Support around wellness and burnout: how to keep the work moving forward but also take care of ourselves so we can be in it for the long haul."

"We need leadership workshops that address the unique challenges facing BIWOC leaders in these David vs. Goliath battles, and internal work settings — leadership training on effective staff management with case studies, leadership training on effective HR principles, leadership training on budget-setting principles that prioritizes equitable pay and benefits."

"Consistent one-on-one executive coaching, without a doubt. We need a space that is free of the power dynamics we face with our staff and with our boards to collaborate, seek support, problem-solve, and innovate. Additionally, spaces for us to gather with other women of color leaders, and opportunities to connect and support one another. Funding to attend conferences and workshops, and other continued learning opportunities. Reflection retreats to quietly process all we hold in this space."

Accelerators and Barriers

While leadership development and wellness are accelerators, the absence of those things was named as barriers to the work.

“Multitasking is probably the biggest hindrance to leadership. My workload is easily around 60 hrs/week (something that I think is widespread within movement leadership, per what I hear from colleagues leading in similar roles). Support for administrative tasks is usually underfunded, and leaders are pulled into a barrage of administrative tasks. Management training and support is also a recurring need. Managing in an environment of constant pressure (particularly in communities where we are facing multiple attacks) and maintaining commitments to equity and sustainability can be hard.”

Narrative Change and Public Education

Organizations find that investing in narrative change and public education really helps to support base-building and organizing efforts. Grant partners share that they focus on building public consciousness about the intersection of racial and climate justice so that constituents have an understanding of the many ways that climate change impacts the community's overall health and well-being. Being able to do the research and analysis on the science and then translate that to the everyday community member is important so they can understand and have visibility into the issues that impact their communities directly.

“We create spaces for our community members to learn about what is environmental justice. What is climate justice? When in history has there been Indigenous resistance? And how can we make that history relevant to our people? We say educate to liberate. That's been a mantra of ours throughout the years because those of us that have been in this from the beginning understand that it's important to have a political educational foundation in order to really understand what this work means.”

“With Covid, we were able to draw a narrative around how [the pandemic] is directly intersectional with the climate crisis. And it's the same kind of inequitable underpinnings that made people more vulnerable to Covid that make our communities more vulnerable to climate change events, so we're able to really weave that in and drive folks to the polls and vote.”

Short-term Wins for Longer-term Fights

Grant partners find value in really being strategic about the battles they take on. It's important for sustaining community engagement to have a combination of strategies that address things in the short term and long term. Grant partners focus on relationship building at all levels: in our communities, in political spaces, and in EJ/CJ movement spaces. And there is a focus on leveraging local models/wins for state and national solutions.

“Winning is important because it's really defeating for our community when we pick fights that are like long and protracted struggles. We need the wins for momentum. There are some things that have taken 12 years and there are some fights we have won in a year. So we do a combination of figuring out what are the long arches of struggle that we're gonna have. And what are the short fights we can piggyback on and win it.”

“If you organize the people most effectively, inform them, and support them, they can help identify the strategies and the conditions for moving forward. A basic strategy is community organizing. A second strategy is developing

policy based on grassroots knowledge. A third strategy is how we communicate and disseminate that information. And then a fourth strategy is national movement building.”

“Strategic decision making is, what are we looking for, and where are there openings for forward momentum. But, on the other hand, it is equally important, since we are working with communities in different regions of the world, to have deep, long-term listening circles on a regular basis to hear exactly what's happening in communities, what their assessments are, and what are they doing. What are their needs?”

