



## Interview with Carina Barnett-Loro (Climate Advocacy Lab)

Ashley Hopkinson

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Could you start by introducing yourself and talking about what problem your organization set out to solve when it was created, and how you see yourself actively solving that through the work that you're doing now?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** I'm Carina Barnett-Loro. I'm the co-director of the Climate Advocacy Lab. The Lab was founded back in 2015, and we were actually originally a project of the Skoll Global Threats Fund, which itself was a project of the Skoll Foundation. It was founded to help fill a few key gaps that had been identified in the US climate movement coming off the failure to pass federal climate legislation in 2010.

The first gap that had been identified was that most climate advocacy efforts were focused on policy research and more like insider baseball lobbying and advocacy. And there hadn't been enough of a focus on building the public will that was necessary to contest and force the political will, through both grassroots organizing and mobilization efforts, that we knew was going to be needed to pass and implement that type of transformative federal policy that would meaningfully address climate. So I think there was that first initiative really focused on public engagement, organizing, advocacy, communications. What is the people aspect of climate work versus what's just the kind of policy science technology aspect?

And the second piece, which is related to that, was that there was a wealth of social science research that... This is 2015. A lot of things that have been piloted in the Obama era around behavioral science and it was like peak nudge time. There was this wealth of social science research from political science, psychology, social movement theory with potentially valuable insights for how we communicate, engage, and motivate action on climate that wasn't accessible to advocates and certainly wasn't being readily applied in the context of climate campaigns.

So that second original goal of the Lab was to both make that research more accessible to advocates, and distill the breadth of what was coming out of academia into actionable insights.



And then the third was that a lot of organizations were conducting interesting research. They were creating tools related to climate advocacy and organizing, but there was no central repository for those resources. And access often lived with the largest and most well-funded groups.

The issue was that nobody was really sharing with one another. A lot of people were doing redundant research, polling on the same questions. There wasn't this ethos of what we've come to call movement generosity, this idea that we have so much more to gain by sharing than we do by holding all of our intellectual property close to the vest. I think that those were some of the three key goals from the original Climate Advocacy Lab back in 2015. And over time we've grown into an organization that addresses those problems as well as a number of others that have evolved.

Obviously, the world has changed a lot over the last nine years, and I think notably we have developed a large training program to help fill some of the gaps around capacity building and support. I've also built the largest community of US climate movement practitioners. We have over 4,000 Lab members. We started with 150, so it's been big but steady growth over time. All 50 states, DC, Puerto Rico, and members from several sovereign tribal nations too.

Our mission statement has evolved over time, but our current focus is really how we're equipping the US climate movement with the evidence-based insights, skills and connections needed to build durable power and when equitable solutions.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How would you describe the organization as being distinctive in this space where there are a lot of people working on climate?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** We're a movement support organization. So in that way, we're differentiated from a Sierra Club or even like an organization that's directly organizing people. We're more advising those types of organizations on their approaches. The core to our organizational ethos from the beginning was this commitment to evidence-based advocacy. I come from an organizing background and started organizing back in 2009 on the federal climate legislation that failed. I'd like to think that it wasn't all my fault, but I certainly learned a lot from that process or from being a part of that big campaign.

Having been an organizer, it's intimate knowledge to me that every day advocates are making hundreds of decisions in their work. Adults make around 10,000 decisions a day, and obviously a large number of those are decisions that we're making in the context of our work. And that's weighing trade-offs of different campaign strategies, tactics, communications, organizing, all of those things. We often choose to do something because that's how we've done it in the past and not because we feel really certain that that's actually the strategy or tactics that's most likely to get us to the outcome that we're hoping to get to.



So how do we take away the guesswork? How do we take the stress out of a lot of those decision points, thinking about how we synthesize that wide range of evidence into insights and recommendations, tools like strategies for advocates? We're really hyper-focused on social science research, on data and testing. Over time, we have evolved to understand a more inclusive definition of how we think about evidence. Everything from case studies and the breadth of people's personal and organizational experience, as well as field experimentation and social movement research. These are some of the higher level pieces of strategy evidence that are helpful in informing a lot of people's decisions.

Beyond the evidence-based orientation of our work, we have always been in a network weaving role. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of our community, we have advocates and organizers, social scientists, data scientists, funders. We have people from other movements who are cross-pollinating, thinking, "Oh, this is what we're learning in the democracy space that's applicable in the climate space," and vice versa.

