

The story of SIX

The worldwide social innovation exchange

From 2007 to 2015: the first eight years



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2	Introduction Background to this report
3	Part 1 How to run a global network: lessons from SIX Clear vision and strategy Value Trade-offs People and partners Regional nuances Variety
5	Part 2 Understanding SIX's growth What is SIX? Establishing SIX – how it started and stuck SIX today SIX as a community – open to all SIX – scope and numbers Where the money comes from Current governance and management What SIX does Activities and products Events Regional and thematic nodes Influencing and leading Website and resources Future development? The value of SIX Conclusions and reflections
16	Timeline Origins and development of SIX

Introduction

Throughout the world social innovation is seen as having a major contribution to make in the way we live and how we solve problems in whatever sector. Social innovators tend, almost by definition, to work on the margins – that is one of their strengths but it is also a potential weakness cutting innovators off from each other, from learning and sharing and from those whose support they need to bring ideas to fruition. The Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) was created in order to put social innovators in touch with each other and with those with the power and resources to make things happen, to foster sharing and learning, to avoid re-invention of the wheel and to provide both inspiration and legitimacy to the world of social innovation.

Background to this report

The Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch) jointly commissioned this short report on the history and lessons of SIX. The research had two related purposes:

- to identify the transferable lessons that can be drawn from SIX for the development of international networks generally
- to provide an account of the work of SIX in order to communicate its value and impact better

This brief report focuses on the story of SIX, the challenges and dynamics of running a global network, its value and impact.

This report is based on a series of interviews with people who interact with SIX in different ways since it has begun. We would like to thank Jon Huggett (SIX Chair), Geoff Mulgan (Nesta UK), Andrew Barnett (Gulbenkian UK Branch), Carolyn Curtis (TACSI, Australia), Martin Stewart Weeks (Independent consultant, Australia), Amis Boersma (Hivos, The Netherlands), Katie Wehr (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, US) and Ada Wong (The Good Lab, Hong Kong) for their contributions.

The interviews took place in the summer of 2015.

Part 1

How to run a global network: lessons from SIX

Below is a summary of the transferable lessons that can be drawn from SIX for the development of international networks.

Clear vision and strategy

SIX started with a simple mission and it has remained largely unchanged. Trying to be all things to all members, and solve all the world's problems, are distracting. Remember why the network was set up in the first place and work towards that aim; if a change in strategy is considered, think carefully about whether the original mission has been achieved and whether the new strategy is worth the risk of upsetting the status quo.

Value

A network's success is entirely dependent on the value it brings to its members. If members are engaged and interested, they will participate in the network and thereby contribute to its growth; conversely, if a network has no obvious benefit to a member, it will become uninterested. There are a variety of ways a network can be valuable to its members – providing useful resources, producing and curating powerful events, helping members find and nurture the right relationships, and by attracting a diverse range of organisations to it. All of these attributes contribute to a vibrant network in which innovation can flourish. The benefit of this is that less concern needs to be given to growing the network – a network which creates the right environment for its members will naturally attract their recommendations.

Trade-offs

Decisions need to be made regarding the size and depth of a network. Many interviewees agreed that the quality of connections should be the primary focus – once a network is established as 'deep', it will flourish; members of a tight, rich network will bring in their friends. Signs of 'depth' are members recommending membership to friends, frequency of contact, and 'high bandwidth' conversations: productive conflict, clear language, and emotional engagement. That said, the size of a network is important. The wider a network is, and the more organisations and countries represented, the more credibility it will have and the lower cost per member there will be.

People and partners

Consistency and longevity of passionate leaders within the network is crucial. Without champions and ambassadors for the network the relationships required to sustain and grow a network are difficult to nurture. Ensuring a network's full-time staff are fully engaged is difficult, but thinking through the leadership choices early on is very important. Similarly, finding a group of 'core' participants and partners who will champion the network is a useful exercise, though usually emerges organically.

Regional nuances

Local presence was also emphasised. SIX has built itself up with a nodal model, as noted above, and gaining traction in a geography requires on-the-ground, passionate ambassadors. This does not necessarily require actual local offices or nodes, however, but as a minimum requires champion partners willing to act on behalf of the network. Cultural diversity can be a huge benefit, however, the different approaches to and understanding of social issues requires both regional and global conversations. Managing a diverse network from the centre can be difficult and can lead to a perception of 'Western dominance'.

