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# Knowledge as Leadership, Belonging as Community: How Canadian Community Foundations Are Using Vital Signs for Social Change

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Keywords: Community foundations, Canada; philanthropy, sense of belonging, Vital Signs

*My definition of community is knowing and acting like we have a shared fate.*

– Zita Cobb, Shorefast Foundation

## Key Points

- The concept of “community” in community foundations is being reframed – less strictly tied to the specific locales that originally defined their boundaries and increasingly about a process of engagement and a resulting sense of belonging.
- The greatest asset of a community foundation is not the size of its endowment, but its knowledge of community and ability to use this knowledge for positive change.
- This article explores the Canadian network of community foundations’ use of the reporting tool Vital Signs to implement a knowledge-driven approach to leadership and how it is using this knowledge in more inclusive, engaged models of community to drive change agendas in their own communities and, collectively, at a national scale.
- In implementing knowledge as a leadership tool, there remains a vast difference between what is feasible for the large community foundations and the small and new ones, particularly those in more isolated places. In spite of these constraints, community knowledge can become a means of scaling attention to particular issues and give many community foundations the confidence to frame issues in new ways.

The long-standing value proposition of community foundations – as philanthropic institutions embedded in place that serve donors, match them to worthwhile community projects, and make grants in a responsive manner (Perry & Mazany, 2015; Graddy & Morgan, 2006) – is being questioned, and community foundations are being admonished to reinvent themselves (Carson, 2011). The challenge to their relevance arises in part from the need to succeed in a tough dual “race” (Oliphant, 2015, p. 61): one challenge focused on securing new donors who have more options than ever before, and the other on having impact when needs greatly outstrip resources and when donor satisfaction is closely linked to perceptions of impact (Buteau, Chaffin, & Buchanan, 2014; Millisen & Martin, 2014). The definition of “community” has also shifted, from one comfortably defined by geography to a more elastic one, shaped – and fragmented – by social identities, interests, and values (Yivisaker, 1989).

The proposed route to reinvention is through more effective roles in community leadership, to enhance their impact and donor appeal as well as generating a broader public benefit (Bernholz, Fulton, & Kasper, 2005; Auspos, Brown, Kubisch, & Sutton, 2009; Ranghelli, 2006). The extent to which community foundations are demonstrating such leadership and achieving greater impact

varies greatly (Daly, 2008; Graddy & Morgan, 2006; Guo & Brown, 2006; Jung, Harrow, & Phillips, 2013), and what constitutes “community leadership” is itself being remade. In this recasting, the greatest asset of a community foundation is not the size of its endowment, but its knowledge of community and ability to use this knowledge for community benefit and positive change.

As community foundations move into more active leadership roles, they have struggled between two competing approaches: to lead change by prescribing the type of change that should occur and implementing change-oriented measures, or to facilitate change by enabling others (Easterling, 2011). As Easterling observes, historically most foundations have favored allowing the community to “generate its own solutions” and using their grantmaking and convening powers to facilitate other organizations to execute change (p. 94). To reach for ambitious impacts, however, Easterling argues there is a natural progression toward more directive approaches. For example, many of the 34 U.S. community foundations that participated in Putnam’s Social Capital Benchmark survey – notably those that had the will and skill – assumed quite directive roles in attempting to reshape the civic culture of their communities, albeit with mixed results (Easterling, 2011; Easterling & Millesen, 2015).

