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## Breakfast roundtable on future-fit philanthropy: 12th April, London

***Philanthropic foundations have traditionally given relatively little emphasis to foresight, but if they want to support untested or ‘frontier’ areas, they need to adopt new skills and a foresight mindset. The sector urgently needs a stronger focus on becoming ‘future-fit’, i.e. understanding how the trends of the next 10, 20 and even 50 years will impact its focus, operations and legitimacy.***

Following the publication of [this article on future-fit philanthropy](#), the [Social Innovation Exchange \(SIX\)](#) and the [School of International Futures \(SOIF\)](#) hosted a roundtable discussion in London to explore how philanthropy can harness strategic foresight to create transformative social change.

**Find SIX and SOIF’s reflections from the roundtable below, which highlight some of the key discussion points, and what we think some of the big questions are that face philanthropy that tries to become future-fit.**

### The use of foresight for foundations

There is a growing trend among philanthropists and foundations (including the ones around the table) to using foresight and complex systems thinking to shape what they do. In this small group there were several different challenges which foundations saw the need to use foresight to tackle. These included:

- The future of healthcare and public health services
- The future of civic space
- The future of the climate and the role for philanthropy in climate change

### Futures thinking as a way to help make the “Third Horizon” real

More and more, philanthropists see the value of engaging with the future in a systematic, collaborative and participatory way. Picking up on ‘weak signals’ gives foundations the potential to notice where the future is already emerging, and to catalyse people coming together to embody that future. Using foresight means we can collectively prepare for big challenges and help shape the future we want to see.



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*To achieve this foresight with impact, we need to design around three core principles:*

- *Purpose*
- *Participation*
- *Complexity and interdependence*

We can use the International Futures Forum version of a three horizons model to think about the future. If the first is the solid status quo, futures thinking enables us to create a greater sense of solidity around the second and third horizons. The second horizon represents innovation and achievable change, while the third horizon represents the vision of a new and different future. This helps us move away from the norm of organisations acting in their own interests, rather than the interests of the system.

If it's agreed that we need to look at the future in order to best achieve a foundation's mission, it remains difficult to carve out the time needed for this from our day-to-day duties. Thinking about the future can feel abstract and difficult to tie down into concrete actions. We need ways to anchor this thinking into organisations and to test out hypotheses with tangible action.

As a sector, philanthropy is also in danger of reducing complex problems in order for them to feel more approachable, and for us to feel safer. Instead, foresight requires an inherent systemic lens and systems thinking approach in order to grasp the complexity of the challenges we face.

## The requirement to look at the future of philanthropy's role in society

Discussing how foundations become future fit implies that we should protect their role in society. There is an implicit assumption that funders have a right to continue to act on behalf of society to solve social and environmental challenges. To what extent do we need to be working on society's challenges going into the future, and to what extent do we need to do fundamental work on ourselves as funders?

The debate over whether philanthropy can always be described as a 'good thing' is live globally. Questions over the sector's legitimacy and accountability loom larger as philanthropy looks to the future and tries to achieve bigger and bolder things. As a sector, it often works in the interests of its individual organisations, despite its mission to tackle inequality. Likewise, hierarchical governance and a lack of diversity in philanthropy restrict how participatory philanthropy can be. If philanthropy is unable to share power, and if as a model it is able to be co-opted by people to do radical and worrying things, we can see it as part of the problem.

At the same time, while philanthropy can rightfully be accused of hoarding power, there are few examples of sectors - like the civil service and the private sector - which have been able to escape



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neoliberal thinking and prerogatives. In this case, to what extent should philanthropy accept the messy system and imperfect approaches, and just do what it can?

## Developing a common agenda in foundations' foresight work

There is more and more appetite from philanthropic foundations to explore and embed futures thinking within their organisations. However, doing this work is hard and doing futures thinking well needs organisations to be connected in order to share and learn from each other, and supported in translating big picture thinking into day-to-day actions.

If we agree that foundations do have a role to play in the third horizon, we need to improve how we share knowledge about solutions that exist elsewhere, and how we learn from each other. SIX and SOIF can help provide foundations with these necessary connections and support needed to take futures thinking further.

We plan to take this conversation, with a view to:

- Hosting more roundtables with foundations and key thinkers to share views and experiences
- Exploring the best examples of how foundations have engaged with futures thinking
- Scanning the horizon for emerging issues of relevance to the sector and convening cross-sector explorations on key issues of interest - like the future of authoritarianism, technology, governance, and climate change
- Building the strategic foresight capability of foundations to integrate the third horizon into their operations, programmes and strategic planning
- Looking further into the futures thinking of philanthropy with a focus on issues of accountability, purpose, participation, operational implications, and necessary cultural changes

This breakfast was the first in a series hosted by SIX and SOIF. If you'd like to join the conversation on future-fit philanthropy, please get in touch with [sophie@socialinnovationexchange.org](mailto:sophie@socialinnovationexchange.org)