The Climate Catalyst Fund: Landscape Analysis, Investment Logic, and Operational Roadmap

Dear Ecosystem Partner;

We are operating in a moment that demands clear strategic vision, principled commitment, and unshakeable courage. Across the climate and environmental ecosystem, shifting economic priorities and political headwinds have led some institutional funders, including many of you, to exercise caution. In response, many are consolidating resources, narrowing strategic scopes, and moderating external communications to mitigate perceived risk.

However, our Black, Brown, Indigenous, and working-class communities do not have the luxury of taking a sabbatical from survival. Frontline populations continue to face compounding environmental and economic pressures, from extreme weather disruptions to local energy grids, to utility rate hikes driven by rapid data center expansion, to persistent public health burdens in industrial corridors. These challenges directly impact household stability, community health, and economic dignity.

To establish a data-informed operational path forward, USCAN commissioned FSG, a social impact advisory firm, for a landscape analysis covering public opinion trends, philanthropic funding flows, and peer network positioning. In parallel, we engaged Ullman Consulting to conduct an in-depth member assessment, mapping recent policy achievements, operational priorities, and network recommendations. Grounded in our Board's March 2026 resolution, this report synthesizes qualitative member wisdom alongside 11 stakeholder interviews, six national polling analyses, and four years of foundation grantmaking data.

This research provides the empirical foundation necessary to deploy capital where it offers maximum leverage, accountability, and scalable movement impact. The findings reveal a clear strategic opportunity: while broader climate funding remains fragmented, our true power lies in connecting climate action directly to daily economic survival. By anchoring our collective strategy in economic dignity, public health, and local governing power, we convert public anxiety into durable, scalable victory.

To catalyze this strategic transition, USCAN is committing $1,000,000 directly from our organizational reserves as initial seed capital. By establishing The Climate Catalyst Fund, we are de-risking essential movement infrastructure for funding partners and demonstrating a high-return model for broader philanthropy. Together, resourcing member-driven networks to achieve local outcomes creates a durable, national foundation for lasting climate progress.

In solidarity and purpose,
Dr. Ife Kilimanjaro
Executive Director, U.S. Climate Action Network (USCAN)

Executive Summary & Research Methodology

Recognizing a rapidly shifting funding landscape, USCAN leadership and our Board launched a strategic initiative to meet two urgent imperatives: to demonstrate the transformative power of true, cross-movement collaboration, and to create high-leverage pathways for aligned philanthropic investment.

The goal of this research is to establish an actionable, data-backed operational roadmap—one that accelerates equitable climate action on the ground, fortifies our movement's connective infrastructure, and unlocks scalable co-investment opportunities for institutional philanthropy. This research was conducted in April-June of 2026.

This roadmap is deeply anchored in the investment logic established by our Board's March 2026 resolution. That resolution grounds our strategy across four core pillars: driving targeted climate initiatives, leveraging momentum to attract multi-year funding, co-designing strategy directly with our member organizations, and maintaining rigorous fiduciary stewardship alongside executive leadership. Table 1 outlines the research methodology and key inputs that informed this analysis.

Table 1: Research Methodology & Inputs

Component	Details
1. Internal Member Assessment	In-depth evaluation of USCAN member organizations, mapping recent wins, campaign priorities, and recommendations for strategic network investment.
2. Stakeholder Interviews	4 Peer Networks 6 Philanthropic Institutions
3. Quantitative Philanthropic Data Scan	Analysis of Candid database entries ($50K+ grants, US foundations, 2022–2025), ClimateWorks 2026 Funding Trends, Giving USA 2025.
4. Public Opinion Polling Synthesis	6 National Polls: Gallup, Ipsos, AP-NORC, Pew Research, Yale CCM.

Source: FSG Ecosystem Analysis and Ullman Consulting assessment prepared for USCAN

The Political & Economic Moment: What Public Data Tells Us

The current landscape presents a complex environment marked by shifting regulatory frameworks, policy preemption at state levels, and broader economic realignments. Within philanthropy, these dynamics have contributed to a recalibration of funding priorities, leading to resource constraints for many climate organizations and network infrastructures. Despite these headwinds, the imperative for durable climate solutions remains urgent.

Research indicates that framing climate initiatives in isolation often limits broader public resonance. For instance, recent polling shows that *77% of U.S. Gen Z respondents feel disengaged when presented with traditional climate narratives.*[1] However, when climate campaigns explicitly connect to daily economic priorities – such as energy affordability, clean water access, heat protections, and local job creation – public engagement and coalition alignment strengthen substantially.

Public Issue Salience & Movement Alignment

To ensure catalytic capital is strategically deployed, FSG mapped core issue areas across three dimensions: public concern (salience), philanthropic momentum, and peer network prioritization. This comprehensive assessment spans the broader public landscape as well as the climate and environmental ecosystem, including both foundations and network organizations.