Variety

Part of the richness of a network is the diversity of it, and this is a huge contributor to its usefulness to members; for SIX practitioners this means they can find people to help, share ideas, and learn across differences. Innovation flourishes in heterogeneous networks. Global networks can include different cultures, countries, types of government, and economic development. At the same time variety drives up complexity, and this in turn increases cost. The trick is to bring in the variety that attracts not distracts at a fair cost – members want to meet both the usual suspects and the unusual suspects.

Part 2

Understanding SIX's growth

What is SIX?

SIX is a global network focusing on social innovation. SIX's vision is that people all over the world can become better innovators by more easily connecting to their peers, sharing methods and exchanging solutions globally. SIX connects people, within and across sectors, as friends who trust each other and who can be open about their challenges, as well as successes.

Establishing SIX – how it started and stuck

The idea of a network for social innovation began at a conference in Beijing when Geoff Mulgan asked anyone interested in establishing a social innovation network to meet for breakfast. At that breakfast meeting it was agreed that a social innovation network would be useful as a global space for honest discussion and practice-oriented learning. Moving from the idea to a functioning network proved challenging. But in 2008 SIX had a name and a home at the Young Foundation where it remained until 2013 when, as always intended, it became an independent organisation, with support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

In 2008 there was little written about social innovation. SIX's first goal was to get social innovation onto the public agenda, to develop processes, methods and tools, and to understand how social innovation works. *'We were there to promote social innovation and to start defining the tools and processes. We saw SIX as a one stop shop for social innovation.'*

One of the difficulties for any new organisation is gaining reputation, legitimacy (and funding). The Young Foundation, and specifically Geoff Mulgan, gave SIX profile and legitimacy but the danger was that SIX would become overly identified with its 'parent'. The initiative was helped from the outset by the engagement and support of Diogo Vasconceles, then a Fellow at Cisco and a former Portuguese Government Minister, who brought additional resources, connections and a certain independence.

SIX connects people, within and across sectors, as friends who trust each other and who can be open about their challenges, as well as successes.

SIX today

SIX sees itself as more of a community than a network. It works with governments, businesses, academics, funders, practitioners and leading social innovation intermediaries that support social innovation to accelerate the field of social innovation around the world. Simultaneously, it also seeks to learn from real people innovating in their own communities. By linking actors across sectors, fields and geographies, SIX seeks to spread the most effective models more quickly.

SIX describes its work as:

- connecting innovators
- designing experiences
- curating knowledge and insights
- disseminating practical examples of social innovation which enable the global community to learn from each other
- building the capacities of its members

SIX as a community – open to all

The term ‘member’ to describe involvement in SIX is contentious. On the one hand, those involved talk about members and membership but, at the same time, say that there is no such thing as members but more accurately people who visit the website, people who attend events, people who engage in conversations (and some people who pay). SIX prefers to describe itself as a ‘community’.

The fluid, informal nature of involvement is arguably a strength and a potential challenge for SIX. Anyone can become a part of SIX – an important feature in a field where good ideas may come from unlikely places. There are no membership criteria or membership drives. People become involved in SIX ‘partly through serendipity – they just trip over it’. ‘Membership’ has grown largely through a web presence and partly through personal recommendation. ‘People get involved in SIX because a friend or colleague says “you’ve got to go to this, or read this, it’s an amazing network” – it’s a viral sort of snowball thing’.

SIX – scope and numbers

SIX now has a presence across six continents (all except for Antarctica) and people from all these places regularly attend events and communicate with each other. In the early days of SIX people had to sign up to access the website which made it easier to count users; later signing in was dropped in favour of deeper, more personal connections.

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In 2009 it was estimated that around 500 people counted themselves as members of SIX, by 2013, 8,000–9,000 people were coming to events, using the website etc. Today SIX is more interested in tracking quality rather than quantity of involvement. It now tries to track people who attend at least two events and to whom staff speak, and broker connections for regularly; using this measure SIX estimates that it has regular quality contact with 2,000–3,000 people across the globe.

SIX would like to develop this tracking to identify who comes to events in different parts of the world from which sectors – for example, in Asia there is high attendance from people working in government whereas in Africa, the public sector is less visible.

