

# Social Innovation in a changing world

## EdelGive with SIX Roundtable discussion

On 9-10 October 2025, we gathered 18 friends of SIX for a roundtable discussion on the role of social innovation in the world today. We wanted to understand how other organisations from different sectors in Europe are navigating this challenging moment and how they are responding. By understanding where the gaps are, we can direct our efforts where we are needed most. Whilst most of the participants were based in Europe, many work across the world so there were multiple perspectives in the conversations.

For those who attended, we hope the below is a reminder of some of our intense conversations (it is not meant to be a comprehensive summary). For those who were not able to join us, we hope this sparks new thinking and reflections. Our roundtable in London is part of a bigger programme of global conversations. We will be hosting similar conversations in different parts of the world, so please join us!

### The context - What we are seeing, realising and accepting?

We all know we live in challenging times. But we wanted to start this conversation with an honest and open approach about what exactly is challenging at this moment.

#### 1. The world will collapse and we need to accept this

We live in a more uncertain world than any time in our living history. Part of the reason for this is that everything has become so unbalanced. No organisation with such unbalanced elements can survive. Nature will collapse before capitalism.

#### 2. These challenges are global

Every part of the world is going through some kind of crisis moment, but it's tougher for countries who believed that their systems were robust and nothing like this could ever happen to them. Many parts of the world are more used to improvising and working in uncertainty and we in Europe and North America have a lot to learn from them.

#### 3. We are part of the problem

Frankly, we are too comfortable and lazy. We have a lack of motivation to change. People in the Global North (and also the privileged people across the whole world) are used to a certain kind of lifestyle that they don't want to give up. Many people are ready to give up democracy to protect their lifestyle.



## What's keeping us up at night?

We're all coping, acting, navigating and preparing for the changes that are happening now. Some of the participants were dealing with the immediate effects of destruction of our systems, some were supporting transformation of existing institutions and others were creating new systems and movements. In the paragraphs below, we've identified some of the different roles organisations and people are playing in different parts of the change process. None of the participants played just one role – they were constantly shifting between these concerns and actions, adjusting their efforts in multiple ways to adapt to the rapidly changing environments they are in.

### 1. Dealing with the effects of deliberate dismantling of systems

*"It's not surprising that it's happening, it's how and where it's happening that is surprising."*

Everywhere we are seeing the existing systems being destroyed or struggling to cope with the change that is arriving/has arrived.

The most profiled example of the immediate dismantling of systems is in the US. From the drastic aid rollbacks to the erosion of democratic institutions, new (and deliberate) forces are moving fast to destroy the good things that all of us have worked on (social innovation, inclusion, diversity). Similarly, in Europe, there's been a shift towards regressive policies with more spending on military and technology. Over the last 15 years, there was openness to the value of social innovation but now, we're facing a turning tide. Europeans feel a sense of dread that the destructive forces are close and things will get worse. However, in places like India and across the Global South, these destructive forces are old news and don't shock people. It's part of their daily lives and people are used to living in uncertainty, finding pockets of resilience and innovation within their challenging context.

Some participants are working to deal with the effects of this deliberate dismantling of systems, from developing new capital resources that serve people and the planet to working to direct the resources to grassroots communities who most need them. Others play the role of guardians within the systems – conserving the social innovations and safety nets existing already.

*"I need to stay and fight."*

### 2. Transforming existing institutions

*"How robust do we make these institutions that naturally balance power? That makes the institutions stronger than the individual? It's not something that's undoable."*

What we are also painfully coming to recognise is that the existing institutions we have are not acting fast enough to adapt sufficiently to deal with the new needs this rapid change is bringing. Our democratic systems are designed for the 19th century. Our education system does not teach these skills and capacities needed for the future. Political parties no longer have a mass membership where

good discussions take place embracing creativity from bottom up. And in many countries, elections no longer have meaning and voters have no real choice.

Many participants are working on the transformation needed in existing institutions that build up our society. Some are working to change their own organisations (shifting decision making power internally for example). Others focus more on supporting other institutions to change by, for example, bringing different sectors together – whether it's community and businesses or local government with social innovation initiatives to spark learning and change. Those playing the role as network weavers are building networks of leaders (community researchers, churches, business, young people, etc), trying to change mindsets with counter stories. Others support the transformation of existing institutions through knowledge sharing, showcasing effective examples in different parts of the world. There's also a key role for neutral players such as the universities and research institutions that are working on influencing public policy through their research, attempting to keep public institutions accountable.

### 3. Building new systems and movements

*"You can't solve the problem with the same system that created it."*

There is an urgent need to build something new. This task requires a deep understanding of why and how the existing systems are falling apart and the ability to step out of these systems to imagine something completely different. We need promises of a new system which is attractive for people.

