

L'Année PhiLanthropique

The PhiLanthropic Year

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PhiLab

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À propos du PhiLab | About PhiLab

Le Réseau canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie (PhiLab) a été créé en 2014 dans le cadre d'une demande de financement « développement de partenariat » obtenue du Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines du Canada (CRSH). Ce financement a été reconduit en 2018 pour six années par l'obtention d'une subvention « partenariat » du CRSH. Depuis 2024, PhiLab profite de financements octroyés par différentes fondations dont la