The data reveals a critical opportunity: while traditional environmental funding remains heavily concentrated in conservation, public engagement increases significantly when climate solutions address household economic stability, public health, and corporate accountability. This alignment creates a strategic opening to connect environmental initiatives with practical economic outcomes, promoting institutional responsiveness and long-term impact across the communities served. Table 2 details the public issue salience and strategic alignment matrix across key thematic areas.

Table 2: Public Issue Salience and Strategic Alignment Matrix

Issue Area	Public Salience	Funding Momentum	Peer Priority	Strategic Alignment
Affordability	High	High	High	Primary Outcome Frame
Public Health & Environmental Justice (EJ)	High	High	High	Human Dignity Anchor
AI & Data Centers	Medium	Medium	Medium	Local Organizing Frontier
Democracy/Civic	High	Medium	Medium-High	Operational Power Engine
Immigration	Medium-Low	Low	Low	Secondary Sector Impact
War & Militarism	Low	Low	Low	Secondary Sector Impact

[1] BBMG & GlobeScan, *From Anxiety to Agency: Five Ways Sustainable Brands Can Win Back Gen Z* (2025). https://globescan.com/2025/04/24/from-anxiety-to-agency-report/

Deep Dive: Four Core Issue Anchors

Anchored in the Board of Directors' March 2026 resolution, the selection of the four core issue areas below responds directly to an escalating climate crisis compounded by fossil fuel expansion, rising geopolitical instability, corporate capture, and acute energy affordability challenges facing working-class communities.

To navigate these complex dynamics, the Board established an investment framework centered on four strategic pillars: driving high-leverage climate initiatives, capitalizing on momentum to secure multi-year funding, co-designing strategy alongside member organizations, and maintaining rigorous fiduciary oversight alongside executive leadership. We believe that by centering our movement strategy on these interconnected priorities enables advocates to address immediate community needs, demand corporate accountability, and build cross-sector coalitions that link local economic priorities to lasting, scalable policy victories.

1. Affordability & Cost of Living

- **Public Sentiment:** Consistently ranks as the #1 concern for Americans across every major poll regardless of party affiliation.
- **Hard Realities:** U.S. electricity prices have spiked ~40% since 2021. In 2025 alone, monopoly electric utilities requested ~$31 billion in rate hikes, impacting 81+ million households. Homeowners insurance premiums rose 41% nationally (2020–2024), with insurers pulling out of climate-exposed working-class regions.
- **Movement Opportunity:** Connecting climate organizing directly to utility ratepayer protections, anti-shutoff legislation, and housing stability converts climate from an abstract issue into an urgent economic survival priority.

2. Public Health & Environmental Justice

- **Public Sentiment:** High, sustained cross-partisan recognition.
- **Hard Realities:** 152 million Americans live in counties receiving failing air quality grades. Extreme heat is now the leading weather-related cause of mortality in the U.S. (projected 60,000 annual heat deaths by 2050), disproportionately impacting elderly, Black, Brown, and outdoor workers.
- **Movement Opportunity:** Cumulative-impact permitting laws, right-to-cooling campaigns, and state-level worker heat protections connect climate justice directly to human health and bodily dignity.

3. AI & Data Center Proliferation

- **Public Sentiment:** Rapidly growing bipartisan outrage at the municipal level; 70% of Americans oppose local data center construction.
- **Hard Realities:** Data center power demand is projected to double by 2030, generating 100M+ metric tons of CO_2 annually. Facilities consume millions of gallons of local water daily for cooling while shifting grid expansion costs onto residential ratepayers.

- **Movement Opportunity:** Serves as a concrete place-based organizing hook that connects clean energy targets, utility rate affordability, water rights, and local municipal zoning control.

4. Governance, Democracy & Civic Engagement

- **Public Sentiment:** Deep concern over government dysfunction, corporate capture, and voter disenfranchisement.
- **Hard Realities:** Over 30 states have enacted restrictive voting laws since 2020. Meanwhile, municipal voter turnout averages just 5%–20%, leaving local utility and zoning boards vulnerable to corporate capture.
- **Movement Opportunity:** Local governing power and voter participation serve as the non-negotiable operational engine required to win, protect, and implement equitable climate policy.