Accelerators and Barriers

Conversely, we also asked grant partners what were the most significant barriers to advancing their vision/missions. Here are the themes from their responses:

Sustaining the Talent Pipeline

Many organizational leaders say hiring and sustaining staff talent is a significant challenge for their organizations. Emergent organizations already have lean staff capacity where they have two to three people doing multiple jobs. Once they find individuals to hire and invest in them, those individuals are often lured away from the organization by funders or larger environmental organizations that can offer more attractive salaries and benefits. In addition to retaining staff, people management was also a challenge named. Most of the leaders we spoke with had very little formal management training and were learning on the fly how to build culture, support staff development, and build accountability systems. Leaders also want to build organizations that place a value on the health and wellness of their staff and volunteers, understanding that CJ/EJ work can be high on emotional labor.

“It’s hard staffing, because especially now that EJ is a more attractive and exciting field. A lot of the top talent is being absorbed by white organizations that all of a sudden need black and brown faces. And it feels unfair. I can’t even compete when organizations are often double the salaries we can offer. And I understand it’s hard to tell somebody who has a family you should stay here for our community when I know they have their family. And especially our folks, they come from generational poverty. That kind of salary can have a substantial life impact. And it’s a big tension for retaining talented staff.”

“If you really wanted to develop your staff, or if you want to recruit a staff that has any expertise, young people want to be paid a commercial rate. And if they’re not, they simply don’t go to the nonprofit sector. And so you also find that you become a training ground with people coming and staying one or two years, having gotten a lot of visibility and experience. And then being able to leave and earn much more than we were paying. We’ve had years of that kind of attrition. Money allows you to hire people with skills and bring on less experienced people you can develop, hire consultants for strong strategic plans or strong comms plans, and it allows you to retain staff.”



Photo: Maui Medic Healers Hui

Accelerators and Barriers

Questioning Experience and Expertise

Grant partners who are women of color leaders say they are consistently having their expertise and experience questioned — even losing funding or not getting funding because of it. And while there seemed to be an uptick in funding for BIPOC-led organizations during the pandemic and post-racial uprising, they feel like those commitments have not fully resulted in increased funding and are starting to dwindle. BIWOC leaders also articulated that they're asked to step into leadership roles because of their expertise and lived experience but are often not compensated for that expertise or volunteer labor.

"As WOC it doesn't matter what credentials I have, my knowledge is always questioned in every space."

"There's not people that look like me that are in the water work or in the environmental work. And so there's always going to be those challenges of being taken seriously or looking at the work that we do from a more serious perspective. And I think that's going to be a barrier for a lot of women of color who are in leadership positions. Also, a lot of our tribal governments don't have women's representation at all. And so having to navigate the ways in which we're working with tribal governments is also/can be challenging at times."

"I've had funders not listen to me speaking, and someone else repeats the same thing I said like I didn't say it. People want to take advantage of or use me for my emotional intelligence. I'm often being called into leadership in moments of crisis with no support."

"I get a lot of lip service for my leadership, but it doesn't translate to the same dollars my peers are getting, whether that be white women or men of color. I get the underlying sense that funders think our wins are a fluke. After we won the EJ Law, there were a lot of foundations who came to get us on their portfolio so that they could claim a piece of that. It's never the full investment."

Oppositional State Governments

At the state level, grant partners are constantly in a defensive position with policymakers, especially in states that are pro-industry and influenced heavily by industry lobbyists. In states where there are climate deniers in state and local government, the battle to protect communities from the impacts of climate change is even more entrenched. Grant partners have been working on several different strategies to build community presence and voice in policy spaces from local port authority boards to state legislature. Strategies have included mobilizing get-out-the-vote efforts, getting on the agendas and turning out big numbers for hearings and public testimony, and supporting progressives and climate justice leaders for public office.

"If we're going to win the fight against climate change, we have to be able to influence political leaders. Our biggest challenge is lobbyists from oil & gas, and other environmentally harmful groups. We need to get in front of them by creating our own PACs, and 501(c)(4)s, and doing more education targeting politicians and local leadership. We also need to cultivate more young people for public office."

