26. 350.org

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350.org began a decade ago, as a self-conscious attempt to build a global, grassroots movement demanding action on climate change. Such a thing did not exist in 2008, but we felt it needed to: it had become clear that the fossil fuel industry was dominating the politics of global warming. It had lost the argument over the science, but it was winning the argument overall, because the argument was (as most are) about money and power. We knew that we could not match the Exxons and the Shells in money, so we needed to find other sources of power, and we turned to the history of broad-based social movements.

The “we” at the beginning was me and seven undergraduates at Middlebury College, a small college in rural New England in the United States. We had no experience and little in the way of resources; there were seven continents, so each of the students took one and set to work (the young man who took the Antarctic was also responsible for the internet). We started reaching out around the globe and found lots of people eager to go to work. There wasn’t, everywhere, someone who thought of themselves as an environmentalist, but everywhere there were people who worried about war and peace, hunger, women’s rights, public health – the things at risk in a degrading environment. They rallied for the first global day of climate action in October of 2009 – 5200 demonstrations in 181 countries, what CNN called “the most widespread day of political activity in the planet’s history.”

Those demonstrations proved that one long-standing shibboleth about the environmental movement was wrong: far from being a project of wealthy white people, it turned out that most of the leadership was coming from the front lines. Those who were working on this cause were mostly poor, black, brown, Asian, young. And so, as 350.org began to grow, that’s where its growth began to come from. Many of its early leaders came from the South Pacific, where the Pacific Climate Warriors began to organize on low-lying island nations like Tuvalu, Vanuatu, the Marshalls, Micronesia and the Solomons; from Africa, where rapidly spreading drought was causing concern to rise; from Central and South America where melting glaciers and disappearing rainforests made the problems plain.

From the beginning, 350.org was convinced that the role of the fossil fuel industry was doing much to keep us from solving the climate problem. Thus, we began attacking the power of that industry as best we could. An early salvo came in the U.S., where indigenous groups and Midwestern farmers had been opposing a little-known pipeline project called Keystone XL, designed to carry tarsands oil from Alberta in Canada down to the Gulf of Mexico. 350.org joined forces with those opponents in an effort to make it a test case of the emerging power of the climate movement. In 2011, we organized civil disobedience actions outside the White House that led, over two weeks, to the arrest of more than 1200 people, the greatest number of such nonviolent actions about anything in the U.S. in some years. Even so, no one thought there was much chance of blocking the project: the *National Journal* published a poll of its 300 “energy insiders” on Capitol Hill predicting a permit would be granted for the project within a few months. That did not happen; instead, the opposition swelled, becoming the most important environmental fight in the United States. It has not only stalled the pipeline for almost a decade, but also led to opponents fighting every kind of fossil fuel project around the world. Many of these fights are successful, but even when they’re not, they slow down the fossil fuel industry – a worthwhile endeavor since each month of delay lets the engineers drop the price of solar panels and wind turbines another percentage point or two.

We also attempted to cut off some of the money supply to the fossil fuel industry, launching in 2012 a divestment campaign designed to get institutions to sell their stock in coal, oil and gas companies. It was modelled on the anti-apartheid divestment campaigns of a previous generation, and indeed South African Anglican archbishop Desmond Tutu was an early advocate, describing climate change as “the apartheid of our time.” Beginning in North America, Australia and Europe, it has spread quickly around the world and become the largest anti-corporate campaign of its kind in history – by 2019, endowments and portfolios worth more than \$11 trillion had committed to divest, including the New York City pension fund, the University of California system, half the colleges and universities in the UK, and Norway’s sovereign wealth fund, which is the largest pool of investment capital in the world. In 2019, Shell Oil paid the campaign a large backhanded compliment, saying divestment had become a material risk to its business.

350.org has run many groundbreaking campaigns and collaborated with a wide variety of other groups and individuals. In Europe it has helped with the Ende Gelände anti-coal campaigns, and held a variety of financial institutions responsible for their investments; in Africa the #AfricaVuka campaign has been standing up to new fossil fuel plants across the continent; in Brazil it has worked with indigenous groups to pass sweeping bans on fracking across wide swaths of the country; in North America it has worked hard on environmental

justice fights from Standing Rock to the Trans Mountain pipeline. In several countries it has affiliated organizations that vet and endorse political candidates. Sometimes 350.org helps catalyze actions – Rise for Climate Action in 2018 was an example of it taking a lead role. Other times it serves as an experienced collaborator helping provide the services that make the actions of others really sing: in 2019, for instance, it helped provide logistical backbone for September’s massive youth-led climate strikes across the planet.

For 350.org, the greatest thrill has been watching a large movement grow all over the planet – that was, after all, its founding hope. There are hundreds of independent 350 chapters scattered around the planet, and many of the young people who began their activist careers working for fossil fuel divestment in college went on to found the Sunrise Movement that inspired the Green New Deal, a congressional resolution that lays out a grand plan for tackling climate change. That optimism is tempered, of course, by the other darker development of its first decade: the planet has gotten ever farther from 350 parts per million CO₂.

As it faces its second decade, 350.org remains the largest organization on Earth whose only task is fighting climate change. That sounds more impressive than it is: it means a staff of 160 people spread around the world, or on average about 25 per continent. Those numbers sound small, and they are – but the number of paid staff is amplified by large groups of volunteers, and of course by a philosophy of collaboration with many other groups. It’s not clear that it’s a big enough movement to win this fight – but at least it’s clear there will *be* a fight, which wasn’t obvious when 350.org was born.