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Redefining rights-based conservation through philanthropy: The Ford Foundation in Mesoamerica

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Abstract

The role of the philanthropic sector in climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation is gaining renewed attention as new pledges to dramatically increase funding for nature-based climate solutions mount. Despite their significant role in the conservation space, philanthropies are relatively understudied as donors; in particular, the lack of accountability and transparency in philanthropy have made them a "black box", including in conservation-related efforts. Based on extensive document and database review alongside interviews with philanthropic grant-makers and recipients, this article seeks to analyze the conservation-related efforts of the Ford Foundation—a long-standing philanthropic actor in international sustainable development. Specifically, we examine how Ford Foundation practices in Mexico and Central America have shifted since 2000 to center Indigenous Peoples and local communities, both in terms of thematic focus and strategic approach. In explaining how Ford Foundation grant-makers themselves understand the process of change, and their lessons from this process, this article highlights the ongoing challenges to and possible methods for centering inclusive, territorial approaches to produce more effective, lasting conservation outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Central America, indigenous peoples and local communities, land rights, Mexico, nature-based solutions, philanthropy, territory

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent high-profile biodiversity conservation and nature-based solutions (NBS) to climate change funding announcements have almost universally highlighted the importance of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) in achieving environmental goals (Bezos Earth Fund, 2021; Sutherland, 2021; Tegel, 2021). From private philanthropic pledges to bi- and multi-lateral donor commitments, IPLCs are increasingly receiving recognition and funding for their role in protecting biodiversity and key carbon sinks—as well as right to do so (DGM, 2020; Tenure Facility, 2022; UNFCCC, 2022). At the turn of the 21st century, centering these communities so clearly in international agendas would have been extraordinary; while conservation programs might discuss IPLCs as stakeholders, participants, or beneficiaries, or might recognize the negative impacts of conservation on local communities (Redford & Sanderson, 2000; Schwartzman et al., 2000), IPLCs were rarely involved in program design and implementation in ways that reflected

their visions, values, or needs. Indeed, even as conservation organizations committed to respect Indigenous rights, whether IPLCs should play any role at all remained up for debate amongst conservationists (Dearden & Locke, 2005; Oates, 1999; Terborgh, 1999; Witter & Satterfield, 2019).

Discourses around the appropriate role of IPLCs in conservation were always contested—amongst academics, conservationists, and social movements (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Ciplet, 2014; Newing, 2009). And, even as the exact meaning of IPLC involvement in these new conservation calls remains vague, and the direct support to these groups quite limited (Rights and Resources Initiative and Rainforest Foundation Norway, 2022), the dramatic shift in mainstream discourse regarding their importance reflects the long-standing effort of IPLCs to affect conservation governance processes from the local to the global (Rodrigues, 2015; Sauls, 2020; Wallbott, 2014). It also reflects shifts in the vision, funding, and accompaniment strategies of key IPLC allies—including philanthropies. This article examines the trajectory of one philanthropic donor through this shift in conventional thinking on community, rights, and conservation by analyzing internal explanations of change.

Drawing on our work for and with the Ford Foundation in Mexico and Central America (MCA), as well as with their regional grantees and partnered foundations, we reflect on two distinct questions. One is theoretical, related to a call by researchers to better characterize and explain the role of philanthropy in environmental governance (Betsill et al., 2022; Gruby et al., 2021). The second is more applied and specific to contemporary concerns around effectively and appropriately increasing conservation and climate finance to IPLCs. Through an analysis of the changing conservation-related priorities and strategies of the Ford Foundation, a professional philanthropic organization based in New York City, USA, this study contributes to "opening up the black box" of philanthropy (following Gruby et al., 2021) through an in-depth case study. We focus on how Ford Foundation grantmakers and those they work with most closely understand processes of change related to conservation funding themselves. After a brief overview of key literature, our data and methods, and the Foundation's history, we turn to analyzing Ford Foundation's funding trends. We find evidence of increased funding for IPLCs in this region, and examine changing Ford discourses around this funding over a 20-year period.

2 | CONTEXTUALIZING CONSERVATION PHILANTHROPY

Today's relatively large, mostly US-based, professionalized, institutional foundations are celebrated and criticized for the outsized role they play in civil society. Even as these foundations lack clear accountability to stakeholders, capture and hold vast amounts of wealth, and may undermine more radical forms of social change, they may also support experimentation that would not be possible with public or corporate funding while working toward longer term social change, rather than on an electoral or shareholder timeline (Holmes, 2012; Reich, 2016). Regardless of the range of theoretical or moral justifications for or critiques of foundations, they are unquestionably significant actors in shaping civil society across scales, including in the environmental sector (Barker, 2008; Ramutsindela et al., 2013).

