
Reparations and Reconciliation: Embracing Indigenous Social Innovation and Changing the Rules of Philanthropy

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This is the ninth article [in our series](#) about social innovation. The series is published as a collaboration between The Philanthropist and McConnell Foundation.

I started thinking more critically about philanthropy's potential as I prepared my keynote address for this year's Canadian Environmental Grantmaker's Network (CEGN) annual conference. The theme of my talk was "decolonizing philanthropy." In 2015-16, I was a fellow in the [International Women's Forum](#) (IWF) and my mentor was an IWF member and philanthropist from New York City. We had many opportunities to talk about fundraising during our visits together. She was generous with her money, her time, and her wisdom, and I began to wonder how we could take philanthropy in Canada to a new level. To do so, we would have to understand philanthropy's underlying structure and to what degree it serves, or harms, Indigenous peoples.

As AnishinaabeKwe (an Ojibway woman) I have dedicated my entire career to improving the quality of life for Indigenous peoples. Our life chances, social conditions, and living standards have improved, however they still do not come close to those enjoyed by non-Indigenous peoples. I studied sociology because I wanted to understand the dynamics of society and what drivers led us to the place we are at in Canada. As a youth activist, I fought for equality and against racism in Thunder Bay, where I went to high school. Later, I spent seven years with [Nishnawbe Aski Nation](#) (NAN), a political territorial organization (PTO) representing 49 First Nations, including 32 remote, fly-in reserves. These communities face what social innovators

call “wicked problems,” with deep roots in colonialism. These issues are highly resistant to resolution through any of the existing modes of problem-solving.^[i]

A suicide epidemic is a wicked problem. I worked on youth suicide prevention for five of my seven years at NAN. In 2018, APTN reported that data revealed close to 600 suicides in these northern Ontario communities since the mid-1980s. A third of these deaths are young people, between the ages of 15-20. The most common method is hanging.^[ii] My uncle hung himself when I was 11 years old. Colonialism in Canada has provided a history of heartache.

Solving wicked problems can be a matter of life and death for Indigenous peoples. I found in social innovation – when I participated in the [Getting to Maybe: Social Innovation Residency](#) at the Banff Centre in 2015 – an insightful way to see, comprehend, and potentially transform the systems that continue to produce undesirable, and often deadly, outcomes for our communities.

If “social innovation”^[iii] is about large-scale, transformative change that disrupts the status quo and addresses inequitable power dynamics, and “reconciliation” is about, as [Reconciliation Canada](#) suggests, creating a vibrant, inclusive Canada where all peoples achieve their full potential and shared prosperity,^[iv] then perhaps changing the rules of philanthropy is good place to start.

For Indigenous peoples, most wicked problems are bound up in a history of colonization and genocide. The layered traumas caused by dehumanizing policies and practices, such as the Indian Act and Indian Residential Schools, manifest in high rates of suicide, addiction, violence, morbidity, and mortality. Ongoing issues of inequity linked to poverty, water quality, sanitation, housing, child welfare, unemployment, incarceration, and education levels are as prevalent today in many places as they were during my youth. I still keep a copy of *People to People, Nation to Nation*, a book of highlights from the Report of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#) (RCAP), on my bookshelf. It was a beacon of hope as a young activist, outlining opinions and proposed solutions to the many “complex issues” raised by the 16-point mandate set out by the government of Canada in August of 1991. The commissioners presented an integrated agenda for change.

RCAP was the seed that planted reconciliation in Canada. University of Manitoba professor Kiera Ladner argues that reconciliation is a process, an action, something that must be continually created and maintained. RCAP said that reconciliation is about finding a way to live together in a mutually agreeable, mutually beneficial manner. In this way, reconciliation begins, not ends, with acknowledging the past and saying, “I’m sorry.” Further, reconciliation cannot happen without a transformation of consciousness by settler society.^[v] The commissioners argued that Canada, as a nation, was a test case for a grand notion – that dissimilar peoples can share lands, resources, power, and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences. Their main guiding question was, what are the foundations of a fair and honourable relationship between the “Aboriginal” and “non-Aboriginal” people of Canada? RCAP acknowledged that assimilation policies had done a great deal of damage, leaving a legacy of brokenness affecting Indigenous individuals, families, and communities. The damage has been equally serious to the spirit of Canada, to the spirit of its generosity. But the damage is not beyond repair, they argued. “Repair” is also a significant concept in decolonizing philanthropy.

