

## Season 2, Episode 9: Climate Change and Racial Justice

**Gloria:** People have a scrappy image of grassroots organizations and don't necessarily see folks on the ground as experts, and my experience was drastically different than that. Like, having come from those communities—this is where the experts are, this is where change is happening.

**Grace:** Welcome to *Giving Done Right*, a podcast on everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

**Phil:** And I'm Phil Buchanan.

**Grace:** How are you doing, Phil?

**Phil:** I'm good. How about you, Grace?

**Grace:** Doing great. Today, we're excited to talk with Gloria Walton, award-winning organizer, writer, and president and CEO of The Solutions Project, which is a climate justice organization. She joined The Solutions Project from a South LA-based community organization called SCOPE, which worked to ensure that Black and brown poor and working-class communities have an equal voice in the democratic process. In her first few months with The Solutions Project, Gloria impressively negotiated a \$43 million unrestricted grant from the Bezos Earth Fund, gave a Time 100 talk along with co-founder Mark Ruffalo—he was my high school celebrity crush, true story—and was named New President to Watch and one of the 100 Power Players by Inside Philanthropy.

**Phil:** Always interesting to learn new facts about you, Grace. I'm excited also about Gloria and the fact that she is at this really important intersection between environment and climate issues and racial justice—you know, the disproportionate impacts of environmental issues on people of color in this country are well-documented. Literally one half of people of color live close to hazardous waste. African Americans are exposed to demonstrably worse air quality—and that's not trivial because the result is higher rates and risk of cancer. You look at the implications and effects of something like redlining, policies that have kept folks out of certain neighborhoods—and the result is that people of color in this country disproportionately live in areas without access to a lot of trees and green spaces and it means that those neighborhoods are literally hotter than other neighborhoods. So, Gloria is really working to build the power of folks in those communities, bringing her grassroots organizing experience to her current role.

**Grace:** And our conversation with Gloria focused specifically, I think, more on the racial justice aspects of the movement, and Gloria has a lot of critiques for philanthropy that even though we've seen that donors have woken up to the realities of systemic racism in our world, that there's still a long way for philanthropy to go in her view. So, I'm looking forward to this conversation.

**Phil:** Here's Gloria.

Gloria Walton, welcome to the *Giving Done Right* podcast.

**Gloria:** Hi, thanks so much for having me.

**Phil:** I'm so glad that you're here. A lot of our audience are individual donors who, I think, care about climate change and they may struggle with some big questions, like, what do I even do? It's such a big issue. And then maybe they haven't thought, some have, probably, but some maybe not so much about the relationship between climate change and racial equity. And as I understand your work—that's a big part of what you're focused on. How would you help someone to understand these issues and about where to even begin as a donor?

**Gloria:** This is something that I reflect on from time to time, especially as I'm out here trying to raise money for these issues. And I'm someone who really believes that if you're really about justice and equity, it's kind of an imperative to center racial justice and your strategies and to understand the dominant world views that influence our society. For me, those dominant world views really are rooted in colonialism and white supremacy, right, is a word that we've been hearing a lot in the past year. And what that looks like in society is often thinking about the individual, versus community. It's extractive approaches where we see everything and everyone for this individual need of, like, how am I going to use this person or use this land or use these communities? And then there's, like, commodification, right? Which just sounds gross, especially when you're doing that to people and communities; actually putting a price tag or worth on people and communities and the places that we call home. And so, when you're just looking at that baseline, right, trying to not take words like racism and white supremacy and colonialism but actually see the systems that have been perpetuated and rooted in those models and dominant reviews that I just spoke to, I think then you can be like, "Okay, you know, what is my role in changing those systems? How am I either contributing or disrupting the status quo?" And this moment is really calling all of us to push pause and reflect on our role in it. And I, come from 16 years of community organizing in South Central LA. And so, I clearly believe we're change makers and we're here to recognize the harm that's been caused from the dominant world views that are

perpetuating society and our globe at this moment and required to do our part to change it and to repair the harm that's been done and to model what interdependence and interconnected is. And quite frankly, I believe that the moment that we're living in, you know, from COVID to the climate crisis, is really pushing us to root in being interconnected and a sense of community and mutual aid and moving away from the dominant practice of sacrifice, whether that's of people and places, to a culture of care.