While environmental concerns have historically rated lower on the agenda for most philanthropies across all world regions (Johnson, 2018), philanthropy has played an important role in shaping global conservation since its earliest days (Betsill et al., 2022; Brockington & Duffy, 2011). From the investment of capitalism's emerging elites in the 19th-century protection of the American West to the start-up funding for the world's major conservation organizations, philanthropists have fundamentally shaped thinking on and spending for nature conservation (Chapin, 2004; Spierenburg & Wels, 2010). From agenda-setting to specific calls for projects to cultivating key non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to fostering market-oriented and innovation-focused measures, philanthropy has influenced the what and how of contemporary environmental action (Bartley, 2007; Holmes, 2012; Igoe et al., 2011).

As Ramutsindela et al. (2013, p. 4) suggest, "much of the work on [conservation] philanthropy... is polarized along the lines of the good and the harm that are associated with philanthropy," and a growing number of analyses have considered the impacts of specific philanthropy-supported biodiversity-related projects, often critically (Barker, 2008; Bartley, 2007; Holmes, 2011, 2012). However, the internal workings of foundation strategy development and decision-making remain underexamined, especially in the realm of international support for conservation. As Betsill et al. (2022, p. 686) note, "Scholars often make passing reference to foundation support for environmental governance initiatives, but they rarely conceptualize foundations as agents." While a significant body of development scholarship has analyzed bilateral and multilateral donors as well as NGOs as significant actors in sustainable development, scholars have turned more limited and less explicit attention toward philanthropies as agents of change (Bebbington et al., 2006; Brockington & Scholfield, 2010; Corson, 2011; Milne & Niesten, 2009; Sachedina, 2011). Recognizing that philanthropies can play a role in conservation (Betsill et al., 2022), and that the people and ideas that compose these institutions change and can drive external change over time (Bebbington et al., 2006), suggests that unpacking how

philanthropy works in conservation might enable better explanations of actually occurring environmental governance in terms of the relations, networks, and goals that shape different actors and their (inter)actions in conservation spaces (Larson & Petkova, 2011).

3 | METHODS

This article is based on three key data sources: (1) Ford Foundation's funding reports and grants database; (2) Ford Foundation headquarters and MCA regional office reports and documents, in addition to those from the Climate and Land Use Alliance (CLUA); and (3) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with current and previous Ford Foundation grant-makers (eight interviews), grant-makers from aligned foundations (two), and representatives of recipient organizations (five). We also draw autoethnographically on our own experiences as recipients, partners, and—for one author, now—an employee of Ford Foundation, acknowledging that this "insider" identity may limit possibilities for critique even as it enables certain forms of reflexive research (Butz & Besio, 2009). For the purposes of this paper, we consider all activities related to biodiversity conservation and land and natural resources management as "conservation-related".

We draw on publicly accessible and internal documentation from Ford Foundation and CLUA, the internal available due to the current position of Victor López Illescas. This positionality meant we could also access Ford's internal grantmaking database, allowing us to examine additional years and grant characteristics beyond what is publicly available online (Ford Foundation, 2022a). The extended database enabled examination of all grants between 2001 and 2020, which we coded for levels of support to the environment and natural resources programs and to the MCA region. Within MCA, we also coded all grant recipients and conservation-related grants by organization type (Table 1) and geographic scale (global, regional, national, local). For example, those grant recipients we identify as "IPLC" are community-based organizations or networks strongly linked to or constituted from communities. We then produced summary statistics of different funding types and recipients over time.

In fall 2021, we conducted virtual interviews with environment-related program officers for the MCA region and headquarters as well as senior headquarters personnel who have overseen this portfolio in some way since 2000. We also selected key external partners whose perspectives could help place Ford Foundation's conservation activities in a broader philanthropic context. Given our working knowledge of this field, we also spoke with several regional experts who either presently or previously worked for a Ford Foundation grantee.[1] To analyze interview data, each author manually coded each anonymized interview individually, based on themes we identified beforehand as relevant to explaining internal change processes, specifically: internal context, strategy changes, external context, key challenges, distinguishing features of Ford grantmaking. The authors shared our key findings through a collaborative note-taking exercise. We then compared our observations on those key themes and suggested other themes or trends that emerged through the coding, highlighting areas of convergence and differences in our interpretations to produce a commonly held understanding of how participants understood processes of change.