Despite the lack of a membership structure, SIX grows ‘because people find it useful’.

But lack of formal membership creates several potential problems for SIX. First, lack of formal membership makes it difficult to assess the true number of people who use SIX and come back for more. Second, lack of formal membership deprives SIX of a potential source of revenue.

While some organisations pay to support SIX and are rewarded with membership of the Global Council (see below) most of those who use SIX do not pay. Third, lack of formal membership – or criteria for membership worries some of those involved. Anyone can claim to be a social innovator and become involved in SIX. ‘This is great but troubling because the greatest challenge in the field is to identify social innovation as not fringe or mad. The biggest risk is “anything goes”’. Some feel that if anyone can be a social innovator then it can’t mean much. Also we need to be careful about charities just re-branding what they already do so people say ‘oh that’s all it is ...’ At the same time, social innovation should not be preserved only for people who describe themselves as doing it.

Where the money comes from

Funding is an acknowledged challenge for SIX with the double disadvantage of being a network, because ‘people don’t fund networks’, and ‘because we want a commons ethos we can’t have pay walls’.

Those involved recognise that ‘SIX is hopeless as a standard funding model’. But, despite not focussing on marketing, SIX does attract funding working on the refreshingly old-fashioned idea that user satisfaction is what matters. ‘We have to get people to come to something and then they get it. People coming back is the only meaningful test of the value of this sort of network’.

SIX grows ‘because people find it useful’.

...despite not focussing on marketing, SIX does attract funding working on the refreshingly old-fashioned idea that user satisfaction is what matters.

SIX has no fundraising staff and sees fundraising as just part of the relationships SIX builds. Global Council members each pay £5,000–10,000 per annum to keep SIX going and *'If they stop paying that means we're not useful anymore'*. SIX has also received support from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (the UK Branch working with the Foundation's Human Development Programme), including a start up grant to help during the spin off from the Young Foundation. Other money comes from organisations interested in collaborating on a particular thematic challenge, an event or series of events. Cisco has given valuable in-kind technical support in the past, through the TelePresence facility.

Events do not usually generate income. SIX could make money from larger events, but larger events would diminish the quality of the interactions and value to participants.

In addition SIX receives money through its role in various European Commission social innovation projects, including the Social Innovation Europe network, which it has been running for the past five years, as well as playing a small role in other other European projects, including the Transition network of incubators.

SIX has also begun to involve funders, through work commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in the US, as an important part of the social innovation network and as a source of support for SIX.

Current governance and management

Since March 2013, SIX has been governed by an Executive Board of eight social innovation experts from around the world. The Global Council is currently composed of 13 leading social innovation organisations from across the globe, which provide SIX with core financial support, as well as advising on the work of SIX.

As one person explained, *'SIX is not one big blob but a collection of tight networks'*. Partly in order to manage the tension between breadth and depth, SIX has begun developing both regional and thematic nodes. Nodes are intended to maximise the number and intensity of connections in order to maximise the impact between the number of people around the world. But like all SIX work, developing the nodes is highly labour intensive.

SIX currently has 4.5 fte staff. The Global Council and Executive Committee members are very involved but the model *'relies on a level of heroism that is not sustainable'*. Nevertheless staff turnover is low, which is extremely important for the growth of the network, and the depth of interaction and retention of the members – *'you need a stable team to build and sustain good relationships'*.

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'You need a stable team to build and sustain good relationships'.

What SIX does

SIX 2.0

Developed by Jon Huggett (SIX Chair) in 2014

What we do	How it shows	What we do not do	In other words...
Help social innovators innovate	Social innovators come back, and bring peers	Drive innovations or their impact (too far away)	Nurture the bees
Offer social innovators the fewest steps to find what they need	Social innovators make connections at SIX	Create a hierarchy (too many steps, and inhibited behaviour)	Help bees pollinate
Nurture intense connections among social innovators	Tight, engaged nodes of social innovators	Build it and they will come (empty rooms kill growth)	Help bees build hives
Start nodes of theme, function, place, eg labs, academics, funders, US, etc.	Growth in intense nodes and members	Not predesign or road map (follow the innovators)	New hives
Nurture the connections among and within the nodes	Interconnectedness, Metcalfe's law	Grow quantity of numbers over quality of connections	Busy bees
Collaborate as peers	Connections go in all directions	Build hierarchies, give awards	No queen bee
Membership is only for pollinators	Member engagement	Not growing numbers for self	No locusts
We share knowledge openly	Best curated social innovation website	Evangelize social innovation	Free honey
Secure funding from innovators to ensure that innovators come first	Base costs covered by membership fees	Make social innovators the 'product'	No beekeepers

SIX has a variety of goals and activities. Perhaps the simplest description is: *'SIX is about bringing together social innovators worldwide helping them with what they need. Our role is to help social innovators do it better'*.

