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Climate Change Is Harming Your Nonprofit (... and what you and all nonprofits can do about it!)

By: Tim Delaney and Amy Silver O'Leary

The unsettling juxtaposition of two recent reports makes this urgent truth unavoidable and crystal clear: climate change is threatening the sustainability of all nonprofits, including the ones you care about most.

First came the report that parts of the American West are in the [worst megadrought in the last 1,200 years](#). Then came a report projecting that the [sea level along the U.S. coastline will rise, on average, 10 to 12 inches](#) by 2050. That same report warns that sea levels could be as much as 6.6 feet higher in 2100, compared with 2000.

Obviously, the megadrought and mega-flooding impose substantial consequences on everyone in the direct-impact zones of extreme weather events. Less obvious, but just as true, these climate change consequences also impact all nonprofits – and not just those with missions focused on the environment and conservation, and not just those in the hardest-hit geographic areas.

How Extreme Weather Changes Threaten Nonprofits

Here's a very incomplete sampling of the *many* harmful effects to nonprofits caused by just these two forms of climate change.

- **Reduces available financial resources for all nonprofits and society**
 - Greater competition for donations as people donate to respond directly to multiple extreme weather events in the U.S. and globally.
 - Government resources increasingly diverted away from current, already-urgent priorities such as health, support for children and families, education, and other aspects of nonprofit work, and redirected towards climate change mitigation. Nonprofits must face the reality that reallocation of resources will impact all nonprofits – not only those that receive direct government funding, but also those that don't, as competition for donations increases.
- **Imposes far greater needs on people, and therefore on nonprofits, resulting in widespread financial strains to address higher demands for services**
 - Megadrought
 - Direct drought – loss of potable water; reduced food production; sustained and extreme heat affects human and animal health.
 - Creates fuel for wildfires – imposing immediate needs for emergency care, food and water, shelter, and clothing, plus longer-term needs like new housing and jobs.
 - Climate refugees – lack of food, water, and livable land forces people to flee seeking new lives elsewhere.
 - Rising sea levels
 - Nearly [30% of the U.S. population lives in coastal areas](#), subjecting people to severe weather events like flooding, and erasing physical infrastructure like buildings, roads, bridges, water and wastewater pipes, and [septic systems](#).
 - Climate refugees – U.S. and global, same as above.
- **Exacts higher costs on nonprofits, causing a need for more funding**
 - Direct – for property and other insurance; replacement costs (offices and equipment).

- Indirect – all of this cuts into everyone's buying power.

Those are just some of the large-scale effects of climate change that nonprofits have been grappling with because of only *two* forms of climate change. The overall impact is unfathomable when adding the consequences caused by other forms of climate change, – including increases in the number and intensity of hurricanes, tornados, blizzards, floods, droughts, and extreme heat events.

The Pathway Forward

In the face of the climate crisis, what can we do as responsible global citizens that's meaningful, and not just make symbolic gestures that may make us feel or look good but really only let us off the hook psychologically?

As individuals and organizations, we must resist the temptation to take *the path of denial* (rejecting scientific evidence and our lived experiences of feeling, seeing, and hearing about the severity of weather changes in our own lifetimes), *the path of futility* (tossing in the towel because the problems are too overwhelming, believing any efforts to change things would be too little and too late), or *the path of blind faith* (hoping that a miracle, from God or technology, will intervene). Instead, we must take *the path of action*, chosen by those dedicated to implementing the wide range of solutions necessary.

We believe there are many organizations that, like the person Robert Frost described in [The Road Not Taken](#), have been standing where those paths diverged, long studying the options to decide which path might prove best. Now, with science, our life experiences, and common sense all crying out for action, nonprofits committed to the public good need to move forward – boldly, with practical purpose and all deliberate speed – down the path of action.

Action Steps Nonprofits Can Take

- Meet with the people in your nonprofit – your board, entire staff, a unit, or other stakeholders – to discuss what *meaningful* actions your organization can take.

We stress emphatically that this is neither a call for nonprofits to abandon their current missions and focus exclusively on environmental causes, nor is it a call

for mission drift such that we all add more work, thus splitting attention and diluting effectiveness.

Rather, it's a call for aligning our organizational actions with our values. This activity is not unlike what many of us have done over the years to address [diversity, equity, and inclusion](#). In many organizations, some people initially heard the call to address racial justice as a demand for entirely changing or formally expanding longstanding missions. That misperception has not been accurate, however, as we have been learning to incorporate our commitments to DE&I into our everyday work.

At the National Council of Nonprofits, for example, as was the case at many other nonprofits, we have wrestled at both the staff and board levels with DE&I definitions, learned from other groups, and engaged in the challenging yet rewarding internal dialogues necessary to align and then articulate our collective values. Now, as part of our core values at the National Council of Nonprofits, [we embed diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout our organization and the ways we carry out our mission](#). Note, we haven't changed our mission; rather, we expressly articulate centering racial equity in our core values, which in turn inform and calibrate how we act in advancing our mission.

If your nonprofit has already done this vital work regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, then you have even more reason to align your actions to address climate change, because [climate change disproportionately harms people of color, immigrants, low-income communities, and other vulnerable populations](#). Is it possible to be committed to equity and ignore the looming catastrophic impacts of climate change?

- Engaging in discussions about how the current and threatened harm climate change inflicts on your nonprofit's mission, plus the values that will guide your nonprofit in mitigating the harms, may bring a momentary sense of unity. But simply putting words on paper is not enough. Again, our work embedding diversity equity, and inclusion throughout our organization – while still a continual work in progress – can offer guidance.

At our organization, the board, staff, and each board committee has discussed the full board's Equity Statement at their meetings. These ongoing, in-depth discussions have helped us to purposefully and tangibly apply the principles of

diversity, equity, and inclusion in our internal operations, programs, policies, and external leadership. Our Equity Statement doesn't guarantee that we will succeed or avoid unintended missteps. But it raises our awareness and focuses our attention.

Nonprofits can take a similar approach regarding climate change. For example, we all can examine our nonprofit's remote work policies in the context of the warming environment, not just the pandemic. If we use vehicles to deliver services or own a building, we can take steps to transition to renewable energy. Also, we all can look for broader systemic ways to address the threat of climate change and then work together, raising our voices to demand action.

Gene Takagi of NEO Law Group wrote persuasively on this subject last month in "[What's Your Nonprofit Doing to Fight Climate Change?](#)" Gene asserts that all nonprofits can consider combatting climate change to be mission-aligned, from practical, legal, and values-based points of view. Gene's article covers examining investment policies, changing operations, considering advocacy, and other actions all nonprofits can take.

We're with Gene. We urge each of our readers to examine your organization's approach to this existential issue. Our collective response to climate change must be on a scale commensurate with the threat; it's an all-hands-on-deck, all-sectors-step-up moment. If nonprofits don't involve ourselves in practicing and demanding solutions, none of us will be able to deal with the consequences.