From Conversation to Coordination: Building Infrastructure for Collaborative Sustainability Funding

About FAST

The Funders Aligned for Sustainability Transformations (FAST) Forum emerged from a shared recognition that many of the world's most urgent sustainability challenges cannot be addressed through isolated funding strategies or siloed institutions alone. FAST was created as a cross-sector community of action designed to strengthen alignment between philanthropy, public, and private funders working across sustainability transformations.

FAST has evolved into an active learning and coordination platform focused on bridging persistent gaps between research, implementation, policy uptake, and long-term systems transformation. The FAST Forum operates under Chatham House Rules, creating space for candid dialogue about operational barriers, funding tensions, collaboration failures, and opportunities for experimentation.

FAST was intentionally designed not as another convening, but as an enabling infrastructure for collaboration: a place where organizations can test ideas, identify shared priorities, surface systemic bottlenecks, and explore practical mechanisms for coordinated action across geographies, sectors, and funding cultures. The initiative is closely connected to broader efforts around evidence-to-action infrastructure and sustainable systems transformation.

How FAST Started

The roots of FAST emerged through a series of scoping workshops held in 2025. These workshops brought together a diverse coalition of sustainability funders and practitioners to examine why promising sustainability efforts often fail to move effectively from research and pilots into scalable implementation.

In late 2024, representatives from the Belmont Forum, Future Earth, and the University of Illinois System began discussing the need for more collaborative and coordinated funding structures to accelerate sustainability solutions. As the three organizations were planning the 2025 Sustainability Research & Innovation Congress, they saw an opportunity to use the global gathering to convene funders from around the world for a focused conversation on how philanthropy, public funders, industry, and venture capital could work together more effectively to move promising ideas from research to real-world impact.

The first workshop, held in June 2025 during the Sustainability Research & Innovation Congress in Chicago with support from the Walder Foundation, focused on establishing the case for collective impact and identifying persistent "baton-passing" gaps between research, development, and implementation. Participants highlighted the need for stronger cross-sector partnerships, shared coordination infrastructure, and durable alliances capable of supporting long-term systems transformation.

Recognizing the value of the conversation and the urgency of the challenges discussed, participants agreed to continue meeting beyond the initial workshop. The group committed to exploring how a more sustained funder network or collaborative platform could help align priorities, reduce fragmentation, and support the development and scaling of sustainability solutions.

Subsequent workshops moved from shared purpose toward operational problem-solving. Participants explored barriers such as mismatched funding timelines, fragmented investment landscapes, underfunded coordination functions, talent and stage-fit frictions, and limited mechanisms for tracking collaborative impact. By New York Climate Week in September 2025 (workshop co-sponsored by Belmont Forum, Center for Biodiversity and Conservation at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), and Fundación Avina), discussions had evolved into concrete operating models. Participants shared their experiences with collaborative funding and supportive coordination structures (e.g. common tagging systems, staged capital pathways, matchmaking systems, decision logs, and evaluation cadences). Participants also explored a thought-provoking transformative change evaluative framework developed by our workshop host, Center for Biodiversity and Conservation at AMNH.

FAST emerged from these conversations as a practical continuation of the work: a recurring forum where funders could move beyond theory and collectively test new collaboration mechanisms in real time.

Building the FAST Forum

Following the initial Funders Forum workshops in 2025, participants recognized that sustained progress would require more than periodic convenings. A volunteer organizing committee was formed, bringing together representatives from philanthropy, public funding agencies, research organizations, and intermediary institutions across multiple regions.

Meeting regularly throughout late 2025 and early 2026, the committee worked to translate workshop insights into an enduring community of practice. Activities included refining the Forum's purpose and value proposition, developing governance and participation models, identifying priority themes, designing workshop formats, and establishing mechanisms for ongoing collaboration between meetings.

The committee also guided the transition from the original Funders Forum concept to the Funders Aligned for Sustainability Transformations (FAST) Forum, including development of the FAST identity, website, communications materials, and the broader vision for a sustained coordination platform. What began as a series of conversations evolved into a recognizable community and emerging infrastructure for cross-sector collaboration.

As participation expanded, additional contributors began supporting workshop design, outreach, communications, facilitation, and ecosystem mapping, creating the foundation for the Forum's continued growth.

