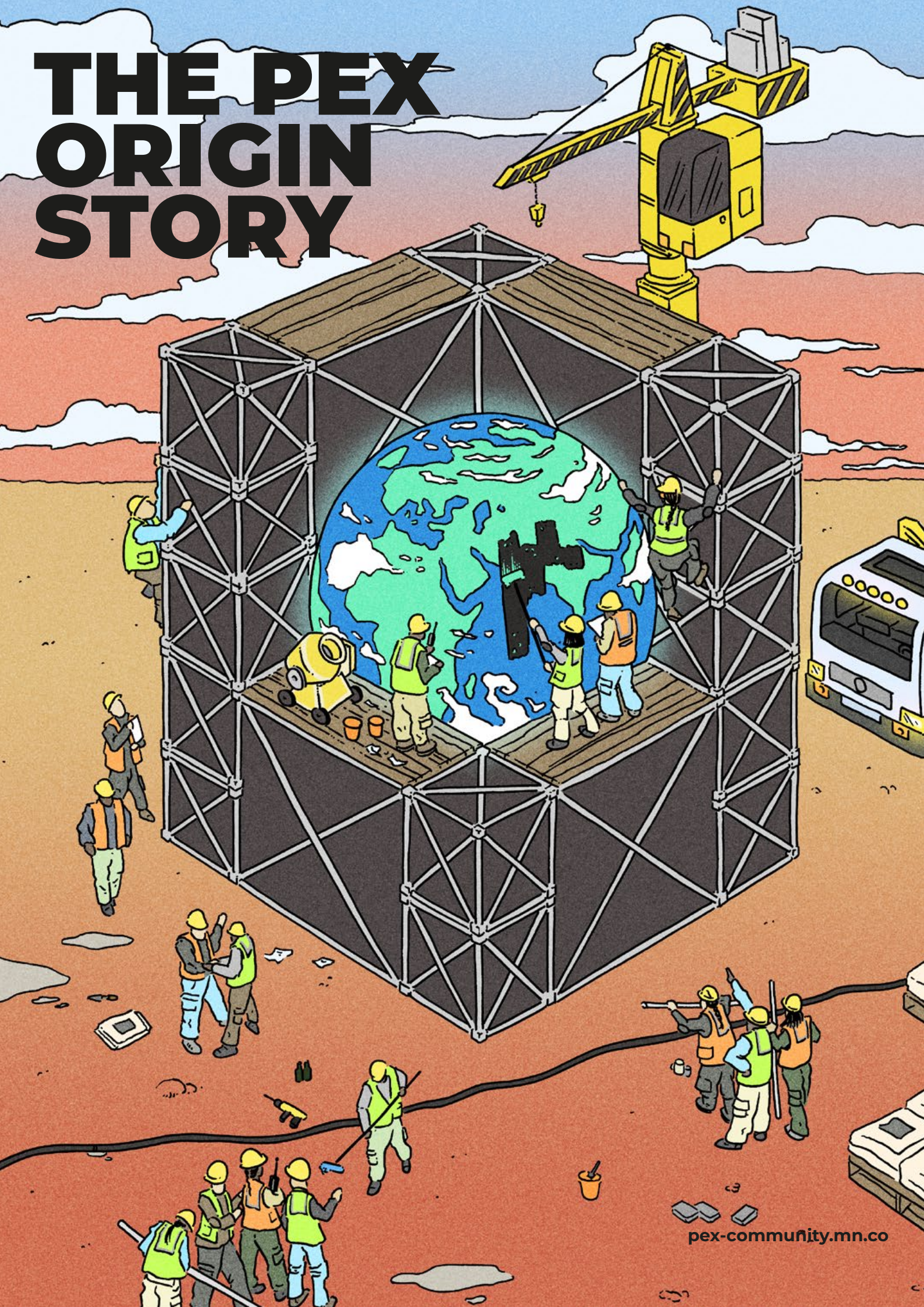


# THE PEX ORIGIN STORY



# FROM SPROUTING SEED TO FLOURISHING ECOSYSTEM

How can the European philanthropy sector break through national and thematic silos? How can it collaborate more effectively across geographical areas and issues?

