

Ulnooweg Indigenous Communities Foundation



Principle 5



☞

What I know for sure about Indigenous-led and Indigenous-informed charitable organisations is that the solutions that they have, the solutions led by communities and the solutions grounded in language, culture and land are the kinds of solutions that this entire country can learn and benefit from.

Kris Archie

CEO of [The Circle on Philanthropy](#)



About Ulnooweg Indigenous Communities Foundation

The [Ulnooweg Indigenous Communities Foundation \(UICF\)](#) was established in 2018 to close the gap between the philanthropic sector and Atlantic Indigenous Communities. UICF primarily funds Indigenous community initiatives, advances education through publicly available scholarships and bursaries, and facilitates opportunities for impact donations, grants and investments. Furthermore, the Foundation empowers philanthropists to support a wide range of initiatives that build towards revitalising Indigenous culture and language across Atlantic Canada and abroad.

What was the challenge?

Canada's philanthropic sector, including registered charities, individuals and corporate donors, plays a critical role in the country's success and vitality. The sector drives critical and innovative work across various domains such as health, education, environmental protection, community economic development, infrastructure, and the arts. The philanthropic sector in Canada includes approximately 200 community foundations. They manage over \$5 billion in assets and distribute approximately \$250 million in grants annually to charitable organisations and other qualified entities.

Despite the sector's importance, its connections with Indigenous communities are not as strong as they should be. According to a [2017 analysis by The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada](#), approximately one per cent of registered charities are Indigenous-focused. This statistic underscores the pressing need to forge new relationships, enhance mutual understanding, and transform philanthropy infrastructure to facilitate more effective collaboration between Canada's philanthropic sector and Atlantic Indigenous communities. The lack of strong ties has profound implications for these communities, impacting their access to resources and ability to scale local and sustainable Indigenous-led opportunities for cultural and linguistic revitalisation. UICF found a lack of existing philanthropy infrastructure and support to facilitate the flow of resources into Atlantic First Nations communities.

Furthermore, as an Indigenous-led philanthropic foundation, UICF faces a significant challenge stemming from the widespread lack of awareness concerning the experiences of Atlantic Indigenous peoples. Many remain unaware of the deep-rooted inequities these communities have faced, including ongoing systemic racism, the [enduring legacy of residential schools](#), and the impacts of the 'Sixties Scoop', all of which have shaped their journey for decades. The tragic discovery made during COVID-19 of the unmarked graves of Indigenous children near former residential schools further highlighted the long-standing injustices faced by Indigenous communities, prompting a growing number of people to acknowledge these issues. Despite these awakenings, systemic issues persist, affecting various aspects of Indigenous life – from growing economic opportunities to governance and beyond. UICF recognises that to address these entrenched challenges, significant investments in building and sustaining Indigenous-focused acts of philanthropy are needed. To unlock philanthropy's potential, the Foundation strives to build a strong giving ecosystem rooted in mutual trust and solidarity between diverse philanthropic actors and the Atlantic Indigenous communities they support.

What was the response?

UICF operates as one of the three Ulnooweg organisations: Ulnooweg Development Group (a non-profit organisation), Ulnooweg Education Centre (a charitable organisation), and UICF (a charitable public foundation). Ulnooweg Development Group is a longstanding non-profit dedicated to the success of Indigenous communities, individuals, and businesses in Atlantic Canada. Established from a 1985 gathering of Indigenous leaders and communities, Ulnooweg's original mission was to "enhance the economic and social well-being of Indigenous communities, including providing support, training, education, and research assistance for employment opportunities. Additionally, backing benevolent and charitable organisations that aid in the economic and social development of the people and community".

With Ulnooweg's four-decade history rooted in serving communities by providing support and capital, UICF is well-positioned to respond to growing levels of giving towards Indigenous causes in Canada amidst renewed calls for reconciliation. This Indigenous-focused giving ecosystem prompts philanthropists to redirect financial resources towards Indigenous initiatives they are most passionate about, including education, healthcare, eldercare, entrepreneurship, ecological projects, culture, language and the arts. Additionally, UICF addresses the need for non-business-related funding within communities, prioritising impact investment opportunities and new endowment funds for social change, sustainable development, and the championing of Indigenous-led solutions across Atlantic Canada and abroad.

