

Aligning for Impact – a view from global foundations



Robert Bosch Stiftung

Introduction

The challenges our societies face are growing in scale and complexity. No single organisation is able to solve these challenges alone. Not even foundations are reaching this challenge, despite their unique positioning and ability to take more risks and invest in a longer time frame.

There is, however, a rise in popularity of collective impact approaches and global collective efforts, like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that demonstrate a turning point. Organisations are beginning to understand that collective action is needed; one that expands beyond sectors and levels within the systems.

Our individual capacities are limited compared to the scale of the problems. And despite knowing we need to work together, it doesn't make it any easier in practice.

This is why we brought together senior representatives from 18 global foundations and leading thinkers for a retreat focusing on this topic in August 2017 on Wasan Island in Canada. Together, we explored what works, what doesn't, practical frameworks, approaches and stories of how to shift organisations, cultures and mind-sets.

About the retreat

Our objectives for the retreat were to:

- Provide a unique and focused opportunity for foundations interested in, and working on alignment across sectors and geographies to develop strategies and practical ways to do it.
- Inspire more collective and collaborative action globally and help participants to find points of alignment and to ignite opportunities to pursue the value of that alignment.
- Enable and strengthen emerging strong partnerships and relationships in this field through the [SIX Funders Node](#).

This retreat built on a similar meeting last year on funding systems change and is part of the SIX Funders Node, a global group for philanthropic leaders.

The 16 leading foundations came from US, UK, Canada, Portugal, and Brazil, united in their mindset to transform their grantmaking and increase their impact. The foundations varied in their scope and scale, and ranged from public entities, family foundations and multinational companies. They were joined by two alignment experts.



Who was there?

1. Carla Duprat, InterCement Institute for Community Development, Brazil
2. Elana Ludman, Graham Boeckh Foundation, Canada
3. Francisco Palmares, The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Portugal
4. Geoff Mulgan, Nesta, UK
5. Helga Breuninger, The Helga Breuninger Foundation, Germany
6. Jean-Marc Chouinard, Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, Canada
7. John Esterle, The Whitman Institute, USA
8. Jordan Junge, SIX, UK
9. Kelsey Spitz, SiG National, Canada
10. Louise Pulford, SIX, UK
11. Mark Cabaj, From Here to There Consulting and the Tamarack Institute, Canada
12. Markus Lux, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Germany
13. Nafeesa Remtilla, Mulago Foundation, USA
14. Ruth Ruderham, Comic Relief, UK
15. Sara Lyons, Community Foundations of Canada and Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal People in Canada, Canada
16. Stephen Huddart, The McConnell Foundation, Canada
17. Steve King, Swarm Partners, UK
18. Tim Draimin, SiG National, Canada

Collective visions of the group



Why are you here?

We asked the participants why they came. This is what they told us.

We are here to:

- Help bring together disparate parts and find convergence on something new
- Open our horizons and expand our sense of vision outside of our boundaries
- Bring our learning back to our country and context
- Be adaptable to learn from each other and understand our role in collaboration
- Be discomforted and disrupted
- Understand how to let go of what no longer works
- Understand the weight of our responsibility and our unique value to add
- Look at naturally occurring opportunities and solutions
- Help align our how and what in order to move philanthropy forward
- Connect with others in a wider-field and find allies we didn't see before
- Question our own power and privilege
- Welcome the unexpected
- Learn how to give up control
- Shape the future together and not just endure it
- Learn how to better align human and planetary potential through our work

What do we mean by alignment and why is it valuable?

'Alignment requires you to really know who you are. You need to know your foundation and what you stand for before you can get to that generative state and truly align'.

Arti Freeman, Ontario Trillium Foundation

The irony is – there is no alignment on what alignment means. In English, alignment has a looser meaning than collaboration; a feeling that you don't need to construct every step. In French or in German it literally means 'in line' and assumes more intentional and concrete forms of collaboration.

So, for the purpose of the retreat, we agreed that alignment can be considered as the following:

- Alignment with ...
- Alignment to ...
- Alignment for...

An emerging framework developed with different types of alignment:

1. On domain (for example against inequality)
2. On outcome (for example reducing teenage pregnancy rates)
3. On a leverage point (for example creating a more integrated mental health system)
4. On a strategy (for example using the supply chain to reduce poverty)
5. On specific projects (for example on co-owning an island)

'The value of alignment is the potential of greater impact'.

Alignment as a Response To Misalignment

When Disconnect Is The Challenge

- How do we sequence alignment for the greatest impact?
- How do we manage and nurture key relationships that are constantly changing?
- How do we know the right amount of investment to spark alignment without disempowering people?

