
Jacqueline Colting-Stol: Foundations and climate action

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This Q&A is part of a [series of interviews](#) with six PhiLab researchers about their areas of study. PhiLab is a Canadian research network on philanthropy based in Montreal, on the campus of UQAM.

Jacqueline Colting-Stol, PhD student in social work at McGill University

As a teenager, did you have a clear idea of what your future profession would be?

No, but I was a good student and my family expected me to go on to higher education.

What attracted you to the world of research?

While I was doing my undergraduate degree in psychology, I carried out research in partnership with the Canadian Mental Health Association as part of an eight-month internship. It was a strategic decision on my part. I thought that doing research would open doors for me to go on to graduate studies. Then I discovered that it can also contribute to social change.

Philanthropy was part of your life growing up. How did that come about?

My family and I have experienced poverty and homelessness. Overcoming these challenges made it possible for me to go on and help others. I started volunteering in my home city,

Ottawa, when I was in university.

In your research you look at how foundations are working on climate change. How did this research get started?

In November 2019, PhiLab invited key players in the Canadian philanthropic ecosystem to discuss how the sector could contribute more to climate action and climate justice, and to making the energy transition more equitable. These partners helped us define the focus and scope of our research. We agreed that there would be several phases. The first phase ended in April 2020, with the delivery of the [Foundations and Climate Action](#) report.

Why should foundations that are not involved in climate issues be interested in your research?

Foundations tend to focus on reducing social inequalities. The climate crisis is increasing these inequalities. It's affecting the well-being of communities. Foundations have resources, power, financial capacity, and networks that can all be put to use to make the social, political, and economic changes that are necessary to address the climate crisis.

How does your research help foundations think about their potential in fostering action to address climate change?

Our report combines a literature review with eight case studies of foundations that are active on climate issues. We present their strategies, along with examples of their actions. Then we propose a framework that foundations can use to start their own philanthropic climate action initiatives.

Your report proposes a framework for foundations to develop their climate action. What is the framework?

There are three steps. First, each foundation must determine its own approach. Each foundation will have its own way of approaching climate change. For example, some will focus on individual behaviours and act on issues like consumer choices. Others will focus on group behaviours and organizational practices. They will look for ways to mobilize the populations that are the most affected by the climate crisis but cannot mobilize on their own. Other foundations will focus on regulation and systemic change. They will want to support efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, for example.

Once foundations identify the approach they want to take, our report proposes a series of strategies they can use to help solve the climate crisis through philanthropy. We then translate these strategies into action plans.

Your report presents five main lessons that will help foundations orient their climate action efforts. What are these?

- Innovation: we need creative ideas to respond to this crisis.
- Speed and scale: we need solutions that can be put into practice quickly, on a large scale.
- Measurement: we need to fund what can be measured. We must therefore think about

how to develop effective performance indicators.

- Capacity: small non-profit organizations need to be equipped to receive and process larger amounts of funding.
- Geography: foundations give in their communities. So we need to develop an understanding of our interdependence.

You present case studies of eight Canadian and international foundations that fund initiatives related to the climate crisis. What are they?

They are the McConnell, Trottier, MakeWay, Catherine Donnelly, Ivey, ClimateWorks, Thousand Currents, and Chorus foundations.

Can you give us some examples of their climate action strategies?

The McConnell Foundation is funding the energy transition through the Transition Accelerator, which was created to move Canada toward carbon neutrality. McConnell also funds the Canada Climate Law Initiative, which provides directors and other trustees with the legal basis to include climate action in their governance practices. MakeWay focuses on northern communities. It funds leadership and capacity development to help Indigenous youth develop solutions to social and environmental challenges in their communities. MakeWay also contributes to the creation of sustainable food systems that promote food sovereignty in rural Indigenous communities. The Ivey Foundation mobilizes stakeholders around eco-taxes and carbon pricing. The Chorus Foundation supports communities whose economies rely on resource extraction to help them make the transition to a low-carbon economy. The Thousand Currents Foundation funds citizen groups who are developing solutions to the issues that affect them, such as climate change. This foundation focuses on women's groups, youth groups, and Indigenous Peoples in particular.

What are the blind spots in foundations' climate action?

Some foundations include climate action in their existing programs. Others have made the climate crisis an integral part of their mission, or have put in place dedicated climate programs. But we are a long way from seeing foundations make a concerted shift toward climate justice through large-scale action, policy influence, grassroots mobilization, and community empowerment. On the climate file, foundations tend to support technological innovations rather than citizen movement-building and community-oriented programs. Of course, it's challenging to find a way to measure the results of these initiatives. How exactly do you measure the effectiveness of a citizen engagement program?

The health crisis has put the climate crisis on the back burner. Should we be worried about the future?

There's another way to look at the situation. The climate crisis has made us see that the issues are all linked: climate, environment, health, employment, et cetera. Looking for solutions in silos will not solve the problems. That's why foundations need to work together. One example of this is the Trottier Foundation, which has partnered with the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, the Suzuki Foundation, and five foundations to help the City of Montreal develop its 2050 carbon-neutral climate plan.