



Summary Report: Northern Manitoba Food, Culture and Community Collaborative: An Exploration of an Innovative Collaborative Model *by Corrie Lynn McDougall*

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A SUMMARY REPORT

Northern Manitoba Food, Culture and Community Collaborative

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The report below summarizes the main elements of the 2016 research report by Corrie Lynn McDougall, following the original article's structure. Of course, syntheses of this nature have inherent limitations, and interested researchers should refer to the report itself for a more fulsome account of the argument.

INTRODUCTION

Philanthropic foundations occupy a distinct position in society (Porter & Kramer, 1999; Anheier & Leat, 2006). Their independence from bottom-line expectations and democratic accountability arguably positions them to support innovation. Trends such as the recent shift from traditional to strategic philanthropy have resulted in foundations taking on a more active role, including in fostering social change. This is especially poignant in light of a more competitive nonprofit funding environment, and in Canada has been manifested through increased efforts at collaboration as a tool to leverage social impact, especially through networks (Elson, 2016; Pearson, 2010). The Northern Manitoba Food Culture and Community Collaborative (NMFCC), a 10-funder partnership, exemplifies the network approach to grant-making. This paper examines NMFCC's funders' collaborative and its potential as a network for change.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Funder collaboration is the process by which public and private actors make formal, sustained commitments to: share decision-making and expertise, develop effective ways to expand the use of limited resources, and

work on policy change (Pearson, 2010). While the use of collaboration – including multisectoral collaboration – is increasing in Canadian philanthropy as elsewhere, the content of such arrangements can vary significantly, while the role of foundations in supporting collaboration is wide-ranging.

To understand philanthropic collaboration, then, conceptual frameworks are needed. There are at least works on the use of nonprofit networks to effect social change: the power of rich networks; the networked nonprofit; and beyond your four walls. First, Anheier and Leat (2006) emphasize the “power of rich networks” in creative philanthropy. Here the emphasis is on the importance of cultivating external relationships as an effective organizational practice. A second work is the networked nonprofit approach articulated by Wei-Skillern and Marciano (2008). It advocates forming long-term networks of like-minded stakeholders in order to mobilize resources and activities to achieve maximal social impact, rather than solely scaling up existing programs internally. Finally, Crutchfield and Grant (2012) argue that the most successful nonprofits of any size mobilize forces “beyond their four walls”. Here the emphasis is on supporter involvement as well as forming networks of like-minded organizations. Together, these three complementary works encourage the development of deep, long-term relationships with like-minded organizations in a philanthropic organization’s external environment.

METHODOLOGY AND CASE SELECTION

NMFCC offers an example of a strategic network approach to effect social change. This paper uses an inductive case-based methodology, focusing on the NMFCC as a model of funder collaboration. The aim of this approach was to use the exemplar case in theory development. The study includes internal data from NMFCC, including annual reports, meeting notes, budget information, evaluation reports, online publication, and digital media. The author also conducted a total of eight interviews from NMFCC participants: five with funders, two with the host organization, and one with government. Knowledge objectives of the case analysis include the forms of collaboration taking place between foundations and other organizations in the network, as well as the outcomes of the collaboration for participating foundations, nonprofit organizations, and the community.

NMFCC was selected as a case on the basis of the problem area. Specifically, the severity and multidimensional nature of Northern Manitoba’s food security crisis implies a need for innovative community-based food initiatives. As such, it is both important to study in a substantive sense and an area where we may expect to identify changes as a result of a new funder network.

NMFCC is an innovative model of collaboration to promote healthier communities in Northern Manitoba. At the time of writing, the NMFCC Collaborative had been in operation for three years, having been established in 2014. NMFCC is a multisectoral funder collaborative comprising philanthropic foundations, charities, governments, and northern Manitobans (NMFCC, n.d.). The shared goal of the NMFCC Collaborative is to revitalize cultural traditions, improve access to healthy foods, and develop resilient local economies (Tides Canada, 2015). NMFCC was created through consultation with the host organization,

Tides Canada, as a strategic philanthropic collaboration to support local solutions and pool money and resources of like-minded organizations.