**Phil:** And it's interesting that you mentioned, you know, the pandemic, because I feel like for anybody who wasn't paying attention to systemic racism, and then was looking at the data and seeing how it was playing out in terms of both the health and economic impacts on populations within our country—you know, the same dynamic obviously exists with respect to climate change where the negative effects of climate change, to a much greater degree than other folks in all kinds of ways, some folks are subject to experience—right down to, like, how many trees there are in your neighborhood. You're leading The Solutions Project, which is a great name. So, what are some of the specific solutions? I mean, how—can you give us some practical examples of what it looks like to take the analysis you just described and actually do something to make it better?

**Gloria:** Yeah. I'm really appreciating that question, and it just takes me back to when I was an intern and I was a community organizer in South Central LA, and I organized for 16 years, and it was there that I learned some foundational lessons, and that was from the grassroots leaders in those communities. These were Black and brown communities, often low income and working class, often on the front lines of environmental degradation. So, in South Central, you know, it's a highly concretized community, meaning exactly what you said. There's, like, minimal green space; minimal trees; barely any parks; some food deserts; it's situated at the center of freeways that go to the north, south, east, and west; often diesel trucks running through the communities, heading to the ports; families are living next to oil drilling and fracking. And then you have like this beautiful community, Black and brown folks who have joined forces to build power in their neighborhoods in order to change the conditions.

And so those were some of the foundational lessons that I learned is, one, that the cornerstone of organizing really is relationships, and there's nothing like the relationships at the community level. And the other thing is that the systems and the conditions of the community that I was organizing in, and the community that I came from, and that I grew up in in Jackson, Mississippi, even—those conditions weren't happenstance or coincidence. I began to understand that decisions are being made every single day to create and perpetuate those conditions. And most importantly, I learned that I had the power of choice to

join forces with them and exercise collective power and agency to really influence those decisions that are being made and, ideally, change the conditions of the communities that we lived in.

So those are some of the lessons that, for me, got me to understand the importance of investing in community organizing, because these communities really understand that when you look at a person, like, our lives are really situated at the intersection of so many issues, and that's one thing that I really love about climate justice is I believe that it's really an intersectional issue. Meaning that, you know, when you're thinking about food, that's a climate issue. When you're thinking about transit and transportation, that's climate. When you're thinking about water and water infrastructure, that's climate. When you're thinking about jobs and the quality of our jobs and whether they're clean jobs, you know, that's climate. When you're thinking about affordable housing, right, like, buildings have a huge carbon footprint, and so there's a way where we should be thinking about construction from a climate justice lens. I learned these lessons in grassroots communities.

**Grace:** So, I'm picturing that The Solutions Project assists local, grassroots organizers to speak up on behalf of communities where decisions are being made from up high that would affect their wellbeing from an environmental and climate perspective, but also just generally, you know, to your point about intersectionality—is that an accurate depiction?

**Gloria:** Yeah, so, I came into The Solutions Project with my experience from organizing, and it's really important to invest in the social infrastructure of community organizations that are often on the front lines and the first responders, you know, when there's crisis or Hurricane Ida hits, right? It's that social infrastructure of community organizations that are there supporting communities. It's building power to transform our worldviews; it's building power to influence policies and to change and transform communities. And so, one of the things that I want to say, because sometimes we—I don't know, people have, like, a scrappy image of grassroots organizations and don't necessarily see folks on the ground as experts. And my experience was drastically different than that. Like, having come from those communities, this is where change is happening, from the streets to the White House. You know, when I look at the movements that have been happening from BLM to the climate justice movement, that's an infrastructure of organizing and power building centered in racial justice. And I see how grassroots communities and grassroots ideas and grassroots organizations are shaping philanthropy. You know, when I started as an intern 16 years, 17 years ago, you know, it was then that I heard Anthony Thigpen, the founder of the organization that I ran for 10

years, spoke, talking about racial justice and systemic change, talking about the importance of funding organizing and power building in this moment that's led by the communities most impacted by the problems and conditions. They were talking about the need for general operating and multi-year support. And now that I'm leading an organization that's really situated in philanthropy but rooted in community and in partnership and solidarity with community and the movement, I'm like, finally, the things that I was hearing 16 plus years ago, philanthropy is finally putting into practice—multi-year general operating support. The needle has moved in that direction, and it's not transformative grantmaking just yet, but people are at least getting more comfortable with two-year grantmaking or three-year grantmaking.

