Sparking real change
Insights from CPI’s work across Europe in 2023
We live in a world of complex systemic challenges.

Between 2024 and 2026, over 100 countries will hold elections. Within Europe, this includes the EU, national parliament, as well as presidential and regional elections. In 2024 alone, the 10th European elections will occur in the 27 EU Member States, with around 359 million EU citizens being called to polling stations. The elections taking place over the next three years are pivotal, potentially redefining public trust and effectiveness in governance.

Across Europe, the escalating cost of living risks plunging more people into poverty and increasing financial hardship for those already struggling. It’s the most pressing worry for 93% of Europeans. Aggravated by austerity measures, it has deepened and widened societal inequalities and intensified public discontent.

Recent advances in digital technologies, such as AI, hold tremendous potential to transform industries, boost worker productivity, and revolutionise public institutions. As governments, communities, and civil society seek to develop and implement technology-based solutions to public sector challenges, there is a risk that these will widen existing inequalities if not designed and distributed equitably.

Exploratory efforts in different forms of democracy and community engagement are critical in this context. They promote transparency and trust within public institutions. Engaging citizens directly in decision-making is vital for democratising governance and shaping public services that work for everyone.

Now more than ever, it’s vital that governments build trust and deliver for the people they serve. But they face significant challenges.
However, there needs to be more expertise in applying participatory approaches, and many governments struggle to engage communities pushed to the margins in these processes. In addition, budget cuts, public sector staff burnout, and a worrying trend of professionals exiting public service roles jeopardise such efforts.

These all contribute to a growing distrust in governments, which people view as less competent and ethical than businesses.\(^4\) This underscores the urgent need for effective leadership and profound organisational transformation to build trust and deliver impact for everyone.

It’s time to evolve from how things are done now to how they should be done tomorrow. We can’t solve 21st-century challenges with 20th-century systems. We need to think differently.


Public institutions must innovate to prevent further societal strain. But, their inability to create the conditions for people to innovate and dream often hampers those who try to work differently.

innovate
From grassroots community initiatives to global philanthropies, people are coming together to shape a new era where governments champion the value of human relationships, welcome a culture of learning, and feel empowered to tackle the complex challenges we face. We’re here to support them in making this happen.

We’re shifting the status quo.
We work in partnership with governments, philanthropy, civil society and communities to challenge the status quo, shift mindsets, and bridge the gap between people and those in power.

By helping people develop the skills needed to do their work differently, they can build trust, better serve their communities, and tackle problems that matter.

Exploring and sharing new ideas
We push the boundaries of our current understanding, exploring topics critical to the future. We share what we’re learning and provide a platform for people to share their stories about how they’re spearheading change worldwide.

Capacity building and transformation
We offer training to help people think and work differently. We support them in transforming structures and cultures to put learning at the heart.

Building networks for change
We connect changemakers to accelerate collaboration and learning in response to complex challenges.

Delivering impact through innovation
We work with philanthropic organisations to address major societal challenges and innovate on how to fund and support public and social impact. Our global programmes lead to healthier systems and meaningful outcomes for communities worldwide.

We are change agents working to unlock the potential of people and power.
In 2023, we worked on various projects to shift the status quo. This includes rethinking urban transformation across Europe and Central Asia, training the next generation of climate leaders, helping partners design a different approach to regulation, and supporting local authorities in using learning to shape public services that meet people’s needs.
Where we worked

- Wales
- England
- Scotland
- Azerbaijan
- Ukraine
- Czechia
- Sweden
- Spain
- France
- Italy
Programme highlights

Inspiring tech innovation for social good

Overview

CPI partnered with Google.org on the Google.org Impact Challenge: Tech for Social Good, with the aim of building a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient Europe by developing technological innovations that benefit communities across the region. This initiative focused on funding and empowering nonprofits, civic entities, academic institutions, and social enterprises to tackle economic inclusion, sustainability, and cyber security, providing them with the support needed to build scalable solutions with lasting impact.

Impact

Twenty organisations were selected to receive a share of €16M in funding and technical support from the Google.org Fellowship - a programme that provides organisations with a team of Google employees who work alongside the organisation’s staff to advance these impactful projects. Selected initiatives ranged from countering the spread of disinformation among the most vulnerable, to incentivising public participation in recycling, and improving the financial literacy and economic inclusion of young people.

