# Planning in a pandemic

## Blog for Ariadne

## Introduction

Ariadne had made arrangements to revise its strategic plan at the point the pandemic made it impossible to predict the future. Plans for a retreat were cancelled and the process stalled.

In thinking what to do, it was decided to hold four online conversations with members. These showed that Ariadne was regarded as a highly valuable forum, and there was no rational basis for changing its ways of working.

At the same time, it was recognised that the pandemic might change the world forever. In conversations during 2020, many people suggested that philanthropy could play an important role to #BuildBackBetter, feeling that that it was a high priority to find new ways to develop social justice in a world where day-by-day this was getting more difficult.

This report focuses on two online discussions with Ariadne members held in late April 2021. These are being supplemented by a range of other conversations involving the wider support infrastructure for philanthropy.

This paper is merely the starting point or ‘baseline’ for further explorations. It will be used to stimulate more discussions and the text will be developed in the process. The final result will depend on contributions from many different people from a variety of perspectives.

## Everyone seems to be rethinking their work

Among those who attended the calls, there was a high proportion of people who were themselves engaged in a strategic planning process. Here are some examples:

‘We are in our own strategic planning process. It is no use anymore to have a two-year strategic plan that is focused on narrow goals and doesn't look at the larger context.’

‘We have to think long term. We have power and privilege. It is really useful to talk this through with people and get support.’

‘We are three years into a 10-year strategy. There is a myriad of possibilities about where the world might be at the end of the strategy. How do we set out this direction while remaining authentic to the unpredictability and uncertainties in the world?’

‘We were relaunching our strategy when COVID hit. It was valuable to have, but we are reviewing this now.’

‘We are looking at a strategic process. I am here to listen and learn.’

‘So many strategic reviews. Some organisations have strategy diarrhoea. It's as if we are in the midst of a Maoist revolution.’

While the online discussions were restricted to Ariadne members, it is clear that many other organisations consulted during this process are rethinking their role and approach to work.

## Need to use new models

Discussions revealed that people felt that new models of planning are required to meet the demands of uncertain times:

‘It would be easy to carry on doing the same old things hoping things will be different.’

‘We have to ask, “what is the 21st century framing for a 20th century set of institutions?”’

‘I personally wonder about strategic planning. We impose indicators and top-down programmes when we're fighting centuries of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism. We need to let go and find people who can do things without the illusion of controlling their behaviour from the centre.’

‘How do we disrupt our thinking and go beyond what our current imagination tells us and find new collaborators in that?’

## This is not an easy process

Change is never easy and there is no clear pathway. A range of comments in discussions refer to this:

‘We are buffeted by 5,000 winds and don't know how to act sometimes. We don't want to take five years to make a plan because by then the whole world is different once again.’

‘How do we balance a long-term vision with the short-term emergency that COVID represents?’

‘How do we support our current grantees while branching out in new directions and trying to join things together?’

‘How to bring all these strands together to deal with the complexity of issues without alienating or instrumentalizing particular interests or sectors? And how do you get them through the door?’

‘How do you convince trustees to do things differently? Some of them are not interested in the bigger picture.’

## There is an appetite for a new journey

Notwithstanding the difficulties, people on the calls feel that it is important for philanthropy to use its power and privilege to begin to fashion a new world. The old ways will not deliver what we need because society needs fundamental reform to the ways it decides its priorities. As one put it:

‘We need a new culture.’

Out of the tragedy of the pandemic, philanthropy can play a large part in developing a new world with social justice at its heart.

A process of co-creation would combine energies and join up the work to build a new ecosystem of practice. An essential quality doing this is humility, putting aside ego driven behaviour that puts individual organisational agendas ahead of a collective approach. It involves and getting in touch with things that really matter.

People felt that Ariadne is a good space to do this because the levels of trust between members is so high. The process involves going into the deeper and difficult issues, so that we can speak more as a sector and less as well as a series of separate interests.

This does not only involve formal collaboratives, but also an approach where different strands of work are joined together to make a jigsaw of different but complementary solutions. In taking this approach, we can learn much from natural systems in which different parts of the ecology combine in both informal and formal ways to build resilience in ways that deliver good societies. This process is akin to gardening, which creates the right conditions for plants to survive and flourish.

## A little less talk; a little more action

People on the call said that there was urgency about this.

Difficulties were immense before the pandemic. A world obsessed with economic growth has produced environmental degradation, the removal of social safety nets, deregulation of planning controls, fragmented communities, and increased conflict. Ever-growing inequality has fuelled political extremism and the emergence of leaders whose way of working was to exploit discontent for their own narrow purposes. Human rights have been a particular target for populist regimes, which use propaganda to fuel racism, homophobia, anti-genderism, and other forms of hate.

People on the calls said that the pandemic had accentuated these trends, rewarding people at the top of the income distribution, and making those at the bottom poorer. A culture of cronyism has grown up with unscrupulous leaders rewarding large contracts to their friends, while disaster capitalists wait in the wings to buy up failing businesses at knock-down prices. Such unscrupulous profiteering will further diminish the planet and its peoples.

