

DEFENDING CLIMATE DEFENDERS

How climate defenders are being targeted for their work

As funders challenging the industries and institutions driving the climate crisis, we are, by definition, funding our grantees to take risks. Whether they are litigating, organizing, divesting, investigating, exposing, protesting or lobbying, climate defenders are rising up with the urgency that the science demands.

Climate defenders—even if they do not identify themselves as such—face multiple direct threats for the work donors fund them to do. Corporations and their government and financial enablers are responding with increased harassment, intimidation, violence, surveillance, and retaliatory legal action.

How funders are responding

As the climate crisis intensifies, we can only expect more reprisals against the youth, lawyers, journalists, scientists, and community activists who challenge these interests' power and profits. Yet, until recently, most climate philanthropy has not seen itself as “in the business” of providing defense and security support to protect movements and communities who put it all on the line. This must change.

Equation Campaign funds movements on the ground to keep fossil fuels in the ground, explicitly supporting our grantees to confront the fossil fuel industry, resist its expansion, and hasten its obsolescence. We also fund our grantees' protection and justice and resiliency efforts as integral to building and fighting power. If some of the world's most profitable and dominant industries and governments have a war chest to intimidate and silence our grantees, we need to put our money where our mouth is and fund a war chest to protect them. **Join Us.**

DEFENDER SPOTLIGHT

*Enbridge directly funded the overtime pay of Minnesota state police when they **arrested over 700 climate activists that were protesting Line 3.***



The Dangerous Context for Climate Defenders



Cornered and defensive industry

An increasingly desperate industry knows that climate science dictates its eventual obsolescence, and that public opinion increasingly supports an energy transition.



A ticking clock

Climate activists are demanding unprecedented reforms and taking increasingly bold actions in response to the urgency of the climate crisis.



Unfettered corporate power

Entrenched influence over government processes, deregulation, and lack of accountability for corporate complicity and abuse.



Dehumanization

Climate defenders are often marginalized by racism, sexism, nationalism and other forms of discrimination and inequality.



Media capture

Powerful elites with resources to manipulate social media and mass communication frame climate advocates as “anti-development”, “foreign stooges,” or “enemies of the state.”



Invisibility

Many fossil fuel projects take place in rural or remote areas, far away from systems of oversight and accountability.

THE CYCLE OF HARM:

Threats to Climate Defenders

While the threats climate defenders experience are often intertwined and multiple, they fall generally into the following categories:

Physical

Eg: killing, beatings, sexual violence and rape, shootings, and physical abuse (during or following protests), torture, and physical surveillance.

**Digital**

Eg: hacking, digital surveillance, online harassment, and trolling.

**Legal**

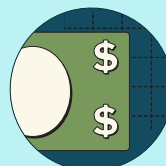
Eg: criminalization, SLAPP suits, arrests, laws granting impunity to police or other security forces, critical infrastructure laws, and abuse of antiterrorism laws.

**Psychological**

Eg: intimidation, smear campaigns against activists' or their families' reputations, bullying and stigmatization (particularly for youth), and repetitive harassment intended to create emotional trauma.

**Financial**

Eg: laws prohibiting the receipt of foreign funding, frozen bank accounts, blacklisting of certain foreign foundations, stripping NGOs of legal status, and criminal penalties for "tax fraud".

**DEFENDER SPOTLIGHT**

In 2023, **eighteen people in Atlanta have been charged as "domestic terrorists" for participating in largely peaceful protests** to protect an urban forest ("Cop City") and decry the fatal police shooting of a fellow forest defender. Sentence-boosting charges relating to "domestic terrorism" and "threats to critical infrastructure" are proliferating across the US, exponentially increasing fines and prison terms, chilling free speech and association, and setting dangerous precedent for the climate movement.



BREAKING THE CYCLE:**The Protect, Prevent, Reveal, Redress (PPRR) Framework ¹**

Defending climate defenders is a fundamental climate strategy, and given the complex, intersecting threats climate defenders face, donors should think about both proactive and reactive measures. Effective protection and defense starts well before an emergency occurs and requires a comprehensive approach that anticipates as well as responds to threats.

A security framework that attempts to “pick” the biggest harm and address it fails to address the ways in which the multiple threats—digital, physical, financial, psychological, and legal—often reinforce and amplify each other. At the same time, a strategic intervention or funding support in even just one of the PPRR categories of protection contributes to and reinforces the entire cycle of protection.

PROTECT: Helping climate defenders respond to imminent threats.

