

# – THE INFLUENCE OF PHILANTHROPIC FOUNDATIONS ON CITY GOVERNMENT INNOVATION

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## Abstract

*In this study I examine the role of philanthropic foundations in stimulating city government innovation. Reduced budgets and rising consumer demands are challenging organizational capacity in government, prompting government officials to recognize the need for innovation to improve policies, programmes and practices. This empirical study draws upon qualitative interviews and policy reports to generate comparative case studies on three city governments in England: Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle. It builds on work in urban studies and policy mobilities that reveals how foundations can influence urban agendas, finding that philanthropic foundations engage with city governments through three different types of collaboration: direct provision of financial resources, exchange of non-financial resources with city governments and indirect engagements. Philanthropic foundations are blending financial resources and less tangible provision of space and time to enable city governments to experiment with new ideas, policies and ways of working. The fusion of non-governmental resources provides city governments with the capacity to act, and city governments often use non-governmental funding for riskier projects and for projects that may not have taken place if public funding had been used. Through these different collaborations and by deploying a suite of interventions and methods, philanthropic foundations stimulate product, service, process, conceptual and governance innovation in city governments.*

## Introduction

Across the globe, cities of varying sizes and economic advancement face an array of challenges. The need to problem solve is spurring interest in public sector innovation, with governments seeking new resources to find new and better approaches to improving services and outcomes (Hartley, 2005; Goldsmith, 2010). As a result, city governments are increasingly working in different ways and with different actors (Lynn, 1997; Miles *et al.*, 2002; Harris and Kinney, 2004).

In parallel, philanthropic foundations are increasingly reorientating their work to the urban level. By working directly with philanthropic foundations, cities often sidestep the nation state to tackle global challenges as diverse as child welfare, climate change and poverty reduction, as well as negotiating trade links and establishing international relations (Nijman, 2009; Barber, 2014; Moir *et al.*, 2014).

Philanthropic foundations' interest in urban issues has translated into a sizable investment in cities. For example, over a six-year period, the Rockefeller Foundation made a US \$185 million investment through its 100 Resilient Cities programme (Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2022), while Bloomberg Philanthropies, prompted by the Covid-19 crisis, announced a US \$78 million Rapid Response Initiative to support US-based cities and cities in other low- to middle-income countries (*ibid.*).

Although philanthropic foundations have been engaging with cities over a long period (Colwell, 1993; Hurd *et al.*, 1998; Clemens and Lee, 2010), the past couple of

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decades have been described as a ‘heyday’ of foundation involvement in the urban landscape (Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2022: 1945). Now philanthropic foundations are not only providing grants to cities but also explicitly intervening to shape urban agendas (Parnell, 2016; Montero, 2020; Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2022).

Governments and scholars have been asking probing questions about philanthropic foundations’ involvement in the urban landscape (Anheier and Daly, 2001; Ravazzi, 2016; UK Parliament, 2016; Pill, 2021; Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2022). Yet scholars argue that more is required and that urban studies need to continue engaging with this phenomenon. For example, Montero (2020: 2266) states that greater attention should be given to philanthropic foundations “‘leveraging cities’ as a proliferating global development practice’.

The research question I ask in this study is: What is the influence of philanthropic foundations on city government innovation? This study builds upon work in urban studies and policy mobilities to explore the influence of philanthropic foundations on English city government innovation. It extends existing work in three main ways. First, it builds upon the work of Ravazzi (2016) and McGuirk *et al.* (2022) to show that foundations are transferring financial resources and promoting their own projects and programmes in English cities. It goes beyond this to show that the influence on different types of city government innovation is dictated by the nature of the collaboration—whether financial or non-financial resources are provided by the foundation, and the methods used. Secondly, it shows that both philanthropic foundations and city governments can act as policy entrepreneurs, with foundations blending financial resources and less tangible provision of space and time to enable city governments to experiment with new ideas, policies and ways of working. Philanthropic foundations are mobilizing ideas, creating circuits of knowledge through global city-to-city networks and events, enabling risk taking and creating a multiplier effect, whereby philanthropic foundation funding helps attract other funders and partners to engage with city governments. City governments use non-governmental funding for riskier projects and for projects that may not have taken place if public funding had been used (Stone, 2000; Evans, 2009; Benson and Jordan, 2011). Thirdly, in this journal, McCann and Ward (2015) pioneered the concept of presence/absence, and this study goes beyond this concept to identify the absence of an innovative idea and to extend it by considering the presence/absence of foundations as actors in governance and the implications this has for policy mobilization and public sector innovation efforts.

I begin by reviewing urban studies and policy mobilities, focusing on how ideas emerge and mobilize, and then influence decision making at the urban level. In the subsequent section I describe the methodological approach I followed. I then move on to discuss my findings and summarize the different types of collaborations between philanthropic foundations and city governments. Finally, I discuss the complexities of measuring city government innovation and make some recommendations for how these could be overcome.

### **Literature review: philanthropic foundations mobilizing ideas to stimulate city government innovation**

In this section I describe the urban innovation imperative in government, define innovation and discuss how philanthropic foundations are often welcome partners in the urban landscape. I then draw upon policy mobilities literature to show how non-state actors are engaged, how ideas develop and are adopted, and conclude by identifying the implications for governance, power and accountability.

- The urban government innovation imperative and the role of philanthropic foundations

There is recognition in the UK, and in many countries around the world, that innovation is needed in government if pressing social, economic and environmental

challenges are to be tackled. Formal and informal public–private partnerships are now often established to deliver urban public goods (Geddes, 2006; Stone, 2010). As a result, new ways of working, new funding mechanisms and new partnerships are emerging between government and non-government actors (OECD, 2014).

