

Charting a Greener Path: Rheda-Wiedenbrück Community Foundation's Climate Commitment



Bettina Windau, Chairwoman of Rheda-Wiedenbrück Community Foundation

In a landscape where climate concerns demand urgent and collective efforts, Rheda-Wiedenbrück Community Foundation (Bürgerstiftung Rheda-Wiedenbrück) has emerged as a proactive force, aligning its resources, community influence, and strategic vision to address climate challenges. In this engaging conversation, Bettina Windau, Chairwoman of the community foundation, unpacks the journey of the organisation's pivot towards sustainability, detailing the catalysts, initiatives undertaken, and the envisioned roadmap ahead.

What prompted the foundation to embark on this journey?

Several factors influenced our decision to prioritise climate action. Firstly, we felt there was a growing consensus, at the national and local level, among both foundations and citizens that climate concerns needed greater attention. This sentiment was the catalyst for discussions within our organisation, gradually shaping our plans. Additionally, a substantial financial contribution, resulting from the merging with another small local foundation and the donations from a private individual, provided us with the flexibility to explore new avenues of funding, including climate-related initiatives. Finally, in 2023, our participation in the ECFI Cohort of the Climate and Philanthropy Learning Journey served as a pivotal moment. It facilitated knowledge exchange, offered valuable insights on integrating the existing climate considerations into our operations and made our ambitions concrete.

Can you elaborate on how you went from talks to actions thus far?

The first step was to amend our statute to reflect our commitment to addressing climate issues. While this process raised some concerns initially, constructive dialogue with our governing bodies helped garner support and move forward with this. Making an outspoken strategic commitment was a key first step.

Secondly, as we do every time we explore new funding possibilities, we have conversations and engage with the community to see what has already been done and what is needed. For instance, we participated in local events such as the Climate Fair that enabled us to formalise our commitment in the eye of the community and seed new partnerships and alliances.

Finally, we engaged with local experts and stakeholders to refine our strategy, ultimately identifying three core areas of focus: climate adaptation, species protection, and climate education.

It is evident that the foundation has been both intentional and strategic in creating the pre-conditions for successful climate action. What opportunities and challenges lie ahead?

Looking ahead, our primary focus for 2024 is to kickstart our climate funding initiatives, termed the 'learning budget.' This entails testing innovative funding modalities and expanding our network within the climate sphere. We know we will encounter some challenges as we are entering a new field, particularly related to climate adaptation and species protection actions. But we are confident that, through partnerships and collaborations, we will be able to reach out to new entities and groups focusing on these topics. Taking climate considerations into account when it comes to the investment of our endowment has opened our eyes to new opportunities to invest in local renewable energy projects, thereby supporting both environmental sustainability and the local economy.

What do you think is the added value of the community foundation entering the climate space?

Rather than added value, we always try to assess our unique position, where and how we could have the most impact. For instance, nowadays local and national administrations in Germany are making available a great amount of money dedicated to the climate issue. However, accessing these funds can be lengthy and complicated, especially for grassroots organisations. For this reason, we can step up in that space, making available less resources but in a faster more flexible way to make the community initiatives and organisations grow and evolve organically.

Furthermore, we can also leverage and bring to the table, along with our public and private partners, not only financial resources but also our convening power. Indeed, being so rooted in the community, we can make the voice of different constituencies, even the most marginalised ones, to better inform strategies, and we can create a bridge between different worlds.

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