

Title: "Philanthropy in the Arctic: Good Intentions or Good Works?"

Author: Heather Exner-Pirot

Published in: *The Philanthropist*, Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy Journal

ISSN 2562-1491

Date: October 12, 2015

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2015/10/philanthropy-in-the-arctic-good-intentions-or-good-works/>

Date of PDF Download: June 14, 2019

# Philanthropy in the Arctic: Good Intentions or Good Works?

By Heather Exner-Pirot

*This article is the fourth in a series on Indigenous Communities and Philanthropy.*

There may be no better phrase to describe the past century of southern intervention in the Canadian Arctic than the maxim “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” As philanthropic, charitable, and non-governmental organizations seek to address development challenges in the region unmet or abandoned by the public sector, it is well worth asking whether their good intentions are redressing past injustices or perpetuating them.

## **Ideological and paternalistic**

To be sure, the history is spotty. Ask Northerners what they think of when they think of outside charitable or non-governmental actors, and Greenpeace will probably come to mind. In 1976, Greenpeace Canada began a campaign to expose and end the commercial hunting of marine mammals, in particular the seal hunt. The campaign effectively destroyed the market for seal pelts, resulting in severe socio-economic ramifications for Indigenous and non-Indigenous hunters. It also vilified their traditions and livelihoods, casting them as murderers of innocent, cherubic seal pups.

Greenpeace apologized for their role in this debacle in 1985 and adopted a policy in 2014 in support of Indigenous rights to a subsistence lifestyle and the right to sustainable development. But not everyone is ready to forgive and forget. Nunavut MP Leona Aglukkaq, in a 2014 speech to the Inuit Circumpolar Council, iterated that “these groups do not base these campaigns on facts or science, but instead on what they view to be a moral high ground. The ironic part is that from their moral high ground, they completely disregard the rights and traditions of entire groups of people.”

Actions speak louder than words. Many Arctic inhabitants are critical of Greenpeace's popular #SavetheArctic campaign, which has been a boon to the organization's fundraising efforts. But to the skeptical, the entire premise of #SavetheArctic implies, variously, that: a) the people of the Arctic need external actors to save them; b) the Arctic environment needs saving and the people don't matter; and c) the people of the Arctic are either incapable or unwilling to protect their own environment. It can be galling.

Greenpeace is the most prominent, but certainly not the only, example of a Southern organization pursuing ideological ends at the expense, intended or not, of local interests. As new groups with philanthropic mandates have sought to engage in the Arctic, they may have been surprised and dismayed by the mistrust and suspicion they've been greeted with. But given recent history, it's justified. Philanthropy in the Arctic seems too often to be motivated by either condescension or paternalism.

How can philanthropic organizations improve their reputation and their impact in the North?

1. *Focus on capacity building.*

One of the things that distinguishes philanthropy from charity is its focus on long-term problem-solving, rather than short-term relief. The popular *Feeding My Family* Facebook campaign exposed some of the differences in those approaches. While it's certainly not evil to send a shipment of diapers and Kraft Dinner to a single mother in Resolute Bay, it uses a lot of resources that could arguably be better spent by funding a local food bank or community organization, or, better yet, supporting efforts and ideas that seek to promote food security initiatives that can address the high cost of food in the Arctic in the long term.

The philanthropic philosophy fits well with what many Arctic communities seek from external partners, which is access to resources and strategies that support local efforts to build capacity within communities: capacity to live independently of outside assistance, to enact local control of education and health care systems to reflect traditional ways, and to make and implement local and regional governance decisions including land use. This is sometimes referred to as *fate control*, or the ability for people to control their own destiny.

2. *Context and history matter.*

Become educated about the Canadian Arctic and its peoples, and be aware that the history of Arctic Indigenous peoples and European newcomers is often a troubled one. You may be the latest in a long line of well-intentioned but ultimately inept Southerners to offer solutions to problems too complicated and rooted for you to ever understand. Be willing to learn. Also: the Canadian Arctic is bigger than just Iqaluit, or Nunavut, or even Inuit. It is diverse and complex even if southern perceptions of it aren't. Try not to be exclusive or chauvinistic.

3. *Be aware of culture clash.*

Inuit writer Zebedee Nungak captured some of the ways culture matters in the 2006 documentary *Qallunaat! Why White People are Funny*. Are you goal-oriented? Do you like lists and categories? Do you see urgent tasks that need to be addressed all around you? Me, too. These are common

characteristics of *Qallunaat*, and of the philanthropic industry in particular, and are generally viewed as strengths. But these same attributes can be quite jarring North of 60. Learn patience. Build relationships and earn trust. Practice incrementalism. If you want to engage in the Arctic, it's only polite to adapt rather than impose. And process really matters.

#### *4. Become community-oriented.*

One of the more common criticisms of philanthropic work in the Arctic is that too often Southerners try to impose their mandates and pet projects on Northerners. Try to be flexible enough to address your partner community or organization's priorities rather than convince them to adopt yours. Offer your services; if they are useful, you will be welcomed. If they are not, maybe you need to rethink what you are trying to accomplish.

#### *5. Don't be cynical.*

Don't get discouraged by the complexity of the challenges or feel under-appreciated for your efforts, no matter how hard you've worked. There are a lot of unfulfilled human development needs in the Arctic that preclude the indulgence of self-pity. Do your work in a spirit of humility and partnership. And remember, true philanthropy is not about you, or your organization, or your upcoming annual report.

---

The good news is, many organizations are leading the way in building partnerships and projects that are mutually beneficial and can have positive long term impact in the Arctic. Tides Canada, for example, has begun providing core and project support to groups of emerging northern leaders, beginning with Dene Nahjo, a new Indigenous leadership development initiative in the Northwest Territories. The lesson here is to invest in people and build northern capacity without compromising or neglecting cultural or social needs and priorities. Oceans North marine environmental monitoring work is another good example of working with local stakeholders on realizing their policy objectives, in this case science-based conservation policies that are consistent with land claims and traditional practices and knowledge, rather than forcing an imported agenda onto others.

As organizations work with, rather than for, Arctic communities, and as Northerners are approached as potential partners rather than objects of charity, efforts aimed at improving living standards and restoring rights to self-determination will continue to be realized.