Canadian community foundations are affecting a pivot in leadership that embraces an alternative to a directive versus facilitative style – that of a knowledge-driven approach. They are shifting from relying primarily on conventional grantmaking as their main leverage for impact, which tended to be facilitative, to using knowledge to catalyze community awareness and action. The success of Vital Signs, a reporting tool designed to improve their knowledge of community, has reoriented and equipped them to drive change agendas in their own communities and collectively at a national scale. When results of these annual “check-ups” undertaken by local community foundations revealed that many citizens do not feel connected to their communities, the national association took up the issue in 2015 to create a shared, countrywide strategy

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that aims to enhance a sense of belonging as a means of promoting more inclusive and engaged communities. Working with local community foundations, the strategy has established a collaborative, national-local small-grants program, supplemented by local microgranting initiatives, as vehicles to encourage participation by individuals and groups. Participation per se, rather than services produced by projects or programs, is the primary criterion of success. Still in its infancy, the complexities of implementing a national strategy for place-based institutions with their own priorities and differential capacities are significant, and yet to be fully resolved.

Although other foundations have effectively used data to engage conversations “on the facts” to transcend partisan divides and generate collaborative efforts at change,<sup>1</sup> several features distinguish the approach undertaken by Canadian community foundations. First, it is not an

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., the work of the Wallace Foundation in building support for arts education (Bodilly, Augustine, & Zaharas, 2008).

## *As a basis for community, place still matters, but so too does process and the reciprocity it generates.*

“initiative,” akin to the comprehensive change projects led by private foundations in the 1990s (Kubisch et al., 2011), but a knowledge-based leadership style. Second, it links the national and local levels. A key lesson that emerged from five decades of place-based initiatives is the value of cross-site learning (Ferris & Hopkins, 2015), and this is integral to the Canadian model. Vital Signs has enabled ideas and innovations for change to percolate from a local to the national level, and then be diffused across locales. Third, the model does not treat knowledge as simply data-gathering, but instead as a conversation-starter among diverse stakeholders that may lead to differing means of moving forward, and in this way treats both community and change as “creative processes” (Follett, 1919).

We assess how knowledge is being used as a strategic change tool by community foundations in the Canadian context, and demonstrate the value, and challenges, of knowledge-led, coordinated leadership at a national scale to facilitate change at a local level. To appreciate the rationale for a sense of belonging as the goalpost of this strategy, we begin by exploring why a sense of belonging matters, and how it is both a locally relevant and scalable concept.

### **Belonging: More Than a Feeling**

The concept of “community” in community foundations is being reframed. With suburban expansion and an increased interest by donors in funding internationally, it is less strictly tied to the specific locales that originally defined the boundaries of community foundations (Carson, 2015). In addition, it is increasingly seen to be about a process of engagement and a resulting sense of belonging. This process view of community is by no means new, but some old ideas have gained new currency. Almost a hundred years

ago, the American philosopher and local organizer Mary Parker Follett described community as a “creative process” of deliberation, participation, and integration (1919). Through a dynamic of mutual engagement, the differences among citizens are aired, understood, and integrated into something more encompassing, producing a “course of action that is a result of the interweaving of ideas, personalities, and the situation” (Feldheim, 2004, p. 346). As a basis for community, place still matters, but so too does process and the reciprocity it generates.

This reciprocity is captured by the concept of a sense of belonging, an idea that became popular in the late 1970s (often called a “sense of community”), then faded and has been reintroduced with the interest in social capital (Putnam, 2000; Easterling, 2011) and rise of well-being and happiness indices in recent years. Belonging is twofold: it involves “sharing a sense of personal relatedness” (MacMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9) – a sense of being part of a collective “we” – and investing oneself in a community, be it geographic or social. It thus embodies some degree of reciprocity – of the community imparting a sense of welcoming, so people thereby feel a fit with that community and a desire to contribute to making it a fit for others. For purposes of community building, belonging is seen as beyond an individual feeling or relationship, to a catalyst for creating healthier, more inclusive, and more resilient communities, given the benefits it can generate (Community Foundations of Canada, 2015a).

The benefits, at both an individual and community level, of a strong sense of belonging have been well documented. For individuals, a strong sense of belonging is correlated with high levels of social capital and trust of others (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2015); it predicts how meaningful one’s life is perceived to be (Lambeth, et al., 2013), and enhances a variety of health outcomes (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). At a community level, a sense of belonging is related to positive perceptions of safety and tolerance of others, higher levels of donating and volunteering, better general and mental health, and overall resiliency, such as the ability to recover from natural

disasters and economic downturns (Carpiano & Hystad, 2011). As Berry and colleagues have shown, when citizens have higher levels of participation and a sense of belonging in their communities, they also believe that their governments are more responsive (Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993).

