



Indigenous Philanthropy: repatriation of social governance - Study of the New Paths Foundation

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The philanthropic sector has long kept itself separated from First Nations issues. In 2011, only 6% of Canadian grantmaking foundations offered donations to charities who intervened among indigenous communities (The Circle on Philanthropy and Indigenous Peoples of Canada, 2014, p.8). This barely visible presence is in strong contrast to the level of need. In addition, on multiple dimensions, be it health or the level of education, or even accessibility to decent jobs or wages, indigenous populations find themselves unmistakably disadvantaged compared to the rest of the Canadian population (Posca, 2018). The historical weakness of Canadian philanthropic involvement can in no case be attributed to the fact that First Nations have access to self-sufficient and self-sustaining mutual help systems. Far from it! In reality, in the face of the almost complete absence of the philanthropic sector regarding this population, we add the almost non-existence of foundations issued from and managed by members of the aboriginal community.

The extreme rarity of foundations established *for* and *by* aboriginals is a sufficient argument in and of itself to pique the intellectual curiosity of researchers on the few existing cases. More fundamentally, it is enough to be interested in them for what they represent: a practical expression of First Nations autodetermination. While still at its very beginning, the constitution of a philanthropic system founded on aboriginal culture and leadership represents a break from the paternalism that characterizes the mechanisms of traditional help. Against the solutions thought up and imported externally, the emergence of foundations managed by aboriginals represents a taking charge, both financially and professionally, of the social problems that directly affect this population.

Up until now, the interest of research has mainly been oriented towards the study of non-aboriginal foundations drawn towards or already involved in the support of causes that touch this population. This is what we notice, for example, with initiatives such as the [declaration of action](#) launched by the [Circle on aboriginal philanthropy and peoples of Canada](#), which was signed by over 90 foundations who wished to demonstrate their involvement in the reconciliation. This initiative mainly aims at the development of an understanding between the Canadian grantmaking philanthropic sector and the reality of First Nations. It consists of facilitating a relationship between the funders of potential aboriginal foundations and those working for this population. At the moment, aboriginal philanthropy is directly drawn to the establishment of

a reconciliation process based on respect and reciprocity (Scott-Enns, 2017). It is thus addressed, first and foremost, to non-aboriginal grantmaking organizations.

What about the place occupied by aboriginal foundations in the development of First Nations, or even in the reappropriation of their history? What do they allow to be accomplished within these communities? Do they bring about innovative forms of philanthropic practices? What challenges do these organizations face in the pursuit of their social mission?

In order to answer these questions, we interviewed Marie-Claude Cleary, the newly appointed director of the [New Pathways Foundation](http://nouveauxsentiers.com/en/). This foundation, created in 2010, is located in the Wendake community in Quebec. They work towards “the improvement of living conditions of First Nations, by supporting initiatives that aim at the personal and human development of individuals within their community” (<http://nouveauxsentiers.com/en/>) Our exchange with Mrs. Cleary took the form of a semi-directed interview which took place in a cozy cafe of Quebec City. This exchange gave us enough data to discuss several of the most atypical particularities of the Foundation’s activities. Our article presents four of these particularities.

Needs as a driver for growth

From its beginning, even the New Pathways Foundation’s creation process didn't follow the usual trajectory of the establishment of a foundation. Generally, the creation of a grantmaking foundation is the making of wealthy people who wish to act on a question or an issue considered socially pertinent or on a cause that they cherish personally.

The New Pathways Foundation is in no way the product of a private fortune dedicated to an ethical purpose. It was founded in reaction to the urgent needs expressed by the First Nations of Quebec, to which an answer was imperative. Mrs. Cleary reminds us that the idea behind the creation of a foundation emerged from a regional strategy whose objective is to fight against poverty and social exclusion, supported by the will of First Nations’ chiefs in the face of the alarming statements regarding the living conditions of First Nations, and, more particularly, First Nations youth. In April 2010, the First Nations of Quebec and Labrador Health and Social Services Commission (FNQLHSSC), in collaboration with three founding members (Andrew Delisle, Aurélien Gill and John Martin), created the New Pathways Foundation, an entity at the service of Quebec’s First Nations. Even if the foundation still receives support from the FNQLHSSC, it is now independent and governed by a board of directors composed of both community and First Nations organizations representatives.

The founding act of the foundation stems from a feeling of urgency. Mrs. Cleary indicates that the chiefs proceeded in a backwards fashion compared to the norm, in the sense that the foundation began their activities while having limited funds. They choose a progressive development model: *“and it is a big challenge because we have no base funding. When you have recurrent funds, you then work on the best ways to use that money. For us, in contrast, we stated the profound needs and decided to throw ourselves at the problem without having any certainty of recurrent or stable funding”*. On several points, be it concerning the establishment of programs or the diversification of its funding sources,

it was obvious, through Mrs. Cleary's statements, that they were operating under a "work in progress" perspective. This is to say that their programs, without necessarily being in an exploratory phase, are implanted on a relatively limited scale. The goal is to spread them, even, generalize them step by step and to explore other avenues for new initiatives.