When Disconnect Is The Opportunity

- Aligning impact with the end consumer + new market
- Aligning budgets for greater impact and leveraging supply chains
- Aligning our own efforts means honing our focus

Getting to alignment – Principles and aides for action

A set of principles and [aides for action to assist with alignment](#) emerged throughout the retreat, with guidance from expert, Mark Cabaj.

These principles and aides are intended to guide thinking and action, as opposed to provide a step by step instruction. Often, insights are embedded within tools and aides for actions about the complex problem we're trying to solve and as such, Mark recommended taking the time to reflect on the backstory within the aide and what it highlights.

'It's important to remember that tools reveal certain things and distort others, so be aware of how and when to use the tool'

Mark Cabaj, Tamarack Institute.

This [resource](#) provides a more detailed list of frameworks, methodologies, practices and books to assist with alignment.

Emerging principles of alignment

The following principles should be viewed as helpful precursors for successful alignment, not strict conditions.

- Be clear on the purpose
- Build the trust – collaboration proceeds at the speed of trust
- Focus on the long-term
- Be iterative and open to change
- Be transparent and open

It's interesting to note that many of these principles were surfaced as fundamental to the future of social innovation during the [SIX Wayfinder](#) in February 2017.

Foundational ideas to guide alignment:

There are a few foundational ideas or principles about that should guide thinking and action when trying to get alignment across diverse people, organizations and sectors. These are outlined in the [resource](#) prepared by Mark Cabaj following the retreat:

People and organisations can align on 'ends' and 'means'. For example, residents and organizations in Tillamook County, Oregon, spent time developing a common agenda to reduce teen pregnancy, but differed widely in their means: some promoted abstinence, others, safe sex, others advocated education. Together, they succeeded in reducing teen pregnancy by 75% in ten years

Alignment can be positive or negative. The outcomes or agenda around which diverse



people and organisation may seek to align may be 'good' (e.g., saving a rainforest, Polish Solidarity in the 1980s) or 'bad' (e.g., collusion amongst pharmaceutical companies to set prices for certain drugs) or debatable or in-between (e.g., OPEC setting oil prices to create certainty in the market)

There is a difference between 'superficial' and 'deep' alignment where people and organisations simply align on a relatively unexplored or poorly understood set of current values and interests or 'deep alignment' where shared aspirations and directions are developed based on a deeper exploration and reflection of values and interests

Take alignment where you can get it. In his new book, *Collaborating with the Enemy: Working With People You Don't Agree With, Like or Trust*, Adam Kahane argues that 'conventional collaboration' – a focus on getting everyone to agree on problem and solution – is sometimes inferior to 'stretch collaboration' where people only need to find sufficient ground to work on whatever areas they can agree on, even though these may fall very short of their hopes or ambitions

Alignment building may be short term, one-off, enterprise or a long term process that starts with small wins, building trust and confidence, opening up opportunities for deeper alignment

The process – Key questions to consider:

Regardless of scope, size or scale, the group identified the following key questions that were key to consider during the process of alignment:

- What's the power you bring to the table? What about the power of others? How do you manage this power? What are you expecting? Who is excluded? (either intentionally or accidentally?)
- How do you bring in underrepresented voices?
- What's the end outcome? Have you missed the chance for alternative outcomes? Did you focus too much on the destination and miss the journey? Have you considered the sustainability? If and how will you exit?
- How do you align at multiple levels of scale – both horizontally across geographies but also vertically from those on the ground up to the policymakers?

The changing role of foundations



- The question of how to be better aligned led to a bigger question about the role of foundations. Many of the funders in the SIX Funders Node are changing their strategies and moving away from traditional thematic-based grant making to taking on a more transformative role. Some foundations see their role as supporters of critical platforms that connect and enable others to be changemakers. Others recognise that when working in new and different ways, they're required as a foundation to step in as a partner and do the work themselves. What we've heard from the funders we work with is that they recognise that if they want to be truly transformative in how they work, they need to work with others in new and different ways; they can't do this alone.
 - As the roles of foundations change the way they operate both internally and externally, so do the boundaries of their work. This raises questions about how they operate, how they fund and how they work with others.
- 'As we try to fund for more impact through our new transformative grants, how do we find the funders that can do the pieces we can't? This is why we're interested in alignment and collaboration and understanding how to be pursue collective approaches – to have a bigger impact' Jen Roynon, Ontario Trillium Foundation

Stories of Alignment

Aligning the Mental Health System in Canada

After the health system failed 22 year old Graham Boeck and he tragically died, his family became determined to improve how patients and families are treated in Canada. Based in Canada and open to the world, the Graham Boeck Foundation (GBF) aims to be a catalyst in bringing about transformational changes that significantly improve the lives of people with or at risk of mental illness.