Recommendations for Philanthropy

Below is a list of recommendations on how philanthropy can better support the work of proximate leadership in the climate and environmental justice space. These recommendations tie back to the themes from the landscape discovery and conversations we had with funders supporting frontline CJ/EJ organizations, often led by Black, Indigenous, and/or women of color. WE LEAD will put forward these recommendations and priorities to an advisory body of community leaders to inform our approach and strategy. Funders should read through this list and consider which of these practices you are currently using and what shifts you might make to deepen the investment in the important work led by women of color and their allies on the frontlines of climate and environmental justice work.

“Community is especially good at knowing when they’re going to get screwed. How can we make sure the people moving money are listening to those warning sounds as people are trying to get community organizations in the deployment fight. We have an opportunity here if we do things well to knit national funders, regrants, local funders, knit them together in a way that hasn’t been there in the past.” — Global funder

1. Think Expansively About Measuring Impact

In speaking with funders who are investing in community-based EJ/CJ organizations, we surfaced some themes related to how funders are thinking differently about impact. Traditional ways of quantifying impact have limitations on the expansive ways that CJ/EJ organizations are having impact on the ground and at all levels of systems change. Funders can support grant partners to develop the capacity to illustrate the impacts of community organizing, shifts in public opinion, and mobilization. If funders used these metrics, it would set EJ/CJ grant partners up for success.

Funder Considerations

In evaluating grant partners, look at shifts in influence: Are grant partners at decision-making tables and on the agenda? Are policymakers using their talking points? Is local media using their talking points/narrative?

Consider impact over the long haul — short- and near-term PLUS long-term gains: Are grant partners able to get policy discussions moving? Are they getting policy implemented and then following up to ensure implementation and enforcement?

Turn evaluation inward: How can we support the movement? How do our practices hinder or help? What are doing to remove barriers for grant partners?



Photo: Grassroots Collaborative

Recommendations for Philanthropy

2. Invest in Leadership and Infrastructure

EJ/CJ organizations in general, and leaders from communities of color in particular, continue to feel the burden of the nonprofit starvation cycle when it comes to investing in their leadership and the build-out of their organizations. While programmatic work might be funded, the basic capacity needed to grow and sustain their organizations is often not resourced. The need to fortify and strengthen organizations is of particular concern for organizations fighting climate and environmental injustice because they are defending their communities against heavily resourced polluters, industries, and lobbying machines in yearslong battles. In addition to program and project grants, we encourage funders to think about offering additional set-aside investment for staffing, legal and communications support, healing, wellness, personal and digital security, and skills development.

“We need to offer general support when and wherever we can and deeply understand the groups on the ground know what they need. And the more we relieve them of the busy work and let them do the work and support them and ask useful questions, connect them with other groups doing similar things that they can learn from. Resource gap is the biggest problem with BIPOC movement groups. CJ organizations need an infusion of resources to match their strategy skill set.” — Intermediary funder

Funder Considerations

Consider providing infrastructure or organizational effectiveness grants that can be used for non-program expenses that are rarely funded.

Pay for leaders to participate in leadership development programming and training for skill development and managerial learning.

Underwrite the cost of coaches, retreats, and sabbaticals to sustain leadership.

In order for grant partners to have impact they must be sustainably supported, which means measures of success should include grant partner’s ability to pay salaries and benefits, and hire and retain the folks they need for more capacity.



Photo: Go Austin Vamos Austin

Recommendations for Philanthropy

3. Provide Open Space for Peer-to-Peer Learning and Support

Proximate leaders who are building power find a lot of value in getting to learn with and from their peers in the sector. They find spaces where they can just “be” in relationship with each other, sharing more organically their experiences, lessons, resources, and strategies to be effective.

Fund the space for under-resourced leaders to come together to learn with and from each other. Make it as easy as possible for them to participate by paying for travel and accommodations and coupling opportunities to larger sector events that leaders are already attending. Provide facilitators who are skilled at holding space, but leave the agenda open so participants can design what is most useful given the moment and climate in the sector.

Funder Considerations

Be a network weaver for grant partners: Make connections for grant partners who you think might be good collaborators and then fund the collaborative work or projects.