A sense of belonging has been shown to vary across ethnic population groups (Shields, 2015), but is not automatically higher for majority groups, nor a function of living in an homogeneous community. While immigrants initially have a lower sense of belonging to the local community, this difference decreases over time, and few differences have been found between minorities and nonminorities living in diverse neighborhoods, although groups experiencing discrimination are naturally negatively affected (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2016). A sense of belonging tends to be higher among married or common-law couples and those with children, but does not significantly correlate with gender and has only modest association with socio-economic status – lower-income groups being somewhat lower (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2016). In short, research suggests that a sense of belonging is not primarily a product of personal attributes or situational factors, but, instead, of relationship to and engagement in community, however defined.

Over the past five years, the Canadian network of community foundations has implemented a new approach to leadership that emanates from its mobilization of community knowledge and is centered on understanding the factors that promote belonging, and is using this knowledge to work toward more inclusive and engaged models of community.<sup>2</sup>

### Knowledge as a Leadership Strategy

Canada was an early adopter of the community foundation model, establishing the first one

<sup>2</sup>This analysis is based on a review of primary documents of Canadian community foundations, a series of interviews with their CEOs, and the observations of the Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) president and CEO and senior staff who are co-authors of this article. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of CFC.

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in Winnipeg, Manitoba, seven years after the model was “invented” in Cleveland (Sacks, 2014). Canada’s community foundation sector is second in size only to the United States – although its coverage is more extensive than that of the U.S., with 85 percent of the population served by a community foundation (CFC, 2014) and only 10 centers of population greater than 50,000 without one. Collectively, Canada’s 191 community foundations manage about \$3.6 billion U.S. in assets and made grants of over \$164 million in 2015 (Community Foundations of Canada, 2015b), making them important actors in the philanthropic and civic landscape. A similar pattern of bifurcation to the U.S. is present in Canada, where the 10 largest community foundations, which are located in the major cities, hold more than 80 percent of the assets and have quite a different reality than the large number of newer, small foundations (Imagine Canada, Grant Connect, & Philanthropic Foundations of Canada, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>“Large” pales by U.S. standards, as even the Vancouver Foundation, by far the largest in Canada, ranks 15th among its American cousins (CF Insights, 2015; Imagine Canada, Grant Connect & Philanthropic Foundations of Canada, 2014). Most of the other established Canadian foundations would rank between about 30th and 100th in asset size among their U.S. counterparts, so that the nature of their work is roughly comparable, although as we argue, asset size has become a less meaningful way to describe their work. In addition, total asset size is a deceptive measure because community foundations in Canada, as in the U.S., hold a substantial amount – 50 percent to 70 percent – of the assets under management as donor-advised funds, thus reducing their discretion over total grantmaking.

*In 2014, Community Foundations of Canada adopted a new strategic focus that was intended to refocus the network (connected organizations) into a movement (coordinated, collective action), shifting the metaphor from a music school teaching individual players to that of a symphony whose conductor more deliberately orchestrates collective action among its members.*

What distinguishes the Canadian community foundation network is not its assets, but instead the presence of a strong national association. Established in 1992, Community Foundations of Canada (CFC) is dedicated to community foundations rather than being combined with private foundations in an omnibus association like the Council on Foundations in the U.S. From its inception, the effect of an active national association has been to generate among its members a sense of common purpose and identity as a network, rather than operating as individual, autonomous philanthropic institutions serving local communities. CFC plays an important role in network building by providing learning tools and safe spaces for peer-to-peer learning for the leaders, staff, and volunteers of community foundations. This has enabled successful local innovations to be emulated by others and serves to cultivate the development of small community foundations.