The Field: Ecosystem & Philanthropic Funding Analysis

Philanthropic Funding Realities & The Infrastructure Opportunity

A rigorous analysis of U.S. foundation giving exposes a stark philanthropic reality, one that reveals both the depth of current underinvestment and a high-leverage opportunity for aligned institutional partners. Today, climate and environmental causes capture roughly 3% of total U.S. charitable giving, hovering between $6.8 billion and $7.25 billion annually. Yet, the vast majority of these resources remain tied to traditional conservation, with biodiversity and natural resources absorbing 64% to 68% of all environmental foundation dollars. By contrast, Environmental Justice receives a mere 4% to 5% of total climate funding, totaling $351 million in 2024 spread thin across nearly 1,300 grants. With an average grant size of just $271,000, frontline organizations are left managing short-term micro-capital when what they urgently require is multi-year, transformative surge capital to win.[2]

This structural imbalance becomes even more pronounced when we look at the connective tissue of our movement. While advocacy and systems-change work secured $106.8 million across 239 grants in 2024, dedicated network building, collaboration, and coalition infrastructure received a meager $3.7 million nationwide, distributed across only nine funders. We cannot expect frontline groups to win high-stakes battles in isolation without the backbone support required to sustain them. Table 3 presents a detailed breakdown of U.S. foundation climate giving across funding categories.

[2] Dollar amounts reflect available public data on grants over $50,000 in 2024 from the Candid Foundation Directory database.

Table 3: U.S. Foundation Climate Giving Breakdown		
	Total $	**% Share**
Biodiversity & Natural Resources	$3.50 B	64%
Climate Change Mitigation & Adaptation	$1.20 B	17%
Environmental Education	$320 M	4%
Environmental Justice	$351 M	5%
Environmental & Resource Rights	$242 M	3%
Sector-Based Sustainability (Ag, Forestry, Fishing, Building)	$290 M	4%
Other / Uncategorized	$217 M	3%
Total	**$6.12 B**	**100%**

Source: FSG analysis of Candid Foundation Directory database. This is a climate funding breakdown for 2024 only.

Two pioneering foundations have led the field – investing $1.5 million and $700,000, respectively – to demonstrate that place-based victories cannot endure without dedicated, cross-movement coalition infrastructure. USCAN's Climate Catalyst Fund builds directly upon this proven insight, establishing a high-leverage vehicle to bridge this funding gap and turn isolated local wins into scalable national power.

Beyond these structural funding gaps, philanthropic giving in the climate sector is undergoing a profound realignment. While some broad generalist donors have softened their narratives or pulled back to navigate political headwinds, a dedicated core of high-conviction funders is doubling down on state-level policy, legal defense, and grassroots power-building. At the same time, major donors are increasingly recognizing the multiplier effect of movement collaboratives and regranting intermediaries to maximize grantmaking efficiency and community impact. A powerful testament to this shift is MacKenzie Scott's $1 billion-plus climate allocation, which channeled $140 million into trusted collaboratives like The Solutions Project, The Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice, and the Climate and Clean Energy Equity Fund.

This evolving landscape is defined by distinct funder archetypes, each operating with different levers and strategic priorities. While some funders focus primarily on commercial market scaling, global policy frameworks, or donor-directed pass-through vehicles, our network model offers direct alignment with those seeking true systems-level impact. Specifically, systems-building funders who invest in connective infrastructure, frontline-centered regrantors focused on grassroots movement power, power-building generalists prioritizing democratic participation, and place-based funders driving local community health victories represent natural

co-investment partners for USCAN. By meeting these diverse partners where their strategic priorities lie, the Climate Catalyst Fund creates a unified, high-leverage vehicle for collective investment and movement-wide scale.

Ecosystem Gaps & Strategic Opportunities

Despite the essential, dedicated work of our peer national networks, FSG's landscape analysis reveals three profound structural gaps that continue to limit our collective impact. First, our movement lacks a proactive, sustained space for cross-movement strategy coordination, conflict transformation, and horizontal learning; the essential infrastructure where diverse member tables can navigate tensions, share winning tactics, and build deep strategic alignment.

Second, a deep disconnect persists between rapid international climate transitions and U.S. domestic organizing, leaving us without an active pipeline to translate global lessons and transition strategies into practical tools for local campaigns. Finally, while frontline grassroots groups are securing heroic, place-based policy victories every day, our field lacks the connective tissue required to translate those local wins into a dynamic, movement-owned national policy platform and a unified narrative of economic dignity.

Left unaddressed, these structural fractures keep our movement fragmented and our power isolated. To bridge these exact silos, FSG outlined opportunities for how USCAN could turn these field gaps into engines for collective progress, highlighting a strategic path forward.

