HOW FUNDERS ARE SUPPORTING SOCIAL INNOVATION: THREE EXAMPLES FROM THE YOUTH SECTOR

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PRACTICES OF INNOVATION ARE NOT UNCOMMON IN COMMUNITIES, PARTICU-larly in the social sector where there is a need to innovate to provide new solutions to address pressing local problems. Microfinance, the use of alternate governance models, and the development of social enterprises are some examples of social innovation.

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According to the Kellogg Foundation, such innovation remains largely episodic despite the continuous creation of ingenious solutions to social problems. In part, this is due to piecemeal funding, under-resourcing of organizations, and structures that hinder continuous discovery and innovation in organizations. These issues, combined with the new complexities faced by organizations such as recession, greater competition for dollars, and inability to sustain or take innovations to scale, have created a greater need for joint efforts, partnerships, and collaboration, even among funders.

This article explores the ways in which three different funders have supported social innovation, with a particular focus on youth-led organizing.

- The first example, a collaborative between the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Laidlaw Foundation, Tides Canada Initiatives, and other partners, highlights how funders can help create environments for a community of practice to emerge.

- The second example, drawing from the evaluative learning of an inter-governmental group with funders from all sectors, illustrates the impact funding collaboratives can have on leveraging additional resources to the youth sector while promoting institutional change within different funding bodies.

- The third example, based on the experiences of a national project undertaken by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation as part of its inclusion strategy, highlights how adopting developmental evaluation practices can dramatically support innovation and learning.

CONVENING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: YOUTH SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT IN ONTARIO

The context

Over the last few years there has been an influx of support for youth engagement and organizing in Ontario, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area. This has coincided

with a surge of activity and growing networks as young people find ways to solve their own problems. The Foundations and Pipelines research (http://www.laidlawfdn.org/ sites/ default/files/Foundations.pdf), completed through a working group convened and funded by the Laidlaw Foundation, identifies youth social infrastructure as the support required for good youth engagement and organizing in communities. Social infrastructure encompasses a variety of elements that collectively build capacity and sustainable support at individual and group levels, placing power in the hands of young people in communities.

During a series of informal meetings, the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), the Laidlaw Foundation, and Tides Canada Initiatives identified an emerging trend and a growing gap in the youth sector, namely, the need for intermediaries and some sustained infrastructure to help youth in communities take on more proactive roles.

Innovation: Creating an environment for innovation

Recognizing this gap in social infrastructure, OTF and Laidlaw Foundation collaborated with Tides Canada Initiatives in March 2009 to convene over 50 youth organizers and other stakeholders who would collectively contribute to building an Ontario movement. The aim was not to create something new but to amplify and accelerate exciting work that was already happening.

While the funders involved sensed this was an important issue and that there was a transformation that needed to take place if youth engagement and organizing was to be more strategically supported, there existed many unanswered questions:

> What can we do together that is not possible to do on our own?
> What areas in youth organizing and engagement are ripe for change
>   across the province?
> How can we amplify what is already working, for positive impact, for
>   all those who are leading in youth work in Ontario?
> How can we build resilient community leaders and encourage our youth
>   sector "change agents?"

At this gathering, young people from diverse sectors and groups converged around the issue of how to best to support and transform youth organizing in Ontario. The group agreed on the need for a coordinated provincial model. Bringing people together through this gathering created the space for innovation to take place and specifically tapped into the end users of the innovation, the youth themselves.

A smaller working group formed and met to implement the main priority set by the broader collaborative: to hold a wider stakeholder gathering. At the second gathering held in May 2010, funded by OTF and Laidlaw, a wider stakeholder group met that included youth from across Ontario, funders, policy makers, youth organizers, and youth serving groups. This gathering intentionally formed an inclusive space for shared power and decision-making, and paved the way for a new core team to lead the growing collaborative into the future.

OTF and Laidlaw Foundation continue to be part of this journey as the new collaborative transitions into its role and takes its mandate from the community that brought it

together. The model of emergence is key to success in this collaboration between funders and youth stakeholders. Emergence is a theory and growing practice that looks at the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple and previously unconnected interactions. Briefly, some key learnings are as follows:

- Fluid core team: The collaborative that emerged was extremely fluid. This allowed individuals to take part if they had something to contribute or leave if they felt they could not or had nothing more to contribute. While new members came and went, the core team did not alter its course but was able to continue moving forward. This was due in part to the clear mandate of the collaborative, the commitment of those involved, and the accountability they had to the broader stakeholder base.