TABLE 1 Types of organizations funded by the Ford Foundation in the Mexico and Central America region as coded by the authors, with examples.

Organization type	Example
Academic/Research	Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)
Communications/ Journalism	International Center for Journalists
Conservation NGO/Network	International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
Fund-intermediary	Global GreenGrants Fund
IPLC	Honduran Black Fraternity Organization (OFRANEH)
International organization	United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
Other civil society organizations/ networks	Oxfam

4 | FORD FOUNDATION: TRENDS AND SHIFTS

In this section, we summarize the development of Ford Foundation's role in and funding of conservation and the environment since 2000, particularly for the MCA region. Based on these trends, we draw on interviews and program documents to explain how former and present Ford Foundation staff understand key changes in grantmaking strategy over time, focusing on philanthropy-specific perceptions of IPLCs in conservation. We then question what contextual factors may have influenced these changes.

4.1 | Background: Ford Foundation, conservation, and MCA

The Ford Foundation, established in 1936, quickly became the largest foundation in the United States (Magat, 1979), and remained so for decades. In 1950, the trustees identified: "I) the establishment of peace, II) the strengthening of democracy, III) the strengthening of the economy, IV) education in a democratic society, and V) improved scientific knowledge of individual behavior and human relations" as essential to the Ford Foundation mission of enhancing human wellbeing (Sutton, 1987, p. 49). Ford Foundation's earliest international work coincided with the emergence of the Cold War, and tracked with US policy goals related to democracy promotion as an antidote to communist influence, but also evidenced a strong commitment to intercultural exchange and peace promotion (Sutton, 1987). Sutton (1987) suggests that the tense domestic political situation for progressive causes in the United States in this era made work on social justice easier for the Foundation abroad.

The focus on funding research about international social problems as a key input to affecting social change and bolstering democracy reflected a post-World War II faith in science, technology, and research, which permeated the Foundation's approach in this era, as evidenced in significant investment in the Green Revolution (Byerlee & Lynam, 2020). By the early 1970s, nearly one-fifth of the Foundation's portfolio was for work abroad (Bell, 1971). The original breadth of Ford's mission enabled new directions in their efforts, especially related to land and resources through international offices (Magat, 1979). Common discourses about population growth, particularly in the post-colonial world, directed Ford Foundation attention to ideas about relations between resource use and poverty in the Global South (Bell, 1971; Hermalin, 1987), leading to increasing attention to the connections between poverty, livelihoods, and resource management, intersecting with burgeoning attention to nature conservation globally.

Funding for the environment has never accounted for a significant portion of Ford Foundation's portfolio; however, in the early years of the environmental movement, Ford played a significant role in expanding it, including by supporting nascent organizations, such as Resources for the Future, and providing funding at key moments to now-dominant environmental organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy (Barker, 2008; Birchard, 2005; Chapin, 2004). In its overseas work, the Ford Foundation turned explicit attention from land and resource management to the relation between environmental degradation and rural poverty by the early 1990s, ahead of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. By the mid-1990s, the directors of two of the world's largest conservation NGOs sat on the Foundation's Board (Chapin, 2004), and Ford made repeated grants to organizations aiming to conserve nature in the United States and abroad.

The Ford Foundation MCA office focused from its founding on reducing poverty and injustice, encouraging democratic participation, expanding and strengthening civil society, and supporting education and research. The goal of "expanding community rights over natural resources" emerged from the Foundation's concerns over persistent rural poverty and a lack of economic development opportunities. This catalyzed conservation-related funding in the MCA region from early 1990s, with an initial focus on historically excluded communities' access to assets and opportunities to overcome poverty and on expanding support to policy debates on sustainable development in the region as the theme grew in global significance (Barker, 2008). In MCA, sustainable development-focused grantmaking prioritized poverty alleviation through better management of natural resources, especially in terms of identifying alternative livelihoods and improving agricultural productivity in order to "set aside" forest spaces for conservation, per the Foundation's annual reports (Ford Foundation, 2022b).

4.2 | Trends in Ford Foundation funding for conservation

While by the turn of the 21st century, Ford Foundation had an established history working with conservation organizations and on land-based environmental issues, its funding for conservation-related grants remains a limited portion of the overall Foundation portfolio. However, this theme has grown in absolute terms in recent years, with a jump in the past decade (Figure 1).

