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Structurally Unsound Five Years On

UCL Public Policy

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Acknowledgements

The authors of this report wish to thank everyone who participated in the reflective workshop on 4 June 2024, for sharing invaluable insights and expertise.

We also gratefully acknowledge the contributions of colleagues who worked on the policy commission *Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform UK policy*, and the report Structurally Unsound – Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform policy.

This report follows Chatham House rules and represents a collective view. All errors remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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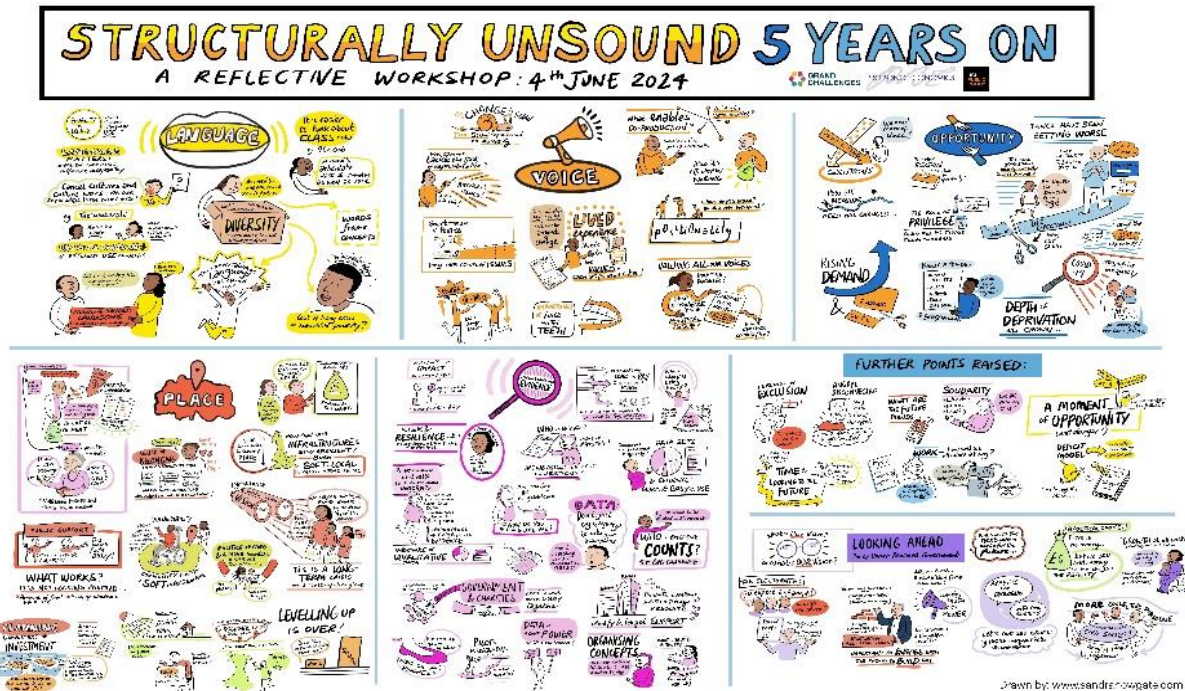Matt Whittaker, Pro Bono Economics

Illustrations

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Structurally Unsound Five Years On – A Reflective Workshop is a collaboration between UCL Public Policy, UCL Grand Challenges, and Pro Bono Economics.

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Structurally Unsound - Five Years On
A Reflective Workshop

In 2019, UCL partnered with the Resolution Foundation on a knowledge exchange commission, *Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform UK policy*. October 2024 will mark the five-year anniversary of the launch of the commission's report Structurally Unsound – Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform policy.

Ahead of this, on 4 June 2024, UCL Grand Challenges, UCL Public Policy and Pro Bono Economics hosted a reflective workshop which reconvened experts drawn from academia, business, policy, and civil society involved, to share insights on the changed landscape of structural inequalities in the UK and discuss approaches to addressing these.

Key aims of the day were to explore:

- What has changed in the inequalities landscape? Where are we now?
- What successes have there been? What has worked?
- What learnings have there been? What has held back progress?
- How can we build consensus across sectors to move the dial on tackling structural inequalities in UK? Where next?

The workshop featured 'lightning talks' focussed on the five cross-cutting themes outlined in the 2019 report: Language, Voice, Opportunity, Place and Understanding Evidence.