- Social technology: The use of technology aids in maintaining momentum and is useful for ensuring collective planning and decision-making. OTF hosted an online community for members to continue conversations. It found, however, that this community was only used during heavy periods of planning and that face-to-face meetings are integral to any group process. Monthly check-in calls using conference calling provided by OTF and Laidlaw was a simple way for people to remain connected to the broader mandate of the collaborative and built a stronger core team.

- Remaining flexible as funders: As funders engaged in this process, we provided the space and conditions for the collaborative to develop outcomes as the initiative was implemented. Our flexibility allowed us to use our learning to help inform new processes and activities as we moved forward. As funders engaged in facilitating a large scale social change, it is important for us to learn and document what has and has not been achieved and why, in order to give birth to new innovations and share our knowledge with the sector.

The intended outcome of this innovation was to focus on the process of creating a space for new relationships to form, intergenerational dialogue, and a platform for the field to voice emerging ideas and issues. In the short term, as a result of this collaborative, as funders we have benefitted from direct access to the field informing our work and strategies in real time.

FUNDING AND TRANSFORMING PRACTICE COLLABORATIVELY: ArtReach

The context
ArtReach Toronto Funders' Collaborative is an initiative of the Intergovernmental Roundtable of Arts Funders and Foundations (IRAFF). In December 2004, the idea for ArtReach began to take shape and a subcommittee was formed that eventually became the ArtReach Funders' Collaborative. The subcommittee identified a gap in access to arts opportunities for youth, and launched the ArtReach Toronto program in 2006 as a pilot with shared contributions totalling $1.5 million over the three-year pilot period.

The ArtReach Toronto program has been extended by two years and is working through a transition process to move out of pilot phase. The collaborative is made up of 11 mem-

ber organizations, including arts councils, foundations, government involvement (at municipal, provincial and federal levels), and social agency funders.

The innovation: Collaborative funder partnership

ArtReach Toronto is a funding and capacity-building program that supports the meaningful engagement of Toronto youth through active participation in quality arts opportunities. The Funders' Collaborative of ArtReach Toronto pool their resources, allowing the pilot program to provide grants and technical support to youth arts applicants. Funders share in a process that is innovative by reducing barriers to access to arts funds for youth in marginalized communities in Toronto.

Collaborative members also sought to champion youth-led initiatives within their own organizations, breaking down barriers to funding and funders typically faced by youth. The pilot allowed funders to share risk, learn from each other, and contribute to a larger pool of funds that ultimately had the potential to deliver greater impact. As a collaborative group, funders made decisions on structure, administration, and direction of the program.

The ArtReach Toronto pilot has been a fascinating study in funder partnerships. A great deal has been learned over the past four years that is still being assessed by the ArtReach evaluator. Some lessons learned are as follows:

- Youth leadership: For the pilot to have validity, it was crucial to create space for youth leadership and to support the active involvement of youth. Youth were consulted in the initial formation of the pilot, and later young artists formed the grant review team who made the main grant recommendations on all grants reviewed by the ArtReach program. Youth were also involved in the evaluation process, in creating and delivering the workshop series, and in event planning for ArtReach.

- Shared values: The collaborative formalized its partnership with a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was in effect for each partner who had contributed funds to the pilot. The MOU outlined goals and underlying values of the program and members, in effect, committed to shared values and risk for the program. It became evident how important such an agreement can be when members of a collaborative come from different sectors and perspectives, with different accountability expectations and operating styles. Signing on to an MOU that explicitly reminds collaborative partners of the shared values helped with decision-making, working with different agendas, and managing risk.

- In-kind resources: The time and skill commitment of collaborative partners and the administrative partner to ensure such a partnership runs smoothly cannot be underestimated. Collaborative members gave a great deal of time at Funders' Collaborative meetings, grant review team meetings, and additional subcommittees. A number of organizations contributed staff from various departments to help when needed, such as communications staff to help with the pilot launch.

- Clear decision-making structure: Implementing a clear decision-making structure and reporting process is a significant challenge with many partners with competing agendas. The collaborative worked well together for the most part, yet participation of different staff at different times in the process made decisions challenging, and this difficulty became most pronounced during the transition process. Collaboratives require ongoing attention, open dialogue, flexibility, and recognition of different layers of reporting and accountability (by collaborative partners, administrative agency, and pilot program staff).

