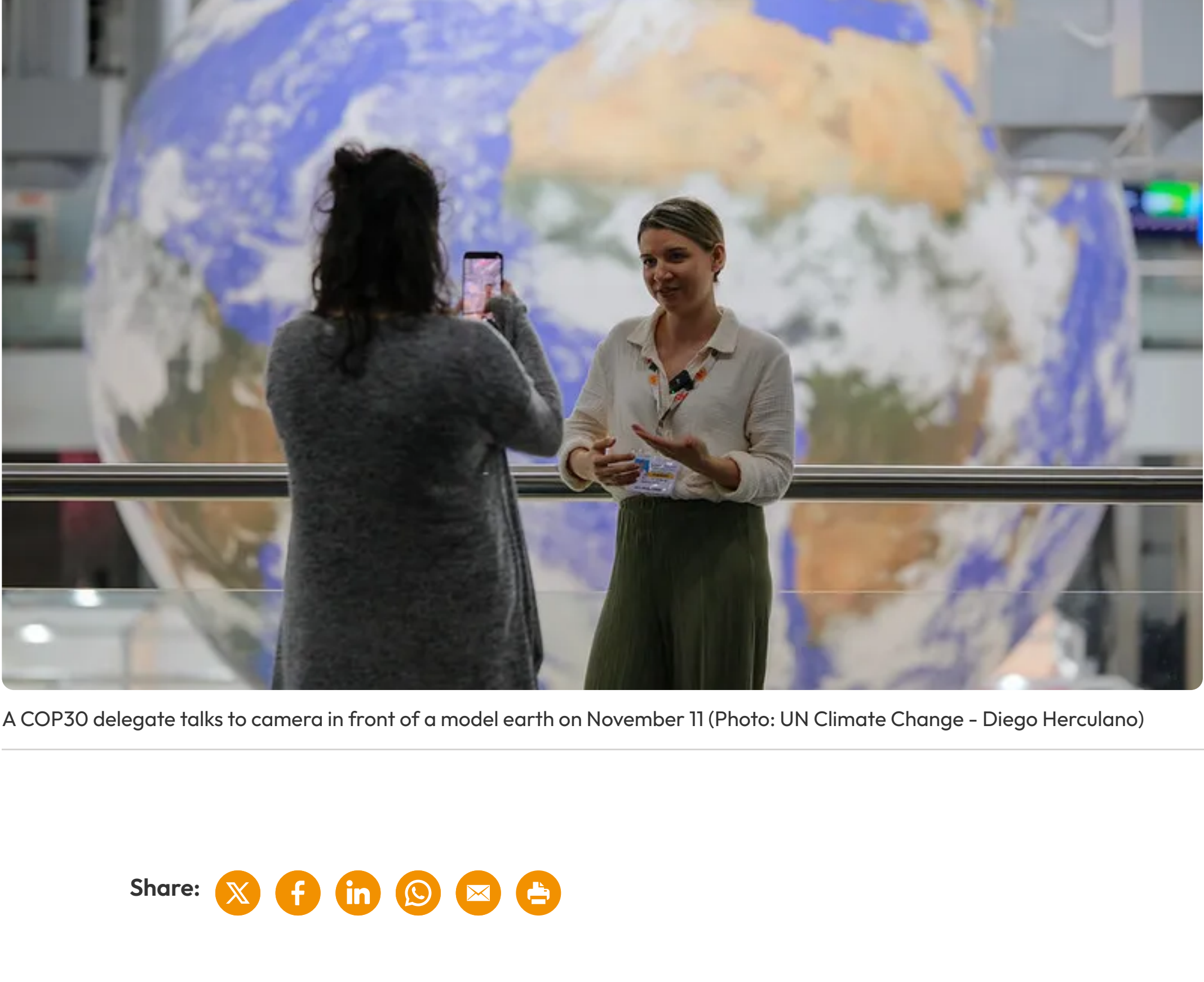


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With multilateralism in crisis, what’s next for climate philanthropy?