Conservation-related funding disbursed from the MCA regional office has increased over time as a proportion of its total funding, but still makes up less than 15% of total funding from the office. That said, some funding from headquarters also flows into the region, reflecting Ford's effort to connect global priorities to local programs. Of conservation-related funding, the total and relative amounts dedicated to IPLCs in MCA has clearly grown since 2000 (Figure 2). Despite a downturn in total and conservation funding during the 2008 Financial Crisis, the percentage flowing to IPLCs has only increased over this period. As of the most recent funding period, almost half of all conservation-related funding in the MCA region goes to IPLC groups, primarily driven by large grants since 2017. This level of funding is up from a mere 18% in the first period studied (Figure 2).

4.3 | Why do more IPLCs receive funds?

Interviewed former and current Ford Foundation staff suggest that these funding trends reflect a concerted change in strategy. They contend that, over time, their

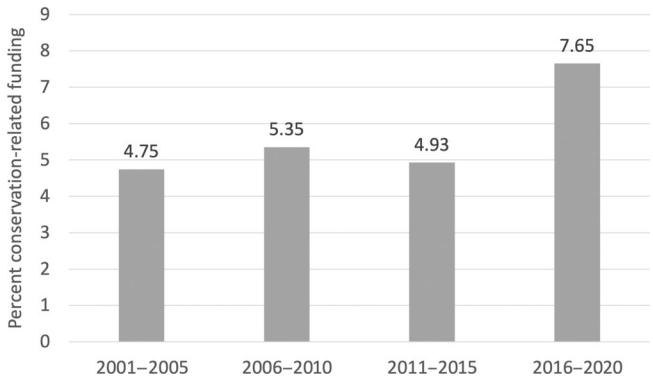
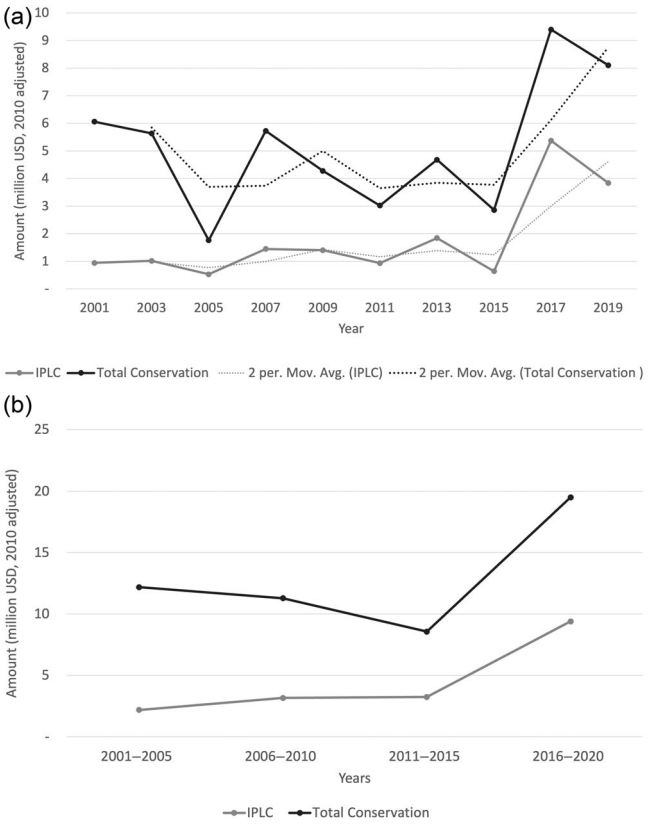


FIGURE 1 Percent of total Ford Foundation funding for conservation-related projects across all geographies, by five-year time step. To account for the irregular duration of grants, our understanding of the dynamics of internal grant-making processes across years, and the impact of external phenomena, such as the 2008 Financial Crisis, we divided the funding data into five-year "buckets" in Figures 1 and 2(b) to better display trends over time.



Years	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2016-2020
IPLC Funding (MCA)	18%	28%	38%	48%

FIGURE 2 Total conservation-related funding from the Ford Foundation Mexico and Central America office and funding from that office specifically to IPLC groups, by two-year (a) and five-year (b) time step. Figure 2a also includes a two-year moving average across (dashed)—the average grant duration across the 20-year time frame was 21-months, with the longest average grant duration (27 months) in the 2016–2020 period. The decrease in overall funding in the 2011–2015 period reflects the ongoing challenges of the 2008 Financial Crisis.