Individual donation fundraising and the revitalization of a philanthropic culture

The Foundation is thus on the hunt for funds. In addition to the support of the FNQLHSSC, the Foundation currently receives help from aboriginal and non-aboriginal donors: First Nations organizations, several religious communities, large foundations as well discretionary funds coming from both levels of government. One of the great challenges of the Foundation's fundraising efforts is to develop individual as well as planned donations. Mrs. Cleary admits that there is great lacking regarding individual donations. In the upcoming years, she hopes to remedy the situation in order to ensure recurring funding that will allow her to offer more accessible programs that are offered on a more regular basis. If she considers that "*philanthropy is an integral part of aboriginals and their traditions - with the sharing and mutual help that are so important in the territories*", she believes that "*philanthropy must reclaim its place among the First Nations of today*".

Therefore, among its many objectives, the Foundation gives itself as a mandate to contribute to the restoration of a philanthropic culture among First Nations. Catalyzing individual donations from aboriginal communities represents much more than an additional source of income. It represents both an individual and collective empowerment regarding the well-being of our youth: "*We, as First Nations, must be the first ones to make a donation to the Foundation even if it isn't a significant one. We must invest in the cause, believe in the mission of the Foundation and be the first actors of change. The Chiefs wanted this nice Foundation, now the communities have to follow suit*".

Cultural recognition, a pledge of mutual trust

The work led by the *Circle on philanthropy and aboriginal peoples of Canada* (2010) revealed that beyond good intentions, important misunderstandings persist on the side of Foundations' who get involved in the collective effort of Canada-aboriginal relations, especially regarding their responsibilities and which attitude to adopt. Notwithstanding their good intentions, there exists certain patterns in the philanthropic sector that do not necessarily facilitate the integration of aboriginal actors in the process of defining the needs and finding solutions¹. On the other hand, aboriginal foundations such as New Pathways have a headstart on that level, which undoubtedly gives them a strategic advantage to establish connections with their beneficiaries. Mrs. Cleary explains what is particular in the case of an aboriginal foundation: "*I believe that there is recognition between the aboriginal philanthropic leader and the beneficiary. Awareness of traditional knowledge, needs, difficulties, environment and living conditions creates a strong bond. It represents a natural understanding and mutual trust*".

¹ Scott-Enns (2017) eloquently expresses this risk of incompatibility between foundations and First Nations' desire for autonomy. In his opinion "even if we want to practice respect and reciprocity, the paternalism of the power dynamic in the traditional granting environment does not facilitate true reciprocal relationships between equal partners".

In the field, the social and cultural embedding of the Foundation is expressed through the care of offering “culturally pertinent” programs that are specifically designed for First Nations youth. These latter are less inclined to sign up to the other camps. The lack of presence of aboriginal youth is partially attributable to a lack of financial means, but is also due, more fundamentally, to a certain incompatibility of public camps with this class of youth for whom the question of identity development is essential. As Mrs. Cleary observes: “*they could participate in the youth camps offered by different foundations but they don’t, or rarely do. The youth must recognize themselves in the service that is being offered to them*”. By offering a camp specifically designed for them, the Foundation’s program offers one that is more adapted to reach aboriginal youth. They place them in an environment where they can build relationships with other youths originating from aboriginal communities from the four corners of Quebec.

This cultural recognition between philanthropic leaders and aboriginal youth represents an essential asset to establish partnerships. The reason being that this recognition goes hand in hand with a certain comprehension of the realities faced by aboriginals, which awards them with a significant strategic advantage: “*I spoke of recognition, but there is also a knowledge of the terrain, all of this is essential to working together*”. Thus, the bond of trust was already established, the aboriginal Foundation can serve as a vector for the pooling of philanthropic resources and the elaboration of programs to be offered. This is what happened, for example, with the First Nations leadership camp. The New Pathways Foundation partnered up with the “Breakfast Club of Canada”, a non-aboriginal organization, in order to build an aboriginal version of already existing leadership camps. This form of partnership has a double advantage as it allows to pool more resources, but also because it eases the way for non-aboriginal foundations to overcome these cultural barriers. In this way, the New Pathways Foundation aspires to become a reference in aboriginal philanthropy. In order to do so, the director counts on increasing the exchanges between aboriginal and non-aboriginal foundations and, in a near future, making new alliances within the philanthropic network: “*we have a lot to learn from the experience of the philanthropic sector. And this intention, this will of reconciliation and action towards First Nations from the philanthropic sector are part of the profound foundations of systemic change. I simply believe that an exchange dynamic between the actors of the philanthropic network and the aboriginal philanthropic leaders is a winning combination for the beneficiaries. We have to learn from each other*”.