Edgar Villanueva, of the Lumbee Tribe, has [written eloquently](#) about this in his ground-breaking 2018 book, *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore*

Balance. Villanueva asks an important question: what if money could heal us? A main premise of his argument in favour of decolonizing wealth and philanthropy is that money itself is inherently value neutral. It is human beings who have used money wrongfully. “European white imperialism spent centuries marching around the world, using whatever means necessary to amass and consolidate resources and wealth,” he writes.^[vi] To add insult to injury, now Indigenous peoples must apply for access to that wealth through loans or grants. “Repair” is step seven in Villanueva’s “seven steps to healing” for the philanthropic sector.

Indigenous people are largely left out of philanthropy. Internationally, direct funding to Indigenous peoples represents a tiny fraction of giving, according to [International Funders for Indigenous Peoples](#) (IFIP).^[vii] While Indigenous issues cut across most program areas, a key finding from Foundation Center in 2015 shows that, globally, funders tend to support Indigenous communities through environmental, human rights and international affairs programs. Few funders have a dedicated program for Indigenous peoples. However, some funders have created wide program areas that can incorporate intersecting issues, such as climate change, food sovereignty, and Indigenous communities.

The University of Toronto recently announced it received its largest-ever donation, a \$100-million gift to further the school’s research on artificial intelligence, biomedicine, and how new technologies can disrupt and enrich lives.^[viii] The donation, from the Gerald Schwartz and Heather Reisman Foundation, will in part go to a new 750,000 square foot complex in downtown Toronto called the Schwartz Reisman Innovation Centre, designed to help spark Canadian innovation and examine how technology shapes people’s lives.

What if someone created an endowment or fund for Indigenous social innovation with that level of support, to be governed by Indigenous peoples? That would be a powerful act of reconciliation given that Indigenous peoples’ lack of access to capital – some of the very capital that generates income for foundations and corporations – is due to colonization that included theft of lands and resources. Many similar landmark gifts have been announced over the past few years – much of it from wealth made on the backs of Native people across Turtle Island. As Villanueva says, “Our peoples and our lands were exploited, over generations, over centuries, and ongoing. Yet despite our role in creating that wealth, white supremacy continues to deny us access to it.”^[ix]

Instead, he argues, we are demeaned for our lack of resources and called lazy. We must jump through hoops and prove ourselves worthy to get a piece of it in the form of loans or grants. As the founder of an Indigenous, non-profit start-up called Turtle Island Institute (TII), a social innovation “think and do tank,” I do jump through hoops. TII offers Indigenous and non-Indigenous changemakers a suite of land- and culture-based methodologies and tools, based in Indigenous epistemologies, to support transformative social change. Complex systems thinking, resilience, and social innovation are part of my PhD program at the University of Waterloo and my work as a research associate with the Waterloo Institute for Social Innovation and Resilience. While I was initially strongly drawn to social innovation during the Banff Centre residency, I needed to understand if bringing social innovation into my life would risk further colonizing of my mind. While social innovation has a Eurocentric foundation, it is also a practice of holistic thinking and Anishinaabeg are natural systems thinkers. Our culture is based on a profound understanding of the interconnected web of life.

I was hesitant to start TII because I knew it would inevitably involve fundraising to support

operational costs. We are now exploring the Tides Canada platform for that reason. As Tim Brodhead, who is a member of TII's board of directors, pointed out in 2013 article in *The Philanthropist* titled "[Innovation: Austerity's Grandchild.](#)"^[x] foundations and corporate donors prefer project funding, with its defined objectives and limited timeframes. As a result, leaders at community organizations are starved for the core funding that maintains their staff and allows them to focus on their missions rather than opportunistically chase after elusive funding.

I knew that I would inevitably face the question posed of many non-profits, "What is your sustainability model?" Or, "After this grant runs out, how will you continue your work?" Vu Le of Nonprofit AF says this last question is "irritating" and "obnoxious." He wrote a wonderful witty response in an article titled, "Standardized answers to the Sustainability Question."^[xi] The short answer: we will stop bothering you and we will bother somebody else.

A potential solution to this cycle of fundraising is to follow Villanueva's advice regarding reparations: "The commitment to repair should come from the side with the wealth and the power it confers."^[xii] If a collection of donors got together and created a new fund for Indigenous social innovation, perhaps that would shift the system to a more equitable and stable equilibrium. And they should market that fund to, and in, our communities. Come to us!