Implementing a continuous evaluation process at the front-end of the program has allowed the collaborative to learn in real time. The program has had a number of successful outcomes in terms of reaching youth in marginalized communities, increasing the quality of arts experiences for young people and supporting emerging artists. The collaborative continues to absorb the learning from the pilot program in seeking a longer-term impact across funding organizations, allowing greater access for emerging young artists to existing arts funds. The full evaluation report can be downloaded at www.artreachtoronto.ca .

EVALUATION AS INNOVATION: YouthScape

The context

In 2006, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation launched YouthScape, a project that sought to test and learn from promising approaches for engaging marginalized youth in their local communities. YouthScape was part of the Foundation's inclusion strategy, focusing on young people who felt disconnected from school and other mainstream organizations led by adults.

Over a period of four years, the Foundation invested in supporting young people to plan and carry out local projects (e.g., improving recreation programs, reducing tension among racial groups, finding voice through art and music, improving relations between homeless youth and the police, etc.). This strategy included national gatherings every year, providing support and training, undertaking evaluations, harvesting knowledge, and managing the project.

Innovation: Use of developmental evaluation

There is no road map for engaging youth effectively. Within YouthScape, all the partners involved in the project were often making the path by walking it. The project aimed to provide a space where young people and adults could create opportunities for healing, empowerment, or engagement, depending on the priorities and skills of young people. As a result of frustration with evaluation approaches that focus primarily on methodological rigour and adherence to a logic model, the Foundation chose to use developmental evaluation as a way of keeping track of emerging dynamics and outcomes. Community partners and the Foundation needed continuous feedback from embedded evaluators; it needed to be learning and improving in real time, not judging and proving after the fact. Accordingly, each community partner employed a part-time developmental evaluator who was mentored by a national developmental evaluator who worked closely with the Foundation.

During the first 18 months of YouthScape, the developmental evaluators were able to surface tensions and misunderstandings which, had they gone unattended, might have undermined the entire initiative. Developmental evaluation led to modifying program designs, providing training, convening partners, and creating spaces for airing concerns in ways that could never have been anticipated. In short, the evaluative process contributed significantly to the success of the initiative.

The commitment to participate in the YouthScape project meant that some organizations would be in flux, experimenting with new ways of relating and working with youth. Developmental evaluation was chosen because it supports the process of innovation within an organization and in its activities. The process allows a project to work with evolving destinations, as YouthScape did, using youth engagement as a compass rather than a roadmap. Enthusiasm for developmental evaluation is tempered by the following cautions:

- Skilled practitioners: Developmental evaluators are more likely to come from a community facilitation background than a formal evaluation one. Emotional intelligence and an ability to pose strategic questions in an appreciative way may be more important than analytical skills.

- Organizational readiness: Some organizations are more ready than others for the messy process of developing and testing strategies as they proceed; control freaks may find themselves out of their comfort zone.

- The meter is always running: In most projects, a fully funded, external developmental evaluator will not be an option; it may simply be too expensive. Rigorously field-testing project assumptions against actual performance, and then adjusting the proposed outcomes and design, has to become part of the organization's culture rather than a job for an external consultant. As developmental evaluation grows as a field, we look forward to seeing process guides and tools that would allow groups to manage more of the developmental evaluation function on their own.

In the spirit of YouthScape – continuous learning and improvement – the developmental evaluators have created A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation to inform and inspire other funders and practitioners in the use of developmental evaluation. Continuous learning can be seen as the key outcome of this initiative. As an inclusion strategy, the intention was to create space for intergenerational dialogue, capacity building for youth and organizations. Other tangible outcomes of YouthScape occurred at the community level, with local partners embedding the lessons of YouthScape, such as ways of interacting with youth, and governance models, assumptions about participation, into larger systems (for example, municipal policy). At the national level, the Foundation systematically captured learning about promising approaches for engaging youth and created a suite of tools and publications for dissemination to a wider audience of community practitioners and policy makers.

The above case examples, taken from the field, illustrate active practices that have enabled social innovation within projects, collaboratives, and funding institutions to occur. This article deliberately speaks to the need for ongoing involvement and support, as the roles that funders play in social innovation go well beyond funding. Innovation at some point requires financing, but the additional role of an engaged and flexible funder can help innovation succeed and go to scale. The Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Laidlaw Foundation and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation have partnered on several fronts, with one another, with other funders, and with regional and community organizations to intentionally create and finance social innovations that can support and transform the youth sector.