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Session 1 - Language & Voice

Sophie Wilson, Head of Government and Society at Ipsos UK, discussed increasing public awareness around "culture wars," "cancel culture" and being "woke," attendant trends around self-censorship, and shifts in attitudes towards discriminatory language. She noted general understandings and interpretations of social phenomena are shaped by the terminologies used to describe them and the person speaking. Data from Ipsos' Offensive Language Research (2021), for example, suggests that words associated with race, nationality and ethnicity are considered particularly offensive, but that the public also recognises nuances of language in relation to speaker and context. Carefully selected language is crucial to accurately convey messages and connect with audiences.

To explore the 'voice' theme, workshop participants participated in a group exercise on positionality, reflecting on:

- What knowledge/s are included in the work you do? What is missing? Why?
- Whose voices are included in the work that you do? What is needed to reach and hear missing voices?

Key points arising from group discussion were:

- **Language is political**. Language can be used by diverse actors to instrumentalise evidence and support specific agendas – the terms in which we frame a problem influence the solutions proposed. Language can be exclusionary and used to obscure disadvantage and inequality, or it can be an enabler of genuine inclusion.
- **Co-production of evidence** is a tool to incorporate marginalised voices but requires sustained commitment and resources from researchers and communities.
- **Language has a temporal dimension**. Language shapes political agendas by elevating the urgency of phenomena. It is often wrongfully used to portray structural and long-term inequalities as transitory crises (for example, 'cost-of-living crisis' as opposed to 'deprivation crisis' or 'poverty pandemic'). There is an incongruence between the long-term nature of structural inequalities, the time needed to formulate a precise diagnosis of them, and short-term policy cycles.

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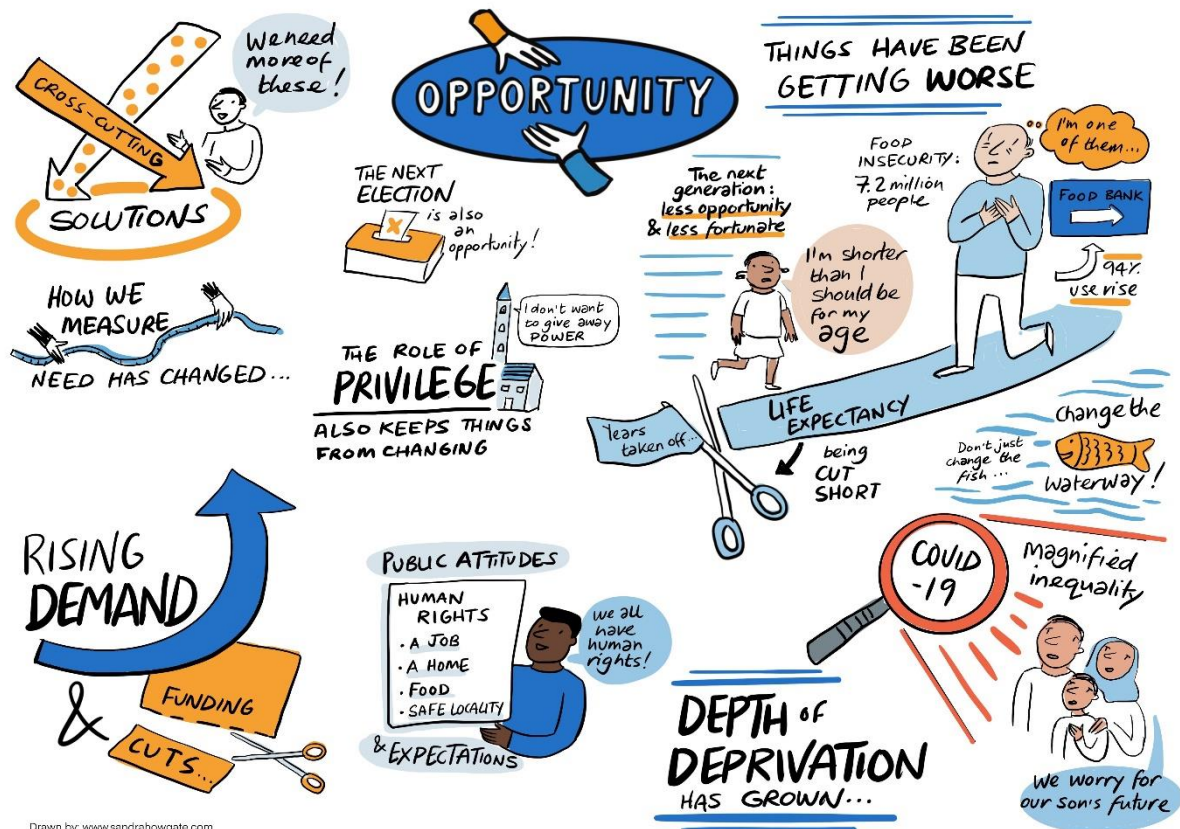
Session 2 - Opportunity & Place

