How Climate and Community Will Shape Your Nonprofit's Future



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When you consider how climate change will affect your nonprofit, your first thought might be about the impacts of extreme weather.

That's a good first thought. The phrase "climate change" describes long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns, largely driven by human activity (learn more about climate change here). You might see the effects of climate in the world around you with heat waves, more severe storms, more drought, food scarcity, and increased poverty and displacement.

But as the Associated Press noted last year, the effects of climate change aren't just environmental. The changing climate affects politics, human rights, equality, law, society and culture—arenas that touch all aspects of a nonprofit organization's work.

We face many unknowns when it comes to climate change. Uncertainty is scary. It's one of many reasons humanity has struggled to fully comprehend and take effective action on climate change. But risk management exists to help us meet uncertainty. As your nonprofit looks to the future, use this article to consider some of the areas most affected by climate risk and prepare for the unknowns climate change will bring for your nonprofit's operations and mission.

How Climate Change Impacts Nonprofits

Nonprofits provide services in an ever-changing environment, in conditions shaped by a variety of factors, including climate. Here are some of the major ways climate change intersects with nonprofit missions.

Nonprofits aid people and communities in need.

Most nonprofits seek to serve people and groups who have significant needs that aren't currently being met by other services. In many places, those may be the people and communities most affected by the impact of climate change.

A McKinsey report found that racial and ethnic minorities and lower-income communities often have more exposure to climate hazards. Communities that have been marginalized may not have as much access as more

privileged communities to programs and resources that might help them deal with the impact of climate change. “Race—even more than class—is the number one indicator for the placement of toxic facilities in this country hit by climate change,” writes the NAACP.

Nonprofits provide services.

Your nonprofit navigates complex logistics daily to serve your community. Most of those logistical decisions, whether they happen in the physical world or digitally, have become second nature to you. But the effects of climate change can disrupt a nonprofit’s ability to provide services for the short term—such as in a fire, flood, or power outage—or in the long term, as consistently hotter temperatures or sea level rise affect where you can offer programs and the cost to do so.

A 2021 report by Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, reminds us that “[h]ow international organizations manage climate risk will be critical to their ability to meet their objectives, deliver their mandates, improve the delivery of their services, achieve value for money and anticipate external shocks.” The report focuses on massive multinational organizations like the World Bank and World Health Organization, but many of its lessons apply to U.S.-based organizations, large and small.

Nonprofits may operate facilities.

Nonprofit organizations operate more than 500,000 facilities in the United States, according to the Environmental and Energy Study Institute. Most of those are commercial buildings. Commercial buildings account for 18 percent of the energy use in the United States.

For many nonprofits that operate facilities, energy costs are a significant operational expense.

Nonprofits have a mission to serve the greater good.

Climate change will speed the spread of infectious disease, destroy property and infrastructure, and decrease access to food and water. These trends will strike at the heart of many nonprofit missions, which often focus on helping people access resources they need, from health care to housing to food.

Nonprofit funders may be reluctant to support growing overhead expense.

As costs related to infrastructure and expenses perceived to be overhead grow—such as insurance, energy bills, and the cost to retrofit facilities—some funders may continue the practice of providing only minimal support for these real expenses. The pressure to raise unrestricted funds to cover these costs—or reduce services—may overwhelm some organizations.

While these are some of the biggest ways climate change impacts nonprofit missions, this is not an exhaustive list. Consider what unique intersections exist between climate change and your nonprofit’s work.

Take Action to Prepare

Once your team understands some of the major ways climate change could impact your operations for the future, plan for how you will address those possibilities (risks). Keep in mind that most risks have expected and unexpected upsides as well as downsides. As your community’s needs evolve due to climate change, you may find new opportunities to partner with experts or provide services you’ve never considered before. Be prepared to investigate opportunities to evolve and grow as well as ways to mitigate harm.

Here are some ways to prepare your nonprofit for the impacts of climate change.

Anticipate how climate change will shape community needs. “Climate change is contributing to humanitarian crises where climate hazards interact with high vulnerability,” the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations body that assesses the science on climate change, writes in a recent report. Your nonprofit’s strategic planning process should consider how a warming planet could shape the kinds of assistance community members need, and how your organization can respond.

Explore partnerships that expand your expertise and reach on climate. Seek ways to support grassroots racial and climate justice efforts that shift power to community leaders—and understand that this may require new

funding approaches, Alice Ng of nonprofit accelerator Multiplier urges. What could you offer a potential climate justice partner? Could you share communications resources to help their work reach a broader audience (if they want that)?

Partnerships can start small, Dr. Akilah Watkins, now president of Independent Sector, said on a *Nonprofit Quarterly* webinar in 2022. A partnership could be as simple as working with another organization on a website focused on climate education, a newspaper article on the issue, or a community event. Or you could pair with another organization to look at your whole ecosystem and how you could influence it through joint work on climate.

Tailor to your mission. If you provide education to children or adults, could you develop a class or module on climate change and its impact on your community? If you're a grant maker, could you set aside a percentage of your grant funds for climate adaptation projects and efforts to reduce global warming? A McKinsey report says foundations have a unique opportunity to help fund solutions in the fight against climate change. Foundations can be nimble, moving quicker than government agencies, and they can support efforts that governments put in place. Other grantmakers may shift priorities to fund more climate efforts.

Reach out to historically marginalized communities your organization serves. Before you seek to design programs and supports for constituents affected by climate change, talk to them. What services and supports would be helpful? What kind of support already exists within the community? What kind is not needed? The social justice newsletter *Reimagined*, formerly known as *Anti-Racism Daily*, has urged nonprofits to build collective movements, in which people with direct experience of oppression make the resource allocation decisions.

Advocate. Gene Takagi writes on the Nonprofit Law Blog that consideration for the ecosystem can be viewed as mission-related for most nonprofits. Could your organization join with others in the nonprofit sector and beyond to work on climate issues? Leading and funding advocacy on climate is a key way for nonprofits to have an impact, according to the Johnson Center for Philanthropy.

Create a business continuity plan. This will lay the groundwork for your nonprofit to continue essential services during a business disruption, such as a natural disaster, power outage, or supply chain interruption. See our accompanying article in this issue, "How to Create a Business Continuity Plan," for guidance.

Green your own house. Consult our accompanying article in this issue, "Your Guide to Going Green in Nonprofit Operations," for ways to make your nonprofit's operations greener and more efficient.

Start Small, Make a Big Difference

Climate change is one of the most daunting challenges humanity has ever faced. It's hard to think about how climate will affect your nonprofit for the long term when you face hiring, programming and budget challenges today. But doing what you can to consider climate change in your mission will prepare your nonprofit to withstand all kinds of unexpected shocks. It can also bring your team members closer to each other and to your community. There is power in taking action.

It's OK to start small. Try to do one thing each week to prepare your nonprofit for climate risk. That might be attending a talk by a local expert on your community's climate issues or discussing climate in your risk committee meeting. Pretty soon, those small actions will begin to add up, and your nonprofit will be better prepared to do its part to address one of the greatest challenges of our time.

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