

Why Movements are Necessary to Win Climate Policy

A Thematic Brief for Funders

In confronting the climate crisis, policy change is often seen as the domain of governments, international agreements, and high-level negotiations. Yet, history shows that the most enduring environmental policies—those that hold up beyond political cycles, economic shifts, and industry resistance—are those that have been shaped and enforced by grassroots movements.

At a global scale, the institutions shaping climate action—from international climate finance to corporate supply chains and trade agreements—are influenced by policy battles fought at local and national levels. In the face of rising authoritarianism, and the associated enabling of the fossil fuel industry, grassroots movements are essential for building power beyond electoral cycles and creating precedence outside the highest emitting countries where authoritarianism is on the rise. They do what governments and corporations often fail to do: build political will, enforce accountability, and drive policy ambition from the ground up, from the local to the global. Importantly, it is rare that grassroots movements engage in policy wins exclusively, but rather ‘multi-solve’, simultaneously shifting culture, meeting material needs of communities not provided by the state, and securing enduring political power over generations.

How Grassroots Movements Drive Globally-Relevant Climate Policy Wins

1. Legislative Reforms: Securing Enforceable Laws

Climate targets are only as strong as the laws that uphold them. Legislative victories—whether emissions caps, deforestation bans, or renewable energy mandates—create enforceable mechanisms that move climate action from aspiration to obligation. These legislative wins, fought for and secured by movements, create upward pressure on lagging governments and industries, making ambitious action the norm rather than the exception. Legislative reforms often pave the way for stronger regulatory enforcement and judicial precedents, ensuring that climate action is not just codified in law but actively implemented and defended.

Case study: COPINH is dedicated to the defense of Indigenous Lenca culture, territorial rights, and biodiversity in Honduras. COPINH has become one of the strongest voices in Mesoamerica and globally for defending and promoting Indigenous Peoples’ rights through legislative reform. COPINH engaged in successful efforts to ensure that the government of Honduras ratified Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, a legal framework which guarantees Indigenous Peoples’ right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. Through decades of struggle, COPINH has expelled dozens of illegal logging operations from Lenca territories, recovered over 200 Indigenous communal land titles, and represented the voices of Indigenous communities in international spaces.



At the international level, grassroots movements have shaped landmark frameworks such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure and Small-Scale Fisheries. Each of these have laid legal and normative foundations for national and global climate policies grounded in land, food, and resource justice.

2. Regulatory Changes: Pushing Policy from Paper to Practice

Even when climate policies exist, enforcement is often weak due to corporate influence or political inertia. Grassroots movements work to ensure policies are not just written but implemented, and that policies are ecologically relevant. They push regulatory bodies to enforce pollution limits, accelerate renewable energy transitions, and hold industries accountable. When movements secure regulatory changes, they create legally binding obligations that influence industry standards and international trade agreements—shaping the rules that govern emissions, deforestation, and resource extraction at a global scale.



Case study: The Zimbabwean government revised its Food and Nutrition policy to incorporate approaches to grain farming used by the movement Zimbabwe Smallholder Organic Farmers' Forum (ZIMSOFF). The government also included ZIMSOFF's approach to farmer-managed seed systems to protect Indigenous seeds in policy discussions, and is currently integrating ZIMSOFF's climate resilient agriculture practices into its agricultural policy framework. ZIMSOFF's work shifted government practice through community engagement, such as: a) inviting government leaders to fairs and movement meetings; b) building the capacity of members to receive government contracts; c) hosting press conferences and mobilizing public pressure to veto harmful laws. ZIMSOFF has both represented food sovereignty movements in global fora (e.g., the UN) and used grassroots-won global policies to enable wins at the national level (e.g., Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food).

3. Judicial Precedents: Enshrining Climate Rights and Accountability

Grassroots-led litigation has forced governments and corporations to comply with climate commitments, uphold environmental rights, and pay damages. These decisions not only force governments to comply with their own commitments, but also establish legal principles that other jurisdictions replicate. These precedents accumulate across jurisdictions, strengthening the global legal framework for climate accountability. Legal victories achieved by grassroots movements often serve as blueprints for climate litigation worldwide, reinforcing the legal basis for climate justice across multiple countries.

Case study: Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) moved the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on the Garifuna people's collective land rights and won a ruling against the Honduran state. The Court held that denying the Garifuna people the ability to exercise their right to free, prior, and informed consent (established by grassroots organizing in UNDRIP) before permitting extractive projects was a violation of their rights. The Court ordered reparations including a public statement of responsibility and future protection for Indigenous lands.



4. Corporate Policy Shifts: Making Extractive Business Models Unviable

Corporations often respond to grassroots pressure long before they respond to government mandates. Movements force industry-wide shifts by organizing consumer boycotts, exposing corporate greenwashing, and demanding divestment from fossil fuels and deforestation-linked supply chains. When corporations are forced to change practices in one country, it sets a precedent that can be used across contexts.



Case study: Kenya's National Environmental Tribunal halted the construction of the country's first coal-powered plant, in large part due to Save Lamu's organizing and political education efforts. Their organizing protected Lamu county's mangrove forests spanning 37,350 hectares, at the mouth of an inlet rich in prawns, crabs and fish and the livelihoods of more than 3,000 artisanal fisherfolk. The 1,050-megawatt power plant would have increased Kenya's greenhouse gas emissions by 700%. In another example, following local communities' resistance, the World Bank withdrew financing for the Bisri Dam project in Lebanon, which would have harmed local food production and biodiversity. Movement groups exposed the expected violations in local and international media, while organizing weekly walking tours of the biodiverse area to mobilize the local community. Had the project continued, the dam would have destroyed 6 million square meters of natural land, dismantled more than 50 historic sites, and created a risk of reservoir-induced earthquakes.

5. Public Accountability Mechanisms: Ensuring Policy Resilience

Governments frequently make climate pledges that lack enforcement or longevity. Grassroots movements act as the watchdogs that ensure policies endure beyond electoral cycles, using protest, public campaigns, and legal challenges to prevent rollbacks and demand stronger action.

Case study: Young women-led Care About Climate created a comprehensive database to track how the parties to the Paris Climate Agreement integrate a gender lens into their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The NDC Equity Tracker compiles local analyses and suggestions from youth leaders for their countries' NDCs. The tracker database connects international climate policy with national commitments and supports youth leaders' agency and advocacy at the national level.



From Local to Global: The Accumulative Power of Grassroots Policy Wins

No single law, regulation, or legal precedent will solve the climate crisis. However, the aforementioned examples together form the necessary architecture for more coherent, coordinated strategies to resist global extractivism and build the food, energy, and governance systems we need to survive. The work of grassroots movements is fundamental to the policy and legal infrastructure needed. Every ruling in favor of Indigenous Peoples' land management strengthens planetary resilience and every corporate accountability victory sets a higher standard for global markets.

For funders seeking systemic, large-scale climate impact, supporting grassroots climate justice movements is not just a moral imperative—it is a strategic necessity. To sustain and expand these wins, funders must provide unrestricted, long-term support that enables movements to engage in litigation, advocacy, and sustained political organizing across multiple fronts. These movements are the driving force behind the policies, regulations, and accountability structures that ensure climate action translates from global ambition to tangible, enforceable progress.