Globally, SIX: opens doors; informs and shares; thinks; collects; provides a channel and a platform; facilitates; supports and legitimises.

Many see SIX's role as growing the social innovation movement.

Activities and products

SIX runs a wide range of activities that help it achieve its mission. The way activities are designed reflect SIX's values.

Events

The events programme convenes people in creative ways all over the world. SIX runs a variety of events. Until recently, all have been small, invite only exclusive experiences, but more recently, SIX is developing more open, inclusive and larger events. Below highlights some of these:

Summer Schools

The Summer School is the most important event in the SIX calendar, and has run every year since SIX was established in 2008.

— What, why and where

SIX Summer Schools are popular events. These are held once a year in a different country and with a different focus/theme. For example, the theme of the 2014 Summer School in Vancouver was *'Shifting cultures, changing systems and preparing for surprises'*. Choice of the host city is based partly on requests made to SIX: *'We don't do events just because we've decided it's a nice idea. We prefer to be invited in. Sometimes a city invites us because it wants top thinkers in social innovation to help them; sometimes people use us to push their own agenda'*. The regular change in location provides a different backdrop to each event whilst, regardless of the event's theme, the value remains the same: connecting people who might not otherwise meet and deepening existing relationships.

— Quality and diversity

Ideally, SIX aims to have 50% new participants and 50% who have attended before, and 70% global and 30% from the host region. A Summer School has less than 100 participants. Quality and diversity are ensured through selective invitations. Individuals/organisations pay to attend (around £300) but there are some bursaries to ensure regional diversity. Like most of SIX work, Summer Schools are very labour intensive. For example, in addition to careful planning of content, the SIX team speak to most of the participants both before and after the event.

— Inspiration and support

Summer Schools involve a variety of site visits as well as seminars, workshops and 'peer consulting' exercises; the latter are spaces for social innovators to share a challenge with colleagues able to call on their knowledge and experience to offer support and suggestions for moving forward. Tweets from Summer School participants give a flavour of the inspiration and enthusiasm the School creates: *'amazing, inspiring conference ...'*, *'great first day, can't wait for tomorrow, just gets better and better'*.

Globally, SIX opens doors; informs and shares; thinks; collects; provides a channel and a platform; facilitates; supports and legitimises.

The events programme convenes people in creative ways all over the world.

— Depth and 'magic'

What makes Summer Schools so special? *'They are engaged, engaging, rooted in place.'* *'They have a personality and are very social. Size is very important to guarantee an in depth conversation.'* *'Participants always reference the "quality of the content, the presenters and the discussion" as a reason that they attend SIX events.'* *'The main difference is that connections made through SIX have more depth. SIX doesn't facilitate just networking for networking's sake and exchanging cards; with SIX there's more real sharing, and real communication.'* *'The magic element comes from the selection and briefing of speakers – SIX brings people doing extraordinary work with an extraordinary way of talking about it.'* They are charged with changing the conversation.

For us, events are about long term learning and relationship building over time, not just having a nice two days together. This is why SIX follows up with a selection of participants by telephone after the School at regular intervals for about a year afterwards (or until the next gathering).

There were only two suggestions for improving the Summer School. One was that more might be done to help the more introverted connect. The other was that the Schools are all conducted in English. This latter point is part of a more general difficulty for SIX, which it is hoping to ameliorate via the regional nodes. For example, the nodes are going to translate SIX's pick of the 10 best articles on social innovation.

Other events include:

— The Unusual Suspects Festival

First held in London in 2014 over four days, working with 35 partners to run 28 events all over London, engaging more than 1,000 participants. The event aimed to connect people doing social innovation, but who don't necessarily identify as 'innovators' – an Unusual Suspect – with the social innovation community, facilitating collaboration across silos and traditional boundaries. The event was a success and very well received by everyone involved. With the support of the Big Lottery Fund, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Nesta and others, SIX will be hosting a second Unusual Suspects Festival in Glasgow in October. Plans are underway to host a festival in London again in 2016, and it may be replicated in other cities outside the UK after that.