Philanthropic foundations have emerged as key actors in local governance. Foundations' wealth has grown considerably over the past 20 years, often making them welcome partners of government (Jenkins, 2010; Jung *et al.*, 2013; Ravazzi, 2016). This is an international phenomenon that often regards philanthropy as an integral contributor to post-recession societies (Harrow and Jung, 2011) and is studied through the lens of austerity governance, whereby public sector spending cuts are redefining urban governance and introducing new state–society relationships (Peck, 2017; Pill, 2020).

Alongside this, philanthropic foundations are increasingly reorienting their work towards cities. This is done both to engage with their target groups and because many foundations believe it is easier to effect change in the city than at the national scale, owing to a perception of less bureaucracy and mayors being closer to their local constituents (Swope, 2017).

Philanthropic foundations as actors in the urban landscape have been conceptualized as a North American-led agenda. Fuentenebro and Acuto (2022: 1951) argued that the 'wider narrative on the intersection between philanthropy and cities has often been intertwined with major North American institutions'. Yet cities engaging with philanthropic foundations are not a phenomenon exclusively happening in US cities, and this approach does not solely involve US-based philanthropic foundations. For example, in Germany foundations have been involved in education policy (Thümler, 2011) and in England, Nesta, the UK's innovation agency, spent approximately £10 million on supporting public sector innovation during 2014 to 2015 (Nesta, 2015).

Urban innovation is often framed as an imperative to solve major and complex urban and global challenges. Philanthropic foundations are actors in this innovative urban governance (IUG), often promoting efforts to govern cities by deploying a new set of programmes, approaches and techniques that are described by McGuirk *et al.* (2022: 1392) as 'self-consciously shaped as innovative departures from business-as-usual, purposefully enacted to create improved outcomes'. Despite philanthropic foundations being diverse and including corporate and family-derived wealth, those aiming to problem solve and stimulate innovation tend to act by transferring financial resources or by enacting and promoting their own projects and programmes (Ravazzi, 2016). McGuirk *et al.* defined this as:

beyond explicitly urbanising governance innovation ... to catalyse adoption of a palette of innovative institutional forms, approaches and techniques geared to deliver more agile, nimble, responsive, experimental and inclusive forms of challenge-led, cross-sectoral urban governance to produce scalable and replicable 'solutions' (McGuirk *et al.*, 2022: 1394).

Despite a wealth of literature on public sector innovation at the national and city level, studies often lack a robust definition of the concept (de Vries *et al.*, 2016). De Vries *et al.* define public sector innovation as:

the introduction of new elements into a public service—in the form of new knowledge, new organisation, and/or new management of processual skills, which represents discontinuity with the past (*ibid.*: 5).

To help define innovation further, these authors segment public sector innovation into four specific types: product, process, conceptual and governance. I use these different types of innovation to structure the data collection in this study.

– Philanthropic foundations and the mobilization of ideas at the urban level  
 The inclusion of new actors in the urban landscape and the quest for urban innovation is resulting in adaptations in the structure and forms of governance to help develop new and better solutions for improved public services (Mulgan, 2009; Potts and Kastle, 2010; de Vries *et al.*, 2016).

Policy mobility is a key driver of innovation. It is useful for explaining how non-state actors are engaged and how ideas develop and are adopted. It also helps us analyse actor configuration and power dynamics and infuses discussions on this topic with concepts such as consideration of space, place and social processes (Ward, 2005; Peck, 2011; Lovell, 2019; McGuirk *et al.*, 2022). Kennedy (2016: 97) claims that interest in policy mobility has increased, as it helps us understand how and why ideas spread—because ‘cities are constantly comparing themselves to other cities and borrowing from them’.

Policy mobility has been used as a lens of analysis in a range of settings to show how innovative ideas—or perceived ‘best practices’—can spread. For example, policy mobility was used to show how the Bilbao and Barcelona models of urban governance came to be disseminated over the past two decades (González, 2010) and how business improvement districts (BIDs) transferred from the United States to the United Kingdom (Ward, 2007).

Studies have shown the role of philanthropic foundations in mobilizing ideas and stimulating innovation at the urban level (Hambleton and Gross, 2008; Villadsen, 2011). For example, Ravazzi (2016) analysed foundations in two Italian cities to reveal the impact of philanthropic foundations on local policymaking and how this varies according to the consolidated mode of governance within which they operate. Knott and McCarthy (2007) analysed philanthropic foundations as ‘policy venture capitalists’ who collaborate with governments to innovate their policy agenda to support children and their families. McCann and Ward (2010) summarized how foundations use several methods for stimulating and mobilizing ideas and solutions, including convening networks, and producing reports and publications, websites and blogs via professional contacts, the media and word of mouth.

McGuirk *et al.* (2022) argue that the urban is viewed as a strategic entry point for foundations for several reasons. First, it provides an efficacious scale for developing and experimenting with new solutions to broader governance challenges. Secondly, the urban scale can be viewed as closer to citizens than the national level; therefore it can help foundations frame solutions as more democratically legitimate. The third reason is linked to the second: cities are viewed as a space for innovation, as they have the capacity to act beyond the control of the state and the ability to generate new organizational and governance models.

In tandem with foundations using cities as sites of experimentation, McCann and Ward (2010: 175) argue that policymakers are ‘under increasing pressure to “get a move on”—to keep up with the latest trends and “hot” ideas that sweep into their offices, to convert those ideas into locally appropriate “solutions”, and “roll them out”, thus making the most of them before the next trend emerges’. McCann and Ward claim that these ‘waves of innovation’ have prompted a ‘churning’ of ideas and initiatives, with policymakers constantly on the lookout for ‘ready-made, off-the-shelf policies and best practices that can be quickly applied locally’ (*ibid.*).

