

Breakfast on corporate social innovation with SIX, Nesta and McConnell

On 22nd February, SIX and Global Council partners Nesta and the McConnell Foundation hosted a breakfast on corporate social innovation in London.

There are a multitude of ways that corporations are contributing to social change, but these initiatives can often feel piecemeal with varying motivations. For this first breakfast, we invited key thinkers to highlight the different ways corporations are supporting social change (and moving beyond corporate social responsibility), and explored what's needed to better align different movements and sectors to increase the impact of this work globally.

Please find a summary of our key discussion points below; a list of useful resources referenced during the discussion and the details of those who attended. The insights captured here give a brief overview of the different discussion points brought up during the event, and do not reflect any one attendee's opinion.

We are at an inflection point

There is a growing consensus that consumers, investors, communities and governments around the world want businesses to change, and backlash against the fact that many corporates work only towards the short term pursuit of profit. This is coupled with social movements now being able to take place on a global scale (like the #MeToo movement) and the global reach of many corporations today.

To be able to take on the social and environmental challenges faced by societies today, there is a need for corporations to move from a place of destructive creation to one of creative destruction. In order to do so, a major shift in mindset is needed across the corporate sector.

What is needed to encourage corporations to innovate for social good?

1. Clear compelling incentives

In order to shift the mindset of corporates to drive better outcomes for society as well as business, and to avoid the reflex of reverting to the status quo, we need clear compelling incentives that have a large degree of certainty and commercial benefit for corporates.

2. Acknowledging the pitfalls of the social innovation movement

The [Centre for Acceleration for Social Technology](#) determines three ways of thinking about value: social value; economic value; and user value. What is often missing in the field of social innovation, is conversations centring on 'user value'. If we want corporates to engage with social innovation, we need to ensure social, economic and user value are *all* being promoted.

“Is it enough for business to do no harm or do we want them to do more?”

- Cassie Robinson, The National Lottery Community Fund

3. Finding new shared language

The use of new language can help create empathy between the corporate world and the world of social innovation. Thinking about business as a series of relationships, or reframing the narrative of 'sustainability' to one focusing on 'time', can help create a shift in mindset that is more geared towards social impact.

4. Redefining what we mean by 'impact'

Changing the conventional mindset of corporates to think of 'impact' as linear, can enable them to see their purpose as multi-faceted, and not only concerned with the financial profit. We are at a point in which we need to ask ourselves, 'is it enough for business to do no harm or do we want them to do more?'

5. Embracing slack

In an era of constant talk about 'regeneration', we must acknowledge that regenerative businesses and societies need slack in order not to reproduce the same scarcity mindset. With this in mind, corporates should openly acknowledge the difficulty in being everything to all stakeholders and should take conscious and confident decisions about who their decisions might negatively affect.

6. Decommissioning to make way for the new

During the process of innovation, some things must be decommissioned in order to make way for a new way of acting. We need to think about this process and, importantly, where the responsibility for this process lies. Resisting the dominant idea of efficiency, we need to acknowledge and incorporate waste - both the waste of human effort and financial capital - into corporate practice and narrative.

7. Not relying on the heroic CEO

Rather than waiting for heroic CEOs to lead the way in corporate social innovation, the conditions need to be created in which this becomes an attractive business practice. If this environment is created without having to rely on the 'enlightened

CEO', corporate social innovation can incorporate both those working in top management and on the frontline in a business.

8. Accessible social innovation tools and resources

Social innovation is in danger of being co-opted as a commercial tool by corporate employees and CEOs who don't have a deep understanding of what this really means, and of what good looks like. The McConnell Foundation's [Academy for Sustainable Innovation](#) is one example of an initiative helping create an understanding of social innovation more accessible to new sectors.

9. Understanding the role of corporations in social innovation ecosystems

Whole systems can't be changed without the involvement of corporates. Yet, thinking about 'corporate social innovation' without the 'corporate' reminds us of the need for diversity of human activity that hopes to make positive social change. We need to ensure corporates don't squeeze out other sectors practising and advocating for social innovation.

Other questions we are left thinking about...

- To what extent is the idea of innovation in business simply doing business well, by remaining agile and being fit for the future?
- How do we reframe the idea of 'innovation' so that it implies a benefit for society without having to talk about 'social innovation'?
- How do we better tie the work of corporations into the human and emotional aspects of social innovation, harnessing the idea of common humanity and the need for holistic approaches to collectively work towards aims like the SDGs?

Where do we go next?

This breakfast is in the first in a series on corporate social innovation hosted by SIX and Nesta. If you'd like to join the conversation, please get in touch with Sophie at sophie@socialinnovationexchange.org

Resource list

- [Winner Takes All](#) - Anand Giridharadas
- [Doing Capitalism in the Innovation Economy](#) - William H. Janeway
- [Fairness in Business report](#) - Blueprint for Better Business
- [The Long Time Project](#) - Ella Saltmarshe & Beatrice Pembroke
- [The evolution of 'tech for good'](#) - Cassie Robinson

Breakfast attendees

1. David Bent - UCL Institute for Global Prosperity
2. Dee Corrigan - Blueprint for Better Business
3. Tim Draimin - McConnell Foundation
4. Nicolina Farella - McConnell Foundation
5. Stephen Huddart - McConnell Foundation
6. Ed Mayo - Co-operatives UK
7. Alex Mecklenburg - Doteveryone
8. Sophie Monaghan-Coombs - SIX
9. Louise Pulford - SIX
10. So Jung Rim - SIX
11. Cassie Robinson - The National Lottery Community Fund
12. Ella Saltmarshe - The Comms Lab
13. Michael Solomon - Responsible 100
14. Kate Sutton - Nesta
15. Chris Turner - B Lab UK