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EDGE EUROPE RETREAT 2025

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“INTERRUPTING BUSINESS AS
USUAL: ADMITTING WE DO
NOT KNOW”

Recap and Reflections
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INTRODUCTION:

A Pause for Reflection and Reimagining

The 2025 EDGE Europe Retreat brought together members for three days of deep reflection under the theme *“Interrupting Business as Usual: Admitting We Do Not Know.”*

The retreat invited participants to step back from daily routines and institutional pressures to reconnect with shared values and with one another.

Rather than focusing on deliverables, the retreat centered community building, honesty, rest, and learning. It acknowledged exhaustion and uncertainty across the philanthropic sector and created room for collective questioning.

Participants reflected on **what it means to fund movements in an increasingly restrictive and polarized context**, where the political right is gaining ground, civic space is shrinking, and **many progressive funders are struggling to move beyond compliance-driven models.**

The space offered an opportunity to admit what participants did not know, celebrate what has worked so far and to imagine, together, what could be possible.



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Session: Bravery and Safety – Navigating Risk in Restrictive Contexts

This discussion surfaced one of the retreat’s core tensions: **the balance between safety and bravery** or in other words how to remain compliant and operational in increasingly repressive environments **while also standing boldly with movements challenging those same systems.**

Participants reflected on the constant negotiation between safety and courage, between sustaining institutions and pushing boundaries.



On the Safe Side

Several participants emphasized that being “safe” is not always a matter of choice but often a matter of survival. **Compliance can be a strategy to keep money flowing, protect staff, and ensure continuity.** Being safe can sometimes be a precondition to being brave later. In contexts where legal restrictions are tightening, safety allows institutions to stay in the game and maintain their capacity to redistribute resources.

On the Brave Side

At the same time, others argued that **the moment calls for greater boldness as it is no longer the time to remain silent,** pointing to peers who stay quiet and continue to be rewarded for it. Bravery, they argued, means **speaking truth even when it is unpopular or risky.** Still, this courage must be strategic. Participants discussed how to “cheat the system legally”: finding ways to subvert restrictive frameworks from within, and identifying when and where it is most strategic to take a stand. Bravery, in this sense, is not reckless; it is intentional and tactical.

Session: Bravery and Safety – Navigating Risk in Restrictive Contexts

Confrontation, Political Language & Censorship

Participants noted that language itself has become a battleground: **using bold or politically explicit terms can lead to censorship or defunding.** Collective strategy is needed to ensure that values and visions are not silenced through bureaucratic or linguistic control.

Some noted that sometimes avoiding open confrontation with funders is the best way to continue channeling resources effectively. If a right-wing foundation gives money that can be redirected to better uses, take it and redistribute, one participant shared, **emphasizing that pragmatism can also be a form of resistance.**

Repressive States and Tone Policing

Participants spoke about the growing phenomenon of tone policing by governments, where public discourse is increasingly restricted and political speech discouraged. This silencing deepens polarization and fear. The invitation that emerged was **to remain true to one's purpose: to pause, reflect, and remember why this work matters, even under hostile conditions.**



Session: Bravery and Safety – Navigating Risk in Restrictive Contexts

Collaborations Between Intermediaries and Endowed Funders

Participants discussed how intermediaries and endowed funders can collaborate to strengthen advocacy. Ideas included **sharing databases, providing grantees with training in digital security, and supporting coordinated advocacy toward European institutions.** A recurring plea was to *loosen rules and simplify procedures* rather than add complexity to an already overburdened ecosystem.

Fiscal Hosting and Funding Unregistered Groups

Participants noted that many unregistered or informal groups need clearer pathways to access funding safely. They called for more transparency and information-sharing among funders. The [EDGE Membership Directory](#) can be a useful resource for identifying which members can legally and safely fund unregistered entities

Key lessons:

- **Safety and bravery are not opposites but a rhythm.** Sometimes compliance keeps the door open; other times, silence shuts down purpose. The art is in knowing when to protect and when to provoke.
- **Bravery must be intentional, not performative.** Being bold is not about grand gestures but about finding creative, even “legal,” ways to subvert repressive systems and redirect power.
- **Language is both a weapon and a shield.** Funders must learn to speak clearly about justice while navigating censorship and the politics of tone without diluting their values.
- **Collective action sustains courage.** Collaboration among funders, intermediaries, and advocates allows risks to be shared, not carried alone, making it possible to stay both safe and radical.



