


# BEING PART OF WHAT'S NEXT

By Valérie Meunier, Founder & CEO of Montallegre



In an increasingly polarized world, philanthropy stands as a rare and powerful force capable of bridging divides and advancing shared human values.

Being part of what's next means for foundations stepping forward to address today's urgent issues while laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable future.

To achieve this, foundations must dare to innovate, embracing bold ideas that amplify their reach and deepen their impact.

Yet, it demands navigating a delicate path — balancing the right positionality, relationships with stakeholders and accountability, all while remaining clear-eyed about the state of the world as it is.

Navigating this path is akin to doing the first ascent of a remote peak: it requires careful planning, unwavering focus, and the ability to adapt to shifting conditions.

It is a call for foundations to rethink not only what they fund but also how they operate and engage across society.

***"Always seek difficulty, not danger. Move forward, try, dare; in audacity, there is enchantment."***

Gaston Rébuffat, legendary French alpinist known for his bold climbs in the Alps and Himalayas

## Seeing Society As It Truly Is

Foundations operate within a broader societal ecosystem, one that mirrors the natural world in its interdependence – where the survival and success of each component rely on the health and cooperation of the whole. Just as biodiversity underpins the resilience of natural ecosystems, a diversity of perspectives and contributions strengthens the social fabric and enables more sustainable and inclusive solutions.

Foundations should strive to develop a clear and nuanced understanding of societies at both local and global levels, actively working to mitigate biases stemming from ideological or cultural influences. This requires not only consistently listening to communities but also leveraging independent research, engaging expert panels, fostering cross-sector collaborations, partnering with media, and drawing insights from public institutions.

By combining various sources of knowledge, foundations can develop a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of societal challenges, leading to more informed and effective strategies. This deeper knowledge also enables foundations to craft narratives around their actions that bridge divides and unite diverse viewpoints

## Beyond the Now

Foundations have the freedom to rise above the noise, acting with a long-term perspective that transcends immediate pressures of the day-to-day. By standing as champions of enduring ideals like justice, inclusivity and equality, philanthropy can work toward a broader societal vision.

To achieve this, foundations should develop clear, long-term strategies that focus on addressing the root causes of societal challenges, rather than only treating the symptoms.

This approach ensures that their work is aligned with broader goals such as social cohesion and the common good, integrating these core principles into their activities.

While long-term planning is essential for achieving meaningful impact, it should not prevent the pursuit of short-term progress. On the contrary, immediate wins play a crucial role in maintaining momentum, demonstrating tangible outcomes, and energizing stakeholders, all of which strengthen the path toward long-term goals.

Foundations should embrace this dual focus, where immediate progress is part of an ongoing journey, integrated into a larger, sustained vision.

This approach ensures that foundations' work remains relevant, transformative, and contributes to lasting societal shifts.

## Moving Traditional Boundaries

Foundations have traditionally worked within defined spheres – education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, or environmental sustainability – but today's challenges are interconnected and demand solutions that span these areas.

For philanthropy to be truly part of what's next, foundations should consider embracing more comprehensive approaches that speak to the real lives and challenges that people face daily.

This requires foundations to think beyond the traditional silos and adopt a more integrated perspective. Tackling complex societal issues often requires addressing multiple layers simultaneously.

For example, in addressing gender equality, foundations could move beyond isolated efforts to empower women in the workforce or support girls' education and instead look at how gender equality aligns with broader issues like climate resilience and economic development. Supporting women-led businesses and social innovators in climate-impacted areas or sectors such as clean energy is a powerful example of how gender equality initiatives can simultaneously tackle environmental and economic challenges.

Moving traditional boundaries also means exploring new ways to fund stakeholders beyond conventional grant-making. Impact investing, endowment funds, program-related investments and social impact bonds are innovative approaches that can create new opportunities for engagement.