Building radically new systems must happen everywhere – whether it's business, money, art, education or culture. Some participants are creating new institutions that offer a different kind of education to the next generation and some are reclaiming/hosting physical spaces as 'radical spaces' where new ideas can emerge. Others are working on shifting power to the communities.

*"How can we as a university create spaces/communities or students to show up as their dancing selves, hold them to the life force?"*

## What we need to do, and how

### 1. The first step to repairing and rebuilding is acknowledgement

*"I'm happy the curtains are going away and we can see the monster."*

We need to acknowledge that the darkside is so well organised - they are well supported financially and knowledge is easily shared. In the old world, in the Global North, we face the real system change organised by others which seems to be stronger than the systems change we want (which we think is for the common good). If so, what is our reaction? We need to acknowledge that what we need is more than just a backlash, then we need to get on with things.

*"The shock of "How could this happen?" is fatiguing, because it doesn't take you anywhere. When are we going to get over this? The surroundings are not going to become kinder. Every extra day in shock makes everything worse around us and we cannot afford it."*

## 2. Balancing Pessimistic and Optimistic viewpoints

*"A lot of our calibration of pessimism/optimism is out of sync with reality and often the very best people are the most paralysed by it."*

How do you get the balance of the dark and the light, the optimism and the pessimism? Europe and many progressives are in a paralytic pessimism, whereas the Global South hasn't fallen into this state. Compared to people in war (like in Ukraine, or Palestine or lots of other parts of the world), our pessimism in Europe looks ridiculous - we are totally comfortable here. Part of our job is to keep focussing back on the concrete, the specific, the real, and not get captured by over-systemic, apocalyptic pessimism.

*"I'm giving up paralysis."*

## 3. Balance the global and local

*"We can't hide in our corners and do our own thing."*

Our challenges are global, so we need to have a global mindset. There is therefore a lot we can learn and leverage from each other. We must find ways to balance the global and local in our work and think about the collective intelligence that can be gathered, but we need to find ways to effectively apply these things to our own work and in our own organisations. But, there is tension in the fact that everyone has such different perspectives. How do we marry that up with our organisational perspective and what learnings can be shared?

## 4. Get more organised and focussed - Step 1: Create Islands of Sanity

*"What is needed now is islands of sanity. We are an island of sanity. So for the next 100 years, how can we connect all islands?"*

We are not well organised enough. We are nice progressive people but we spread our resources in too many directions. Right wing politics, funding and institutions are, in general, more coordinated and take a long-term view. We need a clear vision for change. How do we get more organised, more motivated and develop a much clearer vision of the society we want to create? We now have a clear enemy, which we didn't before, so how can we catalyse this to focus on going forward?

## 5. Be more radical and embrace politics

*"What is the next evolution of democracy for us that isn't a 19th century artefact?"*

We need to rethink the way we understand the fundamentals of politics and not shy away from this discussion or get distracted by democratic innovation techniques like citizen assemblies (as great as they are). We need to embrace a broader conversation about participation, the way we design political parties, and how we encourage creativity coming from the bottom up, not have governments directed by policy papers from well funded think tanks. How can we reimagine a democracy based in values and action that goes beyond the tactics of resistance?

We, social innovators, are powerful people. We have agency, we have good ideas and access to resources. So why are we not doing more? Not political enough, or just too technocratic?

*"Our technocratic paradigm for social innovation is running out of road. We weren't aware of the politics enough - how to build capacities of a much wider group of people to innovate and create new solutions?"*

## 6. Reframe and rethink motivation

*"People are willing to give up democracy for a cruise holiday because democratic liberal system/ market economy promised them that they would get a cruise."*

We (collectively) are focussing our energy on the wrong things. We need bigger conversations about what we value - is capitalism always the elephant in the room? What we value and how we act is guided by bigger systems. We therefore need to look at how change happens across different levels of society simultaneously. Our challenge is bigger than individuals needing to change their actions - we need institutional change too, and at the same time, we need to be clearer on our ultimate goal in terms of the political changes we want to achieve.

*"How can we organise counter power that prevents people like Trump from coming into power, and that can prevent right populist parties in Germany?"*

## 7. We need to be more ambitious

Ultimately, what we need is action, on a bigger scale, now.

Perhaps, at the heart of all conversations during the short time we spent together was that we (collectively, not just those in the meeting) have a lack of ambition - we could do so much more. Collectively, we have the power to change. It is our responsibility to think, and act big, and make change now. We leave you with this important question - is it time to be more ambitious?

*"There is a lot of power in a small group of people who are focussed. We were all looking for the same thing and asking the same question and that is very powerful. So what next?"*

**We invite you to join us as we continue to have these conversations and gather different perspectives around the world. Please get in touch!**