CFC President Ian Bird (2014) uses the analogy of a music school to describe how this networking

role has functioned: Individually, community foundations played their instruments of grant-making, community knowledge, good governance, and community leadership quite well, and CFC has acted as a music school to help them help each other become better players. In 2014, CFC adopted a new strategic focus that was intended to refocus the network (connected organizations) into a movement (coordinated, collective action), shifting the metaphor from a music school teaching individual players to that of a symphony whose conductor more deliberately orchestrates collective action among its members.

The opening of a policy window created conditions conducive to this shift. In 2010, CFC got both a symbolic and practical boost from the newly appointed governor general (the Queen's representative in Canada and patron of CFC), who made expanding philanthropy a priority for his term in office and called on the country to become a "smarter, more caring nation." CFC launched a national awareness campaign about community foundations, supported by more than 400 local and national media outlets, and committed to ensuring that every community has access to a foundation by 2017. At the local level, community foundations took up the challenge by establishing "smart and caring community funds" that not only generate new resources, but also bring new partners to the table. Canadian community foundations were also sensitive to a more competitive environment for donors in which, like their U.S. counterparts, they are under pressure to differentiate themselves from financial institutions that also manage donor-advised funds, although they remain very competitive against the commercial alternatives. Rather than being merely a response to opportunity or a protective stance, however, the main impetus for the leadership pivot was the initiative of one community foundation that in 2000 started using knowledge as a leadership tool.

### **Vital Signs as a Knowledge Tool**

Vital Signs has its origins in the late 1990s, when a small group of civic leaders in Toronto sought to ensure that issues facing poorer populations and neighborhoods would not fall between the cracks as a result of the forced amalgamation

**TABLE 1** Size Distribution of Community Foundations Participating in Vital Signs Since 2007

	Small CFs (Assets < \$1.5M U.S.)	Midsize CFs (Assets = \$1.5M-\$45M U.S.)	Large CFs (Assets >\$45 m)
<b>Number</b>	18	32	12
<b>Percentage of Participating CFs</b>	29%	52%	19%

of seven municipalities into a single city of 2.4 million, which occurred at the same time as provincial downloading of the costs of social and other services (Rose, 2014). How could citizens be engaged in understanding and monitoring the health and vitality of their newly amalgamated city? The community foundation was encouraged to take on the task of monitoring quality of life in the amalgamated city, collaborating with other organizations in data collection and involving residents in conversations about the results of an annual report card.

With assistance from CFC, Vital Signs began to be replicated (with modifications for local needs) in other Canadian cities so that, in 2015, 28 community foundations issued reports. Participation is by no means limited to large foundations; 29 percent of the community foundations that have produced reports since 2007 (not necessarily every year) are quite small, with total assets under \$1.5 million U.S. (See Table 1.)

The Vital Signs reports demonstrate both commonality of shared concerns and differences reflecting issues individual community foundations seek to highlight. Easy-to-read data are presented on key aspects of the community such as health and wellness, crime, education, the status of youth and families, and creativity. Some give actual “marks” as letter grades to the community’s performance on each, while others prefer to identify trends and issues; some commission surveys on citizens’ priorities and compare these against current policies. In several cities as well as at the national level, Vital Signs is strategically focused on a single issue rather than a report card on a broad range of social and

economic indicators. For example, the Vancouver Foundation, which has had a focus on homeless youth and those in foster care, has concentrated much of its reporting on youth and used it to inform granting in this area. The main role of the community foundation in the Vital Signs process is not to produce new, original data, but rather to curate and broker existing information, and thus serve as a convener and leveller of knowledge about the community (CFC, 2015b; McMillan, 2012; Pole, 2016). In this sense, the presentation and ease of access of the data are new, even if the information itself is not collected specifically for the report card.

