

Meeting Note: UK Donor Discussion on Structural Economic Reform in the C-19 Crisis, 7th April 2020

1. Introduction

On 7th April 2020, Leslie Harroun (Partners for a New Economy) and Alex Jacobs (Joffe Trust) convened an initial discussion for funders about their role in the light of the C-19 crisis, in regard to long-term structural reform of the UK economy. This note provides a summary of the issues discussed.

21 people participated (appendix A) including Rachael Clay (Ethicore) who generously facilitated the meeting pro bono. The purpose of the discussion was to share analysis and views about how funders should respond to the C-19 crisis. The numbers of participants and depth of discussion indicate appetite for collegiate dialogue, as we all try to make sense of the unfolding crisis.

One of the key themes to emerge was a tension between the potential for the crisis to exacerbate existing inequalities and the opportunity that it could accelerate positive change.

2. What is the top-most question in your mind in relation to the strategic impact of the COVID-19 crisis?

Summary of 15 written chat answers:

- a) How can the responses to the crisis be shaped to create the world we want to see rather than perpetuate the world that the pandemic hit?
- b) The crisis creates opportunity, but history tells us such opportunities are often co-opted by those with power to reinforce their interests.
- c) The disproportionate impact that the pandemic is having on minorities and marginalised groups, in terms of race, socio-economic group etc.
- d) Can we in civil society narrow down our priorities to a small enough number so we have any chance of getting them taken up?

3. What are the key threats and opportunities for structural economic reform in the current crisis?

Threats (summary of 22 written chat entries):

- Powerful interests use the crisis to further entrench their interests at the expense of society. Inequalities and are exacerbated even further. The poor and marginalised become even more distant from power. Fossil fuel dependence is entrenched. Government overreach results in a backlash later down the line.
- The people who have been most disadvantaged by the current economic model are struggling to survive and so many can't be part of the design of anything new that emerges. This risks reproducing previous inequalities.
- Growth of authoritarianism. The crisis continues for many months & lockdown creates social discontent and increasingly authoritarian measures. The extraordinary measures taken by governments are not rolled back following the crisis, including a surveillance state.

- Rapid mobilisation by powerful industry lobby groups (e.g. airlines, fossil fuels) to reinstate the status quo, with more tax breaks & less regulation. Industries are consolidated and smaller businesses wiped out.
- The economy goes into a long lasting global recession. Workers are not protected in company specific bailouts.
- Unclear where leadership will come from on the international stage.
- Progressive campaigners assume the public is interested in their issues when in fact they just want some form of normality to return. Campaigners cannot agree on an effective, focused platform for change.
- Is it already too late to influence stimulus packages?

Opportunities (summary of 27 written chat entries)

- This is an emperor's new clothes moment. A spotlight has been shone on what we really value as a society, putting public health first. Strong sense of social solidarity, collective effort & community. The certainties around the effectiveness of capitalism have been shaken, as well as the basis of austerity.
- The fragile state offer has been laid visible for all to see and sadly many more to experience. This could become personal to leaders, so they work towards a more balanced and equitable state. New recognition of the core role of public sector workers.
- Significant and visible change in the role of government. Huge increase in state intervention. Science & experts are back in vogue.
- There is an opportunity to foster an alternative narrative of collective humanity, community and compassion. Rooted in the actions of today, this narrative could shape the policies of tomorrow.
- Emerging agreement on this analysis among many academic, church, media, business & civil society groups. Opportunity to build more influential coalitions and align narratives.
- Specific opportunities to:
 - renew the social contract between state, business and citizens and accelerate sustainable approaches & green economy.
 - pursue policies that were previously considered too radical, e.g. on welfare reform, tax, universal basic income, the Green New Deal.
 - make government more transparent & representative.
 - ensure bailouts come with conditions that serve people & planet.

4. Plenary discussion

Scale

The impact of this crisis and the fundamental nature of the issues we have raised will require re-strategising across civil society.

Focus

We should identify how the crisis can accelerate positive changes that were already happening before it struck. After 1945, the NHS didn't address a new issue, but it captured the spirit of renewal.

We cannot address every issue mentioned in this conversation or the many other similar conversations.

Realism

The issues about power and exclusion that are coming out now are not new, but are shown in even more stark terms. There is a risk that these injustices are further deepened, within civil society as well as more widely.

Similar discussions about economic transformation happened after the 2008 crash. It seemed like the edifice of neoliberalism was crumbling. But it didn't.

Moves to genuine stakeholder capitalism will continue to conflict with the short term interests of even progressive investors. The long term economy is in everyone's interests, but the recovery will require short term returns.

Urgency & influence

The Shock Doctrine is being enacted right now. There's potentially only a short time to influence the narrative and direction taken by government leaders.

In terms of influencing government leaders, the unions have been closely involved in the Treasury's response. NEF and Mariana Mazzucato have influence in No. 10 and more widely in government.

International

We need to connect to similar discussions in other countries. The issues are global, e.g. as demonstrated by supply chains.

We should take steps to join up the conversations about these issues that are happening at different levels (e.g. at international, national, community levels).

5. Next steps

We should identify which other conversations and initiatives are already taking place, rather than potentially duplicating them.

We could set up a wiki map to crowd-source information on movements and collective initiatives around these issues. At the moment, it's not clear who is talking to who. The wiki could also include a list of leading thinkers on the issues. The wiki would need a curator. Peter Lipman offered to begin this process.

We should strengthen links between similar conversations between UK & US donor groups. Leslie has opportunities to make some of these links

This group expressed a desire for another call together, probably in about a month.

[ENDS]

Appendix A: Participants

First Name	Surname	Organisation
Alex	Jacobs	Joffe Charitable Trust
Alice	Evans	Lankelly Chase
Alison	Miranda	Transparency & Accountability Initiative
Anna Luiza	Behrens	P4NE
Ben	Stewart	David & Elaine Potter Foundation
Dominic	Burke	Lankelly Chase
John	Lucas	CIFF
John	Fellowes	-
Jon	Cracknell	JMG
Katherine	Knox	Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust
Katie	Hill	Thirty Percy
Keiran	Goddard	Alex Ferry Foundation
Kelly	Clark	Laudes Foundation
Leslie	Harroun	P4NE
Lynda	Mansson	MAVA Foundation + President of P4NE
Nathan	Argent	Oak Foundation
Nick	Perks	Joffe Trust
Peter	Lipman	-
Rachael	Clay	Ethicore (facilitator)
Sonny	Bardhan	Omidyar Network
Sufina	Ahmad	John Ellerman Foundation