Policy mobilities research acknowledges that policy is not often static, and its movement is rarely straightforward and linear. Robinson (2015) usefully argues that analyses of the movements of policy should focus not only on how policy arrives in place but also on how government actors ‘arrive at’ those policies. As Baker and Temenos (2015: 826) claim, this means that ‘instead of tracing the movement of certain policy forms as they touch down in particular local contexts, this approach foregrounds the messy local compilation of multiple, circulating stories, techniques and policy concepts’.

McCann and Ward (2015) argue for the deconstruction of dualisms in policy mobilities research. By this, they mean that certain situations are set up as a ‘clean and neat division of things’, for instance, by ignoring issues of power and ideology, thus concealing complexity. For example, why certain policies mobilize has been analysed as ‘successes’, but McCann and Ward (*ibid.*) argue that success and failure are relational, and the study of failures should not be overlooked. Another dualism McCann and Ward (*ibid.*) identified is that of absence/presence. To date, they argue, policy mobility scholars have focused on the presence of policy in a particular location, rather than on why a policy has not been adopted.

Bok and Coe’s (2017) research on the interaction between the state and private corporations provides a useful framework for studying the role of foundations in policy mobilization. Within their study, the authors draw on the work of Stone (2002), viewing the state and corporate actors as policy ‘transfer agents’ and vehicles of policy mobilization. They argue that the private sector plays an important role in the ‘global policy consultocracy’, in which policymakers are increasingly reliant on private-sector consultants as ‘experts’ in the policymaking process. Bok and Coe claim that consultants can be individuals or companies, and ‘move across space as serialized exporters of technocratic policy discourse, knowledge, leveraging their market power and standing to reinforce and legitimate particular policies, and/or standards as normative “best practice”’ (Bok and Coe, 2017: 53). They state that corporate actors are important agents in the import and export of policy models, but do not expand on how corporate actors perform this role, why government officials engage with corporate actors, at what stage of the policy process corporate actors are involved. Neither do they consider the impacts that this has or expand on the nature of the government–consultancy relationship, beyond saying that the objective of corporates is ‘profit-making and value extraction’ (*ibid.*: 54).

A core part of the recent mobilities turn has been an approach developed by Latour (1996) and Marcus (1995), which involves ‘following the thing’ and ‘following the people’. Most studies in the ‘follow the thing’ strand have typically been multi-site ethnographies (Freidberg, 2001; Cook and Harrison, 2007; Wood, 2014).

Examples of studies in the ‘follow the people’ strand most relevant to this study include Goldman’s (2005) research into the influence of how the World Bank operates on its project sites around the world. The Goldman study involved ‘shadowing’ a single actor in social, environmental and governance ventures to show the World Bank’s role in increasing global inequality. Using a similar methodology to Goldman (*ibid.*), Roy (2010) studied the agents who ‘manage poverty’ and the associated circulations of profits and investments.

A similar approach to ‘follow the thing’, but with a less tangible focus, is ‘follow the policy’. Pioneered by Peck and Theodore (2012), it has been used to analyse the spread of programmes such as Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) and the spread of participatory budgeting (*ibid.*). In a similar way to ‘follow the thing’ studies, the ‘follow the policy’ approach tends to draw on qualitative approaches. Peck and Theodore (*ibid.*: 23) argue that policy models ‘do not drop from the sky, yield “impacts” here and there’, but that policy networks construct them, requiring methodological strategies.

#### – Power relations and accountability

The mobilization of policy in government is laden with power relations. Peck (2011: 791) argues that the mobilization of policy is shaped by ‘what is seen, and what counts, in terms of policy innovations, preferred models, and best practice’. McGoey (2021: 194) claimed that philanthropic foundation-led ‘entrepreneurial projects’ are not only changing the practices of cities but also promoting a more entrepreneurial style of urban governance (Fuentenebro and Acuto, 2022).

Philanthropic foundation involvement in urban problem solving and its influence on styles of governance has led to scholars posing critical questions about how

cities are governed, by whom and according to what values (Pill, 2021). For example, Saltman (2010) claims that philanthropy disproportionately affects the education system in the United States. Harrow and Jung (2010: 1049) ask: ‘To whom is philanthropy accountable and who holds philanthropy accountable?’, and go on to argue that closer attention is needed to help scholars move ‘beyond simplistic celebratory, or indeed fatalistic, rhetoric’ about foundations and urban governance’ (*ibid.*). Roelofs (2015) went further, using the examples of the Ford Foundation and Kaplan Foundation acting as ‘pass throughs’ for CIA-led anti-communist projects to argue that foundation involvement at the urban level provides a conduit to keep citizens away from politicized and contentious issues. In his recent work, Pill (2020) in Baltimore found that there is often an ‘opaqueness’ to the governance arrangements between city governments and foundations and that citizens are often excluded, and argued that critical urban scholars should analyse this further (*ibid.*: 143).

In this study I draw upon the policy mobilities and public sector innovation literature to examine whether philanthropic foundations engaging with city governments foster innovation. To answer this question, I analyse the types of engagements between city governments and philanthropic foundations, the interventions they introduce to stimulate innovation, and the impacts of these efforts on city government innovation. In the section that follows I outline my research design before I discuss the results.

### Research design

My research method involved 67 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, alongside an analysis of secondary data from city governments and philanthropic foundations. I conducted 16 interviews with officials in city governments, 28 with staff from philanthropic foundations and 23 with various experts, including academics, practitioners, researchers and officials, who provided a cross-city, national and/or international perspective. All philanthropic foundations who identified as being engaged with Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle city governments were interviewed to generate a comprehensive account of the involvement of philanthropic foundations in all three cities.