Virtually all community foundations engage with other community-based organizations – including United Ways, social-planning councils, public health agencies, school boards, municipalities, and universities – to prepare the report, and these circles of collaborators tend to become larger and more diverse over time (Pole, 2016). A key challenge, then, is navigating the sense of ownership over the process, given that Vital Signs aims to contribute to a broader system of community knowledge but, as a proprietary program, is also intended to enhance the reputation of community foundations (Pole, 2016). Still the leading proponent, the Toronto Foundation has built an entire brand around Vital Signs, directing a substantial portion of its grantmaking toward high-impact “vital” ideas, organizations, and people, and establishing a Community Knowledge Centre in partnership with IBM (Bhardwaj, 2011). Other community foundations have similarly leveraged the annual report to situate themselves as community-knowledge resource centers, or hubs, by creating online platforms designed to inform

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donors, fund-holders, and the public about local issues and how a wide range of nonprofits are working to address them.

Although there are some debates about the selectivity and quality of the data (Patten & Lyons, 2009), the value of Vital Signs is less about the report per se than its value as a conversation starter that engages different stakeholders and hears differing perspectives in a safe space that diffuses tension and generates innovative solutions – the practice of community as creative process that Follett advocated. The Toronto Foundation has routinized and labelled this process as Toronto Dialogues, which has been used to effectively connect issues identified in the report to new programming and partnerships.<sup>4</sup> One illustration is the issue of youth dropout rates and unemployment, which emerged in the 2005 Vital Signs just before a summer of an unusually high incidence of gun violence among youth that generated widespread concerns about community safety. The September Toronto Dialogue linked these issues with the municipal government's

interest in a youth-sports program and its shortage of workers for recreational programming. The result was a partnership of the city, the community foundation, United Way, YMCA, school boards, and private donors to invest in a Sport Leadership program and coaching institute that provides youth who cannot afford the usual fees with free training to become lifeguards and coaches for a variety of sports. Of the more than 1,600 youth who have completed the certification, two-thirds have obtained jobs related to their training (City of Toronto, 2015), and the program has been replicated in several other cities.

The use of Vital Signs as a conversation starter has strengthened the sense of shared ownership and built broader networks. Importantly, municipalities, police, school boards, and United Ways also indicate that they use the Vital Signs results in their own strategic planning (Pole, 2016). The results are also used internally, by midsize more than large community foundations, to inform strategy and configure granting priorities; indeed, most report using it to shape some aspect of their discretionary grantmaking and a few are using it to influence donors' decisions over their advised funds.

The Vital Signs process is inherently place-based and place-differentiated – what is a priority and an asset or deficit to one community may be very different elsewhere – but the ability to share and learn across locales has strengthened the impetus for leadership on a wider scale. Some of the Vital Signs local reports have served as percolators for scaling attention to particular issues and innovating for solutions at a countrywide level. Issues are identified through local reports; they are picked up by CFC for closer examination through a national report and then flow back to the local level, but with attention now diffused across a number of places. This two-way flow of knowledge and ideas identified a sense of belonging as a concern in the changing dynamics of community and gave rise to a national strategy currently being implemented.

### **Belonging as a Focal Point**

The importance of belonging as a community priority emerged as somewhat of a surprise

<sup>4</sup>The Toronto Dialogues process is described at [https://torontofoundation.ca/sites/default/files/TCF\\_Collaboration\\_and\\_City\\_Building.pdf](https://torontofoundation.ca/sites/default/files/TCF_Collaboration_and_City_Building.pdf)

from Vital Signs. Given that their city has the highest housing costs as well as the poorest neighborhood in the country, one would expect Vancouver residents to identify housing or poverty as their top concern; instead, in the 2011 report they ranked a growing sense of social isolation and retreat from community life as a priority issue (Vancouver Foundation, 2011, 2012). A declining sense of belonging similarly emerged from the 2012 report from Kitchener-Waterloo, a smaller city about an hour from Toronto and known as the Canada's high-tech center. Recognizing that the issue might resonate in many places and thus could be the common element for a more activist national strategy, CFC made belonging the subject of its 2015 Vital Signs report and declared a sense of belonging – as a means of promoting healthier, more inclusive communities – a major focus of its work for the next three years.