Join CPI in driving innovation for social good. Whether you’re an organisation seeking to expand your social impact through technology, or a funder looking to support transformative projects, get involved today and help shape a more inclusive and sustainable future. Discover more about our ongoing projects and partnership opportunities at CPI.
Reimagining Welsh health and social care

Overview

In partnership with CPI, Improvement Cymru launched a programme to reimagine health and social care in Wales. The work focussed on fostering people-led systems transformation and enhancing leadership across diverse sectors. We partnered with Q Lab Cymru to build capacity at all levels, from the community to senior and executive leadership.

Impact

Over 150 people from across the system participated, including the public and the third sector, people using healthcare services, unpaid carers, local communities, national improvement organisations, the Welsh Government and academia.

Through training, workshops, and peer learning activities, we equipped people with the knowledge and tools to apply Human Learning Systems – an alternative approach to public management.

Online learning community sessions provided a platform for people to connect, share experiences, and support each other’s learning.

Improvement Cymru generated knowledge, relationships, and enthusiasm to explore how to do public service differently and is continuing its journey into the next phase.

The success of the Improvement Cymru project underscores the transformative potential of reimagining healthcare and social services. If your organisation wants to centre people and provide bespoke support to individuals, you should consider engaging CPI’s expertise for guidance and support.

Learn more about our work
Overview

CPI partnered with Google.org on AI for the Global Goals, a $25M open call for organizations using AI to accelerate progress on United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The program ran globally, searching for projects using AI to accelerate progress on one or more of the UN’s Global Goals, locally and globally.

Impact

Fifteen organisations globally awarded funding totalling $25 million to drive innovative AI solutions for advancing the UN SDGs.

Projects encompassing areas such as road safety, healthcare diagnostics, education, climate science, and resilience of food systems.

Explore AI’s transformative potential and how the technology could build a more sustainable and equitable future for all.
Supporting survivors of modern slavery

Overview
The University of Nottingham’s Rights Lab initiated the “Pathways Through Liberation’’ project to improve the UK’s National Referral Mechanism (NRM) - a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive appropriate support. We served as a learning partner, designing and facilitating workshops focused on making sense of research findings, and bringing survivors and practitioners together. By convening survivors, practitioners, and policymakers, we sought to co-design new and alternative approaches to the current system, which put the needs of survivors first.

Impact Highlights
Survivors and practitioners collaborated to envision a support journey centred on the principles of dignity, empowerment, and safety. This survivor-led approach emphasised respect for survivors, empowerment through education, and the importance of safety to prevent re-exploitation.

We supported survivors and practitioners to work together to develop improvement recommendations. These included establishing local hubs for survivor services, enhancing mental health support, and implementing a survivor-centred consent process.

Learn more about the workshops’ transformative impact and the vision for a survivor-centred support system.
How Urva, Azerbaijan, is redefining itself through culinary innovation and community collaboration

In the heart of Azerbaijan, the municipality of Urva is reinventing itself as a culinary and tourist hub. Working with the local community, the municipal team is establishing a tourist information centre and developing a village brand to establish Urva as a culinary destination.

The municipality took up this initiative as part of Urban Imaginaries, a learning journey we delivered in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and financed and supported by the European Union (EU). The programme supports local governments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in developing innovative solutions to their most pressing urban challenges.

Urva’s journey of urban transformation highlights how local traditions and public innovation can come together to create new futures that benefit the community.

From reconnecting women released from prison to the Sabail community by creating employment opportunities and spaces for them to get emotional support, to helping refugees displaced by war to integrate into cities across Ukraine, Urva is just one example of how places are reimagining how they support communities across the region.

Once we got the ball rolling and built trust and relationships with residents, they started coming up with their own proposals.

People needed a kickoff moment to understand that they can be the driving force of change.

– Farhad, Urva Municipality

Read the story
Crafting stories of survival and support

Stories help us understand ourselves, others, and the wider systems in which we operate. Through storytelling, individuals have the opportunity to build empathy, connections, and relationships that have the potential to drive meaningful system-wide change.