— Global TelePresence

Dialogues on specific themes that bring together up to 40 people from a different eight countries each time. Themes have included Corporate Social Innovation, financing, design, incubation models, or have focussed on sharing best practice in the field of social innovation in Asia, the future of work, the sharing economy and young people and technology. Since 2012, TelePresence discussions have brought together more than 600 people from over 30 different cities around the world.

'The main difference is that connections made through SIX have more depth ... with SIX there's more real sharing, and real communication.'

...connect people doing social innovation, but who don't necessarily identify as 'innovators'.

Regional and thematic nodes

Through their nodes, both regional and thematic, SIX quickly finds the best innovations from around the world, whether it's the best funding tools for innovation or the best models of caring for the elderly.

The value of nodes

The regional and thematic nodes were devised as a way of addressing the tension between breadth and depth. Regional nodes also address the fact that social innovation means different things in different parts of the world.

SIX now has regional nodes in Asia, Australia and the Nordics, and is developing nodes in Latin America and Africa. In terms of thematic nodes, SIX is working with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and other foundations to develop a funders node, and partners around the world to develop academic, cities, digital and international development nodes.

Developing nodes has proved to be challenging and much seems to depend on whether the node has a passionate, influential, regional champion.

Influencing and leading

Through working with governments, foundations, NGOs and large institutions, SIX contributes to building environments where innovation can flourish. In particular, SIX has worked with the European Commission, influencing social innovation policy since it was first invited to write a paper on who was doing social innovation in Europe, how and what kind of support was necessary.

Following this, the late first Chair of SIX, Diogo Vasconcelos, worked to embed social innovation in the European Commission's innovation strategy. Led by Diogo, SIX was central to discussions at the European level on social innovation. SIX won the first contract of the European Commission's pilot action on social innovation in 2011, the Social Innovation Europe network, and has been working with partners to run this, through three separate contracts ever since. Today, SIX is looked to as a convenor in Europe, and it now instigates events like SI Live, which bring European projects together who might know of each other, but would never consider working together so closely without SIX's leadership.

Further afield, work with the Colombian government's social innovation office is another example demonstrating how SIX is drawing on and sharing its global knowledge of social innovation activity around the world.

Through their nodes, both regional and thematic, SIX quickly finds the best innovations from around the world.

Today, SIX is looked to as a convenor in Europe.

Website and resources

SIX's website contains a mass of information, links, literature, updates and debates. It is a – if not the – major source of information on social innovation. *'It's really important to have one place to go and that's what SIX is.'*

Future development?

One suggestion for future development was to strengthen SIX's think tank role, curating and deepening thinking and concepts. *'SIX has created a thriving garden, now it needs to think about cataloguing the flowers.'*

The value of SIX

What SIX does best was said to be bringing people together as friends to share ideas and learn peer to peer. *'SIX makes it easy to find the person you need and it opens doors.'*

Identifying the impact of a network is always difficult. Tracking what has happened differently among a diverse group of globally scattered individuals, organisations and relationships is one problem; timing is another. *'The effect of SIX is transformational but it may take several years for the effect to be seen in a concrete example'.* In addition, asking about the impact of a network is much like asking about the success of a party – guests come with different expectations and get different things out of the event.

SIX's current supporters and community understand this challenge – *'Funders always want to understand the reach – who and how – but the enlightened see it's about more than counting. Maybe we need some innovation, some creative thinking about measures!'*

Making connections

Various themes emerged in discussion of the impact of SIX. One strong theme was SIX's role in making connections, putting people in touch with each other. Interviewees were able to cite concrete examples of productive relationships established through SIX. *'I probably use the SIX network at least once a week.'* The people in the community do more than just attend events and using SIX's resources – there is a deeper more thoughtful connection.

'Social innovation can feel like a lonely task. The sense of having colleagues (through SIX) working on the same issues and challenges – even around the world – is really inspiring and comforting.'

