

---

---

# INDIGENOUS YOUTH VOICES AND THE ROLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Jocelyn Formsma

## INTRODUCTION

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA BELONG TO DIVERSE AND DISTINCT NATIONS and are an increasingly young population. Although Indigenous communities differ in language, culture, and geographical location, they often share similar political and social histories that have had many negative intergenerational effects on the current generation. Unless the situation changes for the better for Indigenous people, specifically Indigenous young people, these intergenerational effects will continue deep into the future.

The statistics regarding the levels of educational achievement, health, incarceration, violence, language retention, mobility, and poverty for Indigenous peoples in Canada are well documented. What is not well documented is the extent to which Indigenous young people are actively engaged in improving their own lives as well as the lives of their peers, families, and communities.

Governments have failed to implement policies and provide funds for programming to improve the situation for Indigenous young people, and, in many cases, the situation has worsened. Additional measures are required to ensure that Indigenous young people in Canada are able to reach their full potential and, at the most fundamental level, have their rights upheld. The philanthropic community is well situated to intervene by establishing partnerships with Indigenous young people, communities, and organizations to build long-term and lasting solutions.

## OVERVIEW

### Indigenous youth in Canada

According to Statistics Canada, Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing demographic, and the median age of all Indigenous people in Canada is 27 years, compared to 40 years for the rest of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2010). Although youth are a large component of the Indigenous population, most decisions are made without the involvement or participation of Indigenous young people. Thus, their priorities and voices are not always adequately reflected in the deliberations and direction of the communities to which they belong and the organizations with which they work. It should be noted that there are many, mainly Indigenous, organizations and communities that do attempt to ensure youth voices are considered.

JOCELYN FORMSMA is a member of the Moose Cree First Nation, grew up in Northern Ontario, and currently lives in Ottawa, ON. Jocelyn has approximately 13 years of volunteer and work experience in children's rights, social development, and youth engagement. She has a Bachelor of Social Sciences in Public Administration and is currently pursuing her JD (Doctor of Jurisprudence) at the University of Ottawa.  
Email: [jwformsma@gmail.com](mailto:jwformsma@gmail.com).

---

## Indigenous youth representation in Indigenous organizations and communities

One of the unique characteristics of Indigenous organizations and communities is the commitment to and respect for all ages, including elders, adults, youth, and children. While many mainstream organizations have youth as a focus of the work, many Indigenous communities and organizations have actually included youth as part of their governing structure. There are a number of Indigenous organizations and communities in Canada that work at the local, regional, provincial, national, and international levels on a wide range of topics from education, child welfare, financial management, housing, governance, etc. Most of these organizations have some type of youth engagement component to the work they do. There are also national Indigenous political organizations that are recognized as representative of specific Indigenous communities in Canada, and all of these organizations have, or have had at one point, youth councils as part of their work on an ongoing basis. I have personal experience working within many of these organizations as a youth representative.

From 2000-2008, I was involved in different capacities with the Friendship Centre Movement (FCM). Locally, I was a youth board representative for the Timmins Native Friendship Centre. Regionally, I (re)founded the Ontario Aboriginal Youth Council with the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres. Nationally, I worked with the Aboriginal Youth Council (AYC) for the National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC). As president of the AYC, I was also the national youth representative on the NAFC's board of directors. Eventually, I became the NAFC youth coordinator and provided staff support and helped to coordinate the activities of the AYC.

From 2005-2011, I served as a youth representative on the Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN) Oshkaatisak Young Peoples Council and I sat as the NAN female representative on the Chiefs of Ontario (COO) Ontario First Nations Young Peoples Council (OFNYPC).

These roles involved a balance between giving advice and direction and receiving knowledge and experience. Through my roles on these youth councils, I participated in a wide number of activities. I met with Chiefs, other youth councils, government bureaucrats, politicians, premiers, ministers, prime ministers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and businesses representing Indigenous young people. I attended youth council meetings, conferences, chief's meetings, roundtables, galas, meet and greets, and policy meetings. My duties included chairing meetings, writing reports on activities, drafting statements, giving speeches, developing and implementing training opportunities, providing direction to adult-run organizations, organizing annual national youth forums, establishing and maintaining partnerships with other NGOs and Youth Councils.

All of these positions were voluntary, and it took lot of work and time to fulfill the expectations that were placed on all of the youth representatives. Sometimes, I did this work to the detriment of other responsibilities, including paid work and school. Looking back, I realize how tiring the work was and the sheer amount of responsibilities my peers and I had on our shoulders. It really defied the popular narrative of Indigenous young people. I keep in touch with many of the young people that have since filled these roles, and the issues and the workload have not eased.