Connect more tenured leaders with emergent leaders in the climate justice space so they can learn from each other and don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Create spaces for learning that are accessible with flexible, spacious agendas designed by participants.



Photo: The Semilla Project

Recommendations for Philanthropy

4. Share the Technical Expertise

Legal, science, and communications were all areas of expertise that many grant partners have a high need for, but they can't afford to bring in that expertise through full-time employees or even as contractors for sustained work. Funders are often gatekeepers to individuals and organizations that have valuable communications, legal, and scientific expertise. Create opportunities for grant partners to take advantage of expert knowledge they can use to develop their strategies for campaigns, advocacy, and public education. For example, one woman of color leader we spoke to gave the example of a funder hosting a presentation by an economist who was forecasting future pollution/polluter threats. The grant partner was able to use the data from that presentation to plan a defensive campaign strategy. They noted that if not for that funder opening up the session to nonprofits, she would have never had access to the information shared in that presentation.

Funder Considerations

Host teach-ins for grant partners/nonprofits where you pay for the expertise, whether that's another grant partner sharing their process or learning from a technical expert.

Underwrite the cost of legal, scientific, and communication strategists for your grant partners on time-bound campaigns, and legal and non-legal advocacy efforts.

Share case studies and reports from grant partners (with permission) that other nonprofit organizations might learn from.



Photo: Inclusive Louisiana

Recommendations for Philanthropy

5. Center Proximate Leadership, Including BIWOC-led and Local Efforts

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, communities of color and low-income communities are on the frontlines of climate change and disproportionately bear the brunt of rising temperatures, floods, and air pollution. Despite these facts, organizations on the ground are severely under-resourced and yet continue to lead on the frontlines of fighting climate change and polluters. Local wins translate to state and federal wins, but the win is only half the battle: Frontline organizations are also the ones leading on accountability, ensuring that policy and regulation wins are actually implemented. While the Big Greens may be providing the science, data, and legal expertise, it is the leaders on the ground running campaigns, organizing communities, and pushing agencies, departments, and lawmakers to make good on their promises. Organizations and leadership based in impacted communities have a deep understanding of local needs and community-driven solutions to eminent environmental and climate threats and impacts.

Funder Considerations

Invest in the full arc of the local climate and environmental justice campaign, from public education to advocacy to implementation.

Make sure that funding is flexible to allow for the unpredictable nature of advocacy campaigns, e.g., a sudden need for legal support or science experts.



Photo: The Smile Trust

Recommendations for Philanthropy

6. Invest in Sustainable Leadership and Pipeline

One of the areas grant partners say they struggled with the most is being able to hire and sustain staffing for their organizations. Leadership in CJ/EJ organizations describe significant levels of burnout and the inability to take breaks or rest because they don't have enough staff nor the capacity for others to step in and take on some of the workload. Being able to pay staff a living wage and benefits is both paramount to attracting talent into organizations but also critical for the growth and sustainability of the institutions. Emergent leaders might be willing to be paid less initially, but once they're invested in and developed, they are often recruited by higher-paying opportunities in larger organizations or foundations.

"In order to build power you need to be able to have someone or a collection of individuals who can bring different kinds of people from different organizations with different views together in a room to want to work together. And that requires a special kind of leader. Someone who is respected by stakeholders willing to do the personal relationship building to keep people invested, someone who can resolve tension, conflict and anger enabling a common agenda forward. What is needed is the capacity and time to do the power building, and having these dynamic leaders get paid what they should be getting paid." — Native funder

Funder Considerations

Don't make any grants smaller than an average FTE salary and benefits so that organizations can hire and retain talent.

Fund sabbaticals, retreats, and other opportunities for leaders to step away for rest, reflection, and regeneration.

Provide organizational development support to help organizations think strategically about their growth and sustainability, including support on succession planning and organizational design.