Over half of the population in Canada will experience mental health challenges at some point in their lives, and 75% of these cases happen before the age of 24. Suicide is the second leading cause death amongst young people. Yet despite the resounding need, there isn't a strong system for young people and mental health; one which works for them. The system is fragmented. There are different providers for those aged 0-18 and then those aged 18-24. There are 10 provinces and 3 territories and they all deliver care in different ways. On average, it takes 6-8 months to see someone.

In their mission to transform the mental health system, GBF understands the need for alignment. Not only does the system need to be more aligned, but so do the players within the system.

In Ontario, they have aligned on two levels. First, on a systems level with service providers including the Ministry of Health

and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, and secondly, on a community level. GBF needed to ensure that they found the right access point and that there was alignment with the government, the government ministries, community providers and the philanthropic community.

The Foundation have put forward a call for proposal for integrated service hubs in the community and establishing more early-interventions to not only save lives but also cost. This is particularly important as mental health is impacted by so many different parts of our lives, including employment and education.

Aligning on such a systematic scale is not without its challenges. Understanding the sequencing of alignment, who you bring in and at what stage to have the largest impact, is a constant challenge. The changes with partners, particularly changes in government, challenge the process of alignment, as well as understanding

Reducing Poverty Through Cement

InterCement is a Brazilian multinational cement company. Cement, in the form of concrete is the second most demanded product in the world, after water.

InterCement are interested in how they can use cement to reduce poverty and inequality for those at the base of the pyramid.

The business of poverty reduction is complex and to have any significant impact, a new approach clearly needs to be adopted given the limited outreach of corporate social responsibility initiatives. These initiatives are run by the InterCement Institute in partnership with different stakeholders, both within the company and outside, seeking a sustainable model.

Understanding the limited philanthropic reach of the Institute's budget and working closer to the company, they understood that a key way to achieve a bigger impact was to align social aims with other areas of the business and move resources within the company. They're rethinking the value chain of construction, how to use a network and how to see the market. They're interested in the base of the pyramid as customers and how cement and concrete can be used to reduce poverty, through new products and services. They're also exploring business solutions to renovating low-income housing through supporting entrepreneurs and innovators and how the Company can help to enable complete solutions.

This new approach is not without challenges. Cement has been done the same way for 180 years and operates in a conservative context. Encouraging higher-purpose driven management is not immediately compatible within traditional management models. Market fluctuations can discourage innovation, but also provides a real opportunity for new ideas.

Aligning against Austerity

Worried by increasing social inequalities caused by austerity policies, a group of diverse foundations in Quebec came together to publish an open letter addressing the government and form a 'Collectif'.

The organisations varied in size, scale and outlook – some were more conservative and others were activists. It took time and careful facilitation to build trust. It took five meetings just to get to a stage of aligning on what they wanted to say to government.

Aligning and in such a public way was a first for the foundations involved. Out of the initial 15, only 9 signed their names as they were uncomfortable with the public attention.

The letter was published widely across Quebec. As someone commented 'these foundations rarely speak so we should probably listen'. There was good coverage of the letter and many were appreciative that we were advocating against austerity.

Impact

However, impact was limited in terms of their objectives. The government were slow to respond to the public letter and austerity policies haven't changed.

However, the Collectif has had impact in other unintended ways. It created the space for foundations to reflect on their role and inequality and for foundations to align. Many

of the foundations from the Collectif are now collaborating on different issues because they spoke to each other for the first time.

The whole process enabled many, particularly the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, to reflect on their own role, particularly the context and conditions of inequality that created many foundations in the first place and what they were doing to mitigate against this in the future internally with their operations, processes and their endowment.

To conclude, in the words of one respondent, the Collectif brought "visibility" to its member foundations as social actors on the public scene. 'There can be no doubt that creating a group of foundations has spurred many stakeholders to reflect on their role and their positioning with respect to the state. This ongoing reflection has been one of the main themes to emerge from interviews with a number of respondents. Such reflection will have, at least in part, responded to the existential "crisis" that seemed to preoccupy many foundations at the time the Collectif was created. Indeed, over and beyond its immediate message, the founding hallmark of the Collectif lay in the will to create a new entity and to voice a common position.' (Annabelle Berthiaume, 'The Collectif québécois des fondations sur les inégalités sociales')

You can see a detailed case study of the Collectif [here](#)

A story of place

Stephen Huddart, President and CEO of McConnell Foundation, highlighted the importance of place in enabling and facilitating alignment amongst diverse actors. Speaking of the alignment between partners at Wasan Island, he said *‘this island opened up a space for the consideration of partnership. We discovered places of unexpected overlap and connections. Alignment can be very generative, which opens up a space for innovation to happen. The place enabled the initial connection and relationships, key attributes of alignment.’*

‘These times calls us more than ever to deeply reflect the spirit and cohesion of our societies in order to accomplish a sense of belonging and integration. As we deepen our transatlantic dialogue and alignment in our collaboration with German and Canadian Foundations and their allies on Wasan Island, the physical place becomes a home for philanthropic reflection, visioning and collaboration.’