Anne Sorensen, Co-founder of Social+ and Chair of SIX Nordic, 2014

Taking a short cut

Involvement in SIX and the knowledge and connection provides what was described as 'leap frogging' and 'a short cut'. *'Because of our involvement in SIX and access to all that knowledge we were able to make progress so much faster.'*

...bringing people together as friends to share ideas and learn peer to peer. 'SIX makes it easy to find the person you need and it opens doors.'

'The effect of SIX is transformational but it may take several years for the effect to be seen in a concrete example'.

Inspiration and support

'When you present a project you get good critical feedback and reassurance – it emboldens you.' *'Innovation is a lonely business. SIX makes you feel you're not alone.'* *'Innovation is about power and money as well as ideas. SIX provides social innovators with a space helping people work out and analyse obstacles.'* *'Not everyone wants change so it's very supportive to have SIX – it gives you comrades and companions.'*

Providing legitimacy

SIX was also said to give innovators and innovations legitimacy through brand association, opening doors and encouraging willingness to listen to new ideas. Where, for example, government was sceptical about a suggestion *'wheeling in some of the big hitters from SIX can work wonders'*.

'Being involved in SIX from an early stage put us on the international radar of social innovation organisations quickly. We supported the first summer school in San Sebastian (2008), hosted the second in Lisbon (2009) and the first thematic event on ageing and innovation in Paris (2010). SIX quickly helped us create and enlarge our network of social innovation related contacts.'

Gulbenkian Human Development Programme

Exposure to new ideas, new people, new relationships

'SIX gives you access to the best thought leadership and knowledge.'

SIX was also said to bring fresh perspective and new energy especially in established fields such as international development.

'SIX brings an abundant mind set.'

'If you want to gain different perspectives, break out of old ideas, be inspired then go to SIX.'

'Hosting SIX in Vancouver propelled social innovation thinking and acting in Vancouver and British Columbians beyond our wildest imagination. The key was assembling a diverse array of local partners and sponsors. In SIX's wake enabling policy has been developed, new funding streams established and a constituency emboldened. Hosting SIX is a gift that keeps on giving. It's a delight to engage, play and dance with the world's best. Plans are underway to create a summer of social innovation in Vancouver thanks to the SIX experience.'

AI Etmanski, BC Partners for Social Impact, Canada, 2014

'Innovation is a lonely business. SIX makes you feel you're not alone.'

'SIX gives you access to the best thought leadership and knowledge.'

Disruptive thinking

SIX provides an opportunity for diverse, global, outside learning enabling an individual or organisation to understand the range of possibilities and engage in disruptive thinking. Many people cited global learning as important, even if an organisation did not work or fund outside its own country. Being aware of how others are doing things may provide valuable ideas for in-country application. In addition, a global network focussed on social innovation takes organisations away from talking to each other in subject or policy silos.

One person summed up the value of SIX with the words: *'Creators, bridgers, bonders – and disruptors'*.

These and other examples are included on SIX's website.

Conclusion and reflections

Those involved are enthusiastic about the value of SIX. SIX provides inspiration, ideas, thought leadership, support and connections. SIX acts as a social innovation bank of ideas, knowledge and experience, as well as a community, or club, giving the prospective social innovator global networks it would take large quantities of time and money to build.

But SIX clearly means more than that to its participants. Innovation, almost by definition, is lonely and it requires courage and confidence to challenge established ideas and practices. Change is not always welcomed within any sector and, in addition, the social innovator may feel lonely and have to overcome obstacles *within* his/her organisation. SIX provides an essential supportive and encouraging network.

SIX also, crucially, provides legitimacy for the very notion of social innovation, for an idea or programme and for an individual/organisation suggesting a new way of doing things. SIX may assist in opening closed doors not only by lending an organisation or individual the reputation and kudos of SIX networks, but also by attending meetings, hosting events and connecting people.