Belonging as a basis for a national agenda might seem a strange choice given that Canada fares well in global rankings of social inclusion and civic engagement (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2016). It is one of the few countries where public trust and tolerance do not decline as cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity increases (Banting, 2015; Soroka, Johnston, & Banting, 2007). Indeed, a sense of belonging has actually grown slightly over the past decade, with two-thirds of Canadians over age 12 saying in 2014 that they felt a somewhat or very strong sense of belonging to their local community, with teens and seniors feeling most strongly connected (CFC, 2015a).

While not a crisis of divisiveness, neither is belonging a manufactured issue – for several reasons. First, belonging is central to an emerging emphasis in the concept of community on participation and reciprocity. Second, it is tied to community resilience – giving and volunteering are linked to belonging – and it can come apart quite quickly. As one young woman said in the Vancouver Foundation's 2012 report, which took a deep dive into belonging, “getting people connected and engaged to their community underpins everything. Without that sense of responsibility, vast numbers of people will sit on

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the sidelines and we will not be able to tackle the serious problems facing our community” (p. 41). Third, the ability to orchestrate place-based philanthropic institutions of vastly different sizes, none of which are dependent on the national organization for financial support, offers few common instruments. Belonging as a basis for community is one that resonates across very different types of communities and organizations, and is a position from which all can play and interplay between the national and local levels.

The strategy for enhancing a sense of belonging has two main components: microgranting initiated by several community foundations, and a collaborative, national-local small-grants program hosted by CFC.

### Microgrants for Participation

Community foundations have been criticized for treating their grantmaking like peanut butter (Tierney, 2007), spreading small amounts over a

*Nonprofits of all sizes are under pressure to be more responsive and accountable to their members and constituencies, and small-grants programs could be directed to helping them reinforce these relationships, thereby increasing participation of individuals. Using grantmaking to these ends, however, requires an on-the-ground knowledge and capacity within the foundation that goes well beyond evaluating proposals; it necessitates solid working relationships with a wide range of nonprofits and local leaders, and a good understanding of grassroots and neighborhood dynamics.*

large number of recipients. These amounts may be too small to make a significant difference to services or innovation, and require organizations to patch together a variety of other funding sources. Such a critique aligns with the current fashion of strategic philanthropy which prescribes striving for impact on selected priority issues through large grants to a limited number of nonprofits, while exercising significant control over them (Phillips & Jung, 2016).

The microgranting programs that several Canadian community foundations have initiated as a means of enhancing belonging – distinctive

from their primary grantmaking – operate with a different rationale. Rather than helping nonprofits, large or small, deliver programs, the aim is to promote participation by individuals at the grassroots. Both the Vancouver and Calgary foundations, for example, offer grants up to about \$450 U.S.<sup>5</sup> to people who have ideas that will “connect and engage residents in their neighborhood.” Given the focus on participation, the requirements include that these small-scale initiatives be led by volunteers in their “ordinary active-citizen lives” (Calgary Foundation, 2016); that they share residents’ skills and knowledge; are free to all who wish to participate; build a sense of community ownership and pride; involve a diversity of people from the community; and encourage the emergence of new leadership. Examples of such initiatives include an intergenerational storytelling project, free yoga classes, community gardens, neighborhood cleanups, and street parties.