Helen Barnard, Director of Policy, Research, and Impact at the Trussell Trust, highlighted the worsening inequalities in the UK. Deep poverty is becoming more prevalent, and attaining decent living standards is increasingly difficult. Measures like food insecurity, destitution and child poverty are increasing exponentially. According to the Department for Work and Pensions the number of people in 'food insecure' households rose to 7.2 million in 2022 – 2024, an increase of 2.5 million people since 2021 – 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these trends and has further eroded public services due to austerity. While solutions are known in many policy areas, bottlenecks like healthcare waiting lists, have increased reliance on voluntary and charity sectors.

Elanor Warwick, Head of Strategic Policy, and Research at Clarion Housing Group noted that household budgets have been stretched since the pandemic, leading to increased use of credit, borrowed money or going into debt to pay for essentials. It is important to collaborate with local partners and networks and use soft infrastructure to understand the complex spatial and social interactions contributing to the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Inequalities vary within and between neighbourhoods, so a localised, tailored approach could improve understandings of place-based inequalities and ensure that seldom-heard voices are included.

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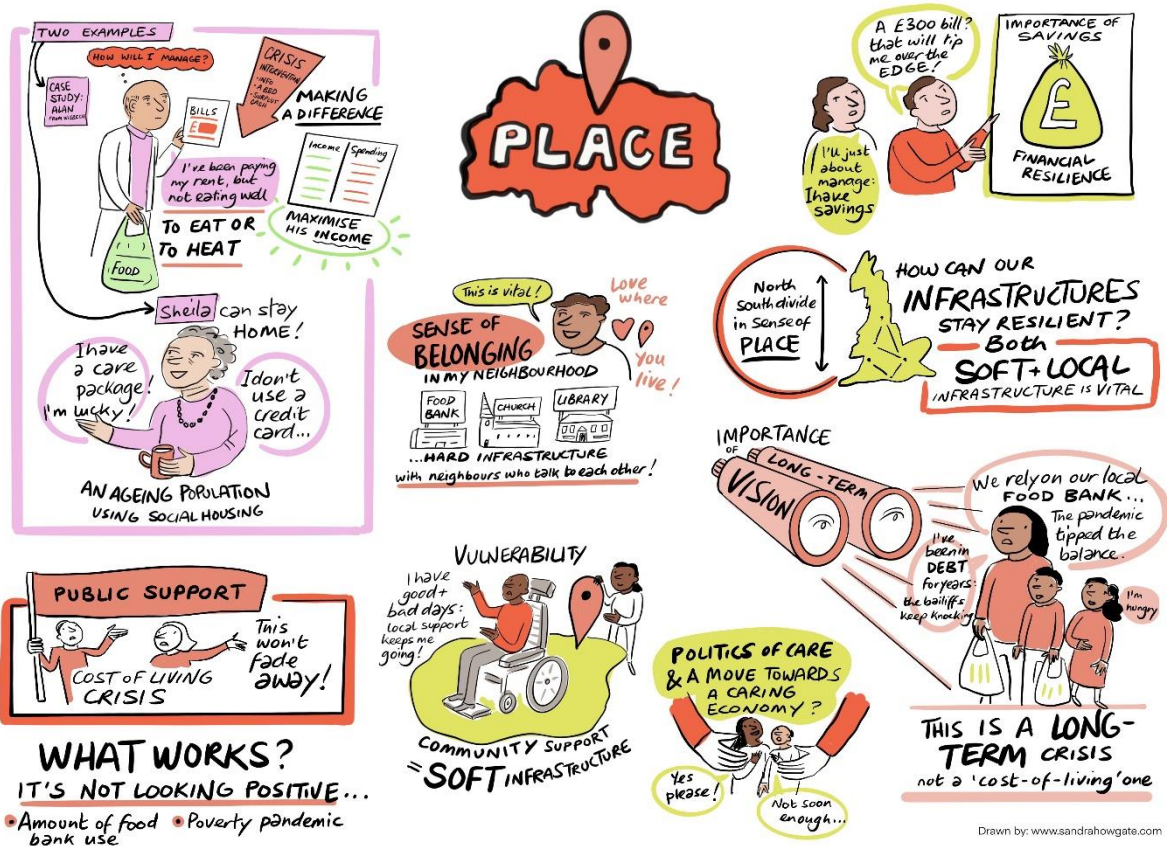
Group reflections on the themes of Opportunity & Place included:

- **Crises should be treated as opportunities to build capacities for the long-term**. Shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated the need to invest in social infrastructure to maintain social cohesion and resilience. Building public sector and civic capacities requires addressing the structural *causes* of inequalities, rather than the *symptoms*. A national narrative on inequalities could catalyse this effort. Public concern about poverty as a fundamental issue for the government to tackle is significant – can this be harnessed to build momentum?

- **Appealing to power**. To shift the inequalities narrative from "opportunity gaps" to "opportunity debts", recognising the role of privilege in perpetuating inequalities and accepting responsibility is necessary. As JustFair has highlighted, for example, the UK Government has legal obligations to safeguard citizens' rights to basic social and economic security, as part of fulfilling its commitments to international human rights standards and the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

- **Risks and responsibilities**. Resilience and efforts to overcome disadvantages are being transferred from institutions to individuals,

- **Financial resilience is an important but unexplored component of inequalities**. Measuring financial resilience and debt would convey a more accurate understanding of deep poverty. Research supported by YouGov in 2022 showed that less than half of UK households (45%) could cover a large, unexpected expense, while in 2023 Citizens Advice reported that one in four people in the UK were behind on at least one bill. Examining data around financial resilience from an intersectional approach can provide insights into particularly vulnerable groups (for example, when child poverty is disaggregated by ethnicity), but questions remain about what we are *not* measuring and thus what we are not acting on.

- **Holistic, intersectional, person-centred approaches.** Inequalities have a spatial pattern, and place shapes the opportunities people experience. Building on an economy of care, there should also be a politics of care, with partnerships between policy, communities, and researchers.

- **Place and community studies are needed over the long term**. Are improvements sustained? Have we got the definition of 'left behind places', right? There are nation-based differences in how place-based inequalities form, manifest and in turn can be addressed. For example, the private land ownership market extracts value from places. Urban planners can create friction for the private market but also play a role in perpetuating inequalities. There is a hope that regional planning policies will be revisited, and that future planning systems will focus on safeguarding public value from private exploitation, by returning to in-depth community studies and addressing place-based equalities.