focus has changed in terms of grant-making priorities and modalities, and that much of this change derives from broader conversations amongst Ford Foundation staff interested in rural livelihoods and the environment. By the early 2000s, conversations between program officers (POs) across regions were driving changes in conservation-related funding approaches via the Environment and Development Affinity Group (EDAG). In the mid-1990s, "affinity groups" emerged within Ford Foundation as a bridge across different offices; while some of these groups developed quasi-organically, by the early 2000s, they had some institutional approval and support. EDAG enabled POs to examine their dissatisfaction with the status quo of funding models as well as vigorously discuss concerns with the growing strength of global conservation NGOs in key locations where Ford Foundation was already doing work. As a former MCA PO noted, EDAG was "perhaps to be the most powerful learning mechanism I've ever participated in in my life."[2]

A key goal of Ford Foundation in international conservation-related work at this point was helping communities "make commercial but prudent use of natural resources," through sustainable agriculture or deriving new forms of nature-based economic value (Ford Foundation, 1999, p. 32). As a former MCA PO observed, "there was a lot of emphasis on kind of conceptual developments, on funding intellectuals or groups that would create visions or narratives that would then influence things... There was a lot of emphasis on little pilot projects of different sorts." This approach translated into a significant number of relatively small, repeated grants to known actors, most of whom were in existing research institutions or NGOs and whose efforts were meant to "gradually creat[e] thinking and narratives that will eventually become kind of the dominant narrative." Thus, besides funding research into and pilot funding for ideas like payments for ecosystem services, community-based natural resource management, and certification schemes, POs worked with governments and established NGOs to create enabling environments for these efforts.

As it evolved, EDAG's conversations increasingly revealed significant challenges regarding the durability, embeddedness, and responsiveness of their grant-making. Some of the key difficulties they identified regarding conservation-related funding included that only a small percentage—if any—reached grassroots groups. As a former MCA PO noted, "nobody gave money on the ground, they gave to universities, think tanks, research institutes." Through EDAG, several POs decided they needed "to

break away from the mold of giving" in perpetuity to large international research bodies and pilot projects, and toward building more grounded capacity as well as exchanging lessons and experiences cross-regionally; the then-MCA PO helped lead this charge, strongly advocating for cutting off some of their most long-standing recipients. EDAG was disbanded by 2005, which staff attribute in large part to the degree to which their "subversive" exchange did not conform to new direction from management; however, the grant-making challenges that EDAG identified and their growing desire to focus on grassroots, enduring investment created the conditions for new strategies.

During the following decade, POs increasingly directed Ford Foundation conservation-related funding, especially in MCA, to processes of securing collective land and property rights for IPLCs. The theory of change shifted from one focused on building a "commonsense field," which alongside successful examples (pilot projects) should logically enable policy choices in line with an evidenced sustainable development approach, to one prioritizing the network-building and organizing to enable more justice-oriented, grassroots politics. As a previous MCA PO suggests, "it's much easier for a group of peasants to get $100,000 from pressuring the government than it is to try to earn it growing tomatoes. So, we should help them pressure government and spend less time trying to get them to produce 10% more tomatoes." Applied to conservation-related grant-making, this approach increasingly centers community-based Indigenous, Afro-descendant, *campesino*, and forest groups as well as the networks that connect them, rather than the earlier focus on livelihoods improvements per se. It also spoke to a growing idea that there was a natural affinity between the needs and priorities of IPLCs and achieving sustainable use-based forms of conservation.

By the mid-2010s, MCA grant-makers had also incorporated a more explicitly community-centered approach to defining problems on which to work. As a headquarters PO notes of this shift, "from the perspective of a community, it doesn't really matter whether it's a mining company or a palm oil company or whatever kind of company coming into the land—the issues are similar." The introduction of community-based territorial approaches to problem-definition and solutions required that Ford put "grantees in the driver's seat... really understanding their needs and learning to be more flexible as an organization," as a former MCA PO reflects. This move was part of what a headquarters-based PO characterizes as the importance of seeing the relation between communities and forest conservation "not as a technical intervention, but as the result of a political process." This change has required a shift toward more hands-on and longer-term accompaniment of recipient groups, whose initial administrative capacities are often limited.

Strategically, this approach has led to grant-making that supports some research and pilot projects, but primarily focuses on building institutional capacity for organizing, advocacy, strategy development, and management as well as the "little p" (non-electoral) political processes that bring attention to the demands and capacities of IPLC groups. Funded efforts in MCA like the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB), the Mesoamerican School of Leaders, and the Mexican Civil Council of Sustainable Silviculture reflect a commitment to supporting community-centered networks and embedding awareness of and capacity for effective grassroots advocacy across scales. The most recent headquarters-based support initiative, BUILD, seeks to support strategic grantee partners in long-term institutional strengthening. Currently, 4 of the 25 BUILD grantees in MCA re IPLCs, though the upcoming cycle of BUILD will support more.