#### – Interviews

To arrange the interviews, a formal email was sent, followed by a telephone call to arrange the interview date and time. The majority of interviews were conducted face to face, although ten were conducted by telephone. All interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, and based on a question guide as an *aide-mémoire*. Permission was granted for interviews to be recorded using a voice recorder. I used written notes to record observations and non-verbal cues (Pierce, 2008).

#### – Case study selection

A multi-case-study approach was selected, as it enabled me to conduct an intensive investigation into the three cities and draw up a comparison between them (Gerring, 2004; George and Bennett, 2005; Blatter and Haverland, 2014). The case study approach was interpretive, thus deepening my understanding of the actions and practices of the institutions and actors involved (Bevir and Rhodes, 2004) and situating the research within the interactionist ontology (Stainton-Rogers, 2006).

The cities were selected to assist with an understanding of whether city size and city resourcing influenced philanthropic foundation engagement. The original intention was to select city governments with varying degrees of philanthropic foundation involvement and engagement to understand why certain cities are viewed by philanthropic foundations as ‘attractive’ partners. However, in England, no data is available to show the scale and frequency of interactions between English city governments and philanthropic foundations. To overcome this, city size was used as a criterion.

– Data analysis

The data resulting from the interviews and document analysis were tangible transcripts and interview notes. All audio files were fully transcribed verbatim—a conscious decision to minimize the risk of missing any crucial detail.

In the section that follows, I discuss my results. I begin by discussing the types of innovation—product, process, conceptual and governance—that philanthropic foundations seek to stimulate in collaboration with city governments. I then discuss the methods they use to stimulate innovation in city governments, the impact on public sector innovation arising from these collaborations with philanthropic foundations, and how philanthropic foundations seek to measure impacts on city government innovation. I also highlight the barriers and complexities that both foundations and city governments may face when measuring innovation.

– Results

Out of the 17 philanthropic foundations in this study, 15 aim to stimulate public sector innovation through their work. The analysis shows that out of these, five aim to stimulate all four types of innovation—process, product or service, governance and conceptual; two focus on all these types of innovation except process innovation, four focus on governance and conceptual innovations, two focus on product or service innovation, and two focus on conceptual innovation. Table 1 shows the geography of this innovation focus across each of the three case study cities.

Table 1 shows similar levels of innovation focus for Bristol and Manchester city governments. Bristol city government engages with the work of ten philanthropic foundations, and nine of these aim to stimulate innovation. Manchester city government collaborates with nine philanthropic foundations, all of which aim to stimulate public sector innovation. Compared to Manchester and Bristol city governments, Newcastle city government has fewer interactions with philanthropic foundations.

### The activities philanthropic foundations use to stimulate innovation

In this study I identified three types of collaboration between city governments and philanthropic foundations and found that philanthropic foundations deploy different methods within these to stimulate public sector innovation. Table 2 summarizes these activities.

It is worth noting the geographical variance in philanthropic activity. As the second row in Table 2 shows, all three city governments (Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle) are exchanging non-financial resources with philanthropic foundations, and all engage indirectly with philanthropic foundations. Yet, as column A shows, no philanthropic foundations are funding Newcastle city government, which means only Bristol and Manchester city governments are receiving philanthropic foundation money to fund staff and programmes of work. Each interaction type will now be discussed in more detail.

**TABLE 1** Innovation focus of philanthropic foundations interacting with Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle city governments

City government	Process	Product or service	Governance	Conceptual	Total engagements with philanthropic foundations
Bristol	3	4	6	7	10 (9 aim to stimulate innovation)
Manchester	3	4	6	7	9 (9 aim to stimulate innovation)
Newcastle		2	2	3	6 (5 aim to stimulate innovation)

SOURCE: author's interview analysis; n = 17 philanthropic foundations

**TABLE 2** Activities philanthropic foundations use with the aim of stimulating innovation in city government

	<b>A</b> <b>Philanthropic foundations fund city government*</b>	<b>B</b> <b>Philanthropic foundations and city governments exchange non-financial resources</b>	<b>C</b> <b>Indirect engagement between city government and philanthropic foundations</b>
Activities philanthropic foundations use to stimulate innovation in city government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide grant funding for staff, programmes of work; attend conferences and ‘convenings’ (events).</li> <li>• Host and fund trips, convenings and conferences.</li> <li>• External expertise and coaching.</li> <li>• Prizes, awards and competitions.</li> </ul> <p><i>Plus the interventions listed in columns B and C.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish reports, toolkits and outputs that are discussed.</li> <li>• Knowledge exchange sessions.</li> <li>• Convenings and other events to transfer ideas or provide skills training.</li> </ul> <p><i>Plus the interventions listed in column C.</i></p>	<p>Outputs are publicly available, in the form of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• websites</li> <li>• press releases</li> <li>• publications, including research reports, toolkits, how-to guides and blog posts</li> <li>• social media content.</li> </ul> <p>Philanthropic foundations may also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fund newspapers and media outlets to generate outputs on their behalf aimed at city governments</li> <li>• fund intermediaries and non-government actors to generate content aimed at city governments</li> <li>• sponsor or host conferences.</li> </ul>
City governments involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bristol</li> <li>• Manchester</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bristol</li> <li>• Manchester</li> <li>• Newcastle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bristol</li> <li>• Manchester</li> <li>• Newcastle</li> </ul>
Number of philanthropic foundations involved	4	15	12

\* The city government may match the resources provided by the foundations.  
SOURCE: author’s research

– Philanthropic foundations directly fund city government to stimulate public sector innovation

The first type of interaction between philanthropic foundations is that of philanthropic foundations funding city government. Four out of the 17 philanthropic foundations engage with Bristol and Manchester city governments in this way. Through these collaborations, the philanthropic foundations provide Bristol and Manchester city governments with grant money to fund staff to be recruited to new roles, and to fund programmes of work, with the aim of stimulating public sector innovation. These programmes are time-bound: they typically last two years, and in all instances the philanthropic foundations set the criteria and terms for how funding may be spent. These programmes are structured around an aim, for example, improving environmental sustainability or promoting the innovative capacity within the city government to solve specific challenges facing the city government. The structure of these programmes varies, with some being strict and directive, while other philanthropic foundations take a more flexible approach, adapting the programme model to suit the needs and requirements of the city government.