Volker Hann,
Director of International Programs
of the Breuninger Foundation and Wasan Island

You can see more about the philanthropy of place in this blog by Louise Pulford, Director of SIX, [here](#)



Why is it so hard?

1. Operational challenges and bureaucracy:
2. Differing priorities
3. Working with partners is hard
4. Systemic challenges
5. Lack of tools that enable alignment

You can find out more about the challenges and pain points of alignment [here](#).



Developing collective actions

Despite the diversity of the foundations present, three issues emerged which are being developed further by the participants:

Supporting global social innovation networks for foundations

We need to connect with our peers to open up new ideas and opportunities to tackle big social challenges in different ways. However, there aren't many spaces, places, or platforms that enable these useful and deep connections. The SIX Funders Node provides a unique opportunity for likeminded individuals to connect specifically around social innovation. It's an action-oriented group of funders who are grappling with the shared challenges of the reinvention of what they're trying to do. Expanding and deepening this work requires the following considerations:

- How can we develop more spaces and places like Wasan Island to develop and deepen these connections and build the ecosystem for social innovation?
- What is the right way to sustain the momentum and energy and continue beyond meetings and how do we ensure that there is sufficient support for this?
- How should we build bridges with other existing networks in terms of themes and geographies?

How can better data help us be better funders?

A group identified the need to collate and curate a set of global examples on data capability for local contexts and understand the challenges and opportunities within this field. There are challenges around the collection of good quality data, the ability and capacity for all to use this data, owning data, and protecting the public interest in this space.

Key questions to consider include:

- How to use big data to create systematic change? What is the role of philanthropy?
- How do we build the capacity and ability of foundations to collect and use data to inform decisions and address big social challenges?
- Who protects the public interest?
- Are there practical and shared approaches where alignment among a significant number of key players could open and protect pathways where foundations could be strategic guardians of public interest?

- What options are there for foundations to engage/support/enable a meaningful public discussion of the monumental issues at stake?

Can we become more systematic about evidence and evaluation?

Foundations and those working on change making are aware of the need to continuously improve their practice through evidence and evaluation. However, this is often easier said than done. A key question emerged on how foundations could become more explicit and systematic about evidence and evaluation.

There is a need for the collation of the different frameworks, practices or techniques that are used to help social innovators, grantors and evaluators; as well as an analysis of which type of evaluation, evidence and information is required for what time.

This group will extend an invitation for others to get involved by sharing those frameworks that they have used or have seen used.

What's next?

We want to open the conversation to others around the world who were unable to join us for this retreat. We're motivated by the energy of those in the Funders Node who are serious about transforming themselves and the funding sector.

We will continue to share learning and insights and make the connections that help to change strategy; as well as host more important conversations.

You can see the list of burning questions that remain from our time at Wasan [here](#). We're planning to host more gatherings across the world with more funders to dive deeper into these burning questions.

If any of this resonates with your work, then please get in contact with Jordan Junge at jordan@socialinnovationexchange.org.

About

About Wasan

As Helga Beruinger of the Beruinger Foundation said ‘Wasan is a place to enjoy each other, celebrate diversity and be part of the human family. It’s a place to leave judgement behind and be at one with our diversity.’ Helga who deeply believes in the power of space to deepen connections and ideas gave her private island to community groups over 15 years ago to progress the space. Wasan itself is a place of alignment, a story of collaboration between five foundations from Canada and Germany, and is a key cornerstone of the Canadian social innovation ecosystem.

[Wasan Island](#) is a partnership between the Breuninger Foundation, BMW Foundation, Community Foundations of Canada, the McConnell Foundation and Robert Bosch Stiftung.

About SIX

The Social [Innovation Exchange](#) (SIX) is the world’s primary network for social innovation. SIX is a global network of over 16,000 people that connects people who believe in innovation for societal good. We help organisations build their social innovation and entrepreneurial capacity. We develop key relationships to tackle societal challenges systematically. We bring communities together to achieve greater impact.

About the SIX Funders’ Node

The SIX Funders’ Node is a global collective of more than 60 foundations who are willing to share, learn and engage with one another to be more innovative in their approach and practice.

Through the Funders Node, we orchestrate a global peer-to-peer learning exchange, host unique activities across the world working through the challenges that the funders themselves identify, and broker strategic relationships and partnerships between foundations.

