

Lost in Translation? US Foundations as Mediators between US Interests and the International Climate Policy Space

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Abstract

Given their historic ties with US foreign policy circles, their longstanding commitment to the amicable resolution of national differences, and their active role in forging an international climate regime and attendant “civil society,” US foundations were ideally positioned to mediate between US domestic and foreign policy interests, and the international climate policy space. The study of their involvement in the international climate debate provides important insights into how US domestic politics feeds into the international climate policy process and, more specifically, how the alignment of international negotiations on the US position helped deliver the Paris outcome. Drawing on archival material from the Rockefeller Archive Center, this report looks at how philanthropic foundations’ early involvement in the international climate debate was affected by domestic issues in the United States.

Introduction

Over the course of the 20th century, and as partners and collaborators of Washington on the international stage, foundations “allowed themselves to be used as private instruments of public policy,”¹ in return for government sanctioned “prestige and influence as they operated around the world.”² As Inderjeet Parmar explains, foundations like Rockefeller, Ford and Carnegie contributed to “marginalize isolationism” as a major force in US politics by:

[building] or [reforming] aspects of the US State’s foreign affairs capacities during World War II, [harnessing] their power to the American state during the Cold War, and [helping] to develop the key political and security concepts that guided American power through the period since the collapse of the Soviet bloc.³

As instruments of soft power, foundations consolidated US command in international affairs, projected US cultural values and a “liberal order [...] composed of alliances such as NATO, multilateral organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the UN, and trade agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.”⁴ In the process, they cultivated a form of “American universalism” which Ludovic Tournès describes as the deeply entrenched “belief that what is good for the United States, is also good for the rest of the world.”⁵

As I will show, philanthropic strategies towards the international climate policy space evolved over time, reflecting broader fluctuations in US and international political and diplomatic landscapes. There are three broad periods of philanthropic engagement in the time leading up to the 2015 Paris Conference of the Parties (COP). The first, spanning from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, was characterized by philanthropic efforts to establish an international climate regime, and to get Washington to commit to it – or, at the very least, not obstruct it. The second period, spanning from the early 2000s to the Copenhagen COP (2009) was characterised by a marked shift in climate funder priorities. Instead of trying to change Washington’s approach, foundations now acted to adjust, through targeted and joint efforts, the international policy architecture to the US

position by getting key stakeholders to adopt a bottom-up, pledge and review approach to international climate action. Building on the Copenhagen experience, a third phase involved ensuring that not just states but that “society,” as a whole, was aligned with the US position. In particular, this involved shaping the overall climate narrative to strengthen and “normalize” the bottom-up approach that would ultimately prevail in Paris. In this paper, drawing on material found at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I will focus on the first of these periods (1980s-1990s) and show how it paved the way for future developments in the climate philanthropy field.

Funding Climate Science

Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, philanthropic foundations helped turn global warming into a legitimate political and social problem in the US. They forged an international climate governance regime centred on new international institutions and processes – the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) –, and “global civil society” on climate change.⁶ The Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF), in particular, appears to have played a very influential role. As Thomas Wahman observed in an internal memo on the impact of RBF’s international climate efforts:

a little money, some perseverance, some strategic thinking and planning coupled with a “perception of the probable” can get some things done on the world stage. It’s very scary when you think about it. Such a thin line. What role the Rockefeller name plays in this is difficult to measure, but it is a factor.⁷

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund’s efforts in the second half of the 1980s and leading up to the 1992 Rio Conference followed on from a series of earlier philanthropic efforts begun in the 1970s that centred on building scientific consensus on climate in the US and overseas. The Rockefeller Foundation (RF), in particular, made a number of grants to different scientific bodies working on “climatic change.” Noteworthy grantees included the University of East Anglia’s

Climatic Research Unit⁸ and its innovative work on historic weather mapping. Through its Conflict in International Relations (CIR) and Quality of the Environment programmes (in some cases, through joint support), the RF sponsored a series of international workshops, conferences, and publications on the “implications of climate modification for interstate conflict”⁹, especially for “the United States, as world power, and major food producer and technological innovator.”¹⁰

While still very much focused on the climate science and the production of a shared understanding of the problem, some within the Rockefeller Foundation recognized that given “the range, complexity, and urgency of the issues raised,” international regulation or agreements would be required.¹¹ For others, however, the priority was to link climate work to existing foundation programs and areas of interest - in particular food and agriculture. By the mid-1970s, there were growing expressions of concern within the foundation on the concrete outcomes of the work it was funding. Commenting on a draft report following the 1975 Bellagio conference on “Climate Change, Food Production, and Interstate Conflict,” John A. Pino, Director of the Agricultural Sciences Program, noted:

one frequently observes the recommendation that ‘someone’ (whoever that someone may be) should give more attention to or ‘someone’ should be encouraged to. There is little direct reference to specific groups or agencies. No indication is given as to whose responsibility this should be.¹²