4.4 | What factors enable or constrain these shifts?

Interviews suggest this shift in grant-making strategy and practice results from personal experiences of POs, institutional factors within Ford, and a changing external landscape, amongst other factors, which interact substantially and dynamically. For example, internal institutional changes within Ford dictate who they hire, while changing global discourses, such as the imperatives for sustainable development or racial justice, influence institutional priorities within Ford.

At the most internal level, interviewees suggest that the professional profile of Ford Foundation regional POs has changed over time. Starting in the 1990s, the Foundation realized that they may be more effective in meeting their goals if they hired POs who were, as one termed it, "intellectually powerful" and "politically or socially very committed" with deep experience in the region, rather than the previously-targeted early-career hires from elite US-based educational institutions. This shift first manifested in targeting POs who were "seasoned specialists" by the time they took on the role—they had lived and worked in their regions, which in MCA coincided with the difficult period of civil conflict starting in the 1970s. Simultaneously, "the Ford Foundation found itself in moments... where it was basically had no access at all and... had to play an increasingly outsider game," as one MCA PO put it, catalyzing the shift away from field-building and the assumption that influencing official decision-makers should be the primary means to affect change. Thus, having POs who could effectively work through non-government channels became increasingly important strategically. Finally, some of the most recent POs hired across the Foundation come from within social movements and regional research organizations and are not U.S.-trained, reflecting a further shift

toward incorporating more diverse voices and away from "elitism," as one PO specifically agues. As of 2022, for the first time, all environmentally-focused regional POs in Ford are from the regions in which they work.

Institutional shifts at the more programmatic level have also influenced funding patterns. As one former MCA PO notes, generally "philanthropy was probably part of the reason why a lot of organizations were sort of squarely in the conservation space or the human rights space or the economic development space. There was a very sort of very siloed [approach]." Although a social justice mission motivated much of Ford's work internationally, this same thematic split manifested within the organization, in some cases leading to "funding opposite sides of the spectrum," as one headquarters PO pointed out. Those working explicitly on human rights and those on environment (historically through a poverty-livelihoods lens) had little cross-fertilization until a top-down effort to synchronize funding priorities pushed POs from different themes into conversation. Through this process, with leadership from MCA POs, "it became obvious that we couldn't be talking about human rights without looking at conservation, without looking at livelihood, without looking at governance, etc.," as a headquarters PO argues. While POs still report some tension between program areas—in some ways reflecting broader trends in development and human rights work on the environment (Roe, 2008)—the idea of rights has become central to Ford's conservation work, as has the appreciation of land and environmental rights as relevant for human rights agendas.

This integration in some ways, however, highlighted the non-centrality of conservation and the environment within Ford Foundation's overall portfolio, which has made this theme precarious at times. Internal dynamics, including the thematic preferences of Foundation leadership and efforts to (de)centralize operations at different times, combined with broader trends, including a greater focus on techno-managerialism in the environmental field at some moments and periods of discursive disconnect between social justice and the environment, has led the Foundation to at times consider cutting environment out of its core activities. However, by the early 2010s, it was the very linkage that Ford had established between conservation and rights that made its work of interest to the broader consortium of foundations increasingly examining the interaction between climate and land use.

CLUA, of which the Ford Foundation is a member, emerged in 2009, as a coordinating structure for climate and land use-related foundation funding "in ways that protect the livelihoods and rights of indigenous peoples and poor rural communities and slow the loss of ecosystem services and biodiversity" (Wells et al., 2017 p. 1). The four member and two partner foundations have since launched an extensive and somewhat integrated program on these themes; however, as a CLUA-member PO notes, it was Ford whose voice primarily inserted rights into the conversation: "Ford was...very successful in pushing the collective land rights agenda and the community forest management agenda... to ensure that there was an empirically based, substantive agenda for advancing collective tenure as a climate change mitigation strategy." It was also Ford's insistence on MCA as a key region for understanding IPLC roles in land governance that secured its place in the Alliance. That Ford Foundation's funding for conservation-related themes is relatively small compared to emerging donors, but that it can leverage this alliance financially and discursively magnifies the effect of Ford's investments.

On the other hand, the uptake of Ford's work incorporating IPLCs, conservation, and climate by other foundations through CLUA has strengthened the portfolio's position within Ford; a CLUA-member PO relayed conversations with former Ford colleagues suggesting, "Ford would not have worked on climate change" without CLUA's interest and attention. A headquarters Ford PO observes,

> The way we ended up bringing climate change to our conversation has also been helpful. We were not paying that much attention to climate change, or at least we were not framing climate change, and they are always like, oh, no, we use the climate change language so we can influence others. Yes, true. But actually, bringing climate change, the language, within Ford also changed our work.

