

Social cohesion & the role for philanthropy



This learning comes from a retreat in September 2019 as part of the SIX Funders Node — a programme in SIX that supports philanthropic foundations from around the world to work more effectively and authentically.

What do we mean by social cohesion?

‘Social cohesion’ has no single unified definition and while some foundations use this language, other similar terms that surfaced included:

Community | Power imbalance | Pluralism | Open society | Shared value | Belonging

Whether it is the black liberation organising taking place in the US, Indigenous rights in Canada, or the current discussions around immigration in the UK, calls for radical renewal of social cohesion are prevalent — as are calls for increased segmentation and exclusion. Having a sense of belonging and feeling part of an open society might feel different for individuals in different societies, yet cohesive societies should enable a sense of belonging no matter your context.

What threatens social cohesion?

Threats to social cohesion vary depending on the context, but widespread and rising inequality was named as the prevailing threat to social cohesion. Other threats include the climate crisis; the legacy of colonisation; and a rise in populist and nationalist rhetoric. This rhetoric creates strong cohesion within certain groups by excluding or even demonising others.

“Can philanthropy exist in the future we envision?”

What needs to change?

While many philanthropic organisations aim to identify and solve structural inequalities in society, there is less readiness to recognise their own organisations as part of the problem. Philanthropy is both part of the system perpetuating inequality and a system in itself. A first step for philanthropy to help create more socially cohesive societies is for funders to resist the narrative that they speak and act from a position of neutrality. Other things that must change include:

- **Radically decentralising power:** many in the philanthropic sector are increasingly talking about power imbalances and sharing power, moving from thinking about community “buy in” to community “ownership”. Funders need humility and an acceptance that this entails the inevitable surrendering of some of their organisational and individual power.
- **Reconceptualising philanthropy:** many communities and cultures engage with philanthropy and sharing resources quite apart from the notion of philanthropic foundations — the controlled giving of income from invested, tax-sheltered accumulated wealth. How can we use different entry points — like gifting or mutual aid — to reconceptualise philanthropy and help the sector evolve?
- **Decolonising philanthropy:** there must be greater recognition of the role of philanthropy in colonialism, and creating or exacerbating colonial structures of inequality.

Which methods can help the sector shift?

Participatory grantmaking:

Philanthropy must engage with new ways of giving, like participatory grantmaking, that give more power to communities. This must be thought of as an iterative approach, rather than an out-of-the-box method. We must consider potential unintended consequences, such as increased competition between organisations or replicating the marginalisation of minorities.

Repurposing endowments:

Most foundations or trusts continue to accumulate wealth for their endowments to exist in perpetuity — an approach that contributes to a core threat to social cohesion: inequality. Funders are positioned to lead by considering the social return of their investments or even spending down.

Redefining success :

Foundations should try to overcome measurement obsession and value qualitative and emergent approaches that let communities define success.

Working with unusual suspects:

Making funding decisions should start with issues, not institutions, and engage a range of different players in our quest to fund solutions. What can we learn from other practices, like citizen democracy?

Overcoming internal barriers and conflict:

Transparency is needed around how funders think social change happens: is it from the ground up? Or do some funders believe in the notion of “great men”? Funders should reflect on their actions, language and roles, and consider how much time is spent on internal versus external transformation.

Evolving community foundations:

Community foundations can be seen as conservative, complacent or at risk of being a draw on, rather than an enabler of, local resources. Yet, with a strong local emphasis, sustainable funding and autonomy, community foundations can play a crucial role in social cohesion.

Moreover, we must address the colonial dynamics still at play within the sector, and begin to disrupt these as organisations.

- **Acting as translator:** foundations should work between grassroots organisations and legal or professional bodies to translate the jargon that create barriers to access.
- **Stepping into gaps in the system:** as the role of global governance structures like the UN and the EU is questioned, philanthropy could step in and champion the social cohesion narratives which are often at the heart of these institutions.

“Once you become a staff member at a foundation, can you still represent the community?”

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” — Lilla Watson

If you'd like to find out more, get in touch at info@socialinnovationexchange.org