In a handwritten note, another RF officer went as far as to question the actual research being conducted. He wrote:

In my view, there is a... probably unjustified interest in climate problems which is fanned by a spate of papers on the subject, some of which present alarming scenarios not supported by good evidence. This has happened on topic after topic in recent years. The RF, I agree, should not be involved in supporting major proposals for research on climate. It can, however, do much to bring professionals of diverse interests together as it did at Bellagio for climatologists and agriculturalists.¹³

The apparent lack of concrete proposals and scientific consensus, when combined with internal changes in program structure and objectives, ultimately led to a significant decline in RF funding towards fundamental research on climate change and to the abandonment of its fledgling interests in climate policy work. As Ralph W. Richardson noted in an internal communication:

It is my opinion at this point, that our staff capability is inadequate to probe the fundamentals of weather prediction and climate variability. Further, such fundamental research should come clearly within the responsibilities of federal funding agencies. I am thus disinclined to urge that we consider any major modification of QE guidelines to accommodate expanded work in this field.¹⁴

Building an International Climate Regime

Only in the early to mid-1980s did foundations actively begin to support efforts to devise, agree to, and implement a global policy response to the climate issue. This coincided with growing “international collaboration and the use of international organizations to promote [a] ‘new world order,’ which was to replace the realist international system of bipolarity and balance of power that had dominated the Cold War era.”¹⁵ In the environmental field, the 1972 Stockholm Conference marked a key milestone in this respect. It paved the way for a series of international environmental initiatives and processes, which directly and indirectly benefited from philanthropic support.

Mirroring these developments, large US foundations launched “global” environmental programmes “to support work promoting the skills, attitudes, relationships, and institutions necessary for environmentally sound international development.”¹⁶ The Rockefeller Brothers Fund, through its “One World: Sustainable Resource Use” programme launched in 1983, played a precursory and highly influential role in this respect.¹⁷ It would be followed by others, most notably by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, through its “World Environment and Resources” programme, and by the Rockefeller

Foundation, through its “Global Environment” programme in 1989.

The Rockefeller Brothers Fund, in particular, played a leading role in the period surrounding the creation of the IPCC (1988), and during the negotiations phase leading up to the Second World Climate Conference (1990) and the establishment of the UNFCCC (1992). In 1985, following a period of internal and external consultations, the RBF had concluded:

that a carefully orchestrated series of international meetings and published analyses over the five-year period leading up to the conference could advance public understanding of the climate change issue to the point where the conference’s discussions would focus on more than just atmospheric science.¹⁸

This involved supporting a small group of non-governmental organisations – most notably, the Beijer Institute (Stockholm), the Environmental Defense Fund (New York), the John F. Kennedy School of Government (Massachusetts), and the Woods Hole Research Center (Massachusetts) – “that had agreed to work together to plan and sponsor the meetings and publications that were contemplated.”¹⁹ Through its focus on a relatively small group of influential and well-respected non-governmental organisations, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund wished to exert outside pressure on governments and, in particular, on the US administration. As an RBF programme officer explained, “given the glacial pace at which governments around the world appear to be moving toward coordinated action to address the problem,” the RBF felt that there was “an important behind-the-scenes role to be played by thoughtful and well-placed nongovernmental organizations that are free from the political considerations that are constraining government initiatives.”²⁰ From the outset (1986), the Rockefeller Brothers Fund strongly believed in the need to deploy “a collaborative approach” between a core group of NGOs which it believed was “more effective” for influencing the international climate policymaking process.²¹

A Science-Driven, Apolitical Approach to Climate Action

While the Rockefeller Brothers Fund believed in the need for science to translate into policy actions, it was also wary of government efforts to “politicize the climate science.” With the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988, there were concerns that the IPCC would be “held hostage by those nations that either did not wish to acknowledge the problem or felt that coordinated policy responses to it were premature.”²² This justified the need for continued support to the Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gases (AGGG) which was intended to act as a “shadow IPCC.”

In effect, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and its grantees believed that scientific consensus within both the scientific and policy communities was, in and of itself, sufficient to drive climate action. This belief undoubtedly reflected many RBF grantees’ and interlocutors’ scientific profiles and backgrounds (in particular, Michael Oppenheimer of the Environmental Defense Fund). It also explained their relative inexperience when it came to translating science into concrete policy proposals and theories of change. Rather than suggesting clear-cut policies, RBF and its grantees focused on getting governments to act. As Thomas Wahman noted:

the basic impression I received is that the biologists and ecologists can demonstrate biotic depletion and eco-system changes that, when combined with the climate change views of the physical scientists, will produce an overview of accelerating change to which policymakers must begin to respond.²³

Dealing with the US Reluctance to Take Action

The position that Wahman articulated expressed a need for identifying national governments and institutions that would be willing to take action at the international level. From a very early stage, the US government was singled out as “an obstacle to discussions of forward-looking, remedial measures.” While no longer questioning the science, as had been the case less than a decade earlier, it “steadfastly refused to consider language setting quantitative targets to stabilize CO₂ emissions – much less reduce them” and opposed proposals for significant North-South transfers.²⁴ The US position was consistent with earlier positions in the environmental field, most notably in the lead-up to Stockholm (1972), and reflected a broader refusal to sign or ratify other major international agreements or conventions.²⁵ As one RBF programme officer wrote:

while the American public’s understanding of the climate issue is far greater than it was five years ago, there is an absence of political will at the national level to commit the US government to a leadership role in the international negotiations. In view of this circumstance, pressure applied from outside, most especially from Europe and ironically Japan, will be critical to the success of national efforts to address the problem in a coordinated fashion.²⁶

Given that “leadership at the governmental level on the issue of global warming is coming at present from Europe, not from the US”²⁷, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund prioritized support to European climate NGOs and networks. Chief among these were the Beijer Institute (which would later become the Stockholm Environmental Institute) and the Climate Action Network Europe (CAN Europe), which was launched in large part through RBF and German Marshall Fund funding.

In addition to funding climate NGOs and networks, foundations also played a key convening role by hosting and facilitating climate-related events and meetings. In this way, they were contributing to nurture a shared understanding of the climate issue among scientists, policy experts, NGO, business, and government

representatives from the global North and South. In 1987, for example, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the W. Alton Jones Foundation co-sponsored two workshops in Villach (Austria), and in the Rockefeller Foundation-owned Bellagio conference centre in northern Italy, which led to the creation of the IPCC.²⁸ Bringing together 24 participants, the second workshop focused on future policy steps and the institutional arrangements required for their implementation. A third workshop in Woods Hole in 1988 laid the groundwork for the future climate convention. A further meeting “of national delegates from the global climate change negotiations, academicians, members of nongovernmental organizations, and UN officials” was organised in Bellagio in 1992 in the run-up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio.²⁹

This focus on European groups and governments in the international climate policy field did not mean that the RBF did not support US-focused efforts. Rather, these efforts were less focused on getting the US to take on a leadership role at the international level and more modestly about mainstreaming the climate issue and “[keeping] the issue of global warming ‘alive’ in policymaking circles in Washington, D.C.” At the federal level, this included “assistance to the World Resources Institute to advance discussions in Washington, DC about appropriate policy response to the warming problem.”³⁰

Focusing on the US Domestic Level

The establishment of the IPCC in 1988 and the prospect of an international climate convention encouraged foundations to extend their efforts to the US domestic level, especially in light of the US’ overall responsibility for the climate problem. By 1992, and from the moment that the UNFCCC was in place, the challenge for US foundations centred on getting the executive branch to commit to an ambitious and legally-binding international climate agreement. As Agrawala and Andresen explain, it was no longer about *whether* the US should reduce its emissions but *how* and *by when*.³¹ As before, the idea was to exert pressure on the US administration, in particular through support to Washington-based think

tanks and pressure groups like the World Resources Institute, the Renew America Project, and the US Congress-based Environmental and Energy Study Institute (EESI).³² EESI's objectives were to (i) elevate the global climate change problem on the national policy agenda; (ii) develop and advance domestic policy responses; (iii) build US support for needed international negotiations. It presents itself as “the Washington DC ‘action’ arm of the ‘Bellagio’ team - the Beijer Institute, the Environmental Defense Fund and the Woods Hole Research Center.”³³

The concept also included providing funding to EESI to organise briefings for Congressional staff “on the latest findings regarding the ozone hole over Antarctica” and on the “greenhouse effect,” as well as a retreat for senior Congressional staff to “bring key Congressional staff together with scientists, administration officials, business leaders and environmentalists to discuss near-term policy options for dealing with climate change.”³⁴ The idea was to:

help establish a core of leadership and a network among House and Senate staff, as well as identify and advance specific steps that staff and their bosses can take in the budget cycle this spring and over the course of the next couple years. It also will strengthen relationships between the Institute and Congressional staff and lay the groundwork for follow-up on specific proposals for Congressional action.³⁵

A second set of domestic efforts is also worth highlighting. These were less focused on Washington politics and more focused on raising public awareness and building momentum around climate action at the state and corporate levels, as well as signalling very “practical,” bottom-up actions that could be made to address the climate issue. For the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the aim was to “encourage an affirmative strategy for sustainable resource use in the US.”³⁶ As Renew America explained in a 1988 project proposal to the RBF:

given the complex nature of the problem and the varying interpretations of scientific data and knowledge, there is a general consensus that priorities for action in addressing this issue must be taken, not only at the international level, but also at the federal and state levels.³⁷

Through their actions, grantees like Renew America, for example, were focused on “[raising] the priority attached to warming trends in the eyes of Americans and [indicating] what states and individuals can do about the issue.” For the RBF:

the domestic orientation of this program complements well the international and developing country-related grants made by the Fund to the Beijer Institute in Sweden, Woods Hole Research Center, World Resources Institute, and others to advance its special interest during the last five years in global climate change as part of the RBF sustainable resource use program.³⁸

A priority for Renew America - as well as for EESI - was to “redefine the issues in terms that can create public awareness and policy changes.”³⁹ In particular, this involved pushing a more positive discourse than that of the scientists and environmentalists, by highlighting the combined economic and environmental benefits of climate action. In a memorandum to Michael Oppenheimer (EDF), Gordon Goodman (Beijer Institute/SEI) and Tom Wahman (RBF), Ken Murphy of EESI suggested:

[avoiding] sounding alarmist [...] to avoid being dismissed as a bunch of kooks. The tone should be serious but should leave people with a sense of hope and opportunity.’ He also suggests ‘[stressing] the opportunity to take relatively small, relatively less difficult steps that can be taken now to begin dealing with the problem.’⁴⁰

As Renew America explained in a proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund:

The challenge now is for the environmental movement to show government, industry, and the American public that substantial progress on the environmental front is in fact possible - and that many state and local governments, universities, industries, and communities have implemented innovative, pragmatic, and cost-effective programs which protect, enhance, or restore the environment. At a time when we are bombarded daily by news accounts of environmental disasters, it is vital that we counter resignation with hope - not false optimism, but realistic hope based on actual success stories in addressing environmental threats. Renew America strongly believes that success is catching. And by raising awareness of success stories across the nation, we can not

only encourage the public and private sectors to emulate successful environmental policies and programs, but can ignite the desire to go the next steps beyond.⁴¹

Inspiring Future Philanthropic Action in the US and Overseas

These early corporate, state, and consumer-focused initiatives continued to develop both domestically and internationally over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, especially in the face of an increasingly influential and highly effective “climate change counter-movement” (CCCM). In addition to undermining the science, the CCCM also focused on the negative economic impacts of climate action.⁴² Given growing domestic interest and receptiveness towards energy-related issues among certain utility companies, state energy regulators, environmentalists, and policy makers, the Rockefeller and MacArthur Foundations, in partnership with the Pew Charitable Trusts, launched in 1991 a new “pass-through” foundation dedicated to “[increasing] energy efficiency and renewable energy as a path toward a sustainable energy future” - the Energy Foundation.⁴³

By framing the climate issue through the very concrete energy lens, the three foundations wished to mobilize a wider public by emphasizing the tangible benefits for consumers and businesses – and counter the anti-climate rhetoric in the process. As Peter C. Goldmark, Jr., president of the Rockefeller Foundation, explained, “no reasonable person, it seems to those of us who became converted to the cause of improved energy practices, can fail to appreciate the considerable opportunity that lies ahead.” He went on to note:

The opportunity can be seized upon for reasons of a cleaner, healthier environment, for reasons of economic competitiveness and growth, for reasons of strengthened international security, or for reasons of global citizenship. Whatever the preferred reason – and the foundations believe all four matter – it defies logic, common sense, and self-interest for the United States to persist

in its wasteful energy practices and to drive into the next century as if fossil fuels are limitless and benign.⁴⁴

As a re-granting or “pass-through” foundation, the Energy Foundation “[specialised] as a strategic intermediary, to get the money working in the field.”⁴⁵ To do so, its priority was to get policymakers and NGOs to create an environment that was conducive to corporate investments in energy efficiency and renewables. Through its sub-national efforts, the Energy Foundation contributed to shape and push through state standards in the areas of renewable energy and energy efficiency in utilities, appliances, vehicles, and construction. By the late 1990s, the Energy Foundation was regularly referred to as a model to follow by liberal philanthropists involved in the climate debate. Many of them went on to become Energy Foundation funders – Mertz-Gilmore (1996), McKnight (1998), Packard (1999) and Hewlett (2001), among others. By 1998, contributions to the Energy Foundation were in excess of USD 100 million.

The launch of the Energy Foundation echoed a broader and growing interest within US philanthropic, environmentalist, and policy circles for business-focused low-carbon strategies. Throughout the 1990s, a number of national “big greens” proceeded, with foundation backing, to nurture close working relations with “progressive” members of the US business community. Instead of calling for more stringent regulation, they enthusiastically embraced the idea that, given the right incentives and support, businesses and investors could play a leadership role in low-carbon transition.⁴⁶ As Jay Hair of the National Wildlife Federation explained, “our arguments must translate into profits, earnings, productivity, and economic incentives for industry.”⁴⁷ This was perfectly in line with the Clinton/Gore administration’s pro-business, “new Democrat” climate agenda; an agenda, that Hair described, when commenting on the 1993 Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP), “that was more carrot than stick to curb greenhouse emissions.”⁴⁸ It also echoed a growing realisation within corporate circles that “there was a strong ‘business case’ for action on climate change.”⁴⁹

In the lead-up to the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, these US-based efforts would eventually spill over to other regional contexts through the establishment of new regional pass-through foundations – the European Climate

Foundation, Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation, Energy Foundation China – and the creation of the San Francisco-based ClimateWorks Foundation (2008). ClimateWorks and its regional partners would go on to play an influential role in pushing a win-win, green growth narrative, and the idea that the low-carbon transition would be a bottom-up affair driven by states, cities, businesses, and ordinary citizens.

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- ³¹ Shardul Agrawala and Steinar Andresen, "US Climate Policy: Evolution and Future Prospects," *Energy & Environment* 12, no. 2/3 (2001): 121.
- ³² Environmental and Energy Study Institute: Proposal for a project to prevent global climate change. December 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA763, RG 3.4, Box 98, Folder 539.
- ³³ From an EESI proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for a Project to Prevent Global Climate Change, December 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA005, RG 3, Series 2, Box 1445, Folder 9047.
- ³⁴ From a letter from Ken Murphy (EESI) to Tom Wahman and Bill McCalpin (RBF), 09 March 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA763, RG 3.4, Box 98, Folder 540. See also letter from Michael Oppenheimer (EDF) to Bill McCalpin (RBF), 03 May 1989. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA763, RG 3.4, Box 98, Folder 538.
- ³⁵ From a letter from Ken Murphy (EESI) to Tom Wahman and Bill McCalpin (RBF), 09 March 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA763, RG 3.4, Box 98, Folder 540.
- ³⁶ From agenda and docket for RBF Executive Committee Meeting, 07 October 1986. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA005, RG 3, Series 2, Box 1408, Folder 8808.
- ³⁷ From Renew America Project proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 13 July 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA005, RG 3, Series 2, Box 1409, Folder 8813.
- ³⁸ From agenda and docket for Rockefeller Brothers Fund Fall Board Meeting, 18 November 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund, FA005, RG 3, Series 2, Box 1409, Folder 8814.
- ³⁹ From Renew America Project proposal to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 13 July 1988. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA005, RG 3, Series 2, Box 1409, Folder 8813.

⁴⁰ From a memorandum from Ken Murphy to Michael Oppenheimer, Gordon Goodman and Tom Wahman, 04 August 1987. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA763, RG 3.4, Box 99, Folder 543.

⁴¹ From Renew America ‘Searching for Success: A Proposal to Develop and Maintain an “Environmental Success Index”’ proposal, May 1989. Rockefeller Brothers Fund Records, FA005, RG 3, Series 2, Box 1409, Folder 8815.

⁴² See Robert Brulle, "Institutionalizing Delay: Foundation Funding and the Creation of U.S. Climate Change Counter-Movement Organizations," *Climatic Change* 122, no. 4 (2013): 681-694; and Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

⁴³ Hal Harvey, "The Importance of Focus in Effective Philanthropy," *New Dimensions for Philanthropic Fundraising* 23 (1999): 18.

⁴⁴ See Rockefeller Foundation, *Annual Report 1990* (New York: The Rockefeller Foundation, 1991).

⁴⁵ See Energy Foundation, *Annual Report 2000* (San Francisco: The Energy Foundation, 2001).

⁴⁶ Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1996), 106.

⁴⁷ Dowie, *Losing Ground*, 107.

⁴⁸ Agrawala and Andreson, “US Climate Policy,” 121.

⁴⁹ Peter Newell and Matthew Paterson, *Climate Capitalism: Global Warming and the Transformation of the Global Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 36.