**Phil:** You're touching on a lot of issues that we talk a lot about on this podcast, including trusting people who are closest to the issues or experiencing challenges. Our mutual friend, Crystal Hayling, I remember her saying to me. “people are the best experts on their own lives, after all, you know, and do not particularly like their lives to be cast as problems for other people to solve,” right? And that that's a huge issue in philanthropy, the sort of overly top-down, dynamic. We at CEP are studying the degree to—and have been tracking—the degree to which big philanthropy foundations have changed—and I think individual donors have, as well, although we have less data on that. It's interesting because, like, something like just unrestricted support, which is what nonprofit leaders so badly need, it's not that folks working at foundations didn't know that this is what nonprofit leaders need, but for some reason the practice just wasn't changing. 20 years, it's been stuck at 20% of total grants. And then all of a sudden, now, we are seeing the shift and we are seeing people saying now that they realize that of course non-profits need flexibility and community rooted organizations need to be able to respond quickly to what's going on. I don't know, I always feel it's a little bit like, you know, your doctor tells you, you know, “Hey, Phil have less cheese,” you know, “exercise more.” Yeah, yeah, yeah. Then you have this—not real example—but you have the heart attack and you're like, “oh, maybe I really will.” And this period has been the heart attack and the question now is how do we build on that? How do we sustain it?

I'd love for you to give an example, if you could, of a particular moment during this time when you've seen grassroots, community-led change happen and something got better. Give us an example or two, what's your favorite success story of the kind of change you want to see more of?

**Gloria:** So, I have many success stories—so, definitely hold that point. But you just said a loaded comment and I just want to respond to a few things.

**Phil:** Okay, good, yeah.

**Gloria:** If you don't mind. You were talking about this idea of, like, trust and, kind of, where philanthropy and donors are moving in this moment. And so, at The Solutions Project, yes, we give general operating grants, but we lead with the value and say that we are giving self-determination grants because to your point, Phil, people don't want kind of parachuting down into communities saying, "this is what you need, this is my analysis of the problem," right, like, that's not the way, but it really is trusting those communities. And even for myself being a former practitioner, but now being situated at an intermediary that is between philanthropy and the climate justice movement, I know that I have to respect the work that I came from, which is why I'm even in the position that I'm in today. And so, even I still consult with, partner with, and then thought partnership with communities on the ground.

**Phil:** Right.

**Gloria:** When we're talking about multi-year support, the value behind that is really understanding that change doesn't happen overnight. Right now, the sweet spot in philanthropy is giving, as I mentioned earlier, two-year grants, three-year grants—but transformative grantmaking requires us to give grants that are 10 years. Because for the systemic change that communities are trying to make, two and three usually isn't a good arc of change, right? Like, we know that the arc of change is long, and it bends towards justice. So, transformative grantmaking would be us giving for 10 years.

And to this question that you asked earlier with donors, and what donors can do, is trusting the practitioners on the ground, moving money faster and at a larger scale, the scale of the problem, really—and there's different ways that that can be done. Grassroots communities are saying you can either give to us directly; you can move, kind of, community controlled capital infrastructure, which is sometimes called non-extractive loan funds, that are often driven by grassroots collaborations; or you can move money to the infrastructure of national intermediaries, like The Solutions Project, and so many others, who are really accountable to the movements and we, like, move flexible dollars quickly and we already have that apparatus to make that happen. So, a good donor really understands those things: that you got to move the money quickly, you got to trust the practitioners on the ground. I always think that how you invest your dollars tells a story. If you follow the money, it's going to tell you what you value.



