



An Indigenous-philanthropic partnership that didn't work, and what we can learn from it

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Introduction

Most of the time we share the success stories in philanthropy, not the failures. Yet mistakes are great teachers. In my ongoing exploration of what makes good partnership, and how philanthropy can support communities that have experienced marginalization, I was intrigued to come across a written account of a partnership breakdown between one foundation and several Indigenous-led organizations in the northwest United States.

The experience of urban Native American organizations with the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAf) was publicly documented and debated, via parallel articles in the journal *Responsive Philanthropy* (Maher 2006; Stauber 2006) and later summarized in a review of the foundation's work (FSG 2011). This article briefly presents the case and explores three areas that can support or pose challenges in Indigenous-philanthropic partnerships: fundamental values and approach to giving; quality of relationships; and use of power.

Case: Urban Native American organizations and the Northwest Area Foundation

When this story began, Northwest Area Foundation (NWAf) had been providing grants for many years to support development and wellbeing in Indigenous communities. In 2003, NWAf sought out urban Native American leaders from 5 cities in the northwestern US to begin exploring the development of a large-scale, long-term funded initiative. The Foundation was guided at that time by new strategic orientations to make bigger, bolder investments to reduce poverty and to see themselves as partners in change initiatives, not just funders. NWAf asked Indigenous organizations in several cities to engage their respective community members and jointly produce a strategic plan to reduce poverty, which could then receive funding. Elders in some cities were concerned that the initiative might turn out to be the "same old story": "An outside intervener comes to the community and mines the community for deeply personal cultural information while guardedly offering large pools of money, only to disappear when the community is not good enough in the eyes of the intervener" (Maher 2006, 15). Leaders believed that the funding would be substantial, however, and decided that it was worth it to accept the invitation. The foundation awarded small contracts to

Indigenous organizations to convene community members and identify priority issues and action strategies in each city. In 2005, after many interactions between the parties across the region, the final strategic plan was presented to NWAFF who then declined it for funding. The foundation originally framed the story as a decision not to support a grant request because, simply, “the proposed plan did not meet our standards for funding” (Stauber 2006, 1).

Although one of the foundations’ guiding principles was that “initiatives have a greater chance of success if they are owned by communities that will benefit from them” (Stauber 2006, 6), it is clear that this principle was not followed. For example, at one point during the consultation phase, NWAFF suddenly expanded the number of communities involved from five to 30 cities (FSG 2011). In addition, NWAFF, not Indigenous communities, decided that the same urban poverty reduction strategies should apply to all 30 highly diverse cities. NWAFF also directed the process by promoting “a practice of community visioning, which was based on ... looking toward the future, when it may have been more appropriate to ask urban Indian community members to build their vision of the future on an appreciation of their strong past and resilient traditions” (Stauber 2006, 9). One of the Indigenous leaders involved reported that they felt the coalition was aiming at a moving target because NWAFF failed to clarify specific granting or evaluation standards that could have assisted everyone to understand expectations. The Indigenous partners believed they had been empowered by NWAFF to define poverty and solutions for themselves. Later, however, they felt that their communities’ culturally specific understanding of poverty, which included culture, education and health in addition to household revenues and employment rates, was a reason why NWAFF refused to fund their initiatives. There was a deep sense of betrayal for the communities and leaders involved. The “same old story” had, indeed, repeated itself.

The relationship breakdown was made public in 2006 through point-counterpoint articles, one by an Indigenous leader and the other by the foundation’s CEO (Maher 2006; Stauber 2006). At that time, NWAFF defended its actions. The story could have ended there. Instead, the foundation board saw an opportunity for learning and convened a task force to study what went wrong, resulting in recommendations to make significant internal changes that would facilitate future partnerships (FSG 2011).

In 2008, NWAFF presented its new practices of “honesty, clarity, and respect for the land and people” based on learning regarding “(1) the need for cultural competency within the foundation, (2) the importance of clear communications, and (3) the need to set clear expectations with grant recipients” (Philanthropy Northwest 2012, 22). The foundation also took steps to re-engage with the urban Native American communities and organizations, “demonstrating greater respect and a true sense of equality in the process” (FSG 2011, 22). A large-scale poverty reduction project was never funded for these organizations, but some of the relationships have healed. NWAFF has come to be seen as an important ally of Indigenous organizations in the region, not just because of grants, but because of the additional supports it offers, such as introducing Indigenous organizations to other funders and helping to bring in new financial partners. The executive director of the Native

American Youth and Family Center, who wrote the critical article in 2006, formally honoured the foundation during a 2010 community ceremony to recognize NWAF's ability to learn from its mistakes and act in allyship with Indigenous communities (FSG 2011).

Addressing challenges in Indigenous-philanthropic partnerships

This case echoes many of the challenges experienced by other funders and Indigenous organizations. Yet many actors working in this sphere seem to be motivated to overcome the hurdles that emerge, “looking for a collaborative, multilateral relationship where all parties are committed to learning and growing” (The Circle 2010, 4). Based on this case as well as a review of the literature, I briefly explore three areas in which barriers have been encountered and for which solutions have been recommended to strengthen Indigenous philanthropic partnerships: fundamental values and approach to philanthropy; quality of relationships; and use of power.