---

In the long run, I was able to develop as a young leader within the FCM, NAN, and COO. However, the opportunities within these organizations only existed because of their youth engagement attitudes and inclusion of youth in their governance structures. Now that I am no longer a youth representative, the experiences I have had due to the roles I held have assisted me in attaining success in both my professional and academic lives.

## **CURRENT STATUS**

### **Lessons learned by a former youth representative**

I learned many lessons from fulfilling these roles. There are three main ones that I want to highlight here. First, governments are not well situated to fund long-term, change-making community programming. Second, a better approach to systemic change is to invest in young leaders at the community level. Finally, there are beacons of hope as to who is well situated to make those changes looking forward into the future.

When I met with the types of people mentioned above, specifically those in government, I believed I was sharing my messages with people who had the power to make things better. I thought if I just told them what was happening to Indigenous young people at the community level, they would help in some way. I believed them when they said they would help. I participated in meeting after meeting, and I heard these people tell me that I was important and that my voice would be heard.

Unfortunately, those sentiments rarely translated into long-term action. It always seemed that once the ball started rolling, we would lose a key person either due to a Cabinet shuffle, so that the people we had been working with moved to a different file, or there would be an election, resulting in a new minister in a new government with a new team, and we would have to start all over again. The bureaucrats we worked with usually did what they could do, but their actions were limited by the authority they had from the minister. Five years went by with no changes and no increased funding to needed cultural and youth leadership programs. Five years became seven years and then nine years. Now, 13 years later, it is my opinion that there is even less Indigenous cultural youth leadership programming than there was when I started. Now that I have “aged out” and am no longer a youth representative, it is no longer in my purview to speak to these people on behalf of Indigenous youth. The best I can do now is fulfill the role of a good “youth ally.”

As a youth ally, I feel it is now my responsibility to share my experiences and knowledge. I believe that it is the people at the community level who remain whether governments and funding come and go, and the work they do needs to get done regardless of whether or not it is funded. Thus, those are the people on whom to focus any efforts to shift the paradigm and create meaningful change.

Through years of youth-engagement work, I realized that there are inherent flaws in the way youth-related projects are supported or funded. These flaws relate to a model of annual funding that relies heavily on quarterly reporting, quantitative evaluation, and the timing of the actual funding cycle. Most organizations complete their yearly reporting in March and then apply for funding again for April. The funding actually arrives somewhere between June and August. Unless an organization or community can bridge the funding in between, the program loses those months of programming and the

ability to support young people. The result is that a program has to compress 12 months of activity into eight months. There is also an emphasis on producing positive outcome evaluations to show the impacts that the program is having. There is little incentive to show failures, which are an inevitable part of running youth programs in demanding conditions, due to a fear of losing the program's funding. There is also little opportunity to show incremental growth and improvement over a long period of time and the positive but important benefits that might be achieved for smaller numbers of service recipients. In situations where a program is not funded in a given year, the youth staff might be released, leaving the community with no youth programming and no resources to be able to carry on their initiatives.

A better approach would be to invest in the support and development of skilled young leaders and their allies at the community or regional level. This could be accomplished through funders establishing long-term relationships with the communities and organizations they support. The reason that this is a better approach is because young leaders and their allies are wholly connected to the communities in which they reside, and empowering them to enact their own solutions by providing appropriate tools and levels of support is more sustainable than the current program funding model. The establishment of long-term relationships helps build trust and allows a program to grow and adapt based on changing needs and conditions. Evaluations should be longitudinal, for example 3-5 years, and should track all the real impacts and adaptations of the program over time – not just for a single year.

There are at least two beacons of hope. First, where governments have failed, the philanthropic sector has stepped forward as a new force for change. Thirteen years ago, philanthropic organizations and foundations were not funding programs for Indigenous youth to the same extent that they are today. I know this because, as a youth representative and coordinator, my eyes were always open and looking for funding opportunities. Much of my time was spent poring over foundation websites and reading “calls for proposals.” The groups I worked for or the work that we were doing just did not qualify. Today, philanthropic organizations and foundations are increasingly interested in working with Indigenous communities and, more specifically, identifying areas of need and support for Indigenous youth. Second, young leaders at the grassroots level have been able to access tools and resources that were previously unavailable. The Internet and social media have increased the capacity for young leaders in nearly any community to be able to access information, reach out to other youth, and share their voices and organize themselves in different ways.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BETTER SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING INDIGENOUS YOUNG PEOPLE**

Meaningful youth engagement for Indigenous young people is not prescriptive, but rather contextual. The context relates to the community in which the program is operating, the organization that is running the program, the ages of the youth, and the physical infrastructure and human resources that are available in a community. While each program depends on a number of factors, there are some broad principles that can be followed when it comes to meaningfully engaging Indigenous young peoples (Alderman, Balla, Blackstock, & Khanna, 2006).