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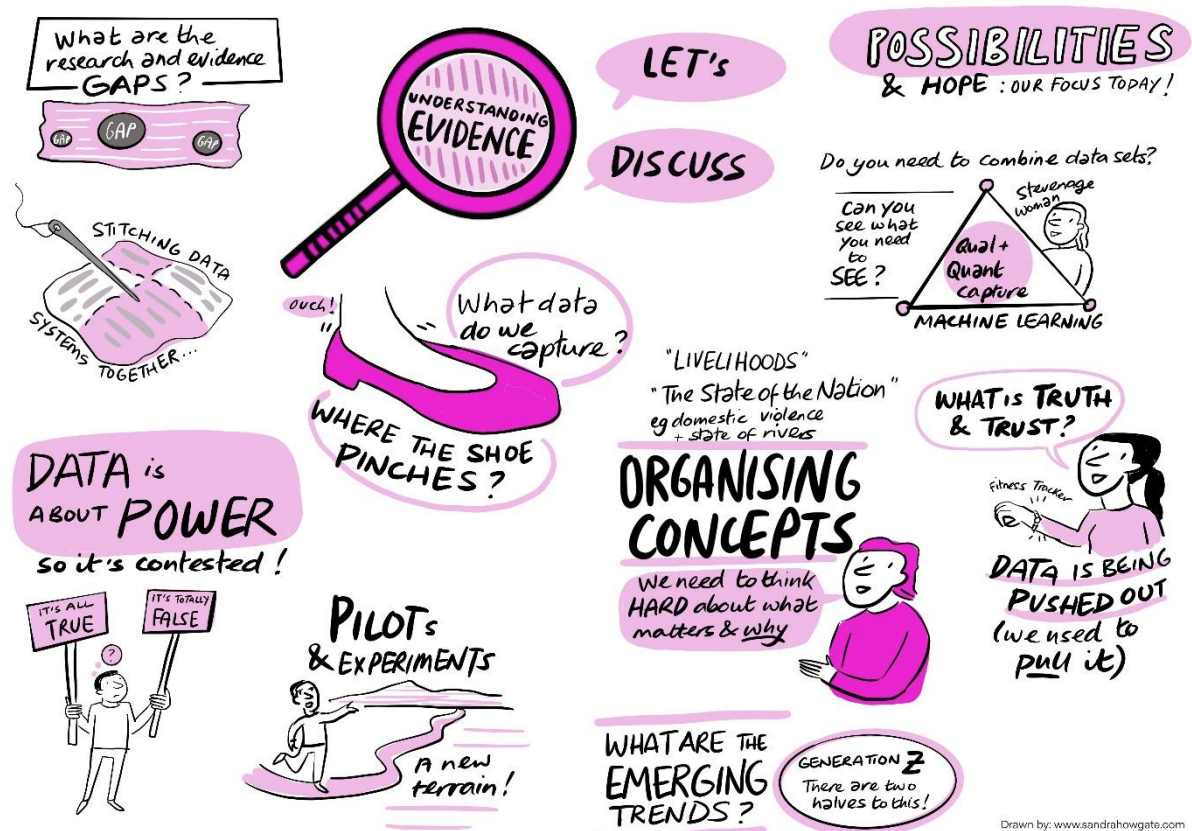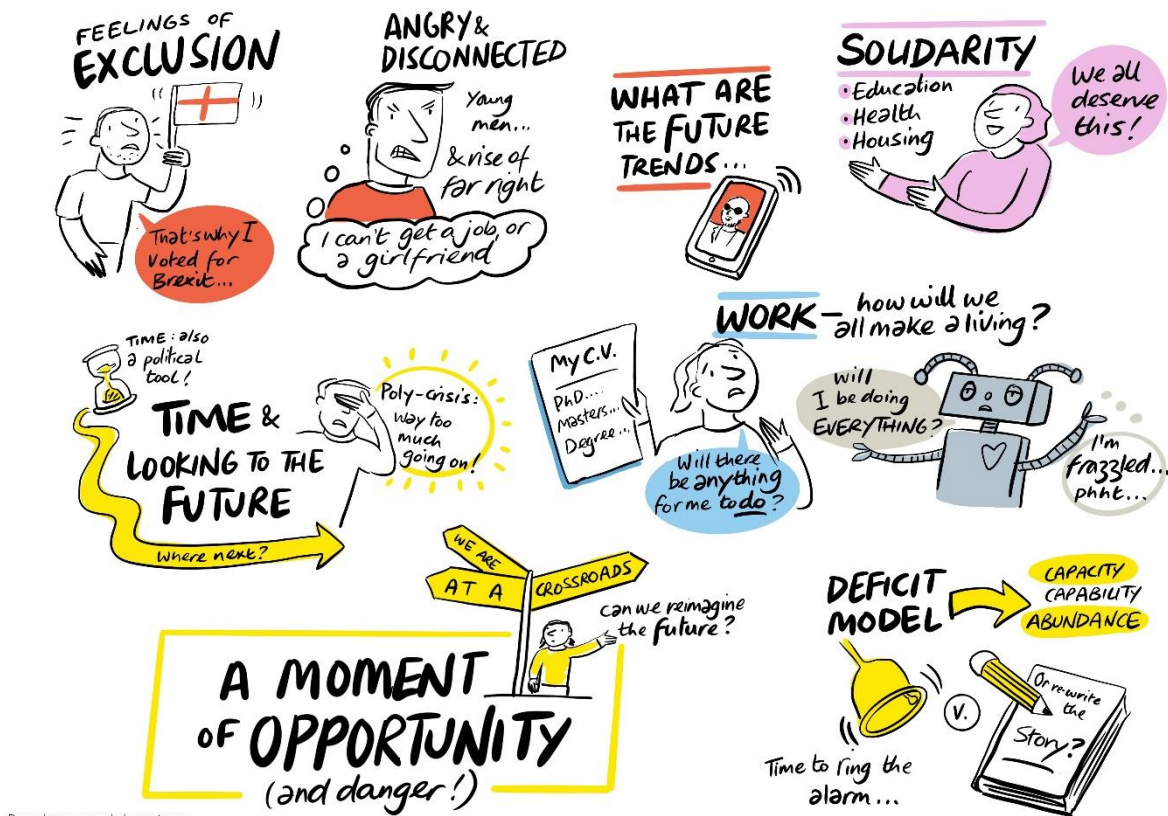
Session 3 - Understanding Evidence

