

# 10 KEEP HUMANITY'S FUTURE IN SIGHT AND INTEGRATE THE POLYCRISIS LENS



Experts now agree that the planet has entered an era of ongoing 'polycrisis', in which society faces multiple, interconnected global threats, including the climate crisis and mass biodiversity extinction, geopolitical instability and nuclear threat, risks of unchecked technological advancements, such as AI and biotechnologies, and ongoing pandemic concerns. Rooted in unsustainable and unequal economic and governance models, this polycrisis represents nothing less than an existential threat to humanity, and life on the planet more broadly. There is a serious risk that if philanthropic organisations do not take these issues into consideration, the sector will find itself unprepared and increasingly unable to deliver on its mission as global contexts rapidly shift.

This principle, more than requiring foundations to change their thematic focuses or missions, calls on them to acknowledge this fundamentally new situation for humankind, understand how such existential threats already manifest and might further manifest in the future, and learn from and help themselves, their grantees and partners. Funders should reflect on the unintended and intended impacts of their work, navigate such threats and megatrends, and adapt to their specific contexts. Above all, when thinking about the future of humanity and the next generations, philanthropic organisations should envision the kind of society our decisions and actions contribute towards building. Adopting the global polycrisis into organisational thinking and acknowledging this fundamentally new situation for humankind will first and foremost fuel the urgency to act across the other nine transformation principles in order to leverage all our strengths and assets to make a greater difference.

Integrating a polycrisis lens does not necessarily mean changing the mission of an organisation. It may translate as shifting programming or the creation of new tools to address big issues such as the climate crisis, risks of tech-led societies, or the need to reinvent the unequal and extractive economic systems that underpin the polycrisis. These long-term existential issues often lack funding and attention despite their massive current and future impacts on each and every one of us. Investing more resources into grand challenges is therefore a much-needed and relevant approach which can be implemented at various levels of your organisation. For example, your organisation could provide systemic support with policy influence, supporting think tanks or applying public pressure. More immediate effects may be achieved by supporting local



CSOs, experimenting with new regenerative and inclusive economic models, or integrating climate mitigation and adaptation strategies.

A group of funders, including the Ford Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, KR Foundation, Laudes Foundation, Marisla Foundation, Oak Foundation, MAVA Foundation, Omidyar Network and the Swiss Philanthropy Foundation, joined forces in 2018 to create the Partners For A New Economy, a consortium which rethinks our global economic architecture and builds regenerative economic models that put people and planet at the centre. On the climate crisis, foundations of all types can start by signing the International Philanthropy Commitment on Climate Change, or one of the existing national commitments, and begin integrating climate-focused activities across their work. The Alliance of Socio-Environmental Funds of the Global South brings together independent and activist socio-environmental funds from nine Global South countries and regions to act on defining a locally grounded grantmaking strategy that responds to local priorities, and disbursing resources without a legal entity operating in the country.<sup>26</sup> The Alliance of Socio-Environmental Funds addresses the polycrisis by integrating an approach that centres around climate change, biodiversity and people's rights.

Another example of traversal integration of existential risk includes foundations helping their teams and partners invest in their own tech infrastructure and awareness. This allows them to leverage new opportunities brought by tech, such as better informed decision-making through data or online fundraising, while simultaneously being better prepared to navigate and anticipate disruptions such as mass job automation, misinformation or privacy risks.

Real opportunity exists here for philanthropic funders, as they can leverage their relationships with grantees, local partners, and wider stakeholders to become a vital conduit for bringing the experience, knowledge and insights of the communities that bear first witness to the impact of the emergent polycrisis. For foundations, embracing the reality of the polycrisis as part of their work will also involve mobilising stakeholders from other sectors – including academia,

the private sector, civil society, and government – to develop a shared understanding of the challenges and explore the co-creation of solutions that may require experimentation and risk (see Principle 2). Philanthropy networks and support organisations also have a key role to play in mutualising the field's efforts to embrace and navigate such complex topics, and help foundations make sense of them so they can take meaningful action at their own level.

Some funders may have justifiable concerns about the risks of integrating the polycrisis lens, especially hierarchising causes and elevating some over others. Applying this principle should not lead us to consider new existential risks, such as the climate crisis, as more important than legacy issues such as inequality and poverty. As we engage in reflection and action on long-term challenges and existential risks, we must keep in mind that they are founded and intrinsically connected with a set of underlying concerns. Therefore this principle is best applied when it integrates immediate issues with long-term risks. For example, a foundation with a vision of eradicating poverty and malnutrition may be supporting the development of sustainable local food systems that adapt to and mitigate the effects of the climate crisis, while simultaneously generating revenue and limiting rural exodus and mass migration.