Who is Involved

FAST's first year engaged 86 organizations spanning philanthropy, government research agencies, NGOs, intergovernmental platforms, private industry, venture capital, accelerators, and development finance institutions. This breadth of participation distinguishes FAST from many sector-specific forums and provides a unique opportunity to identify collaboration pathways across the full sustainability funding and implementation landscape.

Participation was strongest among philanthropic organizations (33%) and public/government funders (25%), reflecting both strong foundation engagement and Belmont Forum's public-funder roots. NGOs and regranting organizations represented 16% of participants, while private-sector organizations accounted for 12%. Venture capital and accelerator organizations (5%) and development finance institutions (2%) remain smaller portions of the forum (Figure 1).

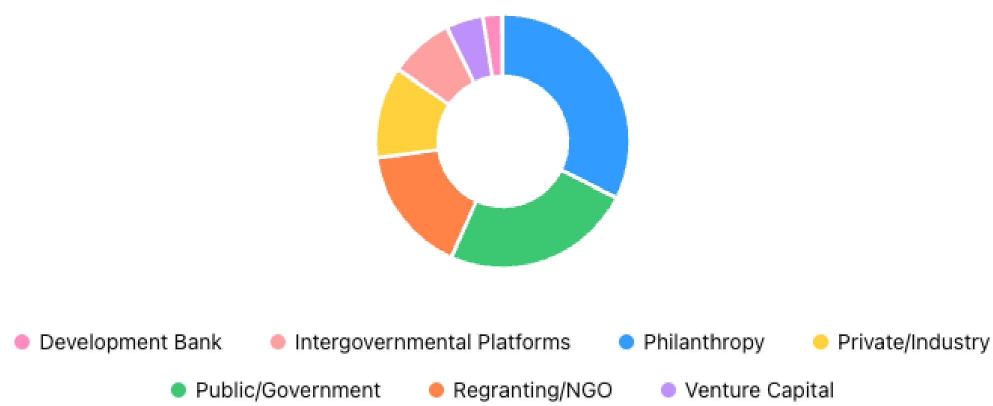

Figure 1. Composition of the FAST Forum ecosystem (2025–2026).
FAST participants represent 86 organizations across philanthropy, government, NGOs, private industry, intergovernmental platforms, venture capital, and development finance institutions. While participation is strongest among philanthropic and public research funders, opportunities remain to expand engagement from actors focused on scaling and deployment.

Importantly, this distribution mirrors a recurring theme that emerged throughout FAST discussions: the sustainability ecosystem is relatively strong in research, knowledge generation, and philanthropy, but weaker in the actors responsible for commercialization, deployment, and large-scale implementation. Expanding participation from venture capital, industry, and development finance institutions represents one opportunity for FAST's next phase.

What FAST Has Accomplished

Since its launch, FAST has successfully created a trusted space for unusually candid and operational discussions across public, philanthropic, research, NGO, and private-sector communities. Rather than focusing only on high-level vision statements, the forum has consistently surfaced, across six workshops (Table 1), concrete operational challenges that limit collaborative sustainability impact and insights into how partners are overcoming such challenges through creative approaches to align and/or co-fund.

1. Advancing New Co-Funding Models

FAST discussions helped highlight innovative partnership models that challenge traditional funding structures. One notable example involved the collaboration between the Belmont Forum and AXA Foundation for Human Progress, where AXA shifted from exclusively funding academic institutions to directly funding non-academic societal actors such as NGOs and community organizations. Participants examined both the opportunities and operational barriers involved in adapting traditional funding systems to support more equitable and implementation-oriented partnerships.

FAST also elevated conversations around catalytic philanthropy and blended funding approaches. Participants explored how philanthropic funders can serve as early-stage risk absorbers, enabling experimentation and bridging efforts toward longer-term institutional or public-sector support. Discussions emphasized the importance of flexible capital structures, phased support, and intermediary organizations capable of translating long-term systems impact into measurable milestones for diverse funders.

2. Strengthening Coordination Infrastructure and Identifying System-Level Barriers

A major accomplishment of FAST has been elevating the importance of the often invisible infrastructure required for successful collaboration while creating a trusted space for candid discussions about the barriers that continue to limit sustainability outcomes.