When philanthropic foundations provide financial resources to a city government to stimulate innovation, they also provide a mix of non-financial resources to create a structured suite of interventions. The non-financial resources take the form of bespoke advice and expertise on policy issues. This package of support influences innovation by mobilizing policy ideas and providing training and upskilling of city staff in specific areas, such as leadership, while simultaneously aiming to create space in city government for innovative behaviour, such as risk taking and experimentation.

A key feature of these structured programmes is the belief of philanthropic foundations that city government innovation is driven by interconnectedness between city governments. Therefore, creating a city government network of trail-blazing city governments to tackle a range of social, environmental and economic challenges is an



intervention all philanthropic foundations use that fund city governments directly (four out of 17). The city governments involved in these programmes are a cohort of peers who are specially chosen by philanthropic foundations as city governments deemed most effective at problem solving.

Another key feature of direct funding to stimulate innovation in city governments is philanthropic foundations providing city governments with external expertise and training on particular policy areas, such as economic growth, education or health, or providing expertise in a technical area, such as programme management or impact measurement. In most cases (three out of four), philanthropic foundations commission a third-party agency to support city governments in this skills and capacity building. These third-party agencies could be academic units, private consultancies or charities, which the philanthropic foundation selects to deliver the skills training the foundation deems necessary. The external expertise provided to the city government is an attempt by philanthropic foundations to fill skills and capacity gaps in the city government to bolster its capacity for innovation.

- Philanthropic foundations and city governments exchange non-financial resources

Table 2 column B shows the second type of engagement between philanthropic foundations and city governments, namely, exchange of non-financial resources. Altogether 15 of the 17 philanthropic foundations studied deployed this method. In comparison to philanthropic foundations providing funding to city government, this type of collaboration is less structured. It entails philanthropic foundations providing intangible outputs within a dialogue with one or numerous city governments on a one-off basis or more regularly. Barriers to entry can be lower than when philanthropic foundations fund city governments. In these cases, city governments are able to contact the philanthropic foundations directly to discuss their work in an informal way.

The exchange of non-financial resources includes the philanthropic foundation publishing reports, policy papers and toolkits with details on how to apply different methods and approaches, and discussing these with city governments either in person or virtually. The aim of this approach is to mobilize best practices for other city governments to adopt and emulate to foster city government innovation.

Prizes and awards are used as a method to stimulate innovation as part of philanthropic foundations providing funding to city governments. Prizes are also used in indirect interactions with city governments. In this type of interaction, such prizes are made available to help identify and reward examples of innovation from city governments to spur other city governments to innovate.

An example of such an awards scheme can be found in the programme by USA Philanthropic Foundation 3 involving Bristol and Manchester city governments. The deputy director of this foundation described it as follows:

We launched the [awards programme] as we wanted to find and elevate the innovative strategies that cities are utilizing to engage citizens to solve problems. We know there is a ton going on in cities, but we may not know about it and media outlets may not pick up on it. We want to create a forum to share it, communicate it and incorporate it into what we do to foster innovation in city governments ... We will host an event with cities, think tanks, journalists and others to go deeper on strategies and help cities take lessons back home.

Beyond rewarding city governments for innovative behaviour, these awards also promote ideas to a wider audience of city governments and other actors involved in policy mobilization, such as the media and think tanks.

– Philanthropic foundations indirectly engage with city governments

The third type of collaboration between city governments and philanthropic foundations involves philanthropic foundations engaging city governments indirectly (see Table 2 column C). In total, 12 of the 17 philanthropic foundations in this study use this approach, with the dual aims of promoting the work of the philanthropic foundation itself to support city government innovation and to elevate and showcase the work of city governments to help to mobilize and spread ideas.

Within this type of interaction philanthropic foundations use two main approaches to stimulate innovation. The first involves the philanthropic foundation making written outputs publicly available to mobilize ideas and resources. These outputs include research reports, toolkits, how-to guides, blog posts, website content, press releases and social media content.

The second type of indirect interaction involves philanthropic foundations funding intermediaries and arms-length networks. Two of the philanthropic foundations fund newspapers and media outlets to produce content on city government innovation; these articles contain the philanthropic foundation's branding and logo. Three of the philanthropic foundations commission consultancies and academics to generate content directed at city governments. Foundations are also involved in, and providing funding to, arms-length city networks that aim to influence city government innovation. Examples include C40 Cities, the Mayors' Migration Council or networks and committees to advance international priorities, such as sustainable development goals (SDGs) or climate change (COP).

Intermediaries and arms-length networks are funded with the aim of mobilizing ideas on a national or global scale to effect change in city government, influence the wider political culture and incentivize city governments to engage with philanthropic foundations. These promotional activities help to raise the profile of philanthropic foundations and to promote and help solve pressing urban challenges. However, as in the case of the provision of non-financial resources (column B), it is less clear how much these activities influence the three case study cities to innovate. However, these indirect engagements could have the potential to be a powerful driver of policy mobilization to help solve global challenges in a range of cities.