Foundations also have concerns about the risks of imposing their priorities or preferences on the communities and partners they support, who may not share their focus or view other issues impacting their lives as more pressing and urgent. Further to this, certain interventions that require shifting away from established practices, cultural norms or sources of livelihood could be unwelcome for local communities.

To avoid bottom-down approaches and incorporate the expertise that communities bring, foundations must work closely and explore values and agency with their local partners from the start. For instance, a number of traditional and indigenous societies are living examples of more harmonious relationships with their surrounding environments. By trusting local knowledge, Fondation de France has supported grassroots communities in Haiti, the Philippines and Nepal in rebuilding rural houses and community buildings after disasters, using local materials and know-how. These properties are fully resistant to

26 [Alliance of Socio-Environmental Funds of the Global South.](#)



future disasters, were constructed with respect for local culture and usage, and are environmentally friendly. Beyond this, they were more affordable and more rapidly built than a number of temporary shelters imported by international aid actors<sup>27</sup>. Embracing the polycrisis lens in philanthropic work requires internal reflection on how issues like the climate crisis, inequality and global instability intersect, and where philanthropic support and intervention can result in the most tangible benefit for local communities. Additionally, we must note that integrated and holistic societal models that address – and in some cases prevent – the polycrisis are often to be found at the grassroots level, within communities. This is especially true when rethinking economic models or growing philanthropic societies (see Principle 5) because traditional practices of reciprocity, exchange and mutual aid can be sources of inspiration for broader society.

The polycrisis can be seen as the result of a loss in humanity's wisdom. Rooted in an extractive relationship towards nature and each other, the polycrisis feeds on exacerbated individualism and an insatiable quest for power. Integrating and addressing the global polycrisis into our work is not only consistent with exercising of community agency, but can actually only be achieved by learning how to listen to the wisdom that crossed millennia to reach us: how to live in greater harmony and respect for our environment, while sharing instead of accumulating, and giving instead of extracting.

## Recommended practices for implementation:

How to get started:

- ✓ Engage in horizon scanning to understand your organisation's existing knowledge and experience of big issues, assess how the polycrisis will impact your work and the work of your grantees/partners.
- ✓ Identify specific transversal trends and challenges that align with or may compromise your mission, values, realities and community.
  - Define what challenges may be long-term threats to the very mission you are working towards and consider where you can make the biggest impact.
- ✓ Engage with experts such as indigenous communities and those with lived experience, to help your organisation and those you serve think through these big issues and how they may impact your mission and plans.
  - Where possible, make these expert resources available to your partners.
- ✓ Inform, educate, and prepare your internal stakeholders – staff, volunteers, Boards, and others – about these concerns and the implications to your work.
  - Engage them in discussion and debate on how to integrate the polycrisis.
- ✓ Involve diverse stakeholders, including communities, grantees, partners, policymakers and other funders to understand how they may be working with and/or experiencing these issues, their needs, perspectives, and potential mitigations.
- ✓ Institutionalise results by reflecting the change internally in practice.

<sup>27</sup> Fondation de France (2012). [Les enjeux de la reconstruction des bâtiments](#).



- ✓ Embed principles such as foresight, sustainability, environmental stewardship, diversity, equity and inclusion into your operations and culture (see Principle 6).
- ✓ Join networks that can provide spaces and opportunities to learn from the collective work on combatting the polycrisis.

To go beyond:

- ✓ Define a theory of change and long-term vision/strategy for addressing the polycrisis through your work.
- ✓ Invest in organisational development, both internally and with your grantees/partners, around expertise, leadership training, organisational development, and strategic planning to tackle the polycrisis.
- ✓ Broaden your engagement and collaboration – build coalitions and networks with other actors who share your vision and goals.
- ✓ Leverage your resources beyond grants, such as advocacy, convening, organisational development, and research.
  - Support grassroots movements, advocacy and awareness, campaigning, and even litigation where relevant.
- ✓ Create new programming and/or investments in areas previously not considered by your organisation or historically underfunded (like securitisation) practices that restrict civic space and local/global democratic checks and balances.
- ✓ Leverage policy and advocacy to drive systemic change, including promoting policy reforms, public education, and lobbying for legislative changes.
- ✓ Seek out, respect, and elevate local solutions to polycrisis issues, such as the climate crisis.
  - Engage with communities, build partnerships with local organisations, and provide funding/resources that are aligned with local needs and priorities.
  - Sign the International Philanthropy Commitment on Climate Change<sup>28</sup> and join the growing global movement #PhilanthropyForClimate.