Across workshops, participants repeatedly identified coordination functions such as matchmaking, translation across sectors, relationship brokering, shared intelligence systems, and secretariat capacity as critically underfunded components of sustainability transformation. Participants emphasized that durable systems change depends not only on funding projects, but also on investing in the connective tissue that allows organizations, sectors, and funding mechanisms to work together effectively.

The May 2026 virtual workshop spotlighted funders that emphasized the importance of investing in "the plumbing rather than the fountain," recognizing that durable systems change depends heavily on behind-the-scenes infrastructure that enables organizations to coordinate effectively. Participants also identified sustainability data fragmentation and siloed information systems as major barriers to understanding collective impact across initiatives.

FAST conversations further reinforced the need for shared frameworks, common language systems, clearer communication pathways, and operational structures that allow organizations with different funding cultures and timelines to collaborate more effectively. Change at the organizational level (e.g., topical priorities, funding timelines, or geographic scope) can be very slow. By mapping which organization funds what and where, we can more effectively 'pass the baton' using matrixed funding collaborations (example below), moving from promising research outputs to implement-ready solutions. As Dave Rankin, Executive Director and CEO of Great Lakes Protection Fund, has observed over the years in working with and building cross-sectoral teams… 'Magic happens in adjacencies.'

Stages →

Lanes

	Discover	Design	Pilot	Scale
Research	Landscape synthesis; gap analyses; scoping RFPs	Co-design with practitioners; methods & data standards	Demonstrate studies with partners; rapid evaluations	Evidence synthesis; toolkits; translational briefs
Community	Needs assessments; stakeholder mapping; equity & framing	Co-creation workshops; MOUs & governance agreements	Community-led pilots; feedback loops; capacity support	Train-the-trainer; peer networks; stewardship models
Policy	Problem framing; regulatory scan; windows of opportunity	Policy prototyping; cost-benefit & distributional analyses	Policy sandboxes; procurement pilots; guidance drafts	Standards & codes; formal guidance; incentives & funding
Implementation	Solution scan; tech readiness & context fit	Implementation plans; workflows; risk & ops design	Field trials; M&E plan; iteration cadence	Rollouts; integration into ops; quality improvement
Finance	Market mapping; capital stack options; risk appetite	Blended finance design; terms; milestones & KPIs	Catalytic/first-loss pilots; outcome payments	Scaling capital; performance-based finance; securitization

Across workshops, participants repeatedly highlighted several persistent system-level barriers:

- Misaligned funding cycles
- Challenges coordinating across local, national, and global priorities.
- Limited secretariat and staffing capacity among smaller organizations.
- Fragmentation between climate, health, ecosystem, research, and implementation communities.
- Difficulties moving funding across geopolitical and institutional boundaries.
- Structural barriers preventing smaller or place-based organizations from participating in large-scale sustainability collaborations.
- The persistent “valley of death” between research generation and implementation.

Importantly, FAST has shifted many of these discussions away from abstract frustration toward spotlighting where across the funder collaborative landscape there is practical experimentation (Table 1). Participants shared examples of staged funding models, partnership accelerators, co-development processes, performance-based contracts, capacity building labs, collaborative design spaces, and matchmaking mechanisms intended to improve implementation outcomes and partnership durability.

Table 1. Summaries for the six workshops held between June 2025 and June 2026.

Date	Location	Sponsors	Themes/Spotlights
June 18, 2025	SRI Congress (Chicago, IL)	Belmont Forum, Impact Funders Forum @ Pew CT, Future Earth, University of Illinois System, Walder Foundation	An Invitation to Take Action, Led by Impact Lab @ Rockefeller & assessed barriers and friction points in research-to-action space and cross-sectoral collaboration
Sept 3, 2025	Virtual	Belmont Forum & Impact Funders Forum @ Pew CT	What does success look like? Why collaborate?
Sept 22, 2025	AMNH (New York, NY)	Belmont Forum, Center for Biodiversity and Conservation @ AMNH, Fundación Avina	Matrixed Collaboration, Database tools (e.g., Ocean Matcher) & Evaluating Transformative Change
Nov 19, 2025	Virtual	FAST Forum Secretariat	Grand Challenges & topical alignment
Mar 18, 2026	Virtual	FAST Forum Secretariat	Funding “unfundables” (Resilience CRA) & co-funding opportunities (Momentum for the Environment Initiative)
May 19, 2026	Virtual	FAST Forum Secretariat	Funding Workforce Development & Scaling catalytic investments through philanthropy - public agency partnerships