I. Fundamental values and approach to giving

In philanthropic partnerships, “values undergird the work” (Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010b, 8). The divergent cultural viewpoints from which parties approach an initiative are often responsible for tensions or failure to advance (One Fire Development, Inc. n.d.; Berry 1999). In the case of NWAF, its Task Force found that “the Foundation staff had one set of plans and values in their heads and the urban Indian communities had a totally different set of plans and values” (FSG 2011, 21). Because “values within Indigenous communities...change how problems are understood and solutions reached” (Kline 2014, 44), funders often have to face and shift their own assumptions, such as NWAF's economic definition of poverty, in order to meaningfully engage with Indigenous partners.

In addition, Indigenous concepts of giving and sharing run counter to dominant views of philanthropy as a linear transfer of resources to those in need. Reciprocity is expressed differently but embedded deeply in most Indigenous cultures (Jamieson quoted in Sub Cuc and Camp 2014). “Much more complex than a two-way exchange of favors” (Jamieson quoted in Sub Cuc and Camp 2014), reciprocal relationships are holistic, expressing respect for one another as well as for the community and natural world that sustain life.

Since all life is considered equal, albeit different, all life must be respected as we are in reciprocal relations with them. ...There is a sense of commitment to the people in many Indigenous societies. Inherent in this commitment to the people is the understanding of the reciprocity of life and accountability to one another (Hart 2010, 7,9).

Both the giver and the receiver are honoured through acts of sharing and giving (First Nations Development Institute, Berry, and Adamson 2000; Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010b; Philanthropy Northwest 2012), and many Native American cultures also view this honour extending to families and future generations (Berry 1999). Generosity can be expressed in many

Indigenous cultures regardless of a person's social or economic status (First Nations Development Institute et al. 2000).

The relevance of reciprocity for modern philanthropic practice is to recognize how “each side provides their resources to bring about sustainable and culturally sensitive change” (Cunningham quoted in Sub Cuc and Camp 2014). Since financial exchange is usually given prominence in philanthropic partnerships, it may be asked what funding recipients have to give in return. One of the key community resources held by Indigenous groups is their knowledge, and mutual partnerships will find ways to recognize its value (Sub Cuc and Camp 2014; Lavallee 2009; Gordon 2007). Even further, partnerships can acknowledge the two-way learning process that inevitably takes place in any partnership (Smyllie and Scaife 2010a). One of principle adopted by a group of philanthropic and Indigenous organizations is that “No participant is without wealth that should be shared with each other, so our collective wealth will resolve our collective poverty” (Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010b, 1; Philanthropy Northwest 2012, 29).

II. Quality of relationships

Reciprocity is relational, and one hallmark of successful Indigenous-philanthropic partnerships is mutual respect (Smyllie and Scaife 2010a; Formsma 2013). The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada believe that philanthropy can be part of reconciliation, building and healing “right relationship” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Brascoupe-Peters et al. 2015). Colonial history, however, has left many negative images of Indigenous people that undermine equitable relationships. Indigenous people have been variously viewed over time as a population to be conquered, as dependents in need of protection, and as individuals to be assimilated in the dominant society (O'Brien 2015). Today, “there is no lack of stories about poverty and dependence on government in Native communities. Most news reports describe Native peoples as recipients, rather than givers” (First Nations Development Institute, Berry, and Adamson 2000, 19; The Circle 2010). A study of Australian funders found that many had heard comments such as “[you] ‘may as well throw your money out the window’ than fund Indigenous communities (Smyllie and Scaife 2010b, 13; Scaife 2006, 15). Such sentiment reflects colonial views of Indigenous people as unable or unwilling to receive assistance (O'Brien 2015; Maher 2006). Similarly, public discourse often describes the problems of Indigenous communities described as “intractable,” or unable to be managed (for example, McMahon 2014).

Entering terrain where success is far from guaranteed can be intimidating for grantmaking organizations (Philanthropy Northwest 2012). A study of large US foundations granting to Indigenous organizations found that risk was of primary concern in their decisions (Hicks 2008, 238; Foundation Native American Roundtables 2010b). Engaging in productive relationships with Indigenous communities, however, requires funders to leave a large measure of cynicism and egoism at the door: “There are a lot of unfulfilled human development needs ... that preclude the indulgence of self-pity. Do your work in a spirit of humility and partnership. And remember, true philanthropy is not about you, or your organization, or your upcoming annual report” (Exner-Pirot

2015). In fact, strong relationships are a way to minimize risk in philanthropic partnerships. Getting to know each other is a prominent method through which foundations gather information about potential grantees in Indigenous communities (Hicks 2008).

Relationships are deepened with time. The literature overwhelmingly recommends sustained, long-term commitments between Indigenous and philanthropic partners for the best outcomes (Scott-Enns 2017; Formsma 2013; Scaife 2006; Sub Cuc and Camp 2014; Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010a; One Fire Development, Inc. n.d.; Smyllie and Scaife 2010a; The Circle 2010). A study of Australian funders found that those who were new to Indigenous grantmaking expected results quickly, while those experienced in the field understood the long term nature of the work (Scaife 2006). Not only does a wider time frame allow for greater results to develop, it also deepens knowledge about the community and its challenges, “giving 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 (Formsma 2013, 109).

