

WRITTEN TESTIMONY from the US Climate Action Network

Chairman Raúl M. Grijalva
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

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Body of Testimony

I. Introduction:

Good morning, my name is Keya Chatterjee and I am the Executive Director at US Climate Action Network (USCAN). Thank you for this opportunity. I am here to share our membership's (190+ organizations) insights on how Justice Equity Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) is operationalized at environmental non-profits and grantmaking foundations.

Our position as a network is that the federal government, large mainstream environmental organizations and foundation grant-making processes have been exclusionary to black and brown communities. This exclusion has resulted in failed attempts to pass durable climate policy because policy makers have ignored the very people who have an organized community behind them. Attempts at corrective measures have been applied in response to this fact, but the interventions are stopgaps, not the systemic change needed to ensure real equity. For example, my own experience working at a large white-led NGO was that while there was a focus on diversity in the workforce, there was a lack of retention because after people of color were brought in, the work of the organization did not change to reflect a commitment to justice and equity. It is insufficient to address only diversity and inclusion and not establish programming focused on justice and equity. Large NGOs and foundations must commit to self transformation. A true focus on justice corrects past harms and mitigates future harms.

Our intent by providing this testimony is to influence federal grant giving and the federal policy making process so that Black, Indigenous and Brown communities have full inclusion in decision making processes. It is only through agency being returned to Black and brown communities that people will have the access and power necessary to implement climate solutions.

The climate crisis would not exist if not for a system of white supremacy in which we operate, meaning a system designed so that people of European descent have better outcomes compared to others. Where would you place a poisonous coal-fired power plant, an exploding pipeline, or a polluting biomass facility if policy makers were not willing to sacrifice Indigenous, Black and brown communities? These facilities are regularly rejected by wealthy white communities, so if not for white supremacy, we

would have transitioned to solar, wind, and batteries long ago, before my time, when President Carter was trying to get us to wear sweaters in winter and move us to energy independence. Long before that, white supremacy and colonialism began the process of attacking and dismantling indigenous ways of living that were connected to the land and that could sustain a stable climate on Earth.

USCAN is on a journey of self transformation and is constantly working to put justice and equity at the heart of our work. We are in our seventh year of a member-led grant program. The purpose of this program is to build grassroots power for climate action, while increasing trust and alignment among our members. To ensure this program is equitable, transparent, and embodies our JEDI values, grant decisions are made by a review committee of USCAN members. Traditionally, most that serve on the review committee are from grassroots organizations; this past grant cycle everyone was from a grassroots organization.

The Federal Grant Process is lengthy, time-consuming, and onerous. It favors nonprofits that have been given grants consistently or with dedicated staff: those that already have the infrastructure in place to tackle it. Nonprofits without those resources are at a significant disadvantage. Knowing this, we have removed anything that is truly not informing the review team's decision. Our program allows grant submissions in varying formats: handwritten, videos, powerpoint, etc.; line-item budgets are not requested. We trust those that are receiving the funds know the best way to spend the funds. The entire application process is intentionally set up to take the applicant less than 3 hours total, and the Review Team Rubric is openly shared with all applicants.

Our grants program is responsive to the organization's needs throughout the grant period. We have multi-year grants for operating support or capacity-building, and more flexible agreements regarding modifications. In addition, we collaborate with our grantee to design evaluation and reporting processes that support the work being done, rather than create extra burdens.

Part of the transformation of USCAN has also been a commitment to bringing Black and Indigenous leadership into positions of access and power in international and federal policy making. Our members tell us that while for the first time they are being consulted on policy more frequently, they feel largely tokenized and do not yet feel influence over policy. The barriers to participation are similar to the barriers to federal grants. The language being used is not the language used to organize in communities. Sometimes the most harmful policies are spoken about in the most opaque terms. Members of USCAN, for example, have had to suffer the pollution and the enormous costs of a carbon capture and storage facility in Mississippi, and there are threats of more of these facilities that communities do not want in Louisiana and across the southeast, surrounding Black communities. This effort is an expansion and extension of poisonous facilities in communities of color that will be paired with a massive network of compressed CO₂ pipelines in every community that has worked so hard to fight back against pipelines scarring their communities. That's not what it's called though, what it is called is "45Q". This kind of meaningless jargon

is no accident and emerges from a culture that does not value community organizers and the language that they use within their communities.

