

## Philea Forum 2025 – Power and Equality: A Balancing Act

# The long road to equity: Walking together through discomfort and compassion

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*Opening Plenary speech, 3 June 2025*

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues, dear friends,

Today's conversation didn't start today. It probably started about 12,000 years ago, when the first forms of inequality emerged as a result of population growth, of competition for land and of the development of hierarchical settlements. One could say that today's conversation is probably about as old as human civilization itself. And probably so too is philanthropy – be it in a different shape than what it is today.

Today's conversation is about the juncture between inequalities, power imbalances and structures which are sustaining them, including within philanthropy. It's a conversation that connects to a complex web of global and regional factors that reinforce each other, and often boil down to entrenched values, norms, practices and structures. It connects to everything philanthropy traditionally cares about: from education to gender equality over racial justice and so much more. It affects every community supported by philanthropy, and has implications on health, stability and resilience of entire societies.

Today, to me, this conversation seems more relevant than ever. It is relevant because over the past years, the share of people living below the poverty line increased in no less than two-thirds of EU member states. Because over the past 10 years income earned by younger people has declined. Because last year billionaire wealth in the world grew three times faster than the year before. Because still today, one in two Muslims in the EU face discrimination in their daily life. Because recent polls point to intensifying harassment and discrimination of LGBTQ+ people. Because if significant gender gaps still exist in the EU, zero-sum battles between women's advancement and men's well-being have also led to more radicalisation, particularly among men under 25, increasingly voting for extreme right. Because in so many cases, all of these challenges and forms of discrimination and inequality intersect, and need more comprehensive, at times more nuanced and undoubtedly more compassionate approaches than what has been the norm to date.

The conversation we're having is also important because of the correlation it holds with growing public disengagement and hostility – ultimately leading globally, including in



Europe, to rapid democratic backsliding. The health of democracy has, according to various indexes, been on a steady downwards spiral since at least 2007. Fuelled by funding cuts, and geopolitical unrest, we now face open wounds across multiple layers of societies, leaving many of us gobsmacked, overwhelmed, confused, while at the same time asked to step up a gear and support solutions that will help create a better tomorrow.

If today's conversation is therefore an important one for our sector, it is at the same time one we have at times felt uncomfortable in addressing courageously. We all know philanthropy is – while celebrated for its contribution to common good – equally criticised for potentially clashing with principles of justice. Philanthropic organisations are therefore increasingly invited to review their internal practices and assess how their values are expressed within their own organisations. Foundations and funders are also questioned about how they engage with those whom they support, how their resources flow and to whom. They face scrutiny for not using their power role as contributors to broader movements for change, and for focusing on symptoms rather than root causes.

So if the conversation at any point feels somewhat uncomfortable, it is probably a sign we're doing it right, and that we're embracing the difficult questions that need reflection for us to move forward on the long and inevitably winding road towards more equitable societies. It's ok for it to be hard, and it's better to be uncomfortable trying, than to stand at the sideline while others stumble.

At Philea, we are proud to see how many organisations in our membership are already engaging with questions of equality, power, justice and inclusion. Through our networks and communities, members come together for sharing and learning. Beyond just being spaces for conversations, they are increasingly seen as opportunities to do better, with up to 70% of our members reporting that being part of the community of Philea brings new knowledge and skills, and up to 1 in 4 members effectively changing practices based on what they've learned from their peers. Rather than establishing the one and only right answer to the challenges met, we celebrate the plurality of responses and see a multitude of pathways which philanthropic organisations can choose to move forward.

With this in mind, it is nothing short of invigorating to see so many of you present with us today, ready to join the conversation. In this first part of the programme, we decided to do things a bit differently than yet another panel, and rather invited four exceptional speakers and human beings, who will in turn each take 12 minutes of your time to share a deep story, conviction, perspective or an idea. We're happy that our four speakers may, on certain points, disagree and bring in conflicting views, and we hope that throughout this time in Lisbon, you will agree to do that too. We hope it will help us all get a deeper understanding of how power and equality is a balancing act that

needs all of us to stand compassionately and humbly in relation to others, at times uncomfortably, but always moving forward.

With that, today's conversation is one to start again, courageously, every day.