External demands for more just climate action provided a clear niche for Ford's accumulated social justice efforts to better position IPLCs as key players in NBS, helping bolster this portfolio's profile and to build cross-cutting links within Ford.

4.5 | Implications for foundation practice

Over the past 20 years, Ford Foundation conservation-related funding has shifted significantly toward supporting grassroots groups, especially IPLCs. In the MCA region, Ford Foundation's stated commitment to IPLCs has manifested in a change in approach to who might be a recipient and how to work with them. In terms of specific territorial challenges, for example, rather than funding NGOs to support communities with specific problems, the MCA office has shifted to funding territorial groups themselves. As one former MCA PO notes, the question became, "what if we... resource these grassroots organizations so they have the power and they want to hire some of those NGOs, they can do that... They

essentially they decide who and what and when," when it comes action in their territories. This PO adds of the recipients, "saying that Ford was funding them certainly helped them go to other funders and get other funding sources. And ultimately they were able to call the shots and they did. Money is power. You can't deny that, and they had the money." While more labor intensive, this approach provides groups with the power to define their territorial challenges and the vision they want to enact.

Another key approach has been to work with networks of IPLCs, supporting efforts to build connections between them. Based in part on the vision of Ford conservation-related work, CLUA support for the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities speaks to a belief in the power of enabling local-scale actors to connect and advocate at the global level, thus enabling conditions for local change. While several POs note that both engaging in global political processes with clear implications for land rights and supporting grassroots struggles in their own national contexts remains a challenge, funding to support efforts like the Global Alliance reflects recognition of the significance of creating leverage across scales of action. IPLCs from the MCA region have been a major political driver behind this broader coalition, both in terms of engaging in protest and resistance and in putting forward concrete proposals, such as a Mesoamerican Territorial Fund (Sauls, 2020).

As grantees report, the flexible, generalized support that Ford offers, and increasingly the related capacity- and network-building provided, has significantly enabled their institutional development and ability to advance these proposals. While the Ford Foundation's relative contributions for conservation and climate have diminished recently given the emergence of new donors, its "moral weight" still plays a role in legitimatizing organizations that receive funds and validating their programs of work. Ford Foundation funding can also seed larger initiatives, due to its reputational benefit and capacity-building focus, as well as reduce the risk to communities of doing the necessary but sometimes dangerous work of pursuing territorial governance in contentious spaces, or to be more ambitious because they have generalized support. While these approaches have led to some major, globally recognized successes—interviewees often cite the case of the renewal of the forest concessions for the Association of Forest Communities of Petén in Guatemala (United Nations Development Programme, 2012)—there are also cases where significant investment may not be sufficient to overcome structural and political challenges—such in the now-titled Miskitu territories of Honduras (Blume et al., 2022; Galeana, 2020). The longer-term view and commitment to politically-informed accompaniment distinguishes Ford Foundation support, according to grantees.

The discursive advance of IPLC rights in the context of conservation and climate is perhaps the greatest gain that Ford Foundation funding has substantively enabled, according to interviews. As one CLUA-member PO argues, echoing this article's framing:

> What we are seeing is a movement of the conservation organizations and the conservation agenda that now basically agrees with the Indigenous Peoples' agenda. I think you can see that even in the announcements made [in Fall 2021] ... every single one of them has said something about how important Indigenous Peoples are. It does not mean they know how to address the issues. And honestly... we cannot pretend that we know how to address those issues either, so it's challenging work, but I think it's a huge success that that agenda has moved from being something that people in the conservation world kind of try to avoid or work around to one that they now recognize they have to embrace.

A Ford headquarters PO expands on this point:

> Simply securing a title for communities may not be sufficient for protecting forests, and there's all kinds of other investments that are needed. So, I think where we are actually at a good place now where, because we have got consensus for the overall premise, we can now focus a bit more attention on figuring out what are those other conditions that need to be in place for this to really have an impact on forests—and those are probably different in different geographies. So, we can have much more nuanced strategy discussions now that we do not have to constantly fight the battle that these people [IPLCs] are relevant and they matter and their rights matter.

While both interviewees note that enacting rights in conservation-related spaces still requires significant work and that one-size-will-not-fit-all, that IPLC rights are now the starting point for conservation conversations has significantly changed the possibilities for engagement.