Although it is labelled a funder collaborative here, it is important to note that key players include not only funders, but also in-kind support organizations, northern Manitoban advisors, and northern communities (grantees).

Funders and in-kind support organizations provide resources to the collaboration. This group of agencies included, at the time of writing: private foundations, a community foundation, three provincial government departments, and five nonprofit organizations. One of these network partners acts as the “host” organization, which manages the strategic granting portfolio for the Fund and works in active partnership with not only the funders but also the communities to help design, communicate, and implement lasting solutions. Next, five northern advisors – four Elders and one youth – offer guidance on the Fund’s strategic direction and on working with northern communities. Grantees, together, received \$491 389 in NMFCC’s first three annual cycles, from 2014 to 2016. These northern communities not only received funding through this collaboration, however: thrice yearly, they also took part in a shared learning conference calls. Funders and northern advisors are invited to these calls. Each call has a central theme and assists grantees in building networks across northern Manitoba.

COLLABORATION

I. Beginning by Building Partnerships of Trust & Shared Values

Prior to the creation of NMFCC, the food crisis in northern Manitoba was addressed via the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative (NHFI), an organization funded by Manitoba Aboriginal and Northern Affairs. NHFI worked with nonprofit “Regional Partners” that deliver food security projects. It provided administration and coordination, agricultural support and training, and agricultural equipment and materials to its partner organizations (NACC, n.d.). While NHFI’s early work resulted in noticeable achievements, disparate approaches emerged depending on the assigned Regional Partner. Moreover, concerns grew about the lack of permanent infrastructure and community capacity-building (Thompson et al., 2010).

Heifer International Canada (HI), a nonprofit hunger- and poverty-reduction organization, began in 2012 to work on the concept of a collaborative funding model to address northern Manitoba’s food crisis. This was a reaction to an environment where the values and norms of the northern Indigenous communities often took a back seat to those of the funders, and where the programming was more aligned to the priorities of funding agencies than the needs of communities. The HI Senior Field Coordinator contacted a number of funders about the idea of partnering to create a larger funding pool and to develop shared learning in supporting northern communities. A collaborative agreement was reached with NHFI. Private and community foundations were viewed as a pivotal part of this collaborative funding model approach, in light of their capacity to fund and support innovation; their grant-making expertise; and their ability to convene

key stakeholders. The model aimed to have funders pledge to govern through trust rather than top-down controls.

NMFCC was piloted in 2013 through an investment of \$25 000 - \$50 000 from the Province and \$25 000 from HI. In the pilot, NMFCC awarded grants to five projects as a way to garner experience, as well as to develop goals and strategies. NHFI and its Regional Partners brought their expertise on the region and its communities. They also saw tremendous benefit in joining forces with HI. Together, the two organizations coordinated intake, administration, and reporting in order to streamline the granting process. Five northern advisors joined the network, as did a community of approximately twenty primarily northern volunteers. As the pilot year concluded, there was much excitement about the range of skills and insights from stakeholders. The group began to enlarge the network of partners to leverage additional resources, skills, and knowledge.

In 2014 HI closed its doors, and so Tides Canada took over as the NMFCC host organization. Tides Canada is a national leader in social change philanthropy, including connecting organizations and granting initiatives across the country. The HI Senior Field Coordinator who had spearheaded the NMFCC pilot became the Project Lead for the NMFCC Collaborative. NHFI funding was renewed and the network was increased to seven funders, resulting in \$212 000 in contributions. This first official year, 13 projects were funded.

Two new funders joined in 2015, in addition to which more northern advisors were invited. At the end of the year, 19 projects had received funding and a new call for inquiries and applications was circulated. Partners meet formally each year in a two-day Business Meeting and Open House, in addition to which they frequently communicate informally.

