
Book Review: Philanthropic Foundations in Canada: Landscapes, Indigenous Perspectives and Pathways to Change

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Philanthropic Foundations in Canada Landscapes, Indigenous Perspectives and Pathways to Change, ed. Peter R. Elson, Sylvain A. Lefevre and Jean-Marc Fontan, PhiLab, Canada, 2020, 323 pp.

“A gift that does nothing to enhance solidarity is a contradiction.”

Mary Douglas in her forward to The Gift, Marcel Mauss[\[1\]](#)

Philanthropic Foundations in Canada: Landscapes, Indigenous Perspectives and Pathways to Change[\[2\]](#) is a wealth of information on Canadian foundations for people just entering the philanthropic world. It is a primer on many of the key issues that confront these groups and how they have moved forward to address these challenges. That said this book also holds much for established practitioners. It examines several important concerns in the field, especially in relation to working with partners in a respectful and collaborative way.

A key learning from this text, especially in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and the Black Lives Matter coalition, is the idea of working toward reciprocity;

where the grantor and grantee are equals in moving a project forward.

As the title suggests, the book is separated into three parts. The Landscapes section is a comprehensive review of the history of foundations and delves into several important operational issues. It speaks to the regulations and frameworks within which foundations operate. The Indigenous Perspectives segment addresses efforts by foundations and Indigenous communities to build relationships and collaborate as true partners in their work. The Pathways to Change chapters provide examples of foundations and communities learning how to work toward long term solutions to complex problems. These meetings with grantees are worthwhile journeys, but the process is long, involves a great deal of work, and much soul searching.

The text provides a great deal of insight into the current environment for foundations and the organization and format of the book assists the reader. There is an Introduction to set the stage. The chapters build on one another to address the three themes. Each section provides new insights into Canada's foundation world – whether it is a better understanding of the history and role of foundations in Quebec or the steady efforts of foundations to engage with Indigenous communities. At the end of each chapter are three key takeaways that summarize its main points. The book finishes with a Reflections and Conclusions chapter to tie things up (a difficult task given the breadth of this work and the ongoing nature of these collaborations).

The Landscapes segment contains five chapters that provide a contextual history of foundations in Canada, including an insightful look at the evolution of foundations in Quebec. It then reviews the creation and growth of foundations in Canada by looking at the history of Philanthropic Foundations Canada. The next chapters outline the frameworks that guide foundations and make them accountable. It also addresses issues such as donor-advised funds and the evolution of corporate philanthropy.

The Indigenous Perspectives section provides a needed perspective on foundation and Indigenous relations and how foundations can respond to the recommendations of the TRC. This section traces the creation of the Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada and raises the question of decolonization of philanthropy to build new relationships with Indigenous people.

The Pathways to Change segment builds on the first two themes and gives concrete examples of how foundations have comprehensively engaged in various shared issues over the years. The five chapters offer case studies of how foundations have worked with other actors to address societal issues in ways that push the boundaries of traditional foundation practices. These foundations moved beyond their comfort zones into advocacy, full engagement with at-risk clients, or working constructively to support government priorities.

If the Landscapes chapters set the history and much of the operational framework of how foundations operate in Canada, then the Indigenous Perspectives and Pathways to Change sections show the route forward.

The authors do not shy away from raising fundamental issues for foundations and some, such as reconciliation with Indigenous people, are discussed extensively. There are a number of constraints on the ability of foundations to address these matters, not the least of which is a traditionally conservative method of providing support.

This book gives numerous examples of community groups, foundations, and other partners working to create relationships that even the power balance between grantor and grantee. It looks at a “continuous learning” process with both uplifting and uncomfortable periods where the partners realize they have to change how they view their work. The chapters show how the paradigm of giving and receiving can be turned on its head. Over time, and with a great deal of effort by all parties, some semblance of reciprocity can be achieved. When this happens there is a chance for all parties to recognize and see each other as equal partners.

The book serves as a reminder that even the largest endowments are given with public support through the tax treatment of these donations. “Foundations are funded by society through the benefits of the tax system on charitable donations, and therefore all stakeholders should be considered in accountability matters.”[\[3\]](#)

The book shows how some foundations shifted into areas where their operational preconceptions and even financial help were challenged by grantees. Throughout the text, there are examples of work being done to build relationships so that all partners move forward on a mutually agreed upon path.

Reciprocity is one of the chief lessons that come out of this book. In order for foundations to move forward, the relationship between the “funder” and the “recipient” must change. Foundations need to focus on reciprocity so that the gift is an equal transfer for both the donor and donee. This concept speaks of a relationship where both parties are seen as part of a community and the gift strengthens their links. Thus, Canadian foundations need to examine their intentions before engaging with Indigenous or at-risk communities.

In our charitable world, the grantor can become separated from the grantee. One example of this is the practice of using intermediaries in giving. This results in there being little or no connection between the grantor and grantee and the result becomes a transaction where the person or group receiving the support is receiving charity but has little or no recourse to expand the relationship. They are not equal, they are not partners, and they are not seen as contributing, just taking. In the chapter *All My Relations: A journey of reciprocity* Couchman, Struthers, and Wiebe express it this way in a discussion about foundations working with Indigenous Canadians:

“The report[\[4\]](#) creates an articulate message about the conflicts inherent in making change in colonially produced social issues from within a colonial structure of organization and regulation still based in Canada on 15th-century British laws.”

The case studies in this book deal with reconciliation, the reduction of social inequalities, and meaningful engagement with youth. They outline the process of meetings, discussions, and movement involved in these collaborations. These are small steps, but they are positive signs.

Not every reader will find all of the selections useful, but they will find gems of wisdom throughout the chapters. Reports from practitioners show how they worked to create new ways of operating or build new relationships based on trust and mutual respect. In the end, the book captures a dynamic foundation movement that is striving to change the way it supports Canadians.

[1] *The Gift: the form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, Marcel Mauss, Routledge Classics, Cornwall England, 2004. Available at: Available at: <https://libcom.org/files/Mauss%20-%20The%20Gift.pdf> .

[2] Available at: <https://philab.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Philanthropic-Foundations-in-Canada-Landscapes-Indigenous-perspectives-and-pathways-to-change-1.pdf> .

[3] *Financial accountability and reporting of foundations in Canada*, Francois Brouard and Marc Pilon at page 76.

[4] *Measuring the Circle – Emerging Trends in Philanthropy for First Nations, Metis and Inuit Communities in Canada: A focus on Manitoba*, (The Circle, 2017b).