

Pushing boundaries to advance social impact Meeting summary and insights

*A meeting of the SIX funders node
New York, January 2016*

'Across the world there are lots of small organizations doing a lot of interesting things in quite different areas of work, from marine conservation to the arts, but a massive fragmentation in the delivery of those things, so the learning doesn't cross the boundaries. We need to connect more and draw out the learning on what's working and what's not. Imagine if we were not only drawing on our own experience, but if we were drawing on the experience of others- we could be much more intentional and quicker and perhaps a little less isolated and anxious about being on the edge of those boundaries.' (Andrew Barnett, Director of the UK branch of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation)

A different approach to understanding funding and connecting funders

In January 2016, a group of 25 foundations from across 4 continents came together at the Rockefeller Foundation's New York office to learn and share insights about funding social innovation that help them tackle their most important opportunities and challenges.

Although there are numerous toolkits, guides and traditional gatherings for foundations providing tips, practical suggestions and inspirational talks on funding innovation, much of it is North American focused, and doesn't provide the trusted and open space that can be so valuable in a group of critical friends.

By nature, the people who are trying to do something different, are often working in isolation and need to connect with others doing the same kind of work- even if it's not in the same country or interest area. Using SIX's unique global, practical and action-oriented peer-to-peer approach, we brought together a group of funders who want to be reflective in their own practice and learn insight from others that will help them be better funders of innovation.

This meeting was part of a larger endeavour, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and led by SIX, to develop an innovation funders collaborative, or 'node', as part of the SIX global network. Through a series of small, carefully curated meetings, with content developed and based on the big questions that are keeping funders awake at night, a collaborative support group for foundations is developing - providing a space for critical friends and pushing the boundaries to advance social change.

Who came and what brought them?

During a small dinner discussion at the SIX Summer School in Vancouver in May 2014, six foundations discussed the need to develop a different kind of forum to help them do their jobs better – they wanted a focused and intentional group of foundation peers who are leading new ways to create sustainable big impact and systemic societal change. Over a series of meetings and collaborative working, SIX has been facilitating the development of this group. The most recent meeting brought 24 foundations from across the world to Rockefeller Foundation's offices in New York in January 2016. They came in all shapes and sizes, from very large to very small, some focused exclusively on multiple disadvantaged needs to youth employment, others on building vibrant and tolerant democracies, some fund risky work, others leverage small amounts for big impact. All of the foundations present not only funded innovation but shared a desire to be more innovative in their own practice.

A full list of the foundations that participated is available at the back of this document.

"One of the observations of this group is both the things that we have in common but also the differences – we come from different parts of the world, we operate in different organizational structures, we have different specific areas of interest, but there are a number of words that provide a theme- complexity, an interest in the most disadvantaged, an emphasis on evidence, on local citizenship, on collaboration."

Key insights

Several interlinked themes emerged in advance and during the meeting. They are summarised below, with a related resource recommended by someone from the group:

- **Working with community and the funder** – a pile of money is just a pile of money – it's only meaningful if combined with the rich aspects of the community but how can funders be sensitive to their own role, power dynamics, feedback, legitimacy and accountability when working in communities? Amy Gilman, from LISC, recommends their report, [Building Sustainable Communities: Initial Research Results](#) for insights on a comprehensive community development approach.
- **Managing impact, sustainability and risk** – funders need to be better at measuring and communicating the impact of multi-faceted initiatives, and being more intentional about where to focus their efforts in relation to the scale of change – what is the right balance between treating the symptoms and managing the root cause? Funders have the luxury of taking on more risk than other organisations, so how can they keep our eyes on things that don't fit our model, including finding the different and new people that might not be on their radar. [What's Your Endgame?](#), recommended by Raj Melville from Desphande Foundation, summarises some strategies to achieve transformational change.
- **Encouraging and facilitating collaboration** – this is a challenge both with grantees and amongst funders – how should we design and structure the most valuable and impactful collaborations, where should efforts be focussed in relation to impact and trust and what is the right route or pace for creating change? The role of a neutral convenor can be essential but what are the best ways of pooling funding, funder collaborations, and the roles each organisation can take? The way the Gulbenkian Foundation have designed their [Marine CoLab](#) in Europe is a great example of how foundations can facilitate collaboration.
- **Catalysing systems change** - Systems change should be incorporated into the design process earlier – how can we create new markets early on? Funders can play an important role in fostering this space through advocacy and influence. It's a long game, but it is possible to change the supply and demands, so we are creating a new kind of system from early on. [The Dawn Of System Leadership](#), recommended by Katie Wehr from RWJF, provides a new take on systems leaders versus collective leadership.
- **Achieving more through collective impact** – aligning funders, governments and NGOs can create greater social impact but little is known about what has been learnt from past failures and experiments, including the tools that we can use to make collaboration and large-scale coordination easier. When doesn't collaboration work, what is the right structure, process and culture, and what is the right balance of power? To better understand the current learning, and potential future focus, read Geoff Mulgan's reflection on [Collaboration and Collective Impact](#).
- **Creating or predicting for the future** – In our rapidly changing world, funders need to build more capacity to better deal with the new challenges that come their way, and this group is the perfect place to explore this. There are a number of foresight tools and techniques (immersive experiences, festivals, scanning and research, forecasting, etc.) which funders can use to prepare for the future, but despite this, there is a lack of institutions that are doing this radical thinking – what role should foundations be doing to contribute to a better future? There are several resources on the future of funding - Gabriel Kasper & Jess Ausinheiler have produced collection of articles on the future of philanthropy, most recently - [Challenging the Orthodoxies of Philanthropy](#), and [A New Funding Ecology- a Blueprint for Change](#) from Collaborate UK, suggests ways to better support social change and some diagnostic tools that may be useful to foundations and other funders.

For further reading and resources recommended by this group, please look at the SIX website.

What next for the funders collaborative?

In a rapidly changing world, the role of foundations to broker and create change is becoming increasingly important. As their role changes and develops, it is vital that funders have the ability and opportunity to share and learn from their peers across the world. The SIX Funders Node will continue to work with leading foundations unpack the questions foundations are tackling all over the world. Over the coming years, we will continue to build on the work we have stated, developing further meetings, and growing this group and supporting new and lasting relationships. SIX will facilitate learning and connections with grantees and out critics, and act as a cultural translator, helping to translate thinking and transfer new ideas and ways of working to push the boundaries for social change.

This work is part of a larger effort from SIX to catalyse systems change, strengthen bilateral relations of people working in similar areas, and also connect funders to grantees and innovative practice. For more information on future activities and meetings, and collated resources from the group, please contact jordan@socialinnovationexchange.org



Organisation	Country
BMW Foundation	Germany
BSR	US
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation	UK
Centre for Ageing Better	UK
Deshpande Foundation	US/India
The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation	US
Fondation Mirella et Lino Saputo	Canada
Instituto de Cidadania Empresarial (ICE)	Brazil
The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation	Canada
Lankelly Chase	UK
Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland	Scotland
Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)	US
Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation	Canada
Nesta	UK
Ontario Trillium Foundation	Canada
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	US
Rockefeller Foundation	US
Social Innovation Exchange	UK
Social Innovation Generation	Canada
The Open Society Foundations	US
The Social Innovation Exchange	UK/US
USAID	US
The Young Foundation	UK