28 [International Philanthropy Commitment on Climate Change.](#)



## Potential obstacles



## Suggested solutions



Most philanthropic funders lack a transversal, cross-sectional lens on societal issues such as gender inequality, racial equity, climate change, or systemic poverty. They may see these issues as the responsibility of organisations specifically working on those areas.



Internal stakeholders within your organisation, particularly governing bodies and Boards who like to see regular outputs and achievements, may view adopting big issues as potential mission drift for the foundation. Begin by horizon scanning how polycrisis issues directly affect your grantees and local partners, and build a case for including these challenges in your work by aligning your support programmes with local systemic concerns.



Resource challenges, particularly financial, lead to funders choosing tailored issues to focus on, rather than broadening their remits to tackling the polycrisis.



Funding is not the only type of support philanthropic foundations can offer their partners and local stakeholders. By adopting an intersectional approach and mapping out all of the non-financial assets your organisation possesses (see Principle 8), determine how you can support efforts to combat big issues that do not involve direct grants or donations. Seek out advice and guidance on these issues from organisations with larger platforms who are doing this effectively, and consider supporting their movement-building efforts.



The climate crisis is one of the most pressing global challenges of our time. However, only a tiny fraction of global philanthropic funding is dedicated to combating climate change effects, with some estimates as low as 2%. Most philanthropic funders already dedicated to other social issues do not feel they can divert resources at this stage.

Combatting climate change may seem daunting, particularly for the majority of foundations who are not experts in this area. However, there are often smaller steps that can be taken internally. For example, examining the environmental impacts of your programme portfolio and determining ways to cut back wasteful activities is a strong start (e.g. a food relief organisation switching delivery containers from single-use plastics to biodegradable or reusable materials). Organisations with investible assets or endowments should aim to better understand how their investments could be made more climate positive.



Foundations willing to take a step in climate action can sign the philanthropy commitments and join the global movement on #PhilanthropyforClimate.



# Resources

Alliance Magazine (2021). [Issue on Climate Philanthropy](#).

Alliance Magazine (2021). [A call to philanthropy: let's help build societies that are tech-enabled, not tech-led](#).

Alliance Magazine (2021). [Philanthropy Must Act on 'Code Red for Humanity'](#).

Ariadne Network and Candid (2022). [Centering equity and justice in climate philanthropy](#).

Association of Charitable Foundations (ACF) and The Environmental Funders Network (EFN) (2021). [Acting on the Climate Crisis – Why, How and the Role of Philanthropy: A resource pack for funders](#).

Catalyst 2030. [Local Solutions from the Global South](#).

Humanize Institute. [Cátedra UNESCO de Alfabetização em Futuros no Museu do Amanhã](#).

Center for High Impact Philanthropy, University of Pennsylvania. [Choosing Change: How to Assess Grant Proposals for Their Potential to Address Structural Inequality](#).

[The Centre for the Study of Existential Risk](#).

Children's Investment Fund Foundation. [One Acre Fund: Equipping Millions of Farmers to Sustainably End Extreme Poverty and Food Insecurity](#).

Civic Futures (2023). [What funders need to know about civic space in 2023](#).

CIVICUS (2023). [State of Civil Society Report 2023](#).

Climateworks Foundation (2021). [Funding trends 2021: Climate change mitigation philanthropy](#).

Connect Humanity (2022). [Funding to bridge the digital divide: U.S. philanthropic giving to digital equity causes](#).

Epic Africa (2020). [The Impact of COVID-19 on African Civil Society Organizations](#).

Fondation de France (2012). [Les enjeux de la reconstruction des bâtiments](#).

Funders Initiative for Civil Society & Global Greengrants Fund (2021). [Closing Civil Society Space: What Environmental Funders Need to Know](#).



Funders Initiative for Civil Society (2020). [Rethinking civic space in an age of intersectional crises: a briefing for funders.](#)

The Fourth Sector Group. [Rationale and Strategy.](#)

[The Future Society.](#)

[Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet.](#)

Latimpacto (2022). [Towards a Comprehensive Climate Action and Conservation Strategy: Recommendations and opportunities for Impact Capital.](#)

The Chronicle of Philanthropy (2021). [Philanthropy Needs to Prepare Itself for A World Powered by Artificial Intelligence.](#)

The Omega Network. [The Global Polycrisis: Cascading Crises.](#)

[Partners for a New Economy.](#)

Philea and WINGS (2022). [Implementation Guide- #PhilanthropyForClimate.](#)

Philea (2022). [Climate philanthropy networks: Shaping and supporting the philanthropy ecosystem in the field of climate.](#)

[Philanthropy for Climate.](#)

World Economic Forum (2023). [We're on the brink of polycrisis. How worried should we be?](#)