Inside Philanthropy

Who's Funding What, and Why

The Foundations That Work on Environmental Health, with an Eye on Building Power

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OIL RIGS STILL OPERATE NEAR SOME OF LA'S POOREST NEIGHBORHOODS. SERGEY NOVIKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK

Scary stats on the effects of environmental problems on human health can be hard to stomach. In a 2019 U.N. report, an international team of scientists called for "urgent" environmental action to slow the rates of related illness and death. One disturbing finding was that freshwater pollution tied to antimicrobial resistance will be the top cause of death by 2050. But, according to Kathy Sessions, executive director of the Health and Environmental Funders Network (HEFN), "there isn't any environmental health or justice problem—even climate change—that is too big or too tough to tackle." She says the key is "building the power to make getting better health and equity outcomes our priority." She and HEFN think a big part of environmental health and justice work is centering the voices of the people most impacted by environmental hazards, who are often people of color and/or those with less money.

A Key Nexus

The intersection between environmental health and justice is well-documented. As an HEFN policy brief points out, pollution sources like highways, industrial sites, waste facilities and refineries are often found in areas "with less economic clout or political voice," like minority or low-income neighborhoods. Flint and Standing Rock are high-profile examples of equity

issues intersecting with land rights and access to safe drinking water.

One 2015 study found the cumulative effect of exposure to environmental hazards in California was 75 percent higher for Latinos and 67 percent higher for blacks than for whites. Research in 2019 showed air pollution in the U.S. is mainly caused by white Americans' consumption of goods and services, but is disproportionately inhaled by black and Latino Americans.

Environmental health and justice funding generally focuses on understanding how people are exposed to environmental hazards and then coming up with ways to address these threats in an equitable way. According to HEFN, philanthropy has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in environmental health in the past decade. But such funding, especially for grassroots environmental justice groups, makes up just a sliver of all environmental giving, much of which goes to big, established nonprofits that, like green funders themselves, are still mostly staffed by white people.

HEFN aims to mobilize philanthropy around environmental health and justice; it works in partnership with Virginia Organizing. Members have access to training, research, collaborative opportunities and a grants database HEFN runs with the Environmental Grantmakers Association (EGA). HEFN has more than 60 members. Some of the bigger players in environmental health within its ranks include the Kresge Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Heinz Endowments, JPB Foundation, California Endowment, Wallace Foundation, John

Merck Fund, and the 11th Hour Project at the Schmidt Family Foundation.

These kinds of funders work under many umbrellas, including public health and education, human rights and equity, tech and chemistry safety, economic stability, climate change preparedness and resilience, and air and water quality policy. A 2016 article Sessions co-authored, "Foundations Invest in Environmental Health," is a helpful resource on these topics.

Environmental Health Funding in Action

Gathering data to empower people is a big part of environmental health movement-building. For example, the California Endowment backed an app that lets people send in community-specific input on fresh food access, public safety, and transit to local officials. The Heinz Endowments invested in "Breathe Cams," which give real-time data on Pittsburgh's air pollution, with findings now used by advocates, regulatory agencies and policymakers.

Funders also help neighborhoods directly address health threats. For example, the Kresge Foundation supported lead and mold removal in low-income housing in Detroit by backing home cleanups, research and advocacy. Other philanthropies direct their environmental health giving to one industry—like the Groundswell Fund's work to train nail salon workers on occupational exposures to toxins.

Safer environments and meaningful policy change are obvious goals, and successful local programs

Foundation helped university researchers, community groups and the California Air Resources Board explore how siting, zoning and policy in Los Angeles were tied to environmental hazards and health disparities. The project developed an Environmental Justice Screening Method that synthesizes data from any neighborhood on hazard proximity, land use, air pollution exposure and "social and health vulnerability." Building on this development, California created a similar CalEnviroScreen, and the state now directs 25 percent of its cap-and-trade program revenues to the communities identified as the most disadvantaged.

Environmental health issues appear in nearly all aspects of our lives. Funding in these areas can also relate to farming practices, indoor and outdoor pesticide use, exposure to hazards like lead paint in utero and in childhood, and much more.

Sessions calls on grantmakers in this field to take chances. In her 2016 article, she and her co-authors wrote that while the government is primarily responsible for environmental regulation, philanthropy "can afford to take risks and support experimentation on ways to make health and equity more central in decisions that shape the places where people live, work and play," taking up the oft-heard call for philanthropy to be society's "passing gear."