Given the great disconnect between philanthropic funds and Indigenous philanthropic objectives, UICF emerged to pursue philanthropic funding with other Foundations and potential investors to benefit and develop the Indigenous communities of Atlantic Canada. For a long time, Indigenous peoples have been advocating for investments to build infrastructure within their communities. Discovery of unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School during COVID-19 brought Indigenous issues into the spotlight once again. It led donors to reflect on their philanthropic commitments towards Indigenous peoples. It was during this time that people began to listen more closely, resulting in a renewed sense of urgency within the philanthropic ecosystem to increase investments in critical socio-economic areas concerning Indigenous communities.

As an Atlantic Indigenous-led Community Foundation, UICF stands out from other community foundations typically bound by geographical location. UICF's board includes representation from Atlantic Chiefs, the Mi'kmaq Grand Council, Atlantic Aboriginal Women's Associations, and the Assembly of First Nation Atlantic Regional Chiefs, giving them the flexibility to serve Indigenous communities across borders. Being Indigenous-governed and having a board that represents their communities allows UICF to directly address the needs of local communities and make a broader impact. Thus, the philanthropic ecosystem UICF is growing takes into account regional priorities, making it highly locally responsive. For example, the Indigenous priorities of Prince Edward Island are tied to agriculture and fisheries, while in New Brunswick, there is a greater focus on infrastructure for language revitalisation and cultural programmes due to the significant loss of Indigenous knowledge in that area.

UICF's community-first approach prioritises listening to Indigenous leaders and chiefs while also providing inclusive platforms for the voices of youth and Elders to actively participate in decision-making processes. Elders hold valuable traditional knowledge, so it is crucial to ensure they can share their wisdom and insights. UICF facilitates monthly tea sessions to hear Elders' stories, capturing oral traditions regarding seasonal changes, how to move along the land, and how to incorporate medicine into ceremony. Concurrently, UICF actively engages youth to cultivate the next generation of leaders. This holistic intergenerational approach helps foster a more robust and responsive philanthropic ecosystem where community insights and traditional knowledge are valued and integrated into programmatic and operational frameworks. Additionally, to better understand the financial needs of community programmes and ensure alignment with the Foundation's mission, UICF conducts community forums and surveys to gather community input at all levels, and provides training in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), thereby promoting sustainable philanthropic impact and growth within Atlantic Indigenous communities.

UICF collaborates with values-aligned partners to develop innovative solutions that strengthen the giving ecosystem. Partnering with organisations like the [Mastercard Foundation](#), UICF has initiated projects such as the [Ta'n telo'ltimk: A way of life](#). Since its launch in September 2020, this initiative has approved nearly \$8 million in bursaries and grants for post-secondary students, qualified donee communities and charities identified by a group of young people committed to breaking down barriers rooted in colonialism and historical injustices. A way of life engages youth to develop youth-led programming and partnerships targeting a variety of skills to lead systemic change, including leadership, language and cultural revitalisation, alongside education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

UICF is committed to fostering strong philanthropic partnerships by carefully selecting partners who share their values. Potential partners are vetted with critical questions such as whether they are interested in long-term relationships and real change, they are committed to sharing and learning, they have implemented programmes supporting other Indigenous organisations, and if they hire Indigenous staff. This thorough vetting process ensures that UICF partners understand the importance of dedicating time, energy, and community engagement to Indigenous-focused development projects.

For example, the Mastercard Foundation has demonstrated a genuine commitment to UICF's mission by regularly involving their staff in UICF-led gatherings and engaging in open, respectful conversations with community members. This commitment to recognition and reciprocity illustrates that meaningful philanthropic relationships with Indigenous communities require more than financial contributions; they demand a united effort and authentic engagement.

Additionally, UICF has increased its pool of impact donations, grants and investments by working alongside other community foundations to distribute funds to non-profit organisations. Recent feature campaigns include the [We Rise Again Fund](#), which supports those impacted by wildfires with rebuilding and mental health support, and the \$400 million investment under the [Community Services Recovery Fund](#) dedicated to pandemic recovery. Both campaigns are facilitated by the [Community Foundation of Nova Scotia](#) in partnership with the [Rural Communities Foundation of Nova Scotia](#), with UICF staff serving on the decision committee to help distribute the funding. This collaborative approach strengthens the giving ecosystem and ensures that resources are effectively channelled to support Indigenous communities.