That kind of commitment to learning and growing both across discipline, across geography, and across other lines of difference is something that's a strength of our network, but also differentiates us from other networks that are more focused on one issue or one area.

**Ashley Hopkinson: As an organization, how do you measure your success? Is it through connectivity?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** As a movement organization, we're always thinking about our work along the spectrum of contribution to attribution. There are very few places where we can say, "Oh, yes, the IRA [Inflation Reduction Act] passed solely because the Lab existed." But we can track higher level trends across the movement and consider how the Labs work, the connections we're making, the research we're supporting, the trainings that we're facilitating for folks across the movement, and how all of those helped create the conditions for that advancement to be possible.

When I look back, I can see the fingerprints of what the Lab has been supporting all over the climate movement. We really did see a shift from a focus on 'insider baseball' to how we are building up the organizing apparatus of the climate movement, and what tactics actually move policymakers. You can't just do big mass mobilizations in DC because that doesn't actually translate to a credible threat to policymakers who are primarily elected in districts or states.

We did a lot of work with state, regional, and national groups to shift their thinking away from a big DC protest centered approach to investing in tactics involving more local and state organizing. How to shift that threat to policymakers in the way that made them understand, "Okay, actually



my constituents care about this issue, and that's going to influence the way that I vote on a variety of policies." This includes the biggest piece of policy we've passed at the national level, the IRA."

On a more granular level, we have a process of setting goals across our different program areas. We proactively track impact by gathering stories from members and partners about their engagement with the Lab and how that made a difference in their work. We look for specific impact stories of, "Oh, I learned this at the Lab, I applied it in my work this way, and it had this impact." This is how we see it impacting the culture of our organization, our campaign overall.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have a story of impact that you could share that illustrates the impact of the Lab and the work that you do?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** One of the states where we've been investing a lot of resources over time has been in Illinois. We had started back in 2015 doing some initial workshops and training and supporting some field research for advocates in Illinois providing one-on-one coaching, helping them think through a broader organizing strategy, and working both at the coalitional level and also with individual organizations.

They passed an initial statewide renewable energy policy in 2016, the Future Energy Jobs Act, and over the next few years they continued to build the strength of the coalition. They were doing political work to hold elected officials accountable. We helped design a statewide Listen, Lead, and Share organizing initiative that involved going into communities to better understand how people were experiencing climate and interacting with clean energy technology in their daily life. That initiative was the lattice work for a statewide organizing strategy that resulted in a new policy that was passed in 2021, the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act. At the time, it was the strongest piece of statewide climate legislation that had ever been passed.

We look at the strategy that resulted in that big win and the subsequent implementation efforts that have followed. We call it the capacity based framework to power building. Organizations are building narrative capacity through communications work and cultural organizing. They're building disruptive capacity through how they're thinking about protests or strikes or disruptive nonviolent actions. The organizing work that people are doing brings more people in, which is required to make anything else happen. We can map all of that back to how our partner organizations in Illinois moved work forward.

One of the big issues we kept hearing from Lab members was the challenges around coalition work, and particularly what it means to support healthy multiracial cross-class coalitions. And so we took on a project over the last year and a half where we looked at five different case studies of coalitions which won, including Illinois, and then one that didn't win. We looked at which processes were in place that enabled those coalitions to navigate conflict, to make decisions, to



hold each other accountable to move forward. We often hear about dynamics that cause coalitions to implode. In those cases, the work doesn't move forward because they don't have the processes in place to move through conflict. Those aren't just insights that are true for climate, although there's certainly dynamics within the climate movement that feel unique.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share an insight or takeaway that you've had from your years of doing this work that someone else involved in coalition building can learn from?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** A lot of the work that we do ultimately is what's required to foment large scale social change. Within the climate movement, there's this mantra: to change everything, it takes everyone. One high-level insight that I can offer: we saw huge mobilizations at the beginning of the Trump administration, and we did a lot of work around understanding the relationship between scale and political power. There's often an assumption about a direct line between scale and power, but scale only translates into power if it's channeled very strategically. So we saw mass mobilizations that ended up having very little impact on public policy. And then you see smaller-scale, highly targeted mobilizations sustained over time that map back to a larger-scale strategy actually resulting in high level systemic change.

Large scale mobilizations are major identity forming events for people who participate in them, but we need to learn how to balance those types of large mobilizations with the smaller sustained ones that social movement research and political science say are actually more likely to lead to the policy outcomes that we're working toward.