Mary-Ann Stephenson, Director of Women's Budget Group, discussed the intersectional nature of inequalities and emphasised the importance of capturing a variety of experiences through evidence. Qualitative research goes beyond understanding data, as it also aims to understand how societal systems impact people's emotions. Including diverse voices in research, leads to a stronger dataset. However, categorising individuals into broad groups like 'BAME' and 'LGBT' can be problematic, as it does not accurately capture divergent and varied lived experiences. Due to capacity issues, frontline and grassroots organisations tend to rely on data available from the Office for National Statistics, for example, even though it does not always capture statistically robust data when analysed across multiple characteristics. The challenge lies in presenting complexity and heterogeneity while maintaining clear and accessible evidence.

Key messages arising from the group discussions were:

- **Data being instrumentalised to support specific agendas.** While policymakers value qualitative evidence that fits their narrative, quantitative data can be easily dismissed or manipulated. The UK has incredibly valuable

qualitative data, but it is often unclear who this evidence is for, who is using it (and for what purpose), and the format in which it is needed.

- **Long-term relationships are key.** Rather than always producing more evidence, building relationships with public and private sector organisations is necessary to ensure effective use of evidence for evidence-based policymaking. For example, social media platforms and other private companies generate huge amounts of data, which can be accessed. If the UK Government created a regulatory body to encourage data-sharing, this could generate huge value.

- **A need for organising concepts to structure and give strength to evidence.** To coalesce data under a coherent framework capable of conveying complexity in an accessible and thought-provoking manner. In times of data abundance, organising concepts facilitate the purposeful and coordinated search for information to shape interventions and assess their impacts. We may be measuring what we need to measure, but we may not be seeing what we need to see if we are not looking at the right combinations of data, at the right time.

- **The role of technology.** In a world of data abundance, machine-learning data has the potential to discover new trends in aspects of inequalities, concepts, and the intensity and causality of these. This could ensure 'future-proofing' of data and ensure measures to address inequalities are tracked and assessed over time.

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Session 4 - Reflect, Review, Renew

The group revisited the five themes and principles from the 2019 report (Language, Voice, Opportunity, Place and Understanding Evidence) to offer some reflections on whether these should be reviewed and renewed. Overall discussions noted that:

- Policy responses ought to aim to **build solidarity and unity**, not division. What lets people know they belong to a nation? Whose futures matter?
- There have been **significant changes in the labour market** since 2019 – in some respects fundamentally making comparisons difficult.
- Temporality is a key concept: **inequalities are historical**, we must understand their evolution, consolidation, and reactivation in time of crisis. Moments of crisis – even of polycrisis – can be opportunities for betterment.
- We need to refocus on the **unequal distribution of power** and emphasise that race is constitutive around the class and gendered politics.
- We need to move away from the *deficit* mentality (there are never enough resources) towards a *distribution* mentality: one of **capacity, capability, and abundance.**
- Several participants noted that **younger generations were becoming more polarised** along gender lines and this was flagged as a key area of focus for work focused on structural inequalities.

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Session 5 - Looking ahead: 'Policy Under Renewed Government'

The workshop concluded with a discussion chaired by Matt Whitaker, Chief Executive of Pro Bono Economics, exploring participants' expectations, concerns, and a look ahead at opportunities that may arise following the UK General Election. The incoming government should prioritise including voices of civil society in their long-term plans. They should focus on providing targeted funding to services that need it most and recognise inequalities as a structural challenge that demands dedicated resources, inter-departmental efforts, and genuine cross-sectoral partnerships. Participants also noted that there would likely be a large intake of new members appointed to the House of Lords and this provides opportunity for engagement on actions and responses to tackle inequalities.

Participants demonstrated optimism with regards to the Labour Party's mission-oriented plans for government given its long-term ambitions and openness to engaging civil society. They raised concerns about the lack of concrete expectations and commitments set by the Labour Party during the election. The discussion concluded with a statement of the need for any future government to recognise inequalities as a structural challenge that demands dedicated resources, inter-departmental efforts, and genuine cross-sectoral partnerships.

For more information on the 2019 policy commission and report, please visit:

[Structurally Unsound – Exploring Inequalities: Igniting research to better inform UK policy](#)

UCL Public Policy and UCL Grand Challenges