There is the federal government's new Social Finance Fund, which is largely focused on repayable loans to social enterprises. The National Aboriginal Capitals Corporations Association is set to launch an Indigenous Growth Fund that will support entrepreneurs. I am thinking instead of a no-strings-attached fund designed to make reparations for the layers of trauma we have endured, to help level the playing field. Decolonizing wealth, says Villanueva, is using money as medicine. "Decolonizing wealth is, at its essence, about closing the racial wealth gap,"^[xiii] he writes. No strings attached. "Reparations are the ultimate way to build power in exploited communities. They are the ultimate way to use money as medicine."^[xiv]

It is encouraging that more funders in Canada have begun to engage with Indigenous communities. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) Report of 2015 helped catalyze this shift. That June, Canada's leading philanthropic organizations declared solidarity and support for stronger, positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. A group of Canada's philanthropic organizations [released](#) a Declaration of Action committing to continuing positive action on reconciliation. As of 2018, more than 100 charities, non-profits, foundations, and community foundations around the country have signed the document.

Now, philanthropy can "take a giant leap forward"^[xv] towards reparations. According to International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP), funders employ a wide variety of strategies to support Indigenous peoples, including direct giving, working through intermediaries, long-term investments, and supporting Indigenous control of philanthropic resources. The IFIP released its *Funding Indigenous Peoples: Strategies for Support* report with GrantCraft in 2015. The Christensen Fund supports the [Kivulini Trust](#), an Indigenous-led group that re-grants to local Indigenous groups in Kenya and Ethiopia. What is key in this model is that Indigenous-led philanthropies base their ethos and strategies on traditional views of reciprocity, in which giving is an exchange between equal parties. The IFIP points out that this way of working promotes a power dynamic different from the standard grantor-recipient relationship.^[xvi] This model, what IFIP calls an "empowerment approach" – one based on the right of Indigenous peoples to determine the nature and use of resources that come into their communities – is worth exploring

in Canada.

Donors in Canada have increasingly begun to think critically about their role in supporting and partnering with Indigenous communities to tackle big issues. Some have targeted support for Indigenous-led change efforts through program strategies, such as the McConnell Reconciliation Initiative. McConnell is expanding proposal criteria to include unconventional project areas, such as social innovation. Additionally, the Suncor Energy Foundation focuses its efforts on three main areas: Indigenous peoples, community resilience, and energy future. Both funders currently include reconciliation as an integral part of their institutional thematic issues, thereby acknowledging Indigenous communities as a population group affected by many intersecting issues. Both support the ongoing efforts of TII. While extremely grateful for this support, I hope I live to see the day when I am not asking powerful, rich, white people for a hand-out, a social reproduction of colonialism; but instead I am in a relationship of mutual support and gift-giving with Indigenous-led funds and funders. As Villanueva says, reparations are due.

[i] Brown, Harris and Russell (2010). *Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination*. London: Earthscan.

[ii] See <https://aptnews.ca/2018/03/27/data-reveals-close-600-suicides-northern-ontario-since-mid-1980s/>

[iii] Defined as “any initiative (product, process, program, project or platform) that challenges and, over time, contributes to changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social systems in which it is introduced. Successful social innovations reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience. They have durability, scale and transformative impact” from [SiG Knowledge Hub, 2013](#).

[iv] See <http://reconciliationcanada.ca>

[v] Ladner, K. (2018). “Proceed with Caution: Reflections on Resurgence and Reconciliation” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings* by Michael Asch, John Burrows and James Tully (Eds). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

[vi] Villanueva, E. (2018). *Decolonizing Wealth: indigenous wisdom to heal divides and restore balance*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., p 6.

[vii] See <https://internationalfunders.org/funding-indigenous-peoples-strategies-for-support-2/>

[viii] See <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/landmark-100-million-gift-university-toronto-gerald-schwartz-and-heather-reisman-will-power>

[ix] Villanueva, E. (2018), p 159.

[x] See <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2013/02/philanthropist-25-1-4-html/>

[xi] See <https://nonprofitaf.com/2015/05/standardized-answers-to-the-sustainability-question/>

[xii] Villanueva, E. (2018), p 160.

[xiii] Villanueva, E. (2018), p 161.

[xiv] Villanueva, E. (2018), p 166.

[xv] Villanueva, E. (2018), p 166.

[xvi] See <https://internationalfunders.org/funding-indigenous-peoples-strategies-for-support-2/>