## Adopting the Right Positionality

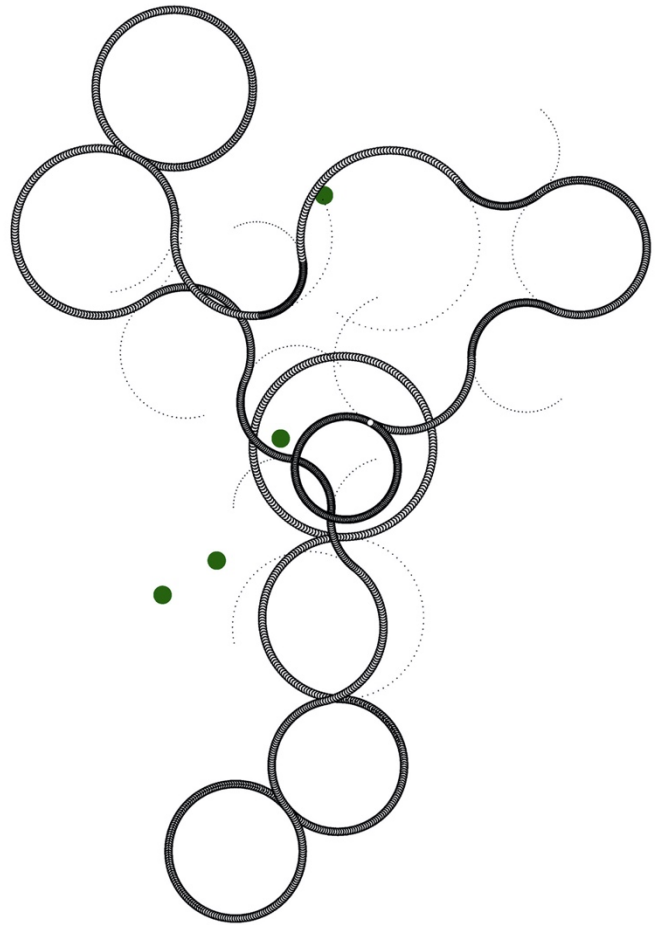
No matter the cause or project, a foundation's impact is deeply tied to its positioning. Foundations are distinct entities; they are not government bodies, advocacy groups, or activists, but rather independent actors capable of bridging gaps across these sectors.

This distinction is particularly important for corporate foundations, where navigating the fine line between corporate interests and social responsibility can define effectiveness and public trust.

Corporate foundations offer a platform for companies to drive lasting, transformative social change that aligns with their values. However, these foundations must guard against being seen as instruments of corporate self-interest. Their true effectiveness lies in their ability to serve as neutral, resourceful intermediaries, using business acumen toward philanthropic goals that genuinely serve communities independently of profit-driven motives.

On the other hand, social justice foundations should carefully avoid being conflated with a political agenda or seen as an extension of civil society organizations. While their missions often intersect with advocacy for systemic change, their role is not to champion ideologies but to foster long-term, community-centered impact. To preserve their effectiveness, social justice foundations should always position themselves as independent actors focused on sustainable societal transformation rather than aligning too closely with activist agendas.

Maintaining this balance reinforces a foundation's authenticity, helping it act as a trusted catalyst for positive societal change.



## **The Power of Dialogue**

As divisions seem more and more irreconcilable on a broad range of topics and entrenched positions dominate discourse, the solution lies in dialogue—one that is broad, inclusive, and open to all perspectives.

This means giving space to voices that are often unheard, particularly dissenting or underrepresented groups, and acknowledging their lived experiences and aspirations in diverse global contexts.

Foundations can play a vital role in creating the conditions for such dialogue—by providing platforms, encouraging open communication, and acting as facilitators. In doing so, they can bridge gaps between opposing views, rebuild trust, and contribute to societal cohesion.

This commitment to dialogue is also important internally, within the organization itself and among its closest stakeholders.

For corporate foundations, it's crucial to foster constructive conversations within the business and with its leadership. This internal dialogue aligns the foundation's mission with corporate values, engages diverse perspectives within the company, and ensures that the foundation's work resonates authentically both within and beyond the organization.

## **Embracing Transparency**

In an era where public trust in institutions is often questioned, philanthropy has a unique opportunity to rebuild confidence through transparency. By openly sharing how decisions are made, how funds are used, and the outcomes of their initiatives, foundations can foster trust and credibility.