Operationalizing The Climate Catalyst Fund

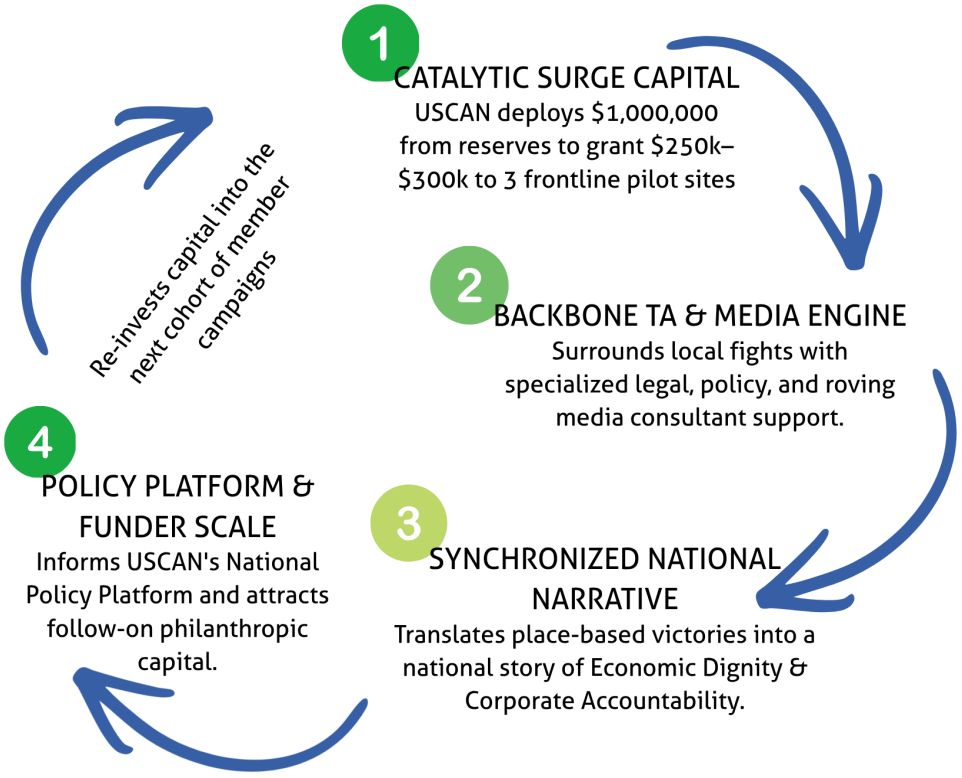
We synthesized FSG's landscape analysis findings (identifying affordability, public health, data center expansion, and democracy as prime leverage points) with direct member insights gathered through Ullman Consulting's comprehensive assessment of member wins, campaign priorities, and recommendations. USCAN combined these external and internal inputs into a single, unified operational strategy: The Climate Catalyst Fund, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: External Inputs and Integrated Operational Actions	
External Data & Member Input	**Integrated USCAN Operational Action**
1. Member Assessment (Ullman) mapped ground-level wins, needs, and priorities.	Member wins and needs are under-utilized sources of strength.
2. Connective tissue is severely underfunded ($3.7M nationally).	Deploy $1,000,000 catalytic seed capital to prove network ROI and de-risk funder entry.
3. Isolated micro-grants fail to cross the finish line.	Award major surge grants ($250k–$300k each) to 3 pilot sites over 12–18 months for decisive local victories.
4. Climate messaging fails without daily economic relevance.	Require campaigns to center Economic Dignity and Health; surround sites with TA and a roving media engine.

To achieve true movement scale, the Climate Catalyst Fund is designed to deliver measurable, transformative impact across three interconnected levels. First, within an intentional 12-to-18-month execution window, it secures tangible, place-based campaign victories, such as municipal data center zoning moratoria, public utility rate caps, cumulative-impact permitting protections, or local clean energy mandates. Second, it directly safeguards the bandwidth and endurance of frontline organizers by surrounding them with $250,000 to $300,000 in direct surge capital per site, specialized legal and policy technical assistance, and friction-free grant administration that removes administrative burdens. Finally, at the ecosystem level, it packages these hyper-local triumphs into a synchronized national narrative of economic dignity and corporate accountability, delivering strong evidence to funders and other ecosystem players that targeted investments in network infrastructure can create catalytic impacts nationwide.

By shifting away from fragmented, one-off grantmaking, the Climate Catalyst Fund establishes a continuous Integrated Impact Flywheel, shown in Figure 1. In this dynamic engine, capital flows directly into frontline organizations, where place-based victories generate compelling national narrative assets. Those assets, in turn, directly inform USCAN's National Policy Platform and attract additional institutional investment, creating a self-sustaining cycle that continually feeds resources back into the next cohort of local member fights.

Figure 1: The Climate Catalyst Fund Integrated Impact Flywheel



Through this repeatable flywheel, USCAN proves to the broader philanthropic field that resourcing member-driven, cross-movement network infrastructure is not merely a supportive mechanism, but the most effective, scalable pathway to winning true climate justice in the United States.