Climate philanthropy must do more than fill the gaps left by retreating governments and find new ways to support climate action in a fragmented global landscape



A COP30 delegate talks to camera in front of a model earth on November 11 (Photo: UN Climate Change - Diego Herculano)

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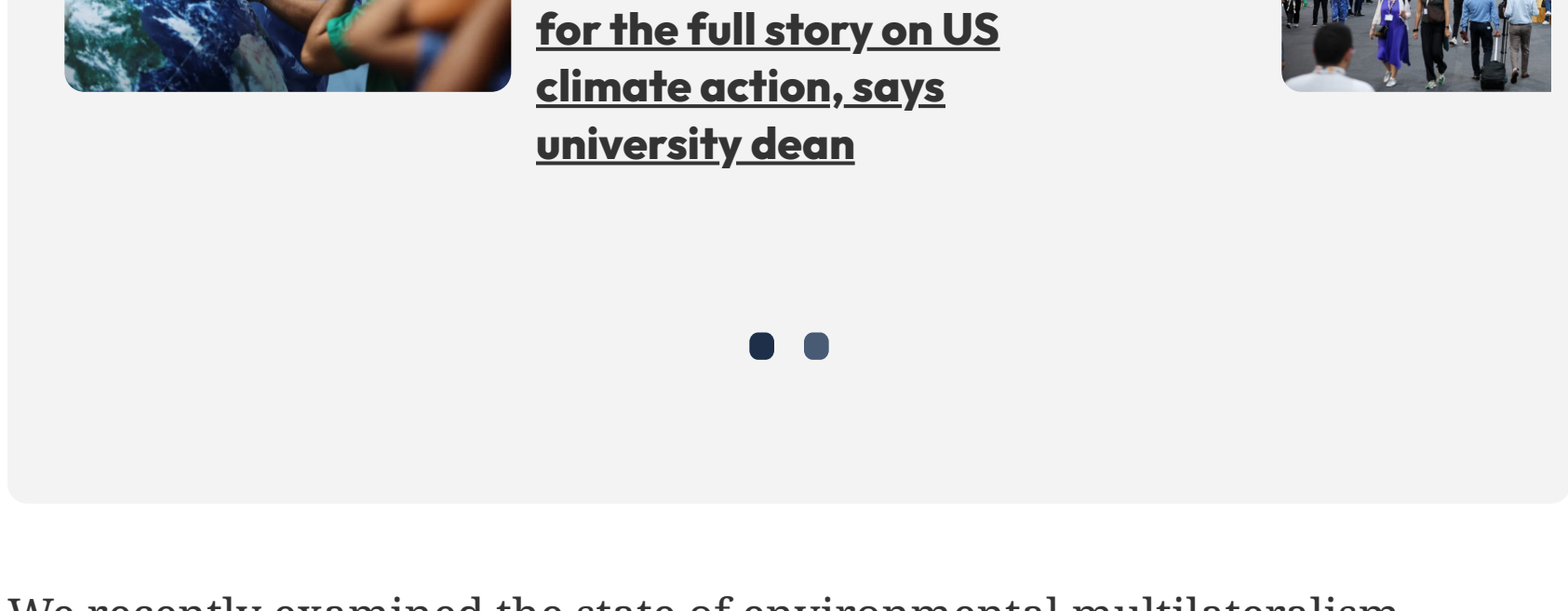
Janet Fleischman is an independent consultant with extensive experience in research, policy advocacy, and narrative storytelling. Jyotsna Uppal is a historian and narrative strategist, who supports individuals and organisations in change processes.

Global climate progress sits at the centre of an acute crisis, as the multilateral order that structured international climate cooperation for three decades frays at the seams.

The Trump administration's withdrawal from 66 United Nations and international organisations in early 2026, compounded by its exit from the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change itself, has launched a rupture in the governance architecture and the geopolitical consensus that made multilateral climate action conceivable.