5 | REFLECTIONS: FUNDING CONSERVATION FUTURES

Nature conservation was never central to the Ford Foundation strategy per se. The Foundation has long

worked on rural and sustainable development, which brought it into contact with issues of land use conversion and conservation; however, as the funding data and interviews above suggest, Ford Foundation staff have explicitly tried to translate the philanthropy's focus on social justice into a strategy that centers the bottom-up demands and needs of marginalized communities, including IPLCs. As such, their funding approach has shifted from researching and piloting sustainable livelihoods for communities that conservation might exclude to highlighting the necessity of these communities for achieving conservation and climate mitigation in the first place. Experiences in the MCA region have particularly informed the evolution of Ford Foundation thinking vis-à-vis the integration of conservation, climate, and natural resources, from the early examples of community forestry in Mexico to the consolidated territorial processes represented through the advocacy of AMPB. According to current and former Ford Foundation POs, this shift in thinking has changed funding strategies and approaches toward centering communities and their territories in defining problems and solutions as well as jumping scales to build the discursive and material conditions for change. The result is a strong alignment with grassroots-led approaches to inclusive, integrative, sustainable development.

While Ford Foundation POs are quick to mention the limits of their impact thus far, and the amount of work remaining, former POs themselves have outlined important steps and lessons that they believe merit attention given emerging conservation philanthropy pledges. First, IPLCs are more than mere stakeholders in conservation and NBS; rather, they are essential to the success of any effort. This goes beyond discursive recognition, encompassing support for tenure, land rights enforcement, and legitimate, IPLC-led decision-making processes. Long-term accompaniment of grassroots organizations, rather than short-term or crisis-defined projects, and capacity-building that sustains long-term institutional strengthening are also worthy of funding—and perhaps necessary for the long-term outcomes NBS proponents seek. Further, these experiences suggest recognizing that multiple forces can act simultaneously in an area targeted for NBS and that understanding this complexity and the views and desires of people in that territory are essential for advancing programs to achieve conservation or climate outcomes. Finally, as the POs above argue, there is still much that Ford and its philanthropic colleagues can do to consolidate the transformation of power relations between IPLCs and civil society, NGO, and donor partners and vis-à-vis vested political economic interests. This work requires more attention to internal organizational dynamics for recipients (for example, as Ford is pursuing through BUILD), but also to creating the conditions internal to donors for more horizontal, inclusive relations that center the vision, values, needs, and proposals of IPLCs.

For Ford, this remains a work in progress—in November 2022, it reported that only 17% of its pledged funds to support IPLCs in achieving conservation and climate goals went directly to IPLCs (Ford Foundation, 2022c). While this level does exceed the 7% of funds channeled directly to IPLCs from the Forest Tenure Funders Group overall, which committed $1.7 billion from 2021 to 2025 to support "forest guardians", Ford Foundation expresses the intent to increase direct funding significantly (Forest Tenure Funders Group & UKAid, 2020). At the same time, that such a pledge exists in the first place speaks to a major shift in donor discourse, even as practice may lag. The self-reported lessons of 20-years of funding change within the Ford Foundation, including in terms of collaboration with other donors and with grantees, suggest that delivering on environmental, social, and economic goals in conservation processes requires steady commitment to rights, accompaniment, and empowerment—and ultimately, perhaps, willingness to change the conservation conversation itself.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Laura Aileen Sauls. *Design*: Laura Aileen Sauls and Victor López Illescas. *Data collection*: Laura Aileen Sauls and Victor López Illescas. *Analysis*: Laura Aileen Sauls and Victor López Illescas. *Funding*: Laura Aileen Sauls. *Project management*: Laura Aileen Sauls. *Drafting*: Laura Aileen Sauls and Victor López Illescas. *Revision*: Laura Aileen Sauls and Victor López Illescas.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Laura Aileen Sauls has previously been a research assistant on a Ford Foundation-funded project. Victor López Illescas has managed a Ford-funded recipient organization and

now is directly employed by the Ford Foundation. These potential conflicts of interest are explicitly disclosed in the article as part of the methods section.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data/code sharing not applicable—no new data/code generated. Publicly available data cited in-text (see Methods).

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ENDNOTES

[1] Victor López Illescas did not participate in grantee interviews to preserve anonymity and reduce potential conflicts-of-interest.

[2] Because of the limited number of study participants and their quasi-public positions, we have not provided identifying information about any given quotation besides the speaker's general position relative to the Ford Foundation. In some cases, an interviewed PO may have had more than one role in the Foundation over their tenure; however, for anonymization purposes, we will simply refer to them as "POs" and indicate if they were ever assigned to MCA.

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