

DRIVING IMPACT IN POLARIZED CONTEXTS

Insights & Recommendations for Philanthropy

This document responds to requests received from diverse philanthropic leaders on the question of how to secure and sustain impact in increasingly polarized environments. It draws on over four decades of experience by Search for Common Ground (Search) and our partners working on the frontlines of conflict-affected and highly polarized societies across the United States and globally.

Rather than advocating for a single lens or institutional approach, our intention here is to share lessons that may help right-size the polarization challenge and thereby inform intervention strategies both for those committed to addressing polarization as a priority and for those simply hoping to navigate it so as to achieve sustainable progress on other issues in confoundingly polarized contexts.

Right-Sizing Polarization Within Broader Societal Resilience

[IFIT](#)'s definition of polarization as "...clustering and radicalization at antagonistic poles" is useful. As a single lens through which to assess societal stability, polarization is compelling. It can destabilize societies even when other elements of societal resilience — functioning institutions, widely available accurate information, economic stability — appear intact. We have seen repeatedly that:

- Elections can be technically secure and yet widely rejected as illegitimate.
- Accurate information can be broadly available and yet interpreted through rigid tribal lenses to justify opposing conclusions and actions.
- Well-designed policy can trigger backlash if it originated from "the other side".

For these reasons, polarization warrants special attention. It can undermine otherwise sound interventions rendering societies ungovernable, even fueling violence. Like a fever, it complicates every response and can become an existential threat, yet it is always a symptom and never a root cause. The implication is to recognize polarization's special status among a limited number of critical indicators that, together, determine a society's health, stability, and resilience, but not to treat it as a primary objective.

In recent years, Search worked with hundreds of peer organizations, researchers, policy-makers, and community leaders across dozens of countries to develop a framework to understand and engage in polarized contexts. Drawing on established measurement methods - e.g. the [SCORE Index](#), [SDG 16+ Indicators](#), and [Positive Peace Index](#) — this [Peace Impact Framework](#) has been applied across diverse contexts to inform analysis, program strategy and design, and impact monitoring. It is now used by 30+ organizations, governing authorities in multiple countries, and will be featured in the forthcoming first annual publication on peacebuilding impact by the UN Office of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs.

The Framework posits five “vital signs” of a healthy society, with polarization captured by the first:

- **Intercommunal trust** — whether people believe others will uphold a shared social contract.
- **Institutional legitimacy** — whether the institutions that govern (courts, police, elections, public health, etc) or serve (media, religious, etc.) are perceived as credible and responsive.
- **Safety** — whether communities feel protected from violence.
- **Agency** — whether individuals believe they can influence their circumstances.
- **Resourcing** — how financial and political capital is directed toward nonviolent conflict prevention and resolution relative to coercive control and punitive response.

For philanthropic actors operating in polarized contexts, applying an analytical or planning framework that accounts for polarization within the context of broader conflict dynamics can mitigate the risk of funded initiatives being frustrated by - or even fueling - conflict dynamics.

Multipartial Coalitions Drive Durable Change in Polarized Contexts

It is a welcome development that philanthropy and policy circles are increasingly emphasizing “localization” and “proximity.” Centering affected communities in leadership and decision-making increases the likelihood that gains will endure. In polarized contexts, however, localization is insufficient.

Sustainable change in polarized contexts emerges through the support of networks and coalitions that are multipartial — that is, composed of leaders and institutions who are each authentically rooted in and accountable to their own constituencies yet, collectively, span across polarized factions. Multipartiality differs fundamentally from neutrality and from one-sided advocacy. While neutral actors may be effective in time-bound mediation, long-term progress requires credible representatives who can engage across divides without relinquishing the trust of those they represent.

This distinction matters. Supporting actors aligned with one side of a divide can deepen polarization and undermine sustainability. By contrast, multipartial coalitions strengthen inclusive ownership, reframe issues in ways that resonate across constituencies, and reduce the risk that reforms are perceived as partisan or imposed. They also generate a “double-bottom line”, advancing progress on the issue around which coalitions mobilize while simultaneously deepening trust across the dividing lines that might otherwise have blocked such progress.

Across contexts, we have seen this dynamic repeatedly:

- **Colombia.** After the narrow referendum defeat of the 2016 peace accord, a broad and diverse coalition — spanning victims’ groups, youth leaders, business actors, and civic organizations — mobilized to preserve a revised agreement. The accord’s durability owes much to this cross-constituency engagement.