### **Philanthropic foundations' influence on city government innovation**

In this section, I discuss philanthropic foundations' influence on city government innovation and how it is dictated by the type of collaboration between it and the city government, and the methods used. Product and service, process and conceptual innovation happen in paid collaborations as a result of the philanthropic foundation's financial resources creating staffing capacity and helping with the identification of new ideas through cultivating networks with a range of actors, brokering connections with other organizations to enable ideas to mobilize, and enabling city governments to buy and implement new solutions. Governance innovation takes place within paid collaborations and when philanthropic foundations provide non-financial resources to city government, such as data and research insights. Table 3 provides examples of innovation arising from philanthropic foundations collaborating with city governments.

Compared to direct funding, philanthropic foundations and city governments exchanging non-financial resources have less impact on city government innovation. Although the exchange of non-financial resources is seen as an important component of the innovation process by both city governments and philanthropic foundations, due to the lack of structure in this interaction type and the lack of financial resources available to city governments, the impact on innovation appears to be less.

However, the exchange of non-financial resources is seen as one input into the innovation process—one that helps to build rapport between foundations and city governments. This rapport is a crucial component of how philanthropic foundations

**TABLE 3** Examples of innovation in Bristol, Manchester and Newcastle city governments

Type of innovation	Example of innovation in city government
Process innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UK Philanthropic Foundation 1 is funding a team of researchers and a wider programme of work, which is creating new organizational forms and new working methods. This helps improve the economic development strategy of Manchester city government.</li> <li>USA Philanthropic Foundation 1 is funding a member of city government staff and a programme of work in both Manchester and Bristol city governments. This enables the city governments to work with new partners, forge new connections and work across new disciplines to improve the resilience of the cities in various policy areas.</li> </ul>
Product or service innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>USA Philanthropic Foundation 1 has facilitated introductions between Manchester city government and different suppliers of potential service and product solutions. One example is the adoption of a new service—a tool developed by a utility company to establish resilience.</li> </ul>
Governance innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UK Foundation 4 has changed how products and services are commissioned by Bristol city government. This has led to the theory and practice of social action influencing the procurement of adult social care to make it more effective.</li> </ul>
Conceptual innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In Bristol city government, attending conferences and events hosted by USA Philanthropic Foundation 1 has helped to reframe the city government's thinking about resilience and sustainability in the city.</li> </ul>

SOURCE: author's research

select city governments for collaboration. Therefore, exchange of resources could help foster more structured interaction in the future that could potentially lead to city government innovation.

- Resource for experimentation and creating circuits of knowledge: philanthropic foundations as policy entrepreneurs and mobilizers

The injection of new resources from philanthropic foundations influences the interconnected concepts of innovation, risk taking and entrepreneurialism. Philanthropic foundation resources are influencing city government innovation by providing spaces and capacity for risk taking and experimentation, creating new organizational forms, and ways of working that enable innovation to take place. In this way, philanthropic foundations are influencing and enabling city governments to innovate.

The resource for experimentation is evident in both Bristol and Manchester city governments and is well illustrated by an official in Bristol city government, who stated:

We have a position to fail and innovate. If I spend public money, it is really important that the citizens see the value and impact of that spending. If I am spending [the philanthropic foundation's] money, you can innovate. You can have a slightly different risk threshold. They have to be comfortable with it, and we have to be comfortable with it, but it lets you do new things and work differently (Programme Manager, Bristol city government).

Provision of space, time and capacity for risk taking is a central tenet of the funding philanthropic foundations make available to city governments, as it is a mechanism for stimulating innovation. Additional funding, beyond public money, is something that can legitimately be used for experimentation and innovation. This legitimacy arises because the funding is seen as 'additional' to the public purse and is framed as experimental, so it is intended for newer, and potentially riskier, projects.

Across all types of collaborations between city governments and philanthropic foundations, philanthropic foundations are mobilizing ideas—either their own ideas or the ideas and practices city governments are using. These are promoted through toolkits, research reports, media outlets, events, conferences and a range of other activities. At the core of this work is the attempt of philanthropic foundations to stimulate innovation by creating circuits of knowledge, with ideas and insights moving between city government

actors and, in some instances, philanthropic foundations fostering connections between city governments and non-government actors, including private companies.

Across all the philanthropic foundations, there is a strong emphasis on the value of events, conferences and ‘convenings’ to mobilize ideas and enable learning between city governments. This can influence process, product, service, conceptual and governance innovation, but within this study, the main identified influence was conceptual innovation. This type of innovation involves reframing specific problems as well as their possible solutions. Conceptual innovation is influenced by six philanthropic foundations in Bristol and Manchester city governments.

An example of how circuits of knowledge influence conceptual innovation is seen in the work of USA Philanthropic Foundation 1, which is funding both Bristol and Manchester city governments. Through a suite of interventions, but primarily through funding a member of staff in the city government to deliver a programme of work over two years, USA Philanthropic Foundation 1 is influencing conceptual innovation by enabling the city government to reconceptualize its approach to problem and policy formulation. The words of Director 1 in Manchester city government illustrate this:

They [USA Philanthropic Foundation 1] have created a space for more than policy: a real depth of thinking about the problem and how we are going to take it forward. When I look at my team, our concept of the city and the future of the city has massively developed, and if we weren't part of [the programme] I don't know if that would have happened. It is a way of opening up connections, working across disciplines and enlarging people's thinking.