Following our work with the University of Nottingham’s Rights Lab to reimagine support systems for modern slavery survivors, we wanted to learn more about what safe and healthy support looks like.

To do this, we hosted a digital animation workshop for survivors of modern slavery. This allowed folks to build digital animation skills while crafting a story about what good support looks like. Survivors focused on the importance of community, family, and public awareness in good support and built videos demonstrating these support systems.
In October 2023, over 100 young innovators from 63 countries gathered in Rome for Youth4Climate: Sparking Solutions to engage in dialogues on climate justice and the role of young leaders in climate action. This was the culmination of the Youth4Climate Challenge, a global initiative co-led by UNDP and the Government of Italy that supports youth-led climate solutions.

We partnered with UNDP on this innovation challenge, delivering the Youth4Climate Academy – a series of mentorship sessions and workshops to support inspiring young leaders in adopting the new mindsets and skills required to tackle climate change.

From using an AI-led solution to provide medicines and healthcare services to remote communities in Nigeria to developing a natural disaster readiness plan for children living in vulnerable coastal communities in the Dominican Republic, young people continue to drive change in the climate action space.

We had the chance to talk with young climate leaders from Morocco, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Georgia about how they see their role in driving change and what they’ve learned in their efforts to develop climate solutions.

“There are a lot of plans, and there’s so much money. But there is not a bridge between these plans and local communities.

We want young people to play that role, to strengthen the bridge between rural areas and governments and donors, and investors.”

— Errachid, Youth4Climate finalist

Watch the video
Reimagining local democracy

How might we imagine a more participatory democracy that leads to action to make imagined futures a reality?

This past year, we hosted a group of democratic innovation practitioners, researchers, urban planners, journalists, social entrepreneurs, and policy experts from Abuja to Belfast to collectively reimagine local democracy.

Through peer-led bi-weekly meetings, we explored questions around redistributing power to communities and understanding the impact of our identities on perspectives. Discussions ranged from the role of trust in democracy to the value of lived experience.

Recognising the complexity of these questions, the group shifted focus to imagination exercises, envisioning ideal spaces for democratic dialogue and conflict resolution.

This learning journey provided a platform for rich and challenging conversations, showcasing the potential of collective imagination in shaping the future.

Putting conflict front and centre of reimagining local democracy was difficult for me, as a participatory practitioner, a lot of my time is spent assuring people that if you create the right conditions, we can avoid conflict and polarisation. But it’s important to recognise that conflict is a healthy part of any democracy and meaningful participatory process. Moving forward, I’m thinking about how we can create better dances through conflict, rather than seek to avoid it.

– Oli Whittington, Huddle participant
Our partners

In 2023, we’re proud to have worked with partners from across government, philanthropy, and civil society.

- Active Partnerships
- Bloomberg Philanthropies
- Centre for Ageing Better
- Crescendo
- Cumbria Northumberland Tyne and Wear Mental Health Trust
- Google.org
- Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland
- Improvement Cymru
- Inverclyde Council
- Iriss
- Itla Foundation
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Lancashire County Council
- Lankelly Chase
- NHS Leadership Academy
- North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board
- Thurrock Council
- University of Nottingham Rights Lab
- United Nations Development Programme
What we’re learning

This past year, our team reflected on the role of learning, adaptation, and relationship-building across our portfolio of work. Four key themes emerged.

1. The value of learning and disruption

There are varying attitudes towards learning and disruption, highlighting the importance of framing the value of learning independently from individuals’ perceptions of disruption. In practice, this means embracing a cyclical learning model where governments and practitioners continuously integrate insights from their experiences into subsequent phases, fostering an iterative approach to learning. While doing this, there is an acknowledgement that embedding this new learning into ways of working can disrupt business as usual. The disruption of ‘business as usual’ can sometimes be uncomfortable and uncertain, which is an essential learning.

2. Change happens through conversations

Meeting individuals, organisations, and governments where they are is critical. Facilitating effective change requires curiosity and a commitment to building relationships through intentional conversations with people. The catalyst for change lies in meaningful discussions that bridge perspectives and create curiosity and understanding. This requires understanding the diversity of perspectives and entry points of our partners and recognising that organisational change remains stagnant without dialogue.