The pandemic has made a centralised and authoritarian agenda easier to maintain. In the not-too-distant future, we are likely to face regimes based on austerity as governments cut back the role of the state in order to minimise their repayment of debts. Meanwhile, politicians are able to absorb and reframe the progressive agenda to one that suits their philosophy. As one example of this the ‘build back better’ agenda in the UK has been transformed into the ‘build build build’ agenda which has weakened planning controls and allowed a freer rein to acquire land for profit.

This means that philanthropy has to do more than just talk. There is a tendency, as one person put it to:

‘Argue about terminology. We spend a lot of time dancing on the head of the pin.’

There is a need to mobilise and unite the energy in social movements such as Black Lives Matter, Reclaim the Streets, and Extinction Rebellion, and to connect these into the growth of local organising through campaigns for the Living Wage and #ShiftThePower. The power of local environmental organising is shown by the fact that there are currently 419 entries on the [National Grassroots Campaigns Map](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?ll=53.43502260766067%2C3.0572545922591976&z=6&mid=13yu348GgZojatUt3lc5FG6krn3MhcNyD). Co-founder Rosie Pearson is [astonished by its popularity](https://www.rethinkingpoverty.org.uk/talking-points/us-stimulus-package-inspires-talking-points/): ‘When we set it up, it was really just to see what’s out there. But we quickly realised there’s a real hunger for sharing information, resources and support.’

Such campaigns show that speedy action is necessary, and philanthropy can learn to do what it struggles to do – name to act quickly and co-ordinated purpose. At the same time, it the problems we face have arisen as a result of 40 years of Neoliberalism. While there is no quick fix, the size and scale of the problems are a spur to act now – otherwise the social justice and human rights agenda will continue to be disabled across the world.

## Our assets

Although the journey might be difficult, those making the journey together have assets they can use to make headway and do not need to start from scratch.

First, the field of philanthropy has power and privilege, with resources that can be used as risk capital to build the foundations of a new social order. One person noted:

‘We have power and we need to use it.’

Second, Ariadne provides an ideal space from with to develop a new culture for philanthropy. The members themselves are considerable assets. One person spoke for many when she said:

‘We don’t need to create a safe space because we already have it in Ariadne.’

Another commented:

‘Whenever I have a question, I always look to people from Ariadne for the answer.’

Ariadne is a trusted community, in part because people share similar values. As one person put it:

‘A great strength of the Ariadne community is that, while we don’t agree on everything, we all want social justice, a flourishing planet and equality in race and gender.’

There was agreement that the grantmaking principles are a great starting point for the planning process:

‘We can use the grantmaking principles as a pillar for our work together. We don’t have to invent everything but can use these as a starting point.’

Another agreed:

‘Implementing the principles gives us a way to operationalize human rights and dignity in all we do in our work.’

## Agenda

In deciding how to proceed, three key agenda items emerged: (a) creative learning from different parts of the Ariadne network, (b) narrative development, and (c) connecting and joining up for action. We will take each of these in turn.

### Creative learning

While the Ariadne network contains people and organizations with similar values, this does not mean that they are all the same. It would be useful to be more conscious about learning from the diversity of traditions present in the network and learn from the ‘edges’ in the East and the South of Europe because the approaches there may bring a creative approach to the issue of human rights. One person suggested a comparison between countries:

‘We can learn, for example, how did Spain deal with Franco and Greece recover from the Colonels?’

There was support for the idea of:

‘… looking at my work through the lens of others.’

This approach could fire the creative imagination of members and enable the sharing of good practice.

### Narrative development

The calls were unanimous in suggesting that ‘intersectionality’ of approaches is necessary in the development of human rights funding if we are to embrace the complexity and interconnection necessary to achieve desirable results.

While this is a vital concept, there was discussion about how difficult it is to apply in practice. One person who worked for a foundation aiming to do this said:

‘This is complicated and nuanced and difficult to do in practice. We use a lot of words to describe it but we need to figure out what they mean and how it actually works.’

Another commented:

‘Black Lives Matter and gender histories and trajectories look different in different contexts, particularly between in Europe and America. There is a challenge to find a common ground. In the feminist funding world, we talk about intersectionality. There are multiple and layered forms of oppression that play out in different ways. The conversations can play out as a “hierarchy of the oppressed” and asking questions about “who is the most oppressed?” so that we ask where should funder attention be. The theories of change are so stuck in an old world understanding of a “single issue, single identity, single geography”. There is a lack of understanding of the global nature of these challenges.’

It was agreed that working on the narrative is a key priority and a big piece of work. There are traps too. As one person put it,

‘We must not feed the culture wars and walk into the traps set by people who demean concepts such as dignity and equality by labelling it as part of the “woke” agenda.’

### Joining up

While the narrative about social justice philanthropy is important, it does not follow that the field of social justice should be framed by funders. People closer to the issues are more important and philanthropists should be guided by people on the front line. This is the essence of the #ShiftThePower campaign. The change we seek lies in action, and the role of philanthropy is to show solidarity by supporting it, not to lead it. The key words here are ‘movement generosity’.

## Next steps

Using this paper as a starting point or ‘baseline’, we will explore the issues raised here through further discussions. This will set in train an iterative process of ‘create and adjust’, so that what emerges has wide ownership in the field. If it works well, the final result will have many authors.

If you are interested to take part in discussions about this, please contact Barry Knight at barryknight@cranehouse.uk.

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