Make introductions to other funders supporting climate change and environmental justice work.



Photo: Rise St. James

Conclusion

At the onset of the landscape analysis, the WE LEAD team committed to taking what we learned from our interviews and surveys to inform how the WE LEAD strategy might evolve to best support leaders on the frontlines of climate and environmental justice. As the next actionable step, we are planning to center the voices and experiences of leaders from communities most impacted by environmental injustice and form an advisory body that will give input on a renewed strategic grantmaking framework and approach for 2024–2026.

Post pandemic and racial uprising, nonprofits have seen philanthropy retreat from their initial commitments to invest more deeply in historically underfunded communities and organizations. We believe that retreating at this time, when people of color communities are ground zero for pollution and environmental degradation, would have devastating impacts — not just for climate change but also for the health, safety, and well-being of all communities and for generations to come.

Our hope is that the insights offered through this landscape analysis and the wisdom of WE LEAD grant partners will spark ideas and actions for how funders can show up for women leaders of color and communities of color who are building a more equitable future. These leaders deserve and need sustained investment and meaningful partnership to continue their successful efforts to take down polluters and transform the systems and institutions that prevent a healthy climate and environment from becoming a reality.

Join Us

For funders who are interested in building out this work with us or have questions about this landscape report, we invite you to be in touch: welead@tides.org

Learn more about WE LEAD at tides.org/we-lead



Photo: People Over Plastics

Photo: Go Austin Vamos Austin

Appendix

Aligned grantmaking organizations who provided feedback for this report:

Equation Campaign	MacArthur Foundation	Park Foundation
Hershey Foundation	Meyer Memorial Trust	Rockefeller Family Fund
HIVE Fund for Climate and Gender Justice	Mosaic	Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples
Kataly Foundation	Nathan Cummings	The Climate and Energy Funders Group
Libra Foundation	National Resources Defence Council	

The WE LEAD team would like to thank all of the grant partners who took part in this landscape analysis and gave their wise counsel for us to share with the field.

We are also grateful to our Independent Advisory Committee members who review grant proposals and make funding recommendations to Tides aligning with our mission, charitable purpose, and goals of the organization. Current IAC members are: Kimberly Middleton, Michelle Mitchell, Peter Martin, and Shauné Zunzanyika.

WE LEAD Approved Grants 2020–2023

ALABAMA

[The Center for Rural Enterprise and Environmental Justice](#)

ALASKA

[Native Movement](#)

[Native Peoples Action Community Fund](#)

ARIZONA

[Black Lives Matter Phoenix Metro](#)

[Dine Citizens Against Ruining Our Environment](#)

[International Indian Treaty Council](#)

[Mi Familia Vota Education Fund](#)

[Native Renewables](#)

CALIFORNIA

[Asian Pacific Environmental Network](#)

[East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice](#)

[Environmental Health Coalition](#)

[HEAL Food Alliance](#)

[Indigenous Climate Action](#)

[National Black Food and Justice Alliance](#)

[People’s Climate Innovation Center](#)

[People Over Plastics](#)

[Womens Earth and Climate Action Network](#)

[Youth on Root](#)

[Youth Vs Apocalypse](#)

[Yurok Tribe](#)

COLORADO

[Colorado People’s Alliance](#)

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

[Faith in Action Network](#)

[Green Leadership Trust](#)

FLORIDA

[Anthropocene Alliance](#)

[Farmworker Association of Florida](#)

[Florida Immigrant Coalition](#)

[Miami Climate Alliance](#)

[The Smile Trust](#)

WE LEAD Grantees 2020-2023

GEORGIA

[CASA, Inc.](#)

[Democracy Lab South](#)

[Georgia Conservation Voters Education Fund](#)

[Georgia WAND Education Fund](#)

[The Black Table Fund](#)

GUAM

[Micronesia Climate Change Alliance](#)

HAWAII

[Hawaii Alliance for Progressive Action](#)