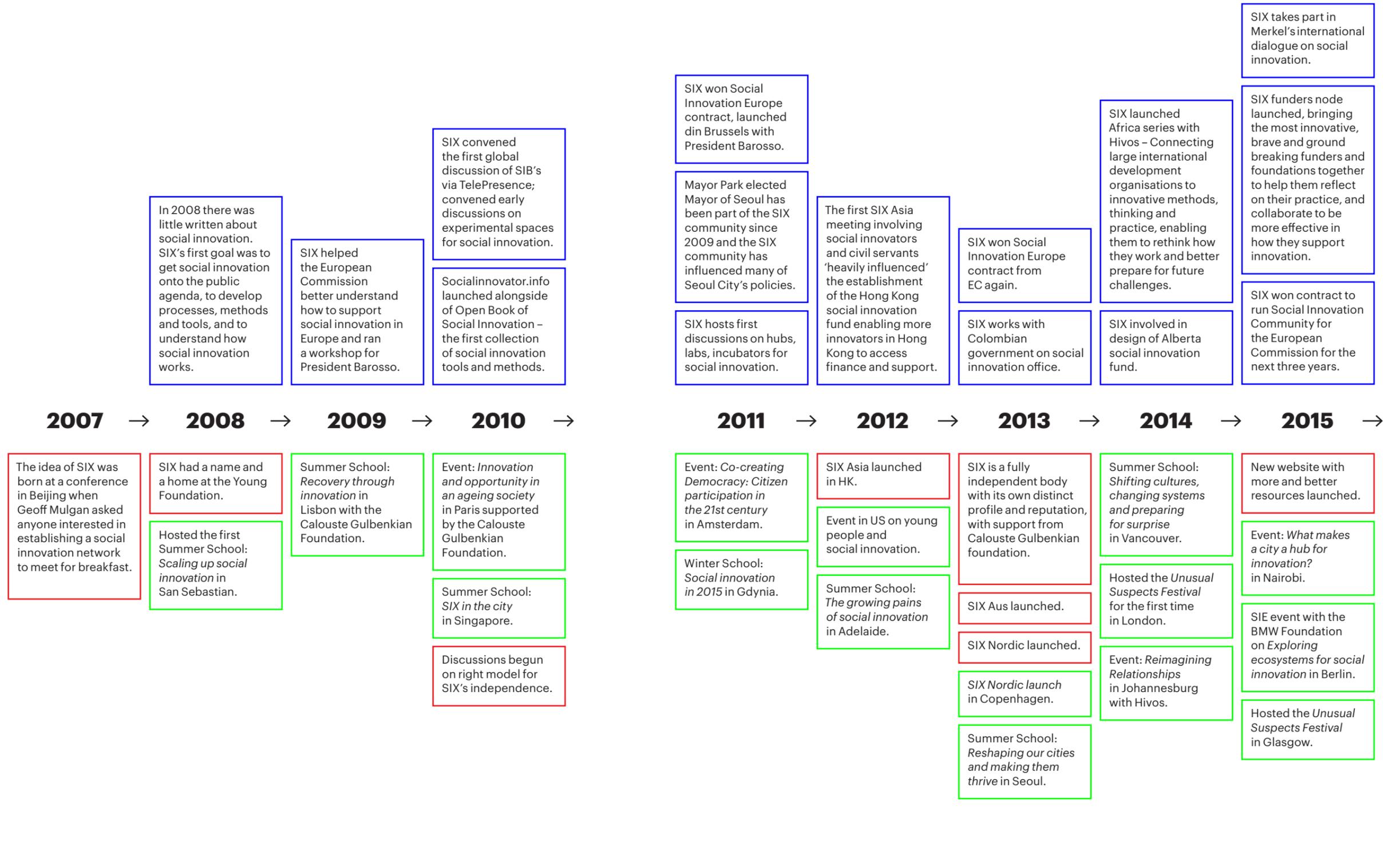
The greatest strength of SIX is that it is about sharing and open global learning. Sharing and genuinely open global learning gets things done and short circuits complex and time-consuming processes (such as knowledge and relationship building). However, without external support, it is not a viable business model. If SIX were an exclusive club or if it charged for its intellectual property, SIX would not need external funding, but arguably external funders, and their grantees, concerned with social innovation have much to gain from what SIX offers: knowledge, ideas, inspiration and disruptive thinking, learning, support, ready made global networks and a degree of legitimacy for new ways of thinking and doing things.

SIX provides an opportunity for diverse, global, outside learning enabling an individual or organisation to understand the range of possibilities and engage in disruptive thinking.

The greatest strength of SIX is that it is about sharing and open global learning.

Timeline

Origins and development of SIX



This document was initiated and supported by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.



We would also like to thank all the organisations around the world that have supported us so far, including our 2015 Global Council members and core supporters:

Incubated by



and many more...



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