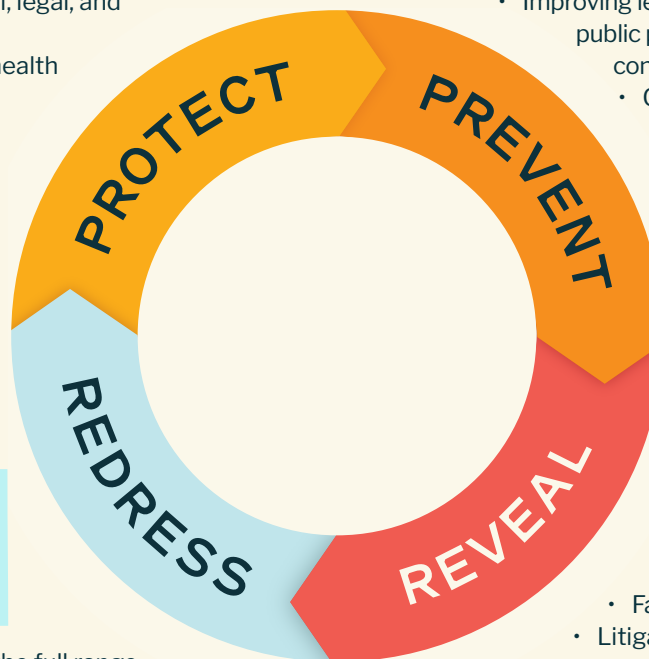
- Equipment – security cameras, window bars, alarms, technology upgrades;
- Capacity building, legal advice and training to enhance personal, organizational, legal, and digital security;
- Trauma, healing justice, mental health support;
- Emergency funds – evacuation and relocation, healthcare, legal defense;
- Investment in risk mapping and early warning systems;
- Security funds and assistance.

REDRESS: Helping defenders obtain remedies when attacks occur, holding perpetrators accountable, and deterring future attacks.

- Legal training and remedies for the full range of perils climate defenders face, including tax investigations, fraud claims, and land use or property challenges;
- Legal defense for those facing criminalization, civil suits, and SLAPPs;
- Challenging immunities of governments, corporations, and international financial institutions linked to abuses;
- Foreign policy tools such as sanctions to respond to reprisals;
- Legislative reform;
- Litigation.

PREVENT: Addressing the root causes of these attacks, including the closing of civic space.

- Lobbying corporations, banks, and international financial institutions to protect defenders in their investments and supply chains;
- Improving legal requirements for transparency, public participation, and free, prior, informed consent (FPIC);
- Celebrating the legitimacy of climate activists through solidarity, public awareness, support for media;
- Adopting and enforcing anti-corruption laws, and laws that punish threats or retaliation against defenders and activists;
- Strengthening civil society networks.

**REVEAL: Exposing attacks through investigative research and documentation.**

- Fact finding and documentation;
- Litigation discovery;
- Media, communications, journalism;
- Shining the spotlight – naming and shaming;
- ‘Follow the money’ initiatives;
- Recapturing and reframing the narrative by supporting climate defenders to counter disinformation;
- Forensic accounting;
- Open source investigations and verification of video evidence.

Funders can do more

Many climate funders engage in trust-based philanthropy intended to share power with grantees and enable them to set the grantmaking agenda. However, climate defenders seeking support know that funders can be risk-averse, discouraging them from honestly sharing the threats they face. They fear their donors will pull back if their work is or appears to be too risky. Funders should understand this dynamic and act accordingly.

From our experience at Equation Campaign, here are some tips:

- **Be proactive.** Raise the issue of risks at the outset and ask grantees about the specific threats they face, and what support they need to mitigate them.
- **Understand that your grantees often have considerable experience and expertise** in keeping themselves safe and only bring in appropriate technical support when requested.
- **Given that philanthropy is often risk-averse,** recognize that your grantees might think they need to minimize or hide threats in order to sustain their funding.
- **Build in comprehensive security funding** as a core element of every climate grant you make.
- **Establish rapid response emergency funds,** but also fund generously in anticipation of risk and response before the harm occurs.
- **Fund grantees' articulated needs first** before supporting landscape scans, studies, and conferences for philanthropy.
- **Fund organizations and experts providing direct services within the PPRR framework,** in addition to the resource hubs and networks that rely on them.
- **Remember our primary purpose as funders** — to move money and get it out the door quickly!

DEFENDER SPOTLIGHTS

At COP27, Egyptian security forces **coerced participants to unlock their phones and computers,** and physically surveilled UN delegates, diplomats, civil society leaders, and youth participants at the conference center and in their hotel rooms.

A lawyer, a journalist, an NGO leader, and a Goldman Prize winner were **charged with tax evasion and jailed in Vietnam** after working to ensure that the government implements its climate and environmental commitments.

¹In February 2016, a group of human rights and environmental funders, NGO leaders and civil society experts attended the strategy convening entitled Holding Civil Space for the Environment at the Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. This Protect, Prevent, Reveal, Redress (PPRR) framework emerged as a platform for both philanthropy and civil society to develop strategies and deploy funding in support of environmental defenders.