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Session: Abolishing Philanthropy – Imagining Post-Philanthropy Futures

In this session, participants explored what it might mean to **abolish philanthropy, not as destruction but as transformation**. The conversation began with an acknowledgment of philanthropy's **colonial and capitalist roots and questioned whether reform can ever be enough to achieve justice**.

Participants reflected on how philanthropy continues to concentrate power among the wealthy, even when it speaks the language of equity, and how **its very existence often depends on unjust taxation and accumulation**.

The group discussed what a post philanthropy world might look like, one **where movements no longer need to ask for permission to act**. They highlighted examples of alternative systems already emerging such as:

- solidarity funds governed by movements,
- mutual aid networks that redistribute resources directly,
- and community endowments owned collectively rather than by foundations.

Post philanthropy worlds already exist; they are being lived by communities practicing cooperation, reciprocity, and collective care outside of institutional funding structures.

A key tension emerged around the role of the state and authority. The session pointed to **anarchist traditions of disobedience**, arguing that even if taxation worked, the state is not there for us. The question is not who holds authority, but how authority is used. **Good authority subverts itself like teachers or mentors who create the conditions for others to act freely.**

The session also surfaced reflections on **fear, conflict, and solidarity**. Living without fear, accepting disagreement, and treating conflict as normal were seen as essential to building honest, diverse, and resilient communities. Solidarity is not easy.



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Session: Abolishing Philanthropy

– Imagining Post-Philanthropy Futures

Participants proposed that foundations use their remaining time and wealth to seed the systems that will one day replace them, **to fund healing, land, and sovereignty instead of endless projects. What if we gave activists the resources, buildings, land, large sums, all at once, and then stopped? No more control. Just trust.**

Key lessons:

- Abolition is not about ending generosity but ending control.
- Post philanthropy already exists in mutual aid, solidarity economies, and collective ownership models.
- Good authority is self subverting, building power in others rather than consolidating it.
- Philanthropy can play a transitional role by redistributing wealth and seeding the alternatives that will make it obsolete.

Session: Rethinking Impact Measurement

This member-led session invited participants to critically examine the assumptions behind traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices. Many shared how conventional metrics, often shaped by donor accountability frameworks, **fail to capture the complexity of systemic change and movement building.** Participants reflected on how numerical indicators and logic models reinforce extractive relationships by prioritizing funders' need for proof over movements' lived realities.

Participants shared how they are experimenting with alternatives. One organization shifted toward story-based learning, where communities define what success looks like and share reflections in narrative or collective forms. Another foundation replaced annual reports with **learning circles, allowing grantees to reflect together rather than submit documents.**





Session: Rethinking Impact Measurement

The discussion also revisited the [Impact Measurement POD](#), first launched at the 2024 EDGE Europe Retreat. Participants agreed that the time is right to relaunch it as a shared learning space focused on participatory, trust-based, and care-centered approaches to evaluation.

A recurring insight was that dominant impact frameworks flatten complex stories into simplified indicators and often end the story too early. One participant remarked **that impact is measured at the end of a project, as if change stops there**. Others agreed that this logic overlooks what happens afterward –the ripple effects, ongoing organizing, and deeper shifts in relationships, confidence, or collective power that continue long after a grant closes.

The group emphasized that social change is non-linear, cyclical, and collective, yet philanthropy continues to treat it as linear and attributable. Participants questioned whose needs impact frameworks actually serve: donors' need for certainty, or communities' need for learning.

They shared **alternative practices such as learning circles, community storytelling, and iterative reflection tools that center emergence, process, and relational depth rather than measurement for compliance.** The shared conviction was clear: meaningful evaluation must document life, not just outcomes.

Key lessons:

- Measuring impact often erases the long tail of transformation that continues after a project or grant ends.
- Impact should be understood as a process of learning, not a mechanism of control.
- Change is non-linear, relational, and unpredictable, and must be embraced rather than forced into metrics.
- Evaluation must serve movements first, offering value back to them.
- Accountability should be mutual, grounded in curiosity, humility, and shared reflection.