The influence on conceptual innovation involves city government officials renaming and reframing their approach and ideology towards policy development. As Director 1 in Manchester city government stated:

The value they [USA Philanthropic Foundation 1] bring is because they partner with so many people; you can be introduced to organizations you would have not have previously known about. [Usually,] if we procure work, it has to be done through competition. But having access to their partners and understanding the work they are doing in other parts of the world or the UK can open your eyes up to what is possible.

### **City-to-city government learning: convenings and networks**

Philanthropic foundations are enabling city government officials to network to create opportunities that open up new frames of reference, new paradigms and new approaches. These networks comprise experts and city governments and provide a forum for philanthropic foundations to bring their own perspectives to bear, as well as their ‘outsider’ perspective on the city government's problems or challenges. A network of city governments with the ability to connect, learn and share ideas is one of the main drivers of conceptual innovation.

The power of city government networks was illustrated by an interviewee in Manchester city government who is involved in a philanthropic foundation's funded programme:

There is no doubt: I think the biggest part was the network and the opportunity to join that network and to share and learn. Yes, there is the resource [to fund staff and programmes], but ... it's not so much the money but connecting with strategy partners [that] is really helpful ... But I think it was that learning, sharing

innovation and interesting ideas ... you can learn through another country or culture that you might not [be aware of], which shows you aren't doing something, or there is something you can do better or differently (Director 2, Manchester city government).

The impact of the philanthropic foundation's networks on mobilizing ideas was a recurring theme in both Bristol and Manchester city governments and both city governments viewed it as the most powerful element of the philanthropic foundation's support in all the funded programmes. As an example, USA Philanthropic Foundation 1 stated:

We see a lot of innovation coming through the power of our network and convening people together. For example, we are bringing cities together to focus on racial equity ... they'll be sharing the really creative work they're doing on the ground, in terms of building resilience with an equity lens. I can say from some of our past convenings [that] we've seen other cities go and just be able to tweak and learn from what others are doing. They picked up on things they learned and took it and innovated in their own city.

This quotation shows how philanthropic foundations are facilitating introductions between city governments and non-governmental providers to help city governments identify new ideas, learn about them, and potentially adapt and emulate them, to spur product and service innovation.

Philanthropic foundations can indirectly bolster the capacity of the city government to innovate through their activity and involvement, thus signalling other organizations to invest or support the city government. As an official in Bristol city government said, philanthropic foundations provide 'cachet', which encourages stakeholders within city government, and outside, to engage with the city government. This 'cachet' has two impacts on innovation: the first is that it provides the resource for innovation to happen in city government; the second is the multiplier effect of philanthropic foundation funding attracting additional partners, expertise and capacity for the city government to use for additional project delivery. This multiplier effect has important implications for city governance, resourcing and innovation.

### **Temporal and spatial variance of innovation and the evolution of methods**

There is a temporal and spatial variation in philanthropic foundations' influence on city government innovation. Beyond the presence of innovation impacts, in this study I identified the absence of innovation. Philanthropic foundations are influencing innovation in Bristol and Manchester city government and this influence can shift and alter over time. However, there is an apparent lack of innovation in Newcastle city government.

The activities used by philanthropic foundations to stimulate public sector innovation should not be interpreted as fixed or static. All the philanthropic foundations I interviewed are constantly finessing how they work. In addition, they are 'experimenting' with different approaches to both engage city governments and stimulate public sector innovation. As Director 1 in USA Philanthropic Foundation 1 said:

[We] haven't done work like this before ... but it is helping us stitch together different things we have done and put them into practice.

This means that the foundation's suite of interventions is constantly evolving and that philanthropic foundations are using city governments as a site for experimentation—to test out their own theories, promote ideas and develop their ways of working.

Across all types of innovation—product and service, conceptual, governance and process—ideas may alter and change as they move between different actors and city governments. Therefore, this study shows that mobilized ideas are not static and, instead, mobilization can change the character and content of the mobilized object. This means there may be contested definitions of the original object, with multiple definitions continuing to evolve, expand and change as the idea moves between city governments. Philanthropic foundations may therefore have helped introduce and fund the new idea in city government, but it was shaped by others along the way. This is evident in both Bristol and Manchester city governments, as ideas are changed to suit the local context and, in some instances, relabelled so that the city can take ownership thereof.

### Discussion

In this study, 15 out of 17 philanthropic foundations aim to stimulate public sector innovation through their work. The injection of new resources from philanthropic foundations influences all forms of innovation: policy, process, product, service and conceptual innovation. This means that philanthropic foundations are actors in networked governance, performing the role of ‘activators’, and stimulating and accessing external resources for city governments. It also shows that the role of local government is changing: it is now a mobilizer of assets, blending its resources with those of philanthropic foundations to develop new policies, programmes, practices and interventions. This reflects the work of both Ravazzi (2016) and McGuirk *et al.* (2022), which shows how the involvement of foundations represents a shift from government ‘business-as-usual’ and can lead to improved outcomes. This study shows that these findings are also relevant to the English city context.

In Bristol and Manchester city governments, there are similar levels of innovation focus across the four types: product or service, process, governance and conceptual innovation. Compared to Manchester and Bristol city governments, Newcastle city government has fewer interactions with philanthropic foundations. Several of the philanthropic foundations that Newcastle city government engages with do aim to stimulate public sector innovation, but because Newcastle city government is not engaged in philanthropic foundation-funded programmes, philanthropic foundations are not fostering innovation in the city. The absence of innovation is an important insight. Apart from McCann and Ward (2015), few other researchers have considered the absence of a policy idea in a certain context to analyse how and why ideas have not been adopted. This study goes beyond examining an idea to consider the presence and absence of an actor—philanthropic foundations—to show how their absence can influence policy mobilization and public sector innovation efforts.

