

Place-Based Philanthropy and Democratic Governance

Community Foundations, Social Innovation, and Rural Atlantic Canada

JOSHUA BARRETT · UNIVERSITY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND



Atlantic Canada: Context & Community Foundations



Atlantic Canada – New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island – is home to **~2.4 million people**, predominantly rural. **44% of Newfoundland and Labrador's population** lives in the St. John's CMA (Statistics Canada, 2021).

The region has **10 community foundations** (6 NB, 2 NS, 1 PEI, 1 NL) – independent, non-governmental organizations governed by local boards that steward endowments, distribute grants, and act as social economy conveners.

A Region of Generosity and Resource Dependency



Resource Economy

Atlantic Canada accounts for **~75% of Canada's fish production**. Primary industries include hydroelectricity, forestry, and mining – creating vulnerability during market volatility.

High Philanthropic Culture

Among the **highest rates of charitable giving** in Canada. Rural residents show strong place attachment, expressed through volunteerism and donations (Petric et al., 2026).

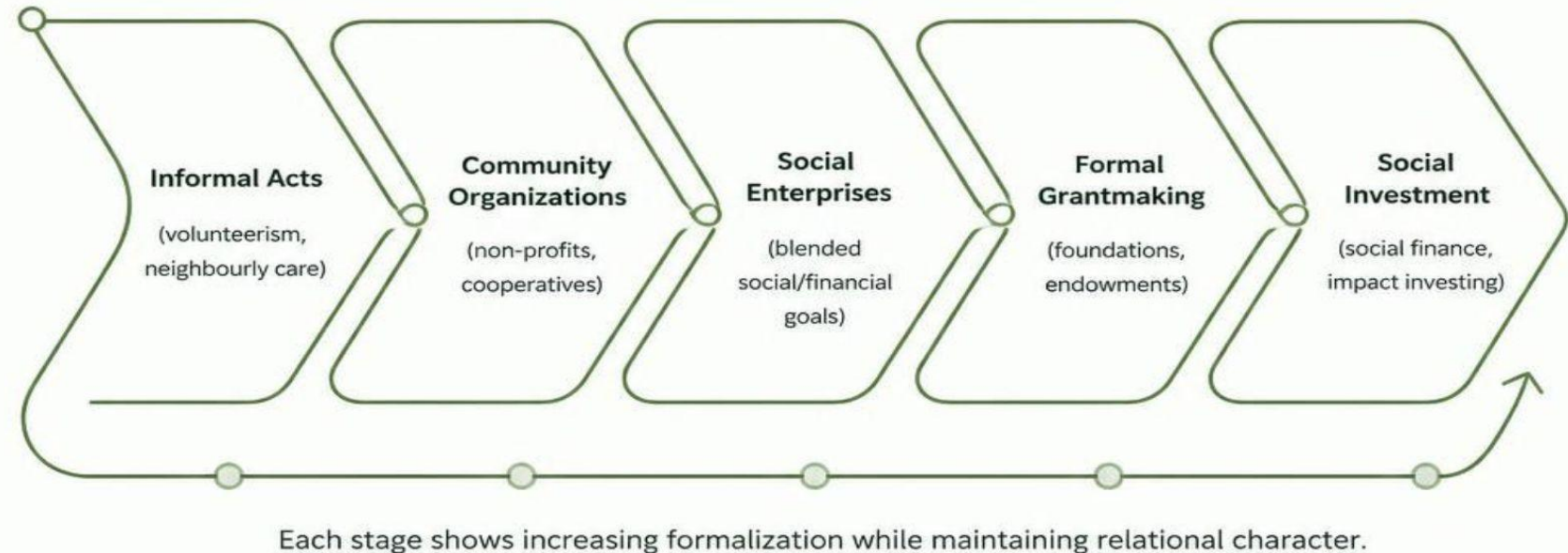
The Core Question

Does rural generosity reflect **cultural disposition** – or a response to **longstanding underdevelopment** and limited state/market investment?

Philanthropy as a Spectrum

This study frames philanthropy broadly

- from **informal care and volunteerism** to **formal grantmaking and social investment** – including non-profits, charities, social enterprises, and cooperatives.
- Philanthropy is understood as **inherently relational**, involving donors, recipients, institutions, and communities (Lefevre & Fontan, 2017).
- The framing also acknowledges **Indigenous perspectives** emphasizing reciprocal relationships and intergenerational responsibility – contrasting Western charity models (Pearson, 2022; Saifer, 2021).



Study Design & Methodology

Semi-Structured Interviews

Five ~60-minute interviews via videoconference.

Thematic Analysis

Deductive and inductive coding by the research team.

Participant Recruitment

Representatives from each Atlantic province and nationally.

Document Scan

Review strategic plans, reports, and websites of 10 foundations.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with foundation representatives from each Atlantic province and Community Foundations of Canada. Analysis combined deductive codes (social finance, innovation, strategic planning) with inductive themes (place-based context, power, equity, legitimacy). Interview findings were contextualized through a scan of publicly available materials from all ten Atlantic foundations.



Innovation Beyond Financial Instruments

"Innovation for us isn't about new money. It's about changing how decisions get made." – Participant 102325

Process Over Products

Innovation meant **redesigning grant processes**, participatory decision-making, and shifting authority closer to communities – not new financial tools.