Institutions have been stripped of authority, voluntary commitments left contingent on political will.

At this precarious moment, what can and should climate funders be doing?



We recently examined the state of environmental multilateralism through an extensive literature review and interviews with climate leaders from around the world - policymakers, UN officials, regional actors, philanthropic leaders and advocates.

Their perspectives reinforced a sobering finding: more consequential than any single country's efforts to undermine the multilateral system is the deeper question of whether that system is still fit for purpose.

Climate philanthropy must do more than fill gaps left by retreating governments; it must ask harder questions about whether gap-filling is the right role at all - and prepare to catalyse the emergence of something new.

Change will not come without pain.

As Sarah Millar, programme director at the Climate Emergency Collaboration Group, an international philanthropic network and strategic regranter, told us: “What we're trying to do here is fundamentally rewire the global economy... it's everything everywhere, all at once. And that's really hard to do.”

Filling the gaps or leading change?

The multilateral climate system, for all its limitations, remains relatively intact. Countries other than the United States continue to submit national climate plans and participate in global negotiations. Yet participation is not the same as effectiveness - many commitments fall short of what's needed.

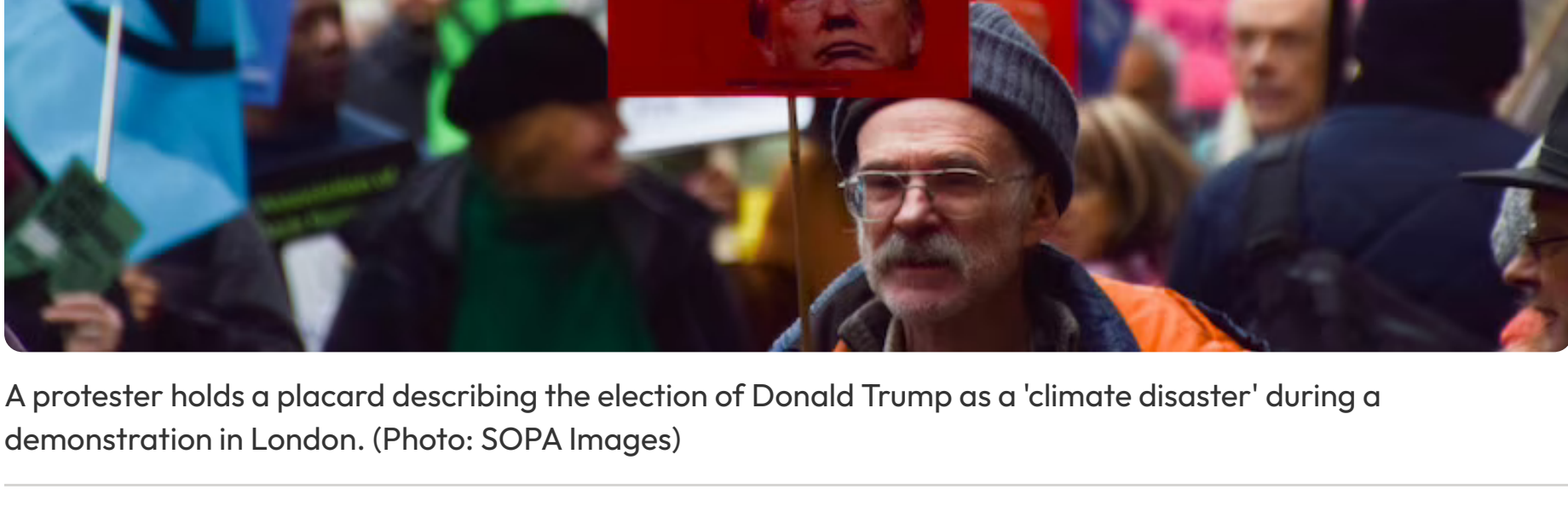
Meanwhile, new regional, thematic and plurilateral coalitions are emerging; voluntary groupings of countries, cities, companies, and civil society organisations aligned around specific climate objectives are increasingly filling the action gap.