---

### **Youth engagement is an attitude**

Youth engagement is not just about funding or implementing a project or program designed for youth. Rather, youth engagement is an attitude of having respect for and including young people in decisions that affect their lives. Youth engagement can and must exist within the culture of an organization or community, regardless of the availability of funding.

### **Contributions must match the needs**

Contributions of funding or other resources and support must match the real needs of the youth, organization, or community. Similarly, the contributions of young people must match their own interests, and their participation must also meet the needs of the organization that is engaging them (in other words, no tokenism).

### **One cannot represent the many**

One Indigenous young person cannot and does not represent all Indigenous youth. Indigenous young people, like all people, have diverse perspectives, expertise, and experiences based on their community and cultural contexts. Equitable youth engagement ensures that there are many opportunities for many youth to engage and does not rely on one person to represent the diverse voices of their peers.

### **Debate as a learning tool**

Learning is a two-way street. Indigenous young people are experts in their own lives and experiences. Sometimes adults have the tendency to “speak to” Indigenous youth, instead of “speak with” them. While mentorship is an important value, it must also be recognised that Indigenous young people also have knowledge to share and can be mentors to both their adult-allies as well as other young people. Using debate as a learning tool is about engaging in a conversation and intergenerational learning.

### **Dignity and safety**

Young people can be vulnerable, so care must be taken to prepare them for their roles and ensure they are coping with any responsibilities assigned. This is also true if young people are required to travel to participate in meetings, conferences, or other events. As a youth representative, I just didn't have the money (or a credit card) to pay upfront for costs associated with participating in meetings away from home. Sometimes I couldn't even check into a hotel room because I didn't have a credit card.

### **Avoid false or unrealistic expectations**

Young people are often asked to participate in a number of events and activities, but the time commitments can sometimes be unrealistic. Consideration must also be given to the age, experiences, and education levels of the young people who are being engaged. For example, weekday meetings or conferences can be difficult for young people who are students and who would have to take time off of school to attend. It is important to be honest about the role of youth within an organization.

### **Balance and accessibility**

Building relationships with Indigenous young people takes time and energy. Adult-allies need to be prepared to take measures to support them in reaching an optimal level of participation.

---

Young people have a lot of knowledge and expertise about the matters that affect them. What typically receives public and media focus is the plight of Indigenous young people, but not the strength and determination they have in trying to create a better community for themselves, their peers and, oftentimes, their children. In Indigenous communities, specifically ones on-reserve or in remote northern settings, many government-run social services exist to treat the symptoms of the underlying, complex, and often inter-generational issues. These services have very limited capacity to be flexible in the approaches they use to try to address the root causes of the issues.

The Voluntary Sector has increasingly been looking at ways to support and assist Indigenous communities, with varying levels of success. However, many of these voluntary organizations are not run by and for Indigenous peoples, nor are they staffed by Indigenous youth.

Philanthropic organizations and foundations, as funders, have the ability to build lasting relationships with Indigenous communities and organizations from an Indigenous perspective, by those who live and work in the community. However, they must be prepared to build on the strengths of the community and its young people instead of focusing exclusively on the “problems” that already receive so much attention. As outlined in *Engaging and Empowering Indigenous Youth: A Toolkit for Service Providers* by the University of Western Ontario:

Not a week goes by without a negative news story about the rates of problem behaviours among Indigenous youth in Canada. Violence, substance use, suicide, gangs ... rates of these behaviours are higher among Indigenous youth than their non-Indigenous peers. However, these statistics do not tell the whole story. Rather than focusing on these negative statistics, we must shift our whole paradigm of intervention to a strengths-based approach. A strengths-based approach focuses on developing assets that are known protective factors, such as strong relationships, life skills, and school connectedness. (Crooks, Chiodo, Thomas, Burns, & Camillo, 2010, p. 2)

Indigenous youth need to see themselves and their communities as capable of change. That is what provides the hope that is needed to help young people become mobilized. Any intervention intended to support and involve Indigenous youth must be done with an approach that supports their strengths and builds on the positive activities young people may already be undertaking in their communities.

#### **A ROLE FOR PHILANTHROPY**

There are a number of important ways philanthropic organizations, private foundations, nonprofit groups, and adult-allies in general, can influence and support Indigenous youth leaders who are working to improve conditions in their communities. These are advocacy for young leadership; policy development; training and personal development; and information sharing and education (Formsma, 2008).

