

REAL INNOVATION IN ATLANTIC CANADA MEANS CHANGING WHO HAS A SAY — PURSUING A NEW GOVERNANCE

WHAT WE FOUND

When community foundations in Atlantic Canada talk about innovation, they are not talking about funding products or programs. They are talking about who gets to make decisions. The most meaningful changes in this sector involve redesigning how foundations relate to their communities: who has a voice, who sets priorities, and who decides where money goes. This kind of change is slow, and more relationship-driven than typical models suggest, which is a strength, not a weakness.

KEY FINDINGS

Changes in governance is the innovation: Participants described innovation as changes to processes and relationships, not new products or programs. The question shifts from "what new thing can we fund?" to "how do we make better decisions together?"

Foundations are redesigning how they give grants: Many foundations are experimenting with participatory grantmaking to reduce competition among applicants, encourage organizations to collaborate instead of competing, and give community members a direct role in deciding which projects get funded.

Doing more with less is what drives creativity: Tight budgets and small teams mean foundations have had to find workarounds — running small pilots, partnering with national programs to test ideas at no cost, and rethinking how existing resources could be used differently.

Sharing power is the hardest part: Moving decision-making authority closer to communities requires real cultural change inside foundations. It means letting go and being open to the ideas of others.

What works elsewhere doesn't always work here: Innovation frameworks designed for large, urban, or centralized organizations do not translate to small, rural, relationship-based contexts. Trust and fit matter more than speed or scale.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE?

If you measure innovation only by programs or dollars, you will miss most of what is actually happening. The biggest changes happen in how decisions are made—not what products are offered. Reporting frameworks need to catch up.

Relationship-building and culture change are legitimate investments. Helping a foundation shift how it makes decisions takes time and skilled facilitation, not just grant dollars.

Rural foundations need time, not deadlines designed for larger organizations. Participatory processes are slower by design. Short timelines and rapid-delivery reporting work against the kind of innovation this research describes.

WHO CAN ACT

- **Funders:** Redefine what counts as innovation. Fund governance development and relationship-building — not just programs. Count process changes as evidence of impact.
- **Funders & Governments:** Build in time for slow innovation. Give communities the time they need to work together. Change grant deadlines and reporting rules so collaborative, relationship-based projects aren't punished for moving more slowly.
- **Governments:** Design national programs with rural organizations, not for them. Co-develop innovation programs with rural foundations rather than adapting urban models.
- **NGOs & FOUNDATIONS:** Start the conversation about decision-making power. Ask who currently decides how grants are awarded — and who doesn't. Participatory grantmaking can begin at a small scale.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The full publication titled "Place-based Social Innovation and Community Foundations in Rural Atlantic Canada" can be accessed online at <https://ruraldev.ca/philanthropyatlantic/>

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