Holistic vision and socio-systemic changes

The Foundation operates from a very particular conception of its theological mission. The organization’s mission is not limited to solving a precise problem experienced by aboriginal communities. It is more about globally transforming their conditions of existence according to the most urgent needs. The Foundation’s intervention is not connected to the advancement of a particular social cause - , generally understood as an area of intervention that is quite compartmentalized-, but endorses a societal project on the national scale, that of “*seeing autonomous and auto-determined communities*”. The pursuit of this “supra-objective” can be seen through an action philosophy that we could qualify, in reference to Mauss, as a total social intervention in the sense that the allocation of resources aims at improving the conditions of the collective as a whole.

The holistic approach of New Pathways explains their decision to focus on educational, individual and social development of the younger generations. The support of Youth is not the Foundation’s cause per se, but it

serves as an enabler for social transformation in order to build the future autonomy of communities and to favor the reappropriation of their identity. *“Our vision, explains the new director of the Foundation, is to see auto-determined communities. All of the programs are developed in this direction. So, when we propose a project like the leadership camp, one of the essential objectives is to work on our youth’s self-esteem and self-confidence with regard to their cultural identity. What we are looking for are youths who will become leaders, who will have more confidence in themselves, who will have a strong identity, and that is across all of our programs, everything that is culture, identity and belonging”*. We can very well see that the Foundation hopes to support social changes on the macrosociological level, which have repercussions going well beyond the population that directly benefits from the financing and programs. Within this holistic conception of their social impact, youth represent the keystone allowing to bring about sustainable changes in the conditions of existence of First Nations communities. As Mrs. Cleary specifies: *“We don’t want to just put bandages on the wounds, we wanted to heal them. I have the profound conviction that we are helping our youth and communities in a direct way in the now, but in a much more global and strategic objective of socio-systemic changes”*.

Putting in place a strategic approach which acts on the systems is a desire that is quite common among philanthropic actors. What is innovative here, is the way they proceed to put into effect the anticipated structural changes. For New Pathways, the socio-systemic changes must be brought forth in an intergenerational perspective. By supporting youth in their initiatives, whichever the domain, the organization is preparing them to fulfill their ambitions and, eventually, serve as models of success for the next generations. For Mrs. Cleary, *“it is an entire generation of youth that we are helping to acquire the skills and wealth to be the next actors of change”*. In this way, the Foundation is remedying to the accumulated effects of a chronic public underfunding and is creating the conditions that will allow the youth to grow both on the personal and social levels². To sum it up, the objective is to reinforce leadership so that the young generations of today become sources of inspiration for those of tomorrow. This is how they aspire to break the intergenerational transmission of lost hope generated by a colonial past that still weighs heavy today, and to provide rays of hope for better days ahead.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we propose a timid answer to our original question. In the light of the New Pathways characteristics, are we authorized to interpret the presence of this aboriginal foundation as a practical expression of social governance? We would indeed tend to think so, for the simple reason that the Foundation explicitly claims for First Nations access to autodetermination. However, deeper still, the latter shows that an aboriginal foundation can reveal itself to be a relevant actor for the development of culturally adapted programs and identifying the needs that will allow for the improvement of living conditions for the whole of the concerned community.

² When it allocates funds, the Foundation plays a lot between these two aspects, between the individual and the collective. On the individual plan, the Foundation focuses directly on troubled youth and fulfills specific needs to support academic perseverance: *“our programs help youths pay for a sport team sign-up, for school supplies, to fulfill primary and essential needs to pursue their studies, to help a student complete an internship, to help a youth live out a unique personal development experience”*. On the other hand, the Foundation also works towards the collective development of youths. For example, Mrs. Cleary tells how one school launched a basketball team but had no equipment. The Foundation stepped in to lend a hand by financing the purchase of the jerseys *“it is good for identity and a feeling of belonging”*, she explains.

While there is no doubt that the Foundation presents itself as a place of governance that elaborated solutions internally, an astronomical quantity of resources is necessary to give life to the project that they are pursuing and to reverse the problems connected to the cumulative effects of colonialism. The organization cannot hope to impose itself as an instrument for collective autonomy and solve significant problems without a convergence of efforts. We have touched on the fact that the Foundation needs increased funding, but one that is also stable and recurring to allow for the viability of their signature programs on a regular basis and on a larger scale; which they hope to offer through their multiple and diverse financial partnerships as well as the cultivation of individual and planned donations. The financial and professional resources stemming from the philanthropic network are in no way to be ignored either. The Foundation definitely needs for their project to be transmitted and carried by a multitude of other actors. It is thus by waking and canalizing solidarities from every corner that the Foundation's main initiatives, currently implemented in a more exploratory "*social innovation laboratory*" setting, be institutionalized on a national scale. This condition seems to be a precondition to achieve the systemic changes that will put an end to the detrimental historic dynamics.

Resources

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For Further

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