The other insight I always emphasize is the power of social norms. I think so often we forget that maybe people start taking action because they're passionate about an issue, but they stay because of the relationships they make. We provide a lot of resources and support around how to do relational organizing, how to build systems of support and accountability within programs. Organizing is hard, so it's not happening as much across the movement as we all would like to see. But I definitely have seen a shift over the course of our time at the Lab and how people are approaching advocacy work.

Another insight is efficacy: ensuring that people know their actions have an impact on the issues that they care about. I think often we ask people to take a very small action and it doesn't feel meaningful with respect to the scale of the problem that we're trying to solve. So we have to do a better job in our organizing and our communications, in building their sense of efficacy in our political system even when it feels broken. We need to be aware of how different relationships to power can impact people's feelings of efficacy within the system, especially along lines of race and class.



**Ashley Hopkinson: Aside from funding, are there challenges that you're working to actively confront in this work?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** The political roller coaster that we've been on for the eight or so years impacts the work in a lot of ways. It forces us to be much better about scenario planning when we're operating under such uncertain conditions. We've learned a lot about the importance of being flexible, of building enough slack into our organizational system to be able to be responsive, but not always get pulled into the latest crisis or thing that's sucking up energy or demanding time. Because as a movement support organization, our real value-add is existing a little bit above the constant churn of everything that's happening and protecting that 30,000-foot level of tracking the way that trends are evolving, and being able to proactively plan for what we see. But we don't want to be so far removed from what's happening on the ground that we're not able to respond to the biggest opportunities, even the kind of things that nobody thought were going to happen. So pivoting toward implementation.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What does it look like if there is a shift in political party? What does it look like if the existing party stays in power?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** This question has a lot to do with the ongoing challenge of disinformation. The climate conversation has evolved from 'deny, deny, deny' to seeding misinformation about renewable energy. Social media disinformation is significantly threatening the ability of other forces, whether that's just the plummeting cost of renewable energy technologies or the force of federal policy like the IRA or state-based policies, to implement and deploy these technologies.

We face significant political opposition in the form of a very well-funded fossil fuel industry. They're fighting tooth and nail to maintain the economic viability of fossil fuels. They're thinking, "If we're going to be phased out in the US, how are we building more LNG [Liquefied Natural Gas] pipelines to export gas to other countries?" It's a whack-a-mole of pipelines. One of the new frontiers in climate advocacy is around carbon capture and storage, these false solutions which involve investing billions of dollars into new technologies without a lot of evidence that they will actually solve problems.

There's a lot of disagreement, principled and otherwise, over the path forward. We've come to see our role as a big tent organization, but we're also trying to help negotiate conflict and navigate some of those differences across the movement. How can we move forward even if we don't agree on everything? There's a lot more room for disagreement in terms of what to do when there are a number of different solutions available.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Is there something your organization has tried in the past that didn't work as well as you had hoped? What was the lesson learned from that?**



**Carina Barnett-Loro:** One of the lessons we learned very early on within a few weeks of launching the Lab was that just because you build something doesn't mean anyone is going to use it. And I get it! The hypothesis that we were holding of, "We build a resource hub, so everybody will come to use it," was based on some faulty assumptions. We had to pivot our strategy for how we were going to think about creating the conditions for cultural change across the climate movement.

Our theory of change was about how we were going to shift away from thinking, "We're just going to keep doing things the way that we've been doing them." We always want to be testing out new approaches. We want to be rigorous in how we're evaluating whether things are working. We don't want to get too attached to tactics based on how we've operated in the past. My original role was focused around how to introduce the Lab as both a tool and a network to people as we were building it out, and being responsive with feedback we were getting about what would be useful. And because we were at Skoll, a large part of our initial approach involved supporting field research, helping people tweak messaging strategies or mobilization tactics that were downstream from higher level strategy decisions.

We realized pretty quickly that we weren't going to be able to make a meaningful impact on movement culture unless we targeted our interventions much further upstream, because an evidence-based messaging strategy isn't going to be impactful if your organizational theory of change is based on bad assumptions. So we ended up using those downstream messaging tests as the hook of getting people to see that what they thought was going to work wasn't actually the best approach. We encouraged people to think about assumptions they were making within their climate organizing work that they need to call into question.