Emerging from Constraint

"We innovate because we don't have many other options."
Limited funding and capacity drove iterative, workaround approaches.

Relinquishing Control

Participatory approaches reposition foundations as **facilitators, not sole decision-makers**. **"The hardest part isn't the money, it's giving up control."**

Place as Constraint and Resource



Geography, scale, and history **actively structure** how philanthropic organizations understand their roles and responsibilities – place is not merely background context.

Relational Density

"Everybody knows everybody here." Dense networks build trust but increase reputational risk in grantmaking decisions.

Peripheral Positioning

"Most of the big conversations happen somewhere else." National programs often require local reinterpretation to fit rural capacity.

Historical Traditions

"People here have always helped each other. Philanthropy just gave it a formal structure." Mutual aid predates formal philanthropic infrastructure.

Narratives, Legitimacy and Power

Participants constructed legitimacy through **storytelling** rather than quantitative metrics – recounting community relationships, local histories of mutual aid, and individual stories of need and response (Dahlstrom, 2014).

Narratives resonated with donors and communities, reinforcing **relational, place-based legitimacy**. However, participants acknowledged storytelling can **obscure uneven outcomes** and make it difficult to communicate failure to boards and donors.

Whose Voices?

Participatory approaches require **cultural change** – not just new processes – to genuinely redistribute decision-making authority.

Accountability Tensions

Dense social ties **strengthen trust** but can **reinforce existing power structures** and limit contestation.

Forthcoming Volume: Philanthropy in Atlantic Canada

An edited volume (~70,000 words, **Winter 2026**, PhiLab Atlantic Research Hub) examining philanthropy's role in community resilience and sustainability across 10 chapters.

01

Mapping the Ecosystem

Network of grant exchanges, wealth transfer, and regional disparities.

03

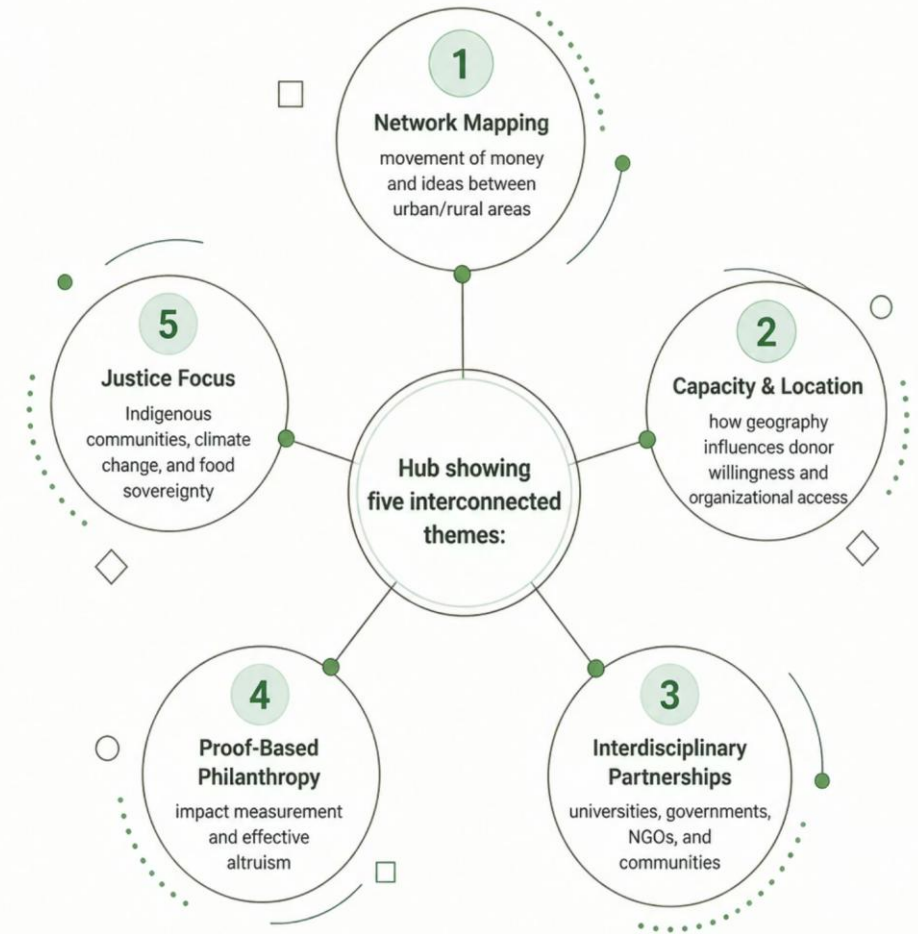
Innovation & Impact

Social enterprise, rural health care, grantmaking evaluation, and future directions.

02

Indigenous & Climate Perspectives

Indigenous generosity, climate adaptation, food sovereignty, and environmental NGO funding.



Key Contributions and Takeaways

Governance Actors



Community foundations are not neutral intermediaries – they **structure local governance** and shape political and economic possibility in rural communities.

Innovation as Adaptation



Social innovation here means **institutional adaptation and collaborative governance** – not disruptive market solutions.

Place-Based Perspective



Rural philanthropic institutions offer a critical site for understanding how **legitimacy, power, and public responsibility** are negotiated in local development.