At the time of writing, NMFCC has had preliminary successes in over 25 communities. These successes have prompted expansion of the Fund and increased demand for it: each year the Fund receives more than double the number of applications that it can support. NMFCC's first three years demonstrate how foundations become in a network, work to identify a shared mission and vision, and bring in new funding partners.

II. Advancing the Cause

NMFCC funders have tapped into their own networks to recruit and fundraise for the Fund. These connections were instrumental in bringing in new funders, such as the Winnipeg Foundation, USC Canada, and the Silver Dollar Foundation. The commitment of network partners to expanding the network has augmented not only NMFCC's funding, but also its credibility.

III. Creating Significant Experiences

NMFCC has also been critical as a knowledge-sharing network, specifically through the communication and sharing of field experiences in Manitoba's north. Annual immersive "Learning Trips", for example, create interactive experiences in grantee communities. These Learning Trips are offered to funders, northern advisors, and potential donors. Funders consider these trips as important, emotional events that help them to better understand the grantee communities, feel more connected to the Fund's values, and to witness the Fund's work firsthand.

IV. Developing a Theory of Change

Within the philanthropic sector, it is widely believed that developing a Theory of Change is the first step in strategic philanthropy (INSP, 2005). NMFCC has developed a Theory of Change which expresses the underlying beliefs and assumptions that guide its work. This Theory of Change has empowered partners to recognize the assumptions and expectations that guide decisions, actions, and resulting accomplishments. The Fund is engaged in a set of activities that extend beyond their pooling of resources to comprise novel forms of grantee evaluation; volunteer-led peer-review processes; consensus decision-making by funding partners; and field-site visits and activities for funders. All of these activities are aligned with the six values elucidated in NMFCC's Theory of Change.

V. The Art of Adaptation

The NMFCC Collaborative's program and model are constantly being re-invented through the redevelopment of projects – although successful projects have also received additional funding through reapplying. Flexibility is part of the approach, as it allows for new possibilities to emerge. This extends to the innovative ways in which partners have structured their grant to the Fund: while most pool their funding for projects, some partners have chosen to dedicate financial resources to administering the fund. Still others have offered in-kind resources such as project materials or planning and evaluation support.

VI. Constant Learning for Change

Viewing knowledge as key to social change, the Fund emphasizes capacity-building in its work. For funders, this has meant an emphasis on building knowledge through collaboration. Along with relationship-building, funders see this learning as a key benefit of the collaboration. The emphasis of learning through NMFCC has also shaped funding practices. The Fund's commitment to fostering an Indigenous worldview has led to an approach to project evaluation that emphasizes learning opportunities. Engaging with community members has led funders to raise new themes and strategies for the network.

VII. Shared Passion & Leadership with Locals

Funding partners cooperate as "equal nodes" among the network of actors and range of issues, rather than striving to become a "central hub" that shapes the agenda. Funders recognize the shared passion of their group, the advisors, and the volunteers as crucial to the Fund's achievements.

Recognizing that people are the most valuable resource for achieving NMFCC's objectives, the Fund goes beyond investing in its inner circle to include investments in its grantees through community-to-community learning exchanges. The aim of the exchanges is to develop talent and leadership among grant recipients, as a tool to create meaningful and sustainable improvements in the capacity of Northern communities.

VIII. Inspired & Active Communication & Dissemination

Funders have been successful in garnering support through a clear and compelling expression of NMFCC's purpose, goals, and values. The role of the Project Lead has been key in this regard: the Project Lead has been a strong voice in articulating the Fund's vision to partners, stakeholders, supporters, and the general public. NMFCC has also been visible in northern communities – fostering relationships with grantees, attending northern events, and providing good online materials for potential donors and grantees alike.

Communication is the glue that binds the collaboration together. Fund partners are committed to communicating on multiple levels and through different means. They work closely and actively with the northern advisors and grantees to learn more about the areas where they are less informed. Furthermore, through opportunities to come together to share stories, such as the learning trips, it has inspired partners, volunteers and grant recipients, to engage with the Fund to express their own values.