[Hawaii Peace and Justice](#)

[Ka Ehu](#)

[Ka Lāhui Hawaii](#)

[Ko'ihonua](#)

[Maui Medic Healers Hui](#)

[Sustainable Molokai](#)

ILLINOIS

[Grassroots Collaborative](#)

[Macedonia Development Corporation NFP](#)

[People for Community Recovery](#)

LOUISIANA

[Another Gulf Is Possible Collaborative](#)

[Bunny Friend Neighborhood Association](#)

[Deep South Center for Environmental Justice](#)

[Imagine Water Works](#)

[Inclusive Louisiana](#)

[National Black Environmental Justice Network](#)

[RISE St. James](#)

[Rural Roots Louisiana](#)

[Water Collaborative of Greater New Orleans](#)

MARYLAND

[NAACP Empowerment Programs Inc](#)

[The Chisholm Legacy Project](#)

MASSACHUSETTS

[Divest Invest Protect](#)

MICHIGAN

[Michigan Environmental Justice Coalition](#)

MINNESOTA

[Honor the Earth](#)

[TakeAction Minnesota Education Fund](#)

MISSISSIPPI

[Education, Economics, Environmental, Climate & Health Organization EEECHO](#)

MONTANA

[Western Mining Action Network](#)

NEVADA

[Make It Work Nevada](#)
[Make the Road States Inc.](#)

NEW JERSEY

[Ironbound Community Corporation](#)

[New Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance](#)

NEW MEXICO

[Earth Care International/YUCCA](#)

[NAVA Education Project](#)

[New Mexico Environmental Law Center](#)

[Nihi Ké' Baa'](#)

[NM Comunidades En Acción Y De Fe](#)

[Pueblo Action Alliance](#)

[San Juan Collaborative for Health Equity](#)

[Tewa Women United](#)

[The Semilla Project](#)

NEW YORK

[Align the Alliance for A Greater NY](#)

[Black Farmer Fund Inc](#)

[The New School Tishman Environment and Design Center - EJ Movement Fellowship](#)

[UPROSE](#)

[West Harlem Environmental Action](#)

NORTH CAROLINA

[Southern Coalition for Social Justice](#)

[We Are Down Home](#)

OHIO

[Black Women Rising](#)

[Environmental Health Watch](#)

OREGON

[Indigenous People's Power Project](#)

WE LEAD Grantees 2020-2023

PENNSYLVANIA

[Grounded Strategies](#)

[Make the Road States Inc](#)

[New Voices for Reproductive Justice](#)

[Philly Thrive](#)

[UrbanKind Institute](#)

PUERTO RICO

[Departamento De La Comida De Puerto Rico](#)

RHODE ISLAND

[Racial and Environmental Justice Committee of Providence](#)

SOUTH DAKOTA

[Brave Heart Society](#)

[Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation](#)

TENNESSEE

[Highlander Research & Education Center](#)

TEXAS

[Achieving Community Task Successfully](#)

[Air Alliance Houston](#)

[Bayou City Waterkeeper](#)

[Centro Por La Justicia](#)

[Coalition for Environment, Equity and Resilience](#)

[Downwinders at Risk Education Fund](#)

[Fenceline Watch](#)

[For the Greater Good](#)

[Go Austin Vamos Austin](#)

[Jolt Initiative](#)

[LINK Houston](#)

[MOVE Texas Civic Fund](#)

[Public Citizen Foundation](#)

[PODER \(People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources\)](#)

[Rio Grande International Study Center](#)

[South Texas Environmental Justice Network](#)

[Southern Sector Rising](#)

[Texas Freedom Network Education Fund](#)

[West Street Recovery](#)

WASHINGTON

[Native Organizers Alliance](#)

WEST VIRGINIA

[West Virginia Rivers Coalition](#)



Photo: The Semilla Project

Back cover photos: Native Movement, People Over Plastics, Native Renewables



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WE LEAD Fund