III. The use of power

Many who work within philanthropic organizations want develop strong relationships and contribute to positive outcomes in Indigenous communities but still struggle with creating equitable partnerships. “Some may see it as relinquishing control. In fact it entails sharing power” (Smyllie and Scaife 2010a, 16). In grantmaking, the power imbalance is exacerbated by the transfer of financial resources (Gordon 2007): “Indigenous grantees are ever aware of who makes the decisions for resources they desperately need, and it is not them” (Scott-Enns 2017).

This case of NWAF and urban Indigenous organizations highlights how the prospect of substantial financial resources for underprivileged communities led Indigenous groups to become involved in a process about which they had serious concerns. In addition, NWAF exerted its power in a number of ways, unilaterally deciding which cities would be involved, expanding the geographic scope mid-way, excluding some Indigenous community influencers from discussions, and ultimately refusing to fund the strategic plan created by Indigenous organizations (FSG 2011). Too often philanthropists have entered partnerships with pre-determined solutions or processes (Sub Cuc and Camp 2014; Exner-Pirot 2015):

It is all too easy for us as funders to assume, rightly or wrongly, that we are knowledgeable about a certain group or project. It is too easy for us to think that we understand one community because we have worked with another community that appeared to be similar... Grantseekers know, better than a funder ever could, about the reality of their day-to-day operations, the community in which they work, and the needs they are trying to address. (Gordon 2007, 13)

The power imbalance in philanthropic partnerships can be mitigated through “an empowerment approach based on the right of indigenous peoples to determine the nature and use of resources that

come into their communities” (Tierney 2015, 16). Key concepts in the literature on effective funding partnerships include: “funding follows, doesn’t lead” (Hardy and Peachey 2015, 20) and “work with, rather than for,” Indigenous communities (Exner-Pirot 2015). Self-determination and sovereignty, therefore, are not just principles to be applied by Indigenous groups in governing themselves, they are also values that philanthropic organizations can support as a “cornerstone of success” in their partnerships (The Circle 2010, 24; The Circle et al. 2017; Indigenous Women’s Fund n.d.).

To take steps towards reconciliation, Indigenous leaders and communities “need to be included in the decision-making over funding priorities and the governance of grantmaking processes” (Scott-Enns 2017). A basic way that foundations can demonstrate the sharing of power is by providing funding with greater flexibility and fewer restrictions, to be used in the way the community believes best meets its needs (Hardy and Peachey 2015; The Circle 2010; Scaife 2006; Sub Cuc and Camp 2014; Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010b; The Circle et al. 2017). Many Indigenous organizations struggle with a lack of core operating funds (Hardy and Peachey 2015; Scott-Enns 2017) although the majority of philanthropic investment available to Indigenous communities is in the form of project grants support (Mukai and Lawrence 2011; Tierney 2015). Furthermore, in the US, “a substantial amount of funding identified as benefiting Natives is awarded to non-Native-controlled organizations” (Mukai and Lawrence 2011, 10), which runs counter to the principles that Indigenous communities know best what they need and are best-placed to implement meaningful solutions.

Power can also be shared during implementation and evaluation on an initiative (The Circle et al. 2017). Rather than imposing their theories of change, funders are encouraged to “be willing to recast what success looks like” by working with the community partner’s conception of goals and success (Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010b). Often results will come in increments over a longer period of time than in non-Indigenous initiatives, requiring both patience and evaluation methods adapted to the initiative (Exner-Pirot 2015; Formsma 2013; Smyllie and Scaife 2010a).

Conclusion

Creating lasting, meaningful Indigenous-philanthropic partnerships requires a cultural shift for people used to the dominant transactional model of philanthropy. There is a subtlety to true reciprocity that can be supported by official policies and knowledge within Indigenous and philanthropic organizations, but can only be fully realized in practice: “The nature and form of our relationships will promote truth and transparency as we learn and grow together” (Foundation-Native American Roundtables 2010b). It is impossible to get everything right when creating partnerships but bringing the values of listening and learning to every stage will allow for growth, as Itoah Scott-Enns, a member of the Tlicho Nation and Director of the Arctic Funders Collaborative states: “We might make mistakes as we evolve, but we need to trust in the strength of our relationships with Indigenous partners. If the trust and respect is there, they will let us know when we need to realign ourselves” (Scott-Enns 2017).

The practice of philanthropy could be enriched and expanded as more philanthropic partnerships are developed with Indigenous organizations and as more space is created for Indigenous leadership in philanthropy. Increasing equitable alliances and sharing of resources may even contribute to the well-being of all communities. According to leaders in Indigenous philanthropy in Canada, “there is also a real opportunity to further integrate Indigenous approaches to community caring and sharing to increase resiliency across all of Canadian society” (The Circle et al. 2017, 33).

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