Philanthropic foundations’ influence on city government innovation is shaped by the methods used. Product and service, process and conceptual innovation happen in paid collaborations, because the financial resources the philanthropic foundation provides create staffing capacity. Simultaneously, foundations often help governments identify new ideas by cultivating networks with a range of actors, broker connections with other organizations to allow ideas to mobilize, and enable city governments to buy and implement new solutions. Governance innovation takes place within both paid collaborations and when philanthropic foundations provide non-financial resources to city government, such as data and research insights. Philanthropic foundations are then directly fostering innovation and enabling innovation to occur between city governments and other actors by brokering connections between the city governments and a wide range of external actors, including academics, consultants, product and service developers and other city governments. This insight builds upon the policy mobilities literature, particularly the work of Peck and Theodore (2012), to show how foundations construct policy transfer networks.

My study does not intend to present the interventions and methods used by philanthropic foundations as fixed or static, as all the philanthropic foundations interviewed are constantly finessing how they work and ‘experimenting’ with different approaches to engage city governments, while also attempting to make cities more efficient. This means that the suite of interventions is constantly evolving and that philanthropic foundations are using city governments as a site for experimentation, to test out their theories, to promote ideas and to develop their own ways of working too. Many researchers in policy mobilization and innovation, such as McCann and Ward (2015), Bok and Coe (2017) and Baker and Temenos (2015), have discussed how policies and ideas can be characterized as ‘best practice’ methods, but to date, no other studies have considered how non-government actors may reflect on and refine their methods for stimulating innovation within their engagement with government. In other words, this study has shown that the currently assumed ‘best practice’ methods for stimulating mobilization and innovation is also changing and evolving, alongside the ideas and practices they aim to develop and spread.

Across all the collaborations and within all forms of innovation, there is an opaqueness and elusiveness about what is going on, what is being mobilized and transferred, the role of philanthropic foundations, and their influence on city government innovation. This can partly be attributed to the esoteric nature and fuzziness of public sector innovation, which reflects existing literature about the lack of agreed definitions for innovation (de Vries *et al.*, 2016), the complexities of measurement (Kuhlman, 2010; Packard, 2010; Kattell *et al.*, 2013) and the often subjective nature of the classification of innovation activity (Osborne *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, it is often concluded that the influence of external actors on public sector innovation is difficult to ascertain (Reisman *et al.*, 2007; Tsui and Lucas, 2013). In this study, I encountered similar challenges and identified further complications in the lack of impact measurement undertaken by both city governments and philanthropic foundations.

Data are seldom collected to assess levels of city government innovation and only gathered for direct collaborations in which philanthropic foundations fund city governments. All philanthropic foundations and city governments deem measuring the impacts of philanthropic foundations’ engagement with city government complicated and difficult to do. Even where data are collected, these do not always capture impact on city government innovation and may not be publicly available. This makes it problematic to assess levels of innovation and understand the role and influence of philanthropic foundations. Furthermore, a lack of data hampers efforts to scrutinize city government and philanthropic foundation governance arrangements and government decision making to improve governance and foster accountability. This reflects Pill’s (2020) finding that there is often an ‘opaqueness’ to the governance arrangements between city governments and foundations and, as a result, citizens are often excluded from accountability forums (*ibid.*).

### Conclusion

This study shows that philanthropic foundations are influencing city government innovation. City governments are mobilizing philanthropic foundation assets to develop new policies, programmes, practices and interventions, and the injection of new resources from philanthropic foundations influences policy, process, product, service and conceptual innovation. Within such collaborations, both the city government and the philanthropic foundation can act as policy entrepreneurs.

The fusion of non-governmental resources is providing city governments with the capacity to act. Philanthropic foundations are blending financial resources and the less tangible provision of space and time to enable city governments to experiment with new ideas, policies and ways of working. City governments use non-governmental funding for riskier projects and for projects that may not have taken place if public funding had been used.

Philanthropic foundation influence on city government innovation is dictated by the type of collaboration between city government and philanthropic foundations, and by the methods used. Product and service, process and conceptual innovation happen in paid collaborations, as philanthropic foundations' financial resources create staffing capacity. Simultaneously, foundations often help governments identify new ideas by cultivating networks with a range of actors, broker connections with other organizations to allow ideas to mobilize, and enable city governments to buy and implement new solutions. Governance innovation takes place within both paid collaborations and when philanthropic foundations provide non-financial resources to city governments, such as data and research insights.

In this study, I address a gap in the literature by investigating the influence that philanthropic foundations have on innovation in three English cities. This study makes an important conceptual contribution to public sector innovation literature by explicitly analysing the role of philanthropic foundations and the resources, ideas, knowledge and networks they mobilize within city governments. It shows that, in response to philanthropic foundation behaviour, city government officials act as policy entrepreneurs, actively developing new solutions and applying for funding to spur innovation in the city government (Stone, 2000; Evans, 2009; Benson and Jordan, 2011).

My research revealed that philanthropic foundations are actors in the innovation process, and also helped me identify issues with innovation measurement that need to be addressed if the impacts on products, services and governance are to be fully understood and managed. This requires the engagement of policymakers and practitioners in government, and engagement with philanthropic foundations, to work on more effectively generating and communicating evidence of impact arising from collaborations to ensure that the influence of foundations on innovation can be understood and managed, and to broaden our understanding of existing measurement barriers and how these can be overcome. Furthermore, there should be an expectation that these data—and other metrics about philanthropic foundations' engagement with city governments—should be made openly available for further scrutiny and analysis by the public, researchers and others.

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