These questions were on the minds of 100+ philanthropy infrastructure professionals from all over Europe, as they gathered during the first PEXforum in Madrid in 2020.

Two years later, in an air-conditioned conference hall of Kadir Has University

in Istanbul, a big ball of red string criss-crossed through the room. Held and passed on by different philanthropy professionals, it was a powerful visual representation of the intricate connections that had formed as a result of the PEX community.

The seed that had been planted in Madrid had grown roots and branches, forming a more interconnected philanthropy ecosystem.

## WHAT IS PEX?

The Istanbul forum, which was neither theme-specific or country-specific, focused on bringing together key actors in the European philanthropy infrastructure space. This is precisely the purpose of PEX, a community of philanthropy infrastructure professionals.

Co-created at the first ever PEXforum 2020 in Madrid, PEX (Philanthropy Europe Exchange) stands for collaboration, diversity, creativity and exchange in the European philanthropic sector. It unites more than 70 philanthropy networks, including national, regional and thematic organisations.

While often overlooked, there is a growing realisation that philanthropy infrastructure plays a critical role in tackling what is known as the “global polycrisis”: our current moment in history, where challenges such as climate change, inequality and gender discrimination interconnect in increasingly complex ways.

“Philanthropy infrastructure is the scaffolding for how philanthropy works in the world,” says Annie Hillar, Co-Director at Gender Funders CoLab. “It offers new ways of connecting people and institutions, such as public and private foundations, donors and activists.”

To be effective, philanthropic organisations need to collaborate better across borders and themes, sharing resources and know-how.

“We need infrastructure that is dynamic, not stable and fixed. I see [PEX] as a ship that carries people forward on their journey,” says Alina Porumb, of Romania’s INSPIRE Community Foundations.

Or, as Hillar puts it: “We wanted to be intentional and conscious about what we’re doing and constantly ask: are we holding to our values, operating with integrity, and being authentic? Are we being the change we want to see?”

# PLANTING THE SEED

The idea behind PEX was born in 2019 within an organisation called Dafne (Donors and Foundations Networks in Europe), which later converged with the EFC (European Foundation Centre) to form Philea — a united voice for European philanthropy. The team at the time consisted of James Magowan, Hanna Stähle, Max von Abendroth, and Hanna Hanses, who came together to create a more unified European philanthropy space.

“We all felt that working in isolation was no longer possible,” Magowan recalls of PEX’s inception. “National associations of donors and foundations wanted to connect with overarching infrastructure organisations, so we decided the time was ripe to create the European equivalent of WINGS (a global philanthropy infrastructure organisation).”

Yet great ideas are only as great as their execution. Over the next two years, the initiative — which now included individuals based all across Europe — set out to get as many national and thematic philanthropy support organisations as

possible on board. They were adamant not to create yet another organisation or network that would serve to promote its own interests. Instead, they referred to the initiative as a space, in the broadest sense of the word.

“Getting people excited was the easy part — getting the funding and following through was harder, because what we wanted to achieve had simply never been done before,” says Abendroth. “Luckily, we had the right people in the right place, at the right time.”

Thanks to this collective effort, the seed grew into a small tree which started sprouting branches. People began contributing articles to the blog, arguing for the importance of better collaboration and describing how the philanthropy sector needs to change.

By 2022, the tree had spread its roots far and wide, intertwining with dozens of organisations and hundreds of individuals to form a veritable ecosystem. It was time for a real-life encounter.

**WE ALL FELT THAT  
WORKING IN ISOLATION  
WAS NO LONGER POSSIBLE**



# THREADS OF CONNECTION

In 2020, just ahead of the pandemic, hundreds of philanthropy infrastructure professionals from all across Europe came together during the first ever PEXforum in Madrid to discuss the challenges and opportunities the sector was facing.