#### **Advocacy for young leadership**

The philanthropic sector can promote, support and develop youth involvement as a

---

policy in the work they fund. Making youth engagement a condition of funding encourages organizations and communities to include it as part of their projects. It is important that there is opportunity for intergenerational learning because young people have a lot of knowledge and expertise to provide to the projects in which they are being engaged. Typically, youth participation in key meetings is not funded, therefore, providing funding or other means of support for organizations to involve youth is an important step to ensure that they are present and that their voices are heard. Additionally, it is important to have ongoing education and outreach to young Indigenous leaders so they may learn more about what strategies other Indigenous youth are using and be successful in creating change in their communities.

### **Policy development**

Funders that run programs in multiple communities often have the opportunity to see the work that is happening on the ground from a level that the communities themselves cannot see. Being a link between organizations that have an interest in sharing their challenges and successes is a simple and easy way to help communities maximize their resources. For example, if a community or program currently does not have a policy relating to youth engagement, it could be connected to one that does or be encouraged to draft a strategy to develop one with the participation of young people.

### **Training development and provision**

Young Indigenous leaders need the opportunity to gain the knowledge and experience in order to implement their own initiatives and the ongoing training to continually improve their skills. Grant-making organizations can serve Indigenous youth well by funding sustained leadership development programs and linking young people with adult allies or experienced peers who can coach or mentor their continuing development.

### **Information sharing and education**

Young people's networks can be limited. Grant-makers can play an important role in supporting the development of information gathering and sharing processes that are essential to youth leaders and their community action or activity groups. They can also help support the participation of young people in conferences, events or other educational sessions, workshops or training sessions where they can provide information to adult audiences or to other Indigenous young people involved in community development activities.

### **Taking a longer-term view**

To have maximum positive impact on the well-being of Indigenous young people, grant-makers must be prepared to make a sustained commitment to the community or communities where they intend to invest resources. In the short-term, it may not be possible to identify all the human or financial resources young people may require to effect the positive change they desire. Having a long-term relation with young people and their communities gives grant-makers the opportunity to spend wisely focusing on what is needed at the moment and what best fits the unique cultural and contextual situations affecting the work they intend to do. As they progress in their efforts to create change in their community, and their needs become better defined, the relationship between young people and their supporting adult allies will help determine the appropriate "ask" to achieve their goal.

---

## CONCLUSION

The situation for Indigenous young people in Canada must change for the betterment of all people living in Canada. It is time we acknowledge the right of Indigenous youth to participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives. No entity, whether it is governments, communities, young people, or organizations, can achieve the goal of building or renewing the vitality of communities alone. Only those who are truly invested in the outcomes will help to create the positive intergenerational connections that will help propel future generations of Indigenous children, youth, families, and their respective communities into a place of well-being and balance. An important part of the process of renewal will come from young people who are respected, mentored, and provided with the skills they need to be fully engaged agents of change. Because it has the freedom and flexibility to fund projects unconstrained by limiting current government policies, the philanthropic sector has the potential to be an invaluable supportive ally for Indigenous youth in this process.

There are already a large number of Indigenous young leaders who are making meaningful contributions to their respective communities and organizations. These young leaders need to be further supported to realize their visions for themselves, their peers, their families, and their communities. Past approaches have, by and large, failed, and if the situation for Indigenous peoples is to improve, then new approaches must be developed and implemented.

Ideally, solutions should be developed and implemented by and for Indigenous young people that are based on a foundation of Indigenous worldviews, values, and ways of knowing.

Ultimately, the path forward must include investing in Indigenous young leaders and supporting community-based solutions by establishing long-term relationships between funders and communities and organizations. Solutions to the complex and intergenerational issues will only be remedied by long-term, strategic, and committed efforts from everyone.

---

## REFERENCES

Alderman, J., Balla, S., Blackstock, C., & Khanna, N. (2006). *Guidelines for the ethical engagement of young people*. Ottawa, ON: First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada.

Crooks, C.V., Chiodo, D., Thomas, D., Burns, S., & Camillo, C. (2010). *Engaging and empowering Aboriginal youth: A toolkit for service providers*, 2nd edition. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Press.

Formsma, J. W. (2008). The convention on the rights of the child and indigenous youth. In Collins, T., et al. *Rights of the child: Proceedings of the international conference* (pp. 469–475). Ottawa, ON: Wilson and LaFleurItee.

Statistics Canada. (2010, June 6). *Median age of population by Aboriginal identity*. URL: <http://www.statcan.ca/english/about/abtstc.htm> [February 20, 2013].