It is too early to tell how effective these micro-grants will be in encouraging participation by a diversity of residents, particularly those who have not engaged previously, and whether such engagement further broadens community and civic participation through a variety of other means, and thus increases the overall sense of belonging. What is evident, however, is that they need to be evaluated by criteria quite different from that for mainstream granting programs. It is also important to ensure that the focus on encouraging participation by individuals does not undermine the work of existing nonprofits, either by sidelining them or by giving rise to competing organizations, which would make sustainability of old and new more fragile. Nonprofits of all sizes are under pressure to be more responsive and accountable to their members and constituencies, and small-grants programs could be directed to helping them reinforce these relationships, thereby increasing participation of individuals. Using grantmaking to these ends, however, requires an on-the-ground knowledge and capacity within the foundation

<sup>5</sup>Under charity regulation, these grants must be administered through qualified organizations but are ultimately directed toward individuals or small teams.

that goes well beyond evaluating proposals; it necessitates solid working relationships with a wide range of nonprofits and local leaders, and a good understanding of grassroots and neighborhood dynamics (Aspen Institute, 2015). In terms of internal management, it entails some realignment toward being more operational, for which many community foundations lack the capacity or interest.

### Collaborative Grantmaking for Inclusion

The goal of promoting broadly based participation and inclusion has been mirrored on a national scale with the creation in 2016 of a collaborative CFC-local granting program. Occasioned by Canada's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which is being treated as what the governor general termed a "once in a lifetime" chance to "take a clear-eyed look" at what kind of country and communities citizens want (CFC, 2015a), the Canadian government seeded \$7.5 million U.S. in a Community Fund for Canada's 150th. This funding is to be matched at the local level by community foundations and private philanthropists have been invited to contribute; the goal is a total fund of more than \$30 million by 2017.

Led by community foundations at the local level, the Community Fund for Canada's 150th distributes grants of up to \$11,000 U.S. to qualifying nonprofits and municipal governments across the country, with a focus on the inclusive engagement of citizens in all regions and particularly those traditionally at the margins of society. The fund seeks to further leverage participation and support by requiring grantees to match the grants through private or in-kind support. The primary aim is to promote local leadership and belonging by funding new and unique projects that fit with its three pillars: encourage people to participate in community activities and events to mark the anniversary; inspire a deeper understanding about what shapes the country and its communities; and build community with the broadest possible engagement of citizens.

Three months in, the nearly 100 projects that have been approved involve the participation of a

wide range of community members, particularly engaging immigrants, refugees, youth, seniors, members of the LGBTQ community, Indigenous with non-Indigenous peoples, and individuals with physical or mental accessibility challenges. Recognizing very different specific objectives of the thousands of projects that are expected to align with its broad pillars, the fund's primary criterion of success is widespread distribution of participation – aimed at creating a "groundswell of local action" (CFC, 2016, p. 2) that "fosters a greater sense of belonging, inclusion, and reconciliation, leaving a lasting legacy for our communities and our country" (Bird, 2016).

From an operational perspective, the involvement of a national membership association in managing a granting program poses new challenges of balancing leadership with responsiveness to members. CFC and its members have never before collaborated on such a deeply operational granting effort, and CFC has had to communicate directly and work closely with each member to establish a new kind of relationship. Internally, CFC has had to develop a new operational capacity to oversee grantmaking and to do so as a collaborator, not the decision-maker. A related challenge has been to balance a national vision for the fund with space for community foundations to lead at the local level with their own knowledge about local priorities (Brown, 2012). In many cases, this involved convincing locally minded members of the potential for a national vision for granting without overstepping, as CFC has no authority – only credibility capital and a relatively small carrot of matching funds.

As Duan-Barnett and colleagues note in their analysis of Michigan community foundations in a large-scale change agenda, those managing such an agenda need to attend carefully to both these vertical (national to local) and horizontal (foundation to foundation) dimensions, and this is an ongoing process (Duan-Barnett, Wangelin, & Lamm, 2012). Further, this movement-wide initiative shines light on the significant diversity among community foundations in terms of organizational capacities, unrestricted funds available for matching, regional variations, and the densities of their organizational and donors networks.