Rosa Gallego, Director of International Relations at the Spanish Association of Foundations, took a leading role in organising the forum, and remembers it as an intense time. "It was an important momentum for the sector," she says, "and we were all extremely motivated to make it a success.

I immediately felt this warm, welcoming, trusting atmosphere amongst everyone present."

She is not the only one to have fond memories of Madrid. Many of the forum's participants found comfort in the newly created community. Porumb fondly remembers a poem that was written based on the learnings of the next conference, in 2021, which took place online due to the pandemic: "It was such a poetic and original way of talking about philanthropy."

THE OLD APPROACH  
OF BREAKING PROBLEMS DOWN  
INTO SMALL BOXES ISN'T  
WORKING ANYMORE



# A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Today, that kindred spirit is fanning an ever-brighter flame. As a community, PEX is constantly creating new ways of connecting philanthropy support organisations, foundations, civil society organisations and activists, and being a hub for much-needed innovation within the space.

“The old approach of breaking problems down into small boxes isn’t working anymore,” says Debora Guidetti of Ariadne Network, who believes a holistic view is key to understanding the global polycrisis. “We need to take risks and go forward in these uncertain times.”

As a space where philanthropy professionals are challenged to think outside the box, innovation and risk-taking are some of the main characteristics of the PEX approach. A good example of a PEX-born initiative that had a wide impact is the European Philanthropy Coalition for Climate — a pledge, involving a wide array of foundations, to implement major environmental improvements across major areas of their

organisations. These include integrating a climate lens into their existing programmes, minimising the climate impact of their operations and considering how they can invest their assets in line with a rapid and fair transition to net zero.

Taking this climate pledge as a blueprint, Hillar is looking forward to increasing the impact of her Gender Equity and Justice working group, another PEX-born initiative:

“In the coming years, we want to engage in advocacy and influence the wider philanthropic space to become more gender-focused,” she explains.

These are just two examples of how PEX is helping philanthropy infrastructure professionals reimagine and reshape the future of the sector. With each activity, PEX is restoring confidence in philanthropy and its ability to address complex, entangled problems through concerted effort.

**WE NEED INFRASTRUCTURE  
THAT IS DYNAMIC,  
LIKE A SHIP CARRYING PEOPLE  
FORWARD ON THEIR JOURNEY**



# DEVELOPING THE X-FACTOR

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From climate change to conflict, migration and economic instability — considering the scale and magnitude of the polycrisis affecting us, myriad challenges await the philanthropic sector going forward. Yet one thing is clear for PEX: the old way of working is no longer fit for purpose.

“We should not waste this opportunity,” says Gallego. “We are finally being confronted with voices we don’t normally hear within our organisations, and we have a space where new ideas can be tested in a flexible way. That’s what PEX is all about.”

So, besides “exchange”, what else does the X in PEX stand for?

According to some, it is the X-factor that is contributing something new and unexpected to the sector. Others believe the X means multiplication of resources, connections, and impact. Others yet say the X stands for experimentation.

In truth, PEX is an ecosystem with many living parts that all depend on each other. Some of them will need sunlight, while others will thrive in the shade.

Some will sprout invisible roots deep into the ground, while others will grow wide-reaching branches.

No matter where your focus lies, we need each and every one of you reading this article to nurture this shared ecosystem. Only then will we solve the “wicked problems” of today and tomorrow.

For Delphine Moralis, CEO of Philea, the host of PEX, this shared problem-solving approach depends on organisations joining forces and understanding in which areas they can each add the most value.

“PEX is this unique space where infrastructure organisations — combined with their vast and diverse membership — come together. By merging all these different visions, ideas and realities, we can connect these individual puzzle pieces and point to a bigger story; a bigger understanding of the many challenges that we face.”

So bring your piece of the puzzle, let’s expand PEX and build a bolder philanthropy sector — together.