3. The power of relationships

Central to the change process is the role of trusted relationships, which are the foundation for building understanding and influencing perspectives over time. Building trust, rapport, and understanding between people is critical in creating sustainable and long-term change. Our work this year demonstrates the transformative potential of cultivating authentic connections, where sustained engagement yields tangible shifts in attitudes and practices. Through long-term relationships and cultivating trust, meaningful change takes root, transcending the confines of programme timelines to create lasting impact.

4. Creating new practice can take time

Creating new practices is a process that demands both time and patience. The journey towards new ways of working means navigating unfamiliar territories and confronting entrenched institutional norms and cultures. The transformative impact of these endeavours unfolds gradually, often extending beyond short-term programme delivery timelines. Instead, sustainable change takes root through cultivating enduring relationships built on trust and mutual respect.
What does the future hold?

As we think about what we’ve learned in the context of our critical challenges for 2023, we have also started to reflect on how we might embed this learning into our work going forward.

1. Integrating learning and disruption
   Balancing the value of learning with the discomfort and uncertainty that disruption brings, especially when developing new practices amidst existing institutional norms.

2. Having effective conversations for change
   Encouraging meaningful dialogue and curiosity-driven conversations to bridge diverse perspectives, particularly in environments where there may be resistance to change or a lack of openness to new ideas.

3. Building sustainable relationships
   Nurturing authentic connections and trust over time, especially when faced with the pressures of short-term programme timelines and the need for immediate results amid complex systemic challenges.

4. Navigating time and patience in practice creation
   Managing expectations around the time and patience required to establish new ways of working, particularly in environments where confronting entrenched institutional norms and cultures is necessary.

5. Addressing global governance challenges
   Responding to the complexities of global governance, including critical election years that may redefine public trust and effectiveness, while navigating issues such as the equitable distribution of AI benefits, rising costs of living aggravated by austerity measures, and the resulting public discontent.

6. Democratising decision-making and citizen engagement
   Overcoming innovation and imagination deficits means involving citizens in government. This is crucial for developing effective, sustainable solutions that address real community needs and genuinely harness the public’s collective wisdom.

7. Urgent need for organisational transformation
   Addressing the growing distrust in government by nurturing effective leadership and profound organisational transformation, recognising the need to evolve from outdated systems to meet the demands of 21st-century challenges.
City transformation
We joined the Mayors for Economic Growth partner dialogue in Istanbul. Alongside representatives from the EU, UNDP and other partners, we explored city level transformation and how to address complex challenges.

Reimagining leadership for climate action
We hosted an event exploring the skills needed for 21st century leadership at London Climate Action Week.

Using AI to advance the Sustainable Development Goals
In collaboration with Google.org, we announced the 15 organisations chosen to share in $25 million funding through AI for the Global Goals at UNGA.

Supporting cities of the future
We introduced public servants to ideation and systems thinking through our ‘Gaming the System’ workshop at the UNDP’s Future-Fit Cities Urban Forum in Batumi, Georgia.

Catalysing collective imagination
Together with Huddlecraft & Canopy we launched the Collective Imagination Practice Community, to advance practice and imagine new futures together.

Inspiring young climate leaders
We launched the Youth4Climate Academy with UNDP, supporting 100 youth-led initiatives from 63 countries.

Can collective imagination spark a public services revolution?
We hosted a joint event with Demos as part of the Public Services Network 2030, exploring how collective imagination can be used to reimagine public services.

Transforming regulation
We launched a report and brought together leaders from across regulatory and inspection bodies, local and national government for a conversation on how to unlock regulation as a tool for public service improvement.

Timeline
Explore some of our team’s highlights from 2023
Our team

We’re an experienced international team of innovators, researchers, and dreamers.

We bring expertise in public sector innovation, design, facilitation, strategic foresight and community organising.

We’re united by a shared optimism that things can be different and that by supporting the world’s changemakers, we can tackle the problems that really matter.

Meet our team
Let’s work together

Get in touch info@centreforpublicimpact.org

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