- **Kyrgyzstan.** Over the past decade, sustained engagement between Muslim religious authorities and national police leadership — within a broader advisory coalition — generated practical trust-building initiatives that reduced extremist recruitment and violence and supported the delicate process of developing post-Soviet policies and regulations that support freedom of religion.
- **United States.** In the lead-up to and aftermath of the 2020 election, cross-partisan networks of civic leaders, local officials, faith actors, and business leaders mobilized to prevent and/or contain political violence in multiple states. In several instances, these coalitions de-escalated tensions precisely because they were not seen as representing only one political identity.

Across contexts, a consistent pattern emerges: coalitions that are proximate to affected communities are credible; those that span divides are more durable; and those that translate dialogue into coordinated action drive sustainable change while reducing polarization. For philanthropy, this underscores the importance of structuring incentives for cross-constituency collaboration, investing in relationship-building infrastructure alongside programmatic outputs, and recognizing convening power and trust-building as core drivers of impact.

This also points to a practical opportunity: national funders can partner with community foundations that are closest to local dividing lines — political, racial, religious, urban-rural, or otherwise — combining locally rooted leadership with broader resources, shared frameworks, and mechanisms for learning and amplification. In doing so, philanthropy can fund locally while building toward national-level impact, while also identifying, resourcing, and connecting collaborative leaders whose approaches can scale through networks rather than replication alone. In a period defined by volatility and unpredictability, supporting this kind of collaborative leadership is less a discrete program strategy or issue-focus than it is an investment in the kind of long-term condition required for impact on any issue to be durable.

Legitimacy and Perception in Polarized Societies

In polarized environments, objective institutional performance is insufficient if large segments of the public perceive institutions as illegitimate. Open societies are particularly vulnerable to the interaction between polarization, information ecosystems, and public trust.

Polarization amplifies misinformation not only through belief in falsehoods, but through the use of information to undermine perceived adversaries. At the same time, institutional reforms that lack cross-group buy-in can become rallying points for grievance. This suggests that democracy strengthening efforts must reinforce not only technical integrity, but also *perceived* legitimacy across polarized groups.

The importance of this challenge is underscored by the fact that, over the past 15 years, democratic societies have *not* outperformed non-democratic societies across the five vital signs of a healthy society noted above - even on measures such as *agency* and *institutional legitimacy*. Even democracies rooted in strong institutions cannot survive a citizenry that perceives those institutions as illegitimate.

Recommendations for Philanthropic Strategy

1. Integrate conflict-sensitivity into criteria and portfolio design. Even for foundations unlikely to set depolarization as a strategic priority, driving and sustaining impact in increasingly polarized contexts can best be achieved by adopting a do-no-harm screening for conflict dynamics, eg assessing how interventions may be perceived across constituencies, whether they strengthen or weaken inter-communal trust, institutional legitimacy, and/or agency, etc.

2. Structure incentives for cross-constituency collaboration. If multipartial coalitions are essential for durable change, funding mechanisms should reflect that reality — through shared governance across diverse partners, joint accountability structures, pooled or matching funds, and sustained investment in relationship-building infrastructure. This can be further strengthened through partnerships between national and community foundations, where local actors identify dividing lines and lead collaborative efforts, while national funders provide resources, learning infrastructure, and pathways to scale impact across contexts.

3. Support longitudinal measurement of trust and legitimacy. Technical performance metrics may not capture whether development gains or institutional reforms withstand or even ameliorate polarized contexts. Comparative, longitudinal data across domestic and international contexts can clarify what works and under what conditions reforms secure sufficient popular support and political will to endure.

4. Enable reciprocal learning across geographies. Conflict and post-conflict societies offer practical lessons that are increasingly relevant for advanced democracies while innovations shared across contexts can inform global practice. Structured exchange and information sharing across contexts can accelerate learning and adaptation to increasingly universal conflict dynamics.

5. Consider an ecosystem approach to the information problem. Because conflict dynamics can overwhelm and even weaponize reliable information, strategies must move beyond fact-checking to combine pro-social digital design, regulatory research & advocacy, AI and digital media literacy, and user-experimentation and narrative initiatives that support, incentivize and amplify collaboration.

6. Foster collaborative leadership. The gap between who has formal authority and who has influence is widening, while volatility and unpredictability are becoming defining features of our environment. Progress will depend on leaders and coalitions capable of mobilizing action across divides without deepening them. Philanthropy is uniquely positioned to identify and accompany this kind of leadership over time — with flexible resources, networks, connections, and amplification that allow leaders to adapt as conditions evolve. Supporting such leadership over the long term can help generate durable progress in ways that narrower investments in specific institutions or issue areas may not.