Transparency not only holds foundations accountable, but also invites stakeholders, including communities and donors, into the process, strengthening their engagement and investment in philanthropic work.

Moreover, transparency cultivates a culture of learning within the sector. When foundations openly discuss their successes, challenges, and lessons learned, they enable other organizations to benefit from their experiences, improving collective effectiveness. This openness creates a feedback loop that helps foundations refine their strategies, ensuring their work is both relevant and impactful. By embracing transparency, foundations contribute to a more collaborative and accountable philanthropic ecosystem.

## **Expanding Reach**

Evidence demonstrates that initiatives developed through multi-stakeholder collaboration—including public, private, and international institutions—achieve broader, more sustainable impact. While some organizations may hesitate to partner with public bodies, these multi-layered partnerships enable foundations to align their efforts within larger frameworks that are better equipped to address complex, systemic challenges.

Collaboration with international institutions, such as the United Nations, brings unique advantages, fostering a form of collective wisdom shaped by the diverse perspectives of the global community. These institutions, less influenced by immediate political pressures than national policymakers, provide a stable foundation for long-term solutions. Engaging with both public and international organizations not only extends the reach of foundations but also aligns their initiatives with an inclusive, enduring vision for societal transformation.

Through such multi-stakeholder partnerships, foundations can amplify community voices, ensuring they play an active role in shaping global conversations. By working together across sectors, stakeholders contribute their distinct strengths, resources, and perspectives to generate a collaborative impact that no single organization could achieve alone.

## Leading The Way

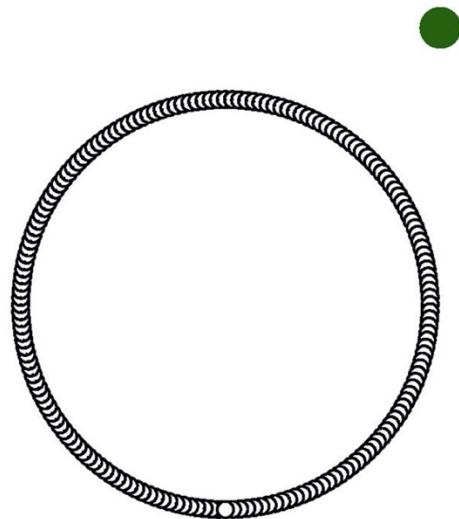
In today's complex world, the temptation to wait for the perfect solution or the right moment can lead to inaction, remaining trapped in a cycle of analysis paralysis. Leaders must understand that complexity is not an obstacle, but rather a powerful catalyst for change.

To move forward, this moment requires bold and decisive leadership—leaders who are capable of navigating and partnering with the many components of society.

Effective leadership in philanthropy also requires a model that is collaborative, inclusive, and agile.

It is essential for both board trustees and executives to work in close partnership, not merely as overseers, but as co-creators of action. Such a dynamic fosters trust and allows leaders to make confident decisions, even when the way forward is unclear.

Finally, at the core of this leadership are audacious, authentic and humble individuals, driven by a deep commitment to making the world a better place for everyone.



## Being Fearless in the Pursuit of Change

By embracing a bold commitment to innovation, long-term strategy, and inclusive dialogue, foundations can serve as catalysts for a more just and cohesive society. Their role is essential not only in addressing current issues but in building sustainable pathways for the future. The foundation's impact will be measured by how courageously they adapt to these evolving responsibilities, redefining philanthropy's potential in a complex world. By doing so, they won't simply respond to today's needs—they'll be at the forefront, truly part of what's next.

**Valérie Meunier** is the Founder and CEO of Montallegre, an international consulting firm specializing in philanthropy and stakeholder engagement. Prior to this, she led global investments and engagement at Fondation CHANEL, advancing the foundation's purpose for women and girls to be free to shape their own destiny. Valérie has also worked in diplomacy in France and for various public institutions in Canada, her country of origin. [vmeunier@montallegre.com](mailto:vmeunier@montallegre.com)

All the artwork featured in this piece is from the series *"The Wanderer"* by Erwan Bouroullec (2021)