



Where You Are Shapes Everything: In Atlantic Canada, Where You Live Changes Everything About How Giving Works

OVERVIEW

Community foundations in Atlantic Canada don't just work in their communities; they are shaped by them. The geography, history, social networks, and regional identity of Atlantic Canada don't just provide context for philanthropic work; they actively define what is possible, legitimate, and appropriate. Place shapes how foundations operate, how they make decisions, and what kinds of innovations can take root.

THE SAME CONDITIONS HOLD FOUNDATIONS BACK:

Distance from national networks · small budgets · little say in national decisions · limited connections to larger investors

AND GIVE FOUNDATIONS THEIR GREATEST STRENGTHS:

Deep community trust · long tradition of helping each other · knowledge of local people and history · personal relationships that no outside funder can replicate

KEY FINDINGS

- **Tight communities build trust but create pressure at the same time:** When everyone knows everyone, foundations can coordinate quickly and build strong working relationships. But it also means that saying no to a grant request can damage a friendship or a community relationship that goes back decades.
- **Atlantic Canada is often left out of the big national conversations:** Participants described consistently missing out on the capital and connections that foundations in larger cities take for granted.
- **Place works in two directions at once:** Small communities and rural geography create real barriers, but they also give foundations strengths that larger, centralized organizations simply don't have.
- **Helping each other here goes back long before formal charities existed:** Community self-reliance is deeply rooted in the culture here. Foundations didn't create this tradition; they gave it a formal structure.
- **National programs rarely fit local realities:** Foundations regularly have to rework programs designed for larger, urban organizations to make them fit smaller, rural communities.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN IN PRACTICE

- **Saying no is more complicated here.** In a small community, every funding decision is also a social decision. Grant-making here carries relationship costs that don't exist in larger systems.
- **Local knowledge is not just context; it's expertise.** Foundations here understand their communities in ways no national survey can capture. That knowledge has real value and should be resourced, not bypassed.

- **The region needs its own infrastructure.** Atlantic Canada doesn't have the connecting networks, shared investment pools, and regional support systems that exist in central Canada. Expecting foundations to use the same tools without that support sets them up to fail.

IMPLICATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Who should act: Provincial and federal governments, funders, and foundations.

- **Federal/Funders: Talk to people here before designing programs.** Engage local foundations and community members at the very start to genuinely understand what will and won't work in their communities.
- **Federal/Funders: Build tools designed for the region's scale.** Atlantic Canada needs its own funding networks, not scaled-down versions of systems built for Ontario or BC.
- **Provincial Governments: Recognize the social cost of grant decisions.** Update how success is measured, so that foundations aren't penalized for the relationship costs of working in small, close-knit communities.
- **Foundations: Name and share your local knowledge.** The knowledge of communities, people, and history that foundations carry is an asset. Share it with funders and use it to push back on programs that don't fit.

KEY TAKEAWAY

In Atlantic Canada, place shapes everything about how charitable giving works. Foundations here are not just smaller versions of foundations elsewhere; they operate in a completely different context. Funders and governments that ignore that will keep creating programs that don't fit.

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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