*This movement-wide initiative shines light on the significant diversity among community foundations in terms of organizational capacities, unrestricted funds available for matching, regional variations, and the densities of their organizational and donors networks. It also illuminates differences, and some tensions, between members that are running the traditional race of attracting donors and granting versus those willing and capable of being innovative and providing leadership beyond grantmaking.*

It also illuminates differences, and some tensions, between members that are running the traditional race of attracting donors and granting versus those willing and capable of being innovative and providing leadership beyond grantmaking.

Such bite-size grantmaking is not a substitute for more audacious leadership on big societal issues demanding large-scale change, and many Canadian community foundations continue to lead and partner on efforts to reduce poverty and homelessness and to support LGBTQ communities, among other initiatives. The national association, too, is working with other philanthropic institutions on the complex, politically and culturally sensitive issue of “reconciliation” with Indigenous Peoples, as well as on welcoming and integrating Syrian refugees. The complementary

value of a strategy aimed at supporting belonging and participation stems from the recognition that communities themselves are complex and becoming more so, and that a sense of belonging is an essential aspect of individual and community well-being and may be a requisite step to mobilizing citizens in collective action for social change on a larger scale.

## Conclusion

Community foundations are under increasing pressures to “up their game” of leadership as community-based philanthropy, and communities themselves, undergo significant change. The basis for their concept of “community” is no longer a strictly geographic one, but an increasingly diverse and potentially divisive one that entails a variety of social, cultural, interest-based, and virtual communities. How do place-based foundations stay relevant in a world less bounded by place?

This Canadian case study illustrates how knowledge of community – particularly of the multiple communities within a specific locale – is a new value-added and an important tool for community leadership. Such knowledge can be applied in two ways. The first is using Vital Signs reporting, now an international phenomenon, to influence policy and social change by levelling knowledge – making it more accessible – across the community. This does not necessarily entail direct advocacy by community foundations, which many resist, but creates a process from which advocacy by others can emerge and encourages the media to focus attention on certain issues. More importantly, when the report is used to convene conversations that are safe spaces for different stakeholders, including business and government, to share differing perspectives and interests, the agendas of various actors can find common ground that may result in coordinated action – sometimes with no advocacy needed and sometimes as a forceful coalition for policy change. One benefit of Vital Signs as a means of taking the pulse of communities is that it is inherently adaptable to local circumstance, which accounts for its adoption by more than 70 communities in eight countries as widely dispersed as Australia, Bosnia, Brazil,

Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Jung & Harrow, 2016).

The other use of knowledge is to identify how communities feel about themselves, particularly the extent to which residents have a sense of belonging. Place may not have an exclusive claim on a sense belonging and participation, but it remains a primary one, and the opportunity is for community foundations to use their ability to reach a very local – neighborhood – level where they can assist individuals to participate with others in projects and events for collective benefit. Microgrants and small-grants programs are one means of achieving this, although these may require community foundations to develop new internal management capacities to support this kind of hands-on granting. Citizen participation through the grassroots is déjà vu in terms of ideas about community building, but the shift from grants for projects to grants for participation entails a reorientation for most community foundations.

In implementing knowledge as a leadership tool, the challenge remains of a vast difference between what is feasible for the large community foundations and the small and new ones, particularly those in more isolated places. In spite of these constraints, community knowledge can become a means of scaling attention to particular issues and give many community foundations the confidence to frame issues in new ways so as to attract visibility, start conversations, and create collaborations. Ultimately, the success of the national agenda depends on being both shared and distinctively local, of accommodating diversity and size differentials, and of the national association being able to both lead and follow.

To some, a focus on participation and belonging, and using microgrants to facilitate it, might seem like a scaling back of leadership – of a retreat to a comfortably small scale rather than working for reform on big issues. We argue the opposite: that cultivating a sense of belonging through participation can – and should be – a complement to other forms of audacious leadership for social change. For small community foundations, it might be all they can manage, but still puts them on a leadership-oriented path. For larger ones,

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it is a means to building community from the inside out, of reinforcing residents' connections to community that can serve as building blocks of individual leadership and collective action over the long term.

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