IX. Areas of Tension

Despite its many successes, the Fund may be facing difficulties in sustainability; seeking out new partners; and the ways it measures impact.

First, the issue of the Fund's financial sustainability is taking up space in the minds of many funders. There is a divide in opinion on extending funder involvement into the long-term. While funders were clear that short-term funding is not an effective way to address the needs in the north, three of the private foundations also stated that extending funding beyond three years would be a "difficult sell" to their respective boards. One funder went so far as to say that the nature of philanthropy "can be a bit flakey". Beyond financial sustainability, there is a question of how to generate the sustained presence that is necessary to foster trusting relationships at all levels. "Slow granting" is necessary, as a recent report by the Project Lead has emphasized, which means that social return on investment may only become clear after multiple years. The sustainability of the Fund's administration is also a concern, as it requires further resources.

Second, a new challenge is seeking out new partners. Specifically, the Fund is interested in partnering with northern businesses to influence market forces. Thus far it has proven difficult to create strategic alliances with relevant business sponsors.

Finally, funders have different expectations and requirements regarding evaluation. Some funders prefer using performance measures to evaluate program success. Others are more concerned with enriching the work of communities, which necessitates flexibility to adapt to their priorities.

X. Section Conclusion

The Fund is having meaningful impacts on northern Manitoban communities, with success attributed to an innovative grant-making model built on shared learning and relationships among funders, as well as between funders and grantees. A pooled funding approach has enabled the Fund to develop innovative ways to grant according to the needs of northern Manitoba communities. The mobilization of sufficient financial resources has meant that each funder can focus their energy on their areas of expertise, also leading to a dynamic learning environment among network partners. With less pressure to continually seek resources, the network has been in the uncommon position to spend their energy on striving to achieve the fund's mission. Funders see themselves as partners of an interrelated and equal group, instead of the more conventional approach of exchanging resources and forming short-term partnerships to achieve a specific goal. Likewise, governance of the NMFCC Collaborative has been based on high levels of trust and a dedication to collaboration, instead of the need to exercise control.

The Fund is a network that strategically coordinates strategies, goals, information, and responsibility. It has enabled funders inside and outside of the region to drive towards a similar set of outcomes and to collect similar types of information from communities in northern Manitoba. It has been intentional in the way it engages funders in the grant application and review processes, creating a more systematic approach. Other key benefits of the collaborative effort have been cooperative agenda-setting, and the collective impact arising from funder cooperation.

A network approach to collaboration requires ways of working with funders that are very different from what is involved in traditional philanthropic sector relationships. This case has demonstrated that nonprofits who embed partnership capabilities into the fabric of their organizational culture and the way they do grant-making will be a step above the rest.

LIMITATIONS & CONCLUSIONS

This study must be understood as a partial perspective, building on the researcher's knowledge of the literature on collaborative approaches to social change in philanthropy. The purpose of the case study was to understand and explore the model of collaboration employed by the NMFCC Collaborative, including its forms and outcomes.

Looking to the future, a central question is how to best move toward the development of a comprehensive framework that integrates existing theory and produces a coherent and practical strategy for philanthropic organizations in Canada to affect social change through collaboration. One of the challenges is that much of the theorizing has been done in Canadian universities and disparate meetings or conferences. Hence the

bridges to local, community-level – not to mention Indigenous approaches – are lacking. At the same time, there seems to be an increasing recognition for the need to work together for meaningful shared thinking on how to achieve social impact.

Bringing together funders that have been involved in multiparty collaborative approaches to gain consensus on a framework for collaboration could satisfy that need. Providing funders with the occasion to share experiences about opportunities and challenges in practice could evolve into the beginnings of an integrative framework.

This report began by commenting on the opportunity that foundations have to nurture relationships that cultivate creative and innovative social change initiatives. This research suggests that now is the time to begin fostering them. The report offers some key perspectives to realizing social change. In particular, the perspectives emphasize the central importance of cultivating rich networks of organizations in the external organizational environment based on trust and shared values.

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