I think meeting people where they're at has changed over the years too, in terms of the evolution of the platform. Email was maybe a better way to reach people in 2015, and now nobody can get through their inbox anymore. We needed to evolve as an organization, as technology evolves, as culture evolves.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How do you view the organization as working towards systems change?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** We went through our first five-year strategic planning process a couple years ago and one of the new programs that emerged from that was a strategic partnerships program. We identified organizations that we wanted to partner with and how we're going to be working with them. So we've been going through the process of developing a learning plan with our partners, thinking through the things that we want to work on together and how to measure success within the course of our partnership, and also how we're going to support our partners in measuring the impact of the work that they're doing on different aspects of climate and environmental justice.



There's always been the tension of breadth versus depth; of going deep with a smaller number of people versus trying to provide concierge level service for thousands of members. In an ideal world, we wouldn't have to choose, but we're never going to live in that world, and we're not going to be able to serve everyone. We bet on organizations where we feel like the mission, the values, and the strategy are aligned with our own. Our partnerships are a big piece of it, and having a resource sharing hub that's more widely available to anyone who wants to use it.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is needed from other actors in this space?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** We think about where we're positioned, playing the role of weaving some of the other movement support organizations together and mapping the movement space. We make sure that we're complimentary in what we're offering within the context of organizations who are offering other aspects of support to the climate justice movement. There's a commitment to collaboration and learning together, of collaboration over competition, even though it can be difficult. It shouldn't be a resource constrained environment, but it is.

We think through how we all work together to make sure that we're really delivering for the movement. With a lot of our partner organizations, or some of the big players within the climate movement, it's a commitment to being transparent about what worked well and what didn't. But because of the challenges of collaboration versus competition, people are not always willing to be open about what didn't work. It can be more challenging to talk honestly about failure, but the clock is ticking and the issues that we're working on are so urgent. We're always trying to support a culture where people feel like there's so much more to lose by withholding that information than by sharing it.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I want to close by asking you what you'd like to see from the Lab in the next couple of years?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** We're in a really exciting moment as a movement, but we're also in a scary moment. On the exciting side with the IRA, there's one trillion dollars on the table that has the potential to transform communities, but there's no guarantee that that transformation is going to happen in a way that's in line with our commitment to equity, justice, and reparative work. So there's this huge opportunity, but it's also a little bit scary in that there are so many ways that things could go wrong.

There are so many ecological tipping points we're bumping up against, and it's hard to predict what's going to be set in motion. One of the areas where we're trying to develop more resources and more support is within mental health: both for people who work on climate day in and day out and are confronted with a lot of bad news, but also for people that have been, and are going to be, impacted by extreme weather events. There's a tremendous mental health toll in addition to the





physical health impact of natural disasters. So we're trying to figure out how to improve psychological resilience in addition to the actual mitigative ecological resilience that needs to happen to make communities better.

We're also excited by the rapid deployment of new technologies -- there are so many new opportunities, and we've already seen the ways in which they're inequitably distributed. How do we continue to push for policies that don't leave people behind? There is a constant tension between the urgency of wanting to move forward and the imperative to make sure that we're not recreating the systems that resulted in the situation that we're in now.

As a movement support organization, we're always trying to proactively look ahead at the big questions that advocates are going to be grappling with over the next five to ten years. Certainly questions around democracy, particularly depending on whether there's a change in the administration this year, whether we go back into defense mode for the next four years or whether we have another opportunity to continue to push the ball forward.

We're also looking at how to connect all of these different initiatives that have been moving forward at the local, state, and national levels. How we can weave all of them together into a clear picture that builds collective efficacy, that makes people think, "We can actually address this." Because most people think that we can't. And we haven't always done a good job as a movement of dispelling that notion. So there's a huge opportunity for narrative and cultural organizing around creating more stories about coming together and solving things versus the doom-and-gloom disaster narrative that has been pretty dominant over the last 20 years.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What keeps you hopeful about this work? What keeps you in it?**

**Carina Barnett-Loro:** One of the great things about working at the Lab is that I get to hear dozens of stories every day about the campaigns and initiatives people are working on. I've gotten to see the seeds that are planted by our movement, and then watch as they bloom, are harvested, and then plant it again. So the whole life cycle is really what we're trying to support at the Lab.

I feel really grateful that I've been around long enough to see the Lab grow, and also to see that a lot of the work that our partners are doing is actually having the impact we envisioned. I wouldn't continue to be in this work if I didn't think it was possible for us to transform our communities.



*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*