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Session: Participatory Grantmaking— Power, Practice, and Paradox

This session built on the experiences of participatory initiatives that have long challenged traditional philanthropy. Participants explored how shifting decision-making to communities transforms not only who gets funded **but also how relationships within philanthropy are structured.**

Participants discussed how **participatory grantmaking must go beyond representation to include *co-governance, long-term accompaniment, and shared risk-taking.*** They reflected on how participatory models can still replicate inequities if not intentionally designed to include marginalized voices.

The purpose is not only to move money but to **challenge the dynamics of ownership, entitlement, and solidarity** that exist even within participatory spaces. The experiment invites participants to ask themselves:

- What does it mean to have enough?
- How do we decide who should hold or give up power?
- Can redistribution be practiced collectively rather than imposed from above?



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Session: Participatory Grantmaking – Power, Practice, and Paradox

Key lessons:

- Participation without power-sharing risks becoming symbolic.
- The process must center care, time, and accessibility, not speed.
- Funders need to resource participation adequately, including compensating movement actors for their time and expertise.
- Participatory grantmaking must evolve from inclusion toward redistribution, asking not just *who decides*, but *who is willing to let go*.

Session: The Agora

During the retreat, members participated in the [Agora](#), a dedicated space for accountability and collective reflection. The Agora allows EDGE members to engage directly with the staff, raise concerns, share feedback, and propose solutions to strengthen transparency and collaboration within the network.

The EDGE staff also presented updates about EDGE’s plans. It serves as a cornerstone of EDGE’s participatory governance model, fostering open dialogue, shared problem solving, and institutional learning.

Cross-Cutting Learnings

Throughout the retreat, several themes intertwined including:

Philanthropy is still afraid of losing control, even when it talks about trust: while funders use the language of trust-based and participatory practices, institutional cultures still default to control, compliance, and risk aversion. Transforming philanthropy means not only changing tools but relinquishing authority, redistributing decision-making, and accepting imperfection as part of accountability.



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Cross-Cutting Learnings

Care is not a metaphor, it is infrastructure: care was described as both political and practical and as the foundation of sustainable work. Participants called for care to shape budgets, team structures, and partnerships, not only relationships. Rest, wellbeing, and reflection must be funded as integral to systemic change.

“Impact” is often philanthropy’s anxiety made visible: impact measurement often stems from institutional fear; fear of being questioned, irrelevant, or ineffective. Reclaiming learning means valuing narrative, emergence, and collective reflection over extractive metrics.

There is no transformation without discomfort: conversations touched on how institutions retreat into safety when faced with change. Participants emphasized that staying with uncertainty and discomfort, personally and organizationally, is necessary for growth. The theme *“Admitting We Do Not Know”* became a lived practice of humility.

Transformation starts with redistributing imagination: while redistributing money, funders must also redistribute who gets to define what “impact,” “success,” and “change” mean. Movements already hold the visions philanthropy seeks; the task ahead is to resource, listen, and follow rather than direct.

Bravery and safety are both necessary...the art is in knowing when to lean into each: there is a constant balancing act between being cautious enough to maintain their institutions and bold enough to act in solidarity with movements. Participants agreed that at times, staying alive as an organization is itself resistance; at others, caution becomes complicity. The challenge is to read the moment and act with courage, care, and collective discernment.

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Screening: The Cost of Growth

We hosted a screening of [The Cost of Growth](#), a new film that EDGE member Voice Over Foundation is co-producing and helping to distribute. This powerful documentary explored how the climate crisis is entwined with our economic system, war, genocide, and struggles for justice, while imagining alternative futures. It featured voices ranging from activists such as Greta Thunberg to leading economists and representatives of international organizations, and included a powerful segment on the [GKN factory](#) collective in Italy and its fight for workers' rights.

Closing Reflections

The 2025 EDGE Europe Retreat was not about arriving at answers but about deepening collective inquiry. The conversations reaffirmed that philanthropy cannot dismantle the systems it depends on without transforming itselfbeginning with how it relates to movements, to power, and to uncertainty.

Resources & Inspiration

- *The People's Want* – <https://thepeopleswant.org/> a book about internationalism by people for the people
- Quote shared from Seun Kuti: “Free Europe from right-wing extremism, from fascism, from racism. Free Europe from imperialism.
- [EDGE Membership Directory](#)
- [Toby Lowe conversation on Impact Measurement](#)
- [Karibu Foundation's grantmaking_guide](#)