Increasing Diversity in the Environmental Health Movement

Sessions helped found HEFN 20 years ago and is now preparing to move on. She tells us one of her proudest moments was the 2016 passage of the Frank R

which updated the nation's chemicals management law and was heavily supported by HEFN members. While this was a major policy advancement, she says the movement-building it supported is possibly even more important. She says, "even where policy falls short, as it inevitably does, we are always building power for the next fight… we had brigades of parents and babies, breast cancer survivors and farmworkers going up to the hill to ask legislators for safer products and processes." She feels this advocacy created a "ripple effect," mobilized consumers, and expanded the cohort of business, health, academic and labor allies.

Sessions sees uplifting grassroots groups and exploring diverse partnerships as key to the success of environmental health and justice funding. She recognizes that, "Philanthropy is a sector built on wealth; it's doesn't necessarily have a healthy relationship with marginalized communities." But she has some advice for funders testing these waters. First, she suggests organizations do their own work to understand "what power religion, racism and sexism have played and continue to play in shaping" them. She says HEFN has been engaged in work to promote internal equity and to support philanthropy in doing so.

Sessions encourages funders to explore why addressing inequity is important to them. Along with the moral imperative, she says the justice element of environmental health funding will make sense to different philanthropies for different reasons. Working with and uplifting under-resourced communities can be a way to prevent disease, protect civil rights, build

And Sessions says that within this work, philanthropies should focus on communities' strengths and successes, not just their vulnerabilities. Even when groups are deeply disadvantaged, she recommends including a contextual background in order to expose and counter any hidden biases that accompany these descriptions.

She advises funders to embrace challenges in working with local, grassroots and diverse groups. She says "there are so many allies, coaches and champions" (like HEFN) who can help philanthropies build these partnerships. For funding professionals who have a hard time selling this kind of work to their colleagues or superiors, HEFN points to the Justice Funders Harmony Initiative as a useful program. HEFN previously commissioned the initiative to teach grantmakers how to make a case for giving that advances equity and grassroots organizing.

At IP, we've often noted the powerful role intermediaries play in environmental funding as conduits between philanthropies and those corners of the movement that need more support. A few examples are Rachel's Network, the Climate Justice Alliance, Environmental Defenders Fund and Climate Justice Resilience Fund. Another is the Global Greengrants Fund—one of the organizations embracing participatory grantmaking—which empowers impacted communities in funding decisions.

"The big message is, it's normal to run into obstacles, but funders can really build their own skills in navigating these challenges," Sessions says. She calls on philanthropies to work together, abandon

And Sessions encourages all environmental funders to look beyond mainstream green groups, as a necessity. She says if they do, “The rising American majority really could be the distributed power grid of the environmental movement.”

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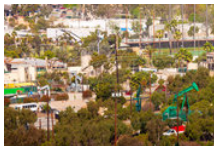

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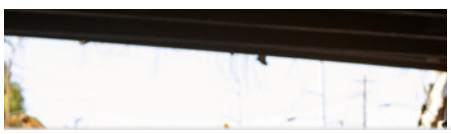

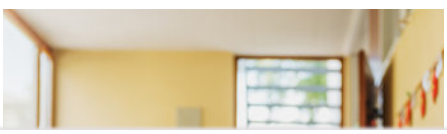

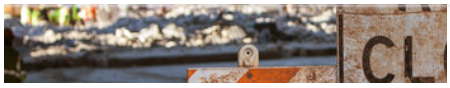

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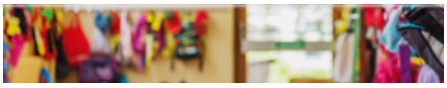

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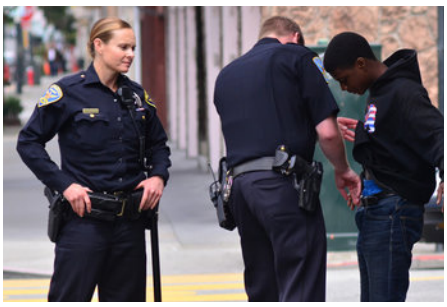

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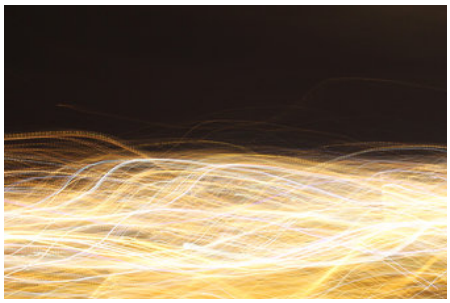

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