II. Content:

USCAN is the US “node” of a global network, the Climate Action Network, which makes formal interventions at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conferences of Parties, or COPs. Our experience in the UN process has been that in order for people of color to gain access, we have had to proactively ensure that badges are prioritized for people of color and that our members are able to vote on who will represent them at international meetings. We have also observed that the barriers to policy access can be ameliorated, but it has to be through proactive work since there are often long standing relationships between white-led organizations and policy makers. Putting JEDI at the heart of our work means prioritizing establishing new, authentic relationships with people of color. Based on our experience moving toward better representation internationally, our top three recommendations for federal policy makers are:

1. Ensure that the people most affected by the policy are included in the decision making process by tracking and sharing who is coming to meetings.
2. Keep a ‘progressive stack’ in meetings, ensuring that the people being called on for questions or put on the agenda to speak are people reflecting the experiences of communities who have been made vulnerable through policy
3. Use language that could be understood in a community meeting and avoid jargon and acronyms

Similar interventions are needed for federal grant making. Several of our members have had first hand experience applying for federal grant programs. The experiences were demoralizing and characterized by a lengthy application process (100 pages long in one instance); with very technical jargon that is difficult to understand and contradictory application instructions. Additionally, many of these application processes and platforms are inaccessible to grassroots organizations interested in applying because they require a proposal submission that is tailored to the technical requirements of a specific federal policy rather than based on the actual needs/reality of the grantee. This is difficult to navigate for small organizations with limited staff bandwidth, and little to no access to policy experts. Finally and most importantly, many of our members are increasingly getting access to funding tables and decision making spaces on policy, but that access does not translate to influence. BIPOC voices and leadership are more often than not tokenized and serve merely as window dressing to create the impression of diverse representation.

USCAN as a network, has evolved and made improvements over several years to ensure that our internal processes, including around grant making, are transparent, democratic, and embody our JEDI values. Our top ten recommendations, based upon our own experience in adaptively improving are:

1. Require 60% representation of women of color, BIPOC and vulnerable communities in boards and staff of grantor organizations (both public and private)
2. Adopt and operationalize a JEDI checklist as a tool of accountability to assess organizational equity, with the power to make changes based upon checklist results exercised at the director level that results in adaptive improvements and systemic change.
3. Have maximum annual operating budget caps e.g. \$500,000 as an eligibility requirement for recipients
4. Use application language that the community uses, not jargon
5. Reserve 40% of grant programs to groups who have never received funding
6. Identify grant and policy programs that result in systemic remedies, instead of just addressing the problem as it is manifesting at the moment (e.g. don't just address flooding, address the root cause of why people of color were pushed to vulnerable lands and address how the climate crisis is playing out in communities that are repeatedly flooding)
7. Eliminate the current filter for eligibility as a grantee partner that is based on a very narrow set of criteria that favors large, established institutions.
8. Make sure that peer review panels include community organizers who organize in Black, Indigenous and brown communities
9. Lower barriers to applying for grants and increase the reach (shorter proposals, more outreach)
10. Invest in collaborations where there are enough resources for every partner .

III. Closing:

In closing, I would like to reiterate that having this hearing is extremely important in the context of where we are as a nation and global community in reference to the climate crisis. We are grappling with a history of systemic impact on BIPOC communities that has never been addressed and the perpetuation of injustice. There are significantly better alternatives that have been tried and tested, and I hope the example and recommendations I have shared illuminate that and play a part in achieving the paradigm shift that is long overdue. Thank you once again for the opportunity to testify.