3. Building a Shared Identity and Community

One of FAST's most significant accomplishments during its first year was the transition from a series of exploratory workshops into a recognizable community of practice. Through the work of the organizing committee and participating members, the initiative developed a shared identity, adopted the FAST Forum name, launched the Aligned for Sustainability website, and created a common platform for communicating insights, opportunities, and emerging collaboration models.

These efforts transformed a collection of conversations into a visible and growing community capable of attracting new participants, sharing lessons across sectors, and sustaining momentum between workshops.

Looking Ahead

FAST is continuing to evolve from a convening series into a broader coordination ecosystem focused on aligned sustainability transformations. Current discussions include developing shared tagging systems, strengthening collaborative intelligence infrastructure, supporting thematic pilots, increasing visibility into funding landscapes, and improving pathways between research, implementation, policy, and finance.

At its core, FAST represents an emerging shift in how sustainability collaboration is understood: from isolated projects and transactional partnerships toward long-term, trust-based ecosystems capable of learning, adapting, and coordinating across complexity.

While FAST has helped to broker numerous strategic partnerships and connections, the forum's greatest accomplishment so far may be cultural. FAST has created a rare environment where organizations with very different mandates, incentives, and operating cultures are willing to openly discuss what is not working and collectively explore what more aligned, equitable, and implementation-oriented collaboration could look like in practice.

Thank you to the following organizations for participating in FAST Forum's first year of its workshop series:

ANR: French National Research Agency
Araucaria Fundacao
Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research
Aspen Global Change Institute
AXA Foundation for Human Progress
Bayer Foundation
Belmont Forum
Bezos Earth Fund
Blue Convergence Fund

BMBF: German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space
CAF - Panama
Climate Commercialization Expert, Biden/Harris Administration
ClimateWorks foundation
CLUA: Climate and Land Use Alliance
CNPQ: Brazil's National Council for Scientific and Technological Development
CNRS: Le Centre national de la recherche scientifique
CNRS Foundation
Cox Cleantech Accelerator
DFG: German Research Foundation
Envira Global
ERC: European Research Council
FAPESP: São Paulo Research Foundation
FFST: Fund for Science and Technology
Fundacion Avina
Fundacion Meri
Gener8tor
Grand Challenges Canada
Great Lakes Funders
Great Lakes Protection Fund
Hudson River Foundation
IADB: Inter-American Development Bank
India Health Fund
Instituto Arapyau
Instituto Clima e Sociedade
Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research
International Development Research Centre
International Funders for Indigenous Peoples
International Science Council
JST: Japan Science and Technology Agency
Kingfisher Foundation
Lemelson Foundation
Lichen Ventures
Moore Foundation
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
National Research Foundation - Kenya
National Research Foundation - South Africa
NSFC: National Natural Science Foundation of China
Ocean Matcher
Packard Foundation
Pew Charitable Trusts
Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation
Planet Labs PBC
Renaissance Philanthropy

REV Ocean
RISE Resilience Innovations
Rivenmoor
Salesforce
Sasakawa Peace Foundation
Science for Africa Foundation
Science Philanthropy Alliance
Sloan Foundation
SNSF: Swiss National Science Foundation
Superorganism
SwedBio
The Rockefeller Foundation
The Wildlife Conservation Society
The World Bank
TSRI: Thailand Science Research and Innovation Council
TUBITAK: Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye
UKRI NERC
UKRI-North American office
UNCIALIUM: United Network for Climate Inclusivity Advocacy Livelihoods, Inherent Utilization and Mobilization (Congo)
US National Science Foundation
VDI: Verein Deutscher Ingenieure
VITO: Vlaamse Instelling voor Technologisch Onderzoek
Walder Foundation
Wellcome Trust
WINGS
WTT Ventures
Xerxes Foundation