Santa Marta coalition tested as co-chair Colombia turns back to fossil fuels

Climate philanthropy has often responded to these gaps by substituting for absent public finance. Arunabha Ghosh, the founder and former CEO of the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), a climate think-tank based in New Delhi, explained: “Philanthropy is having to fill in the gap of public finance where development assistance is failing.” But this instinct deserves scrutiny.

A more fundamental question is whether gap-filling remains the right approach. Does philanthropy keep a failing system limping along, propping up dysfunction - or does it spur transformation and catalyse what comes next? There is no neutrality here - philanthropy cannot pretend its choices are inconsequential. The question is which position advances the transformation the moment requires.

Compounding these strategic questions is a more immediate threat. As formal multilateralism struggles, the civil society actors who might fill the gap face mounting restrictions - a closing of civic space evident not just in the US but in India, Israel, Russia, Turkey, and elsewhere. In the US, the Trump administration has stepped up attacks on philanthropies, threatening legal investigations and the withdrawal of foundations' tax-exempt status.



A protestor holds a placard describing the election of Donald Trump as a 'climate disaster' during a demonstration in London. (Photo: SOPA Images)

For climate philanthropy specifically, there's a particular risk: support for climate action is increasingly portrayed in some US conservative circles as anti-American.

Conservative actors who emphasise fossil fuels for manufacturing and energy security often equate backing renewables with pro-China stances, since China is the largest green technology manufacturer. Yet the economic evidence points the other way, with the clean energy transition already underway - and the perils of fossil fuel reliance further underscored by the war in Iran.

Winning back the narrative

Underlying all these gaps is a failure of narrative. The story of climate progress - and there is real progress to tell - is not being written by governments.

As Christiana Figueres, an international leader on climate change and the former executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, put it this way: “The story of progress is being written by a plethora of other stakeholders - subnationals, finance corporations, NGOs - all of whom are doing their thing together. They're writing an amazing story, and nobody's writing it and nobody's reading it and nobody's taking note of it.”

This storytelling also needs to be more integrated: climate can't remain a siloed concern but must be linked to health, education, gender equity and migration. Philanthropy can help make these linkages legible to policymakers and the public - expanding the coalition of actors who see climate as central to their own agendas.

UN sets out narrow path back to 1.5C warming after inevitable overshoot

Four directions stand out for catalytic philanthropic support in this fragmented landscape:

- **Shift who gets supported, and convene diverse actors.** New pathways are needed to support local communities, civil society coalitions, and subnational actors implementing national climate plans.
- **Support compelling narratives and amplify affected voices.** Listening to affected communities is critical to shaping a just transition that gives communities real agency over change.
- **Engage the private sector differently.** New financing instruments and blended finance opportunities require philanthropy to engage more strategically with private sector and corporate actors - not merely as funders but as partners to design how catalytic capital can flow.
- **Take strategic risks.** Philanthropy may need to fund approaches to implementation, finance, and technology that governments and financial institutions won't support.

This is a precarious moment for multilateralism, civil society and the philanthropic organisations that sustain it.

But that complexity may also provide an opportunity. Philanthropy willing to ask harder questions, take greater risks, and invest in the connective tissue between issues may do more than keep a struggling system afloat.

To catalyse multilateral climate action, many philanthropies recognise that this is the time to deepen their reach. In the words of Ailun Yang, with the environment program at Bloomberg Philanthropies: “Our main way to engage in this is by supporting smart people and innovative ideas. Philanthropy doesn't necessarily do these things ourselves, and that is really where our superpower is.”

This piece is adapted from a project conducted by Janet Fleischman and Jyotsna Uppal, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation's Environment Program; however, all the views and opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own.

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