Encouraging funders to invest in their preferred giving method, UICF creates more locally responsive and sustainable pathways for philanthropic impact, actively empowering Atlantic Indigenous communities. The community also develops funds and serves as a platform for collaboration to facilitate the development and promotion of Indigenous causes. For instance, the Genevieve Francis Memorial Fund (a donor-advised fund) was spearheaded by a young athlete whose personal journey inspired a focus on Indigenous girls and women in sports. The Wolastoqey Language Fund (created by UICF), provides funds towards the revitalisation of an endangered language, working in partnership with [Kehkimin](#) – the first Wolastoqey land-based immersion school. UICF initiatives emerge organically from community discussions and a shared understanding of community needs, underscoring the Foundation's commitment to community-responsive and service-oriented philanthropic strategies.

What have they learned?

- ✓ **Embrace a community-based perspective, embedding Indigenous values and principles into all systems and interactions.** This approach leads to inclusive decision-making, fueled by generosity, solidarity and a profound sense of community, strengthening Indigenous philanthropy support ecosystems. By centering Indigenous values of reciprocity and interconnectedness, philanthropic efforts become more attuned to the needs and aspirations of Indigenous communities. For instance, UICF's monthly tea sessions with Elders, held both in-office and virtually, allow Elders to share their stories, lessons, and perspectives, ensuring their voices and knowledge are integrated into the Foundation's work.
- ✓ **Establish a governance board composed of Indigenous leaders to effectively address Indigenous community needs.** This ensures that decision-making processes are cascaded and rooted in the perspectives and priorities of Indigenous communities. Governed by such a board, UICF maintains a deep understanding of local community needs. For example, the Foundation's bursary approaches exemplify its commitment to community engagement. Leveraging multiple committees, UICF collaboratively determines bursary strategies by gathering insights from community forums and maintaining ongoing communication with community members. This ensures that bursary funds are tailored to meet the unique needs and aspirations of Indigenous students, thereby maximising philanthropic impact.

What have they learned?

- ✔ **Identify the right partners to support community philanthropy mechanisms rooted in Indigenous-centric approaches.** Strategic collaboration with public and private organisations, charitable and profit-oriented programmes, agencies, corporations, and various partners allows for the development of initiatives that resonate with Indigenous communities, fostering a sense of connection and belonging. By partnering with organisations that share a commitment to Indigenous empowerment and cultural preservation, Indigenous communities can feel more connected to the spaces they enter, ensuring that economic opportunities are not only accessible but also reflective of their cultural backgrounds and values. For example, UICF partnered with Memorial University to create and sustain cultural and supportive programmes for Indigenous youth pursuing higher education, and held the [Forward. Together. Connecting Philanthropy with Indigenous Communities](#) conference in 2023 to strengthen relationships, understanding, and collaboration between philanthropy and Indigenous communities.
- ✔ **Prioritise Indigenous-led solutions.** This approach aligns with the values and priorities of Indigenous communities. A focus on Indigenous leadership promotes opportunities for self-determination and sovereignty, empowering Indigenous communities to shape their own futures. Importantly, these efforts actively work to decolonise the philanthropic sector, shifting power dynamics and centering Indigenous voices and perspectives. In turn, philanthropy becomes more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the unique needs of Indigenous communities, ultimately contributing to lasting social change and transformation. For example, UICF hosted youth from across Atlantic Canada at Sin So'sepe'katik, Nova Scotia, for the three-day [Youth Empowerment Gathering](#) in 2022. This event highlighted the positive impact on communities through stories shared by youth who developed community-based programmes that serve and drive change within their communities.

Key outcomes and impact indicators ¹

\$7.9M+ provided in grants and bursaries

Since September 2020, the Ulnooweg EleV team has helped provide grants and bursaries directly benefiting Indigenous youth across the entire Atlantic region in Canada.

155+ initiatives

Ulnooweg EleV youth-led initiatives are relatively evenly split between UICF's four pillars: youth leadership, culture language and wellness, educational pathways, and transition to employment and entrepreneurship. Some notable examples include support for a youth/Elder mock Caribou hunt, connecting digital-age youth with Mother Earth and traditional culture via Two-eyed Seeing, and Indigenous mentorship.

10,000+ Indigenous youth

Partnerships and connections have been created with Indigenous youth throughout the region, including communities, Indigenous governments, school boards, universities, colleges, friendship centres, Indigenous and non-Indigenous non-profits and charities.

\$800K+ in post-secondary bursaries

UICF continues to provide academic bursaries to support university and college students pursuing higher education.

1. Data primarily derived from UICF's partnership with the Mastercard Foundation partnership - ta'n telo'ltimk : a way of life project