

 Pillar 2.
COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES

OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

Imagining climate just democracies

- **Country:** Global
- **Number of staff:** +1000
- **Year of incorporation:** 1984
- **Type:** Private foundation / Grantmaking network
- **Endowment:** Yes
- **More information:** opensocietyfoundations.org

Established in 1984, Open Society Foundations (OSF) is a strong global advocate for democracy. Its founder, George Soros, is a Hungarian Jew who survived the Nazi occupation and immigrated to the United States, where he became a successful investor. Influenced by Karl Popper's philosophy, Soros named the private foundation based on the conviction that "societies can only flourish when allowing democratic governance, freedom of expression, and respect for individual rights". This belief remains at the core of OSF's work.

Through its network of more than 20 national and regional foundations and 45 offices globally, OSF issues more than 2 500 grants annually to groups and individuals that promote justice and open democracies. The Foundation engages in human rights litigation, incubates new ideas, promotes advocacy campaigns and deploys impact investments in more than 120 countries. OSF is currently at an early stage of mainstreaming climate into its work. The climate agenda gained traction when on Earth Day 2020, OSF announced the launch of an emergency package to support urgent climate responses related to the Covid-19 pandemic¹.

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“The climate crisis poses an existential risk to all the communities and causes we support.”

– ALEXANDER SOROS, DEPUTY CHAIR OF OSF

¹ “On Earth Day, Open Society Foundations Announce Climate and COVID-19 Fund”, Open Society Foundations, 2020, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/newsroom/on-earth-day-open-society-foundations-announce-climate-and-covid-19-fund>

In recent reports, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recommended expanding the just transition to a more holistic and people-centred approach. Scientific evidence showed that, in the territories where the OSF operates, several of its programmatic goals could be jeopardised due to the impacts of climate change. Based on the understanding that it could no longer pursue its vision without integrating climate action into its work, OSF decided to adopt the IPCC recommendation as its mission².

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“If our goal is a more democratic society, it may be indispensable to reimagine governance in a new low-carbon global economy and forge large coalitions exacerbated by climate justice.”

– YAMIDE DAGNET, CLIMATE JUSTICE DIRECTOR OF OSF

Acknowledging climate risks, creating a climate programme

Participating in several philanthropic gatherings about climate and consulting with many organisations convinced OSF’s leadership of the need for bolder climate action. OSF then grappled with how best to integrate the issue, considering the holistic nature of climate change. The two main possibilities were to simply increase the funding for climate-related grants or to create a specific and strategic climate unit within the programmatic team.

OSF decided on the second model, following a larger restructure in 2021 that created four new global programmes – including one on climate justice. OSF felt that this approach would be more effective for embedding climate into its DNA and that it would have a greater impact. OSF’s Climate Justice Global Programme aims to bring more coherence to its work of supporting communities to thrive in a world transformed by climate impacts. OSF seeks to foster climate just transitions, looking beyond interventions that can contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions to a broader focus on building a resilient society with more equitable access to resources. An example of this is OSF’s decision to join other philanthropies in launching the COP26 Glasgow Loss and Damage Facility³. The vision is embedded in OSF’s roots in human rights and equity.

²“Climate Justice: The Ultimate Challenge of Our Age”, Open Society Foundations, 2022, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/climate-justice-the-ultimate-challenge-of-our-age>

³“Philanthropies offer kick-start funds for prospective Glasgow Loss & Damage Facility to support vulnerable countries suffering from climate change”, CIFF, 2021, <https://ciff.org/news/philanthropies-offer-kick-start-funds-for-prospective-glasgow-loss-damage-facility-to-support-vulnerable-countries-suffering-from-climate-change/>

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“The main challenge is to demonstrate the climate nexus with the reinvention of democracy.”

– YAMIDE DAGNET, CLIMATE JUSTICE DIRECTOR OF OSF

The Multilateral Partnership for Organizing, Worker Empowerment, and Rights (M-POWER)⁴ – a global initiative focused on elevating the role of trade unions and organised workers as essential to advancing democracy – is an example of this linkage between democracy and climate. This partnership, led by the United States Biden-Harris Administration, has partnered with several philanthropic organisations including OSF and the Response and Vision Fund, also created by OSF and other foundations, which addresses immediate crises and fosters greater structural transformation. In 2021, grants from the Response and Vision Fund addressed “the devastating economic impacts that workers and communities face across the Global South as a result of Covid-19. The investments focus on climate, gender, and debt justice. They aim to catalyse reforms that protect the rights of workers and communities while strengthening accountability mechanisms and addressing inequities in the financial system”.

OSF’s journey to integrate climate considerations into its different workstreams was inspired by its existing programmes’ evaluations of how the climate crisis would impact specific goals. Galvanising intersectionality in its advocacy for positive change programmes and working with governments are two areas in which climate justice has been more prevalent. The Soros Economic Development Fund (SEDF)⁵ – the social impact investment arm of the Open Society Foundation – is also striving to align its investments with climate justice goals by making impact investments to de-risk capital flows into a just energy transformation; prove nature-positive value chains that preserve standing forests; and enhance adaptation and resilience in vulnerable countries and communities.

Supporting climate justice voices from the Global South

OSF’s strategic approach draws on the deep expertise of vulnerable communities who share their knowledge and specific needs regarding climate change impacts. Thus, one of the goals of the Climate Justice Programme

⁴“Multilateral Partnership for Organizing, Worker Empowerment, and Rights (M-POWER)”, U.S. Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/multilateral-partnership-for-organizing-worker-empowerment-and-rights-m-power-initiative>

⁵Climate Justice, Soros Economic Development Fund, <https://www.soroseconomicdevelopmentfund.org/how-we-work/climate-justice#featured-case-study>

is to foster more climate-equitable action in the Global South. Acknowledging that the most well-resourced climate organisations are in the Global North, OSF is positioning itself to lead the creation and/or the strengthening of climate consortiums to promote the visions and demands of think tanks and civil society organisations in developing countries. Challenging the status quo, OSF wants to bring more Global South voices to the global stage. For example, Open Society fellowships, such as the Puerto Rico Youth Fellowship⁶, support activists aged 21 to 35 to implement projects that advance decolonisation and climate justice. It is hoped that more philanthropies will join OSF's mission to amplify Global South voices in the climate justice movement.

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⁵ "Puerto Rico Youth Fellowship, Open Society Foundations,
<https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/grants/puerto-rico-youth-fellowship>