



Mapping Philanthropic Foundations' Characteristics

Research Note provided by: [Vinzenz Janßen](#)

Original publication by: [Tobias Jung](#) - University of St. Andrews | [Jenny Harrow](#) - City, University of London | [Diana Leat](#) - City, University of London

Clouded by inconsistent terminology and socio-legal differences, foundations as a distinct organizational form lack conceptual clarity. The paper addresses this by proposing an integrative typological framework, making it relevant for researchers, policymakers, and those working within the philanthropic sector.

How can the diverse ways in which philanthropic foundations are distinguished be synthesized into a coherent, cross-national classification scheme?

By mapping existing distinctions across academic and practice literature, the authors develop a 13-category classification scheme spanning contextual, organizational, and strategic dimensions. Whilst they acknowledge the provisional nature of the framework, they argue that it provides a useful starting point for a more nuanced, cross-national academic and practical examination of philanthropic foundations.

[#FoundationTypes](#) [#Typology](#) [#OrganizationalClassification](#)
[#CrossNationalPhilanthropy](#)

Background

&

Context



- Foundations operate across vastly different legal and political systems worldwide, making it difficult to compare or even describe them consistently. A label that carries a precise meaning in one country may be meaningless or misleading in another, creating **persistent confusion about what foundations actually are and do.**
- **Academic and policy discussions tend to lump very different types of foundations together**, as if they were interchangeable. Treating a small community foundation the same as a billion-dollar private endowment obscures meaningful differences in how they operate, whom they serve, and what influence they wield.
- Many existing attempts at categorizing foundations focus narrowly on a single dimension (such as funding source or legal status) while ignoring others. **No single lens is sufficient.** Understanding foundations properly requires **looking simultaneously at different categories** such as their origins, resources, strategies, and operating environments.
- The philanthropic sector has grown significantly in sociopolitical importance, yet the conceptual tools used to study and regulate it have not kept pace. Without a shared language for distinguishing between foundation types, **cross-national comparison or informed policymaking remain out of reach.**

ERNOP Research Note

Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Take aways & Learnings



- The authors reviewed over 100 academic and practitioner sources across multiple databases and umbrella body publications to map how foundations have been distinguished. The review shows that **existing categorizations are fragmented, largely descriptive, and rarely transferable across national contexts.**
- Three key dimensions emerged for distinguishing foundation types: **context, organizational characteristics, and strategy.** Rather than relying on legal status, practitioners and researchers benefit from considering all three when describing or comparing foundations.
- The resulting **integrative framework contains 13 categories** (see Figure 1). **This gives practitioners a practical checklist for profiling a foundation**, enabling more precise dialogue about specific characteristics.
- The framework leaves some boundaries undefined, for instance, what exactly separates a "large" from a "medium" foundation. This openness is deliberate: the framework is meant as **a starting point for further refinement** by the wider research and practitioner community, not a finished taxonomy.

No two foundations are alike.
However, they can be mapped across 13 categories.

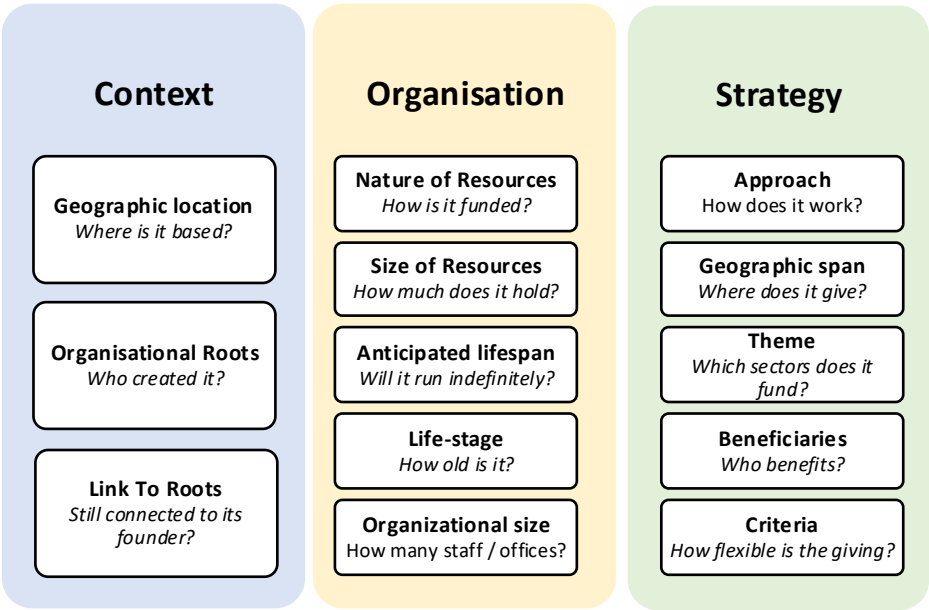


Figure 1: Contextual, organisational, and strategic classification categories forming an integrative framework of foundation types. Adapted from Table 2 in Jung, Harrow & Leat (2018).

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2026/16 is published in June 2026 and has been written by Vinzenz Janßen. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.