**Grace:** If I can, I want to pull back more to like a 10,000-foot view because listening to you and sort of channeling some of our listeners that we've gotten to know—folks care about climate change, they also care about racism. I mean, these two particular issues are ones that tend to be, like, even before you start a conversation, you have to even define like, okay, what exactly are we talking about? Right, like, are we talking about using less plastic on the climate change front? Are we talking about policy change? Are we talking about electing the right officials? Racism—is that about, like, my personal views or is that about how I show up in our school district? And so, I reflect that because The Solutions Project is at the intersection of these two, there's almost, like, a unique challenge of finding the right place to insert donors. It seems like one recommendation you would have for donors is that the lever for change in your view really is the changing and the disrupting of the status quo when it comes to policy and philanthropy, is that an accurate depiction?

**Gloria:** Absolutely. When I came into The Solutions Project—and just to give you a sense of how I got here—when I was running SCOPE for the past 10 years, and we were an inaugural grantee of The Solutions Project. Solutions Project was a smaller grantmaking organizations then, but we were, like, really values aligned. So, I was in thought partnership a lot with the team at Solutions Project and was eventually asked to serve on the board as a practitioner. And so, I served on the board, and really helped to pivot the conversation—and I am someone who loves science, right? We were celebrating the science. That's where a lot of our investments were going. We were doing some grantmaking, but it wasn't necessarily in parity with some of the other things that we were moving. And we were doing a lot of culture work, which is great. And so, for me, all of those sectors are needed, but we're not going to have success unless we really center our investments in the communities that have been historically disinvested in, underinvested in. And once I brought that more fortified vision to The Solutions Project I was recruited to run the organization. I came in with a really big vision, one of transformative grantmaking. You know, what is it going to take to be able to give at minimum five-year, multi-year, six-figure, general operating, self-determination grants to grassroots communities that have been leading transformative change for generations.

When I was talking to high-net-worth individuals, a lot of folks were like, “oh, well, your previous year’s budget was \$1.2 million. And therefore, you know, we feel comfortable giving you this much. We want to fund commensurate with your previous year’s budget.”

Now, mind you, my vision of transformative grant making—\$1.2 million budget ain't gonna cut it. And so, I had to have more conversations than I'd like

to admit about what it requires in this moment from philanthropy to disrupt the status quo. It is not okay to fund commensurate with the previous year's budget that has nothing to do with me and my leadership and my vision for this organization.

So, these were difficult conversations to have where I literally had to say, “and that is what racism looks like in philanthropy.” And that's something that made people uncomfortable, but it's something that was the truth. The numbers tell us that for some reason, we are more comfortable giving to white-led work than we are giving to a woman of color. And that's a problem. We're comfortable giving loads of money for experimentation, for failure. But if it's a woman of color asking for those dollars, the onus is on me to prove and demonstrate how I'm going to create change overnight. That's a problem. And that's what racism looks like in our investments.

So, when I say, like, we have to pause and reflect, that's what I mean, is really evaluate where our dollars have been going and where they have not been going and make the necessary changes.

**Phil:** And, I mean, that's so interesting that you're talking about this because we see in our work tremendous interest right now on the part of foundations in actually understanding—which many of them are still struggling to understand—even what the demographics of their grantee organizations are, how it varies by program area, and analyzing the degree to which they are doing exactly what you described, in order—and I think this is hopeful—to chart a different path where there is more—not just a little more, but massively more—support for organizations that are led by people of color, led by people from affected communities. I don't know to what degree folks are following this, but meantime, you have, among conservative donors and foundations and some more moderate ones, a real backlash to that idea, and I just want to understand the degree to which you're hearing this or run into this: almost a sense of, “well, you know, why are we focusing so much on the individual, demographics of leaders? Are we suggesting that white leaders can't work on issues of race and racism as they intersect with climate?” or whatever the issue is. But I'm curious whether you're seeing any of that kind of backlash, which feels like a lot different conversation than five or six months ago when it seemed like you didn't get a lot of disagreement if you said like, “we have really got to take a look at these numbers and shift where funding is going,” and now we're hearing more and more people say, “well, we're overemphasizing this.” And I think I know don't agree with that, but I'm curious if you're hearing that and what your take is, what you would say back to those folks.



**Gloria:** Absolutely. Yes, I'm hearing that. Which is what the moment is requiring us to do. So, if we recognize, again, the story that the dollars are telling us, the story that recent reports all came out within, like, the past month or two, right? So, this is fresh data. This isn't old data. This is fresh data. It's showing us where the money has been going and where it's not going. And we know that it's not going to Black- and indigenous- and people of color-led work and communities. And the one thing that really stood out to me about the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, from that PRE report is, like, the miniscule amount that's going to racial justice and to the grassroots. But as I stated, that there's even more of a fraction from there that goes to BIPOC-led groups and work. And in fact, what the report was naming is that many of those racial equity dollars are actually still funding white-led organizations. They're the ones receiving racial equity dollars and justice grants, and often appropriating language from the movements on the ground. And, you know, granted, we all need dollars. I think that every there's enough money to go around. However, if equity is about leveling the playing field, to level the playing field does require you to center those that have been historically underinvested in, disinvested in. And “overinvestment,” for me, is not a thing, but for lack of a better way of describing it, you’ve got to overinvest—

**Phil:** Right.

**Gloria:** —in those places and spaces to level the playing field.

**Grace:** So, Gloria, at the end of every episode, we ask each guest the question, giving done right, to you, is about: fill in the blank. How would you answer that?

**Gloria:** Giving done right, for me, is about disrupting the status quo and centering communities that have been on the front lines of environmental degradation and harm for generations. Giving done right, for me, means that you have to recognize that those conditions aren't happenstance, but that decisions are made to create and perpetuate those conditions. And giving done right means that you see the opportunity to turn those values on its head and create new ways that are rooted in community, interdependence, sustainability, regeneration, and reparations—because all reparations is saying is that we have to repair the harm that has been done.

**Grace:** Gloria, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Gloria:** Thank you.

**Phil:** Thank you, Gloria.

**Gloria:** Thanks so much for having me.

**Grace:** So, Phil, what'd you think of our conversation with Gloria?

**Phil:** I thought was really provocative—in a good way. Donors can really interrogate themselves about how they're thinking about allocating their resources, given that we see the underinvestment, historically, in communities of color, in organizations led by people of color. And there's a lot of different data out there, but that story comes through, and she's calling on us not to just address it, but to *really* address it. And, yes, it is true that there's been some change and some shift in the past 18 months, but I think she's arguing for a really sustained commitment to supporting folks to be able to advocate for themselves and what they need.

**Grace:** My mind immediately goes, for some reason, to young people who may be living in some of these communities and how the effect of climate change on them can really shift the trajectory of their lives—you know, whether it's access to clean water that doesn't have lead in it or not having to move when there's constant flooding. And so, it's interesting because I came into this conversation thinking, oh, I wonder whether she's going to give us advice on like, yes, we have to do recycling and give to advocacy and whatever, but actually, her doubling down on the racial aspect, I think, is going to stick with me for a while.

**Phil:** Yeah, and coming back to one of our themes of trusting folks who are closest to the issues to chart the solutions.

**Grace:** So, Phil, where can people go for more information about effective giving?

**Phil:** More resources are on [cep.org](http://cep.org) as well as [givingdoneright.org](http://givingdoneright.org), which has all of our podcast episodes and show notes.

**Grace:** You can find us on Twitter at [@gracenicolette](https://twitter.com/gracenicolette) and at [@philxbuchanan](https://twitter.com/philxbuchanan), you can send us a note with any suggestions or comments at [gdrpodcast@cep.org](mailto:gdrpodcast@cep.org).

**Phil:** I want to thank our sponsors, as always, the Walton Family Foundation—no relation to the guest that we just spoke to—and the National Philanthropic Trust.

And if you liked the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. It really helps.

**Grace:** Thanks again to Gloria for joining us.

*Giving Done Right* is a production of the Center for Effective Philanthropy. It's hosted by me, Grace Nicolette, and Phil Buchanan. It's produced by Sarah Martin with mixing and engineering by Kevin O'Connell and additional editing by Isabel Hibbard. Our theme song is from Blue Dot Sessions and original podcast artwork is by Jay Kustka. A special thanks to our colleagues, Molly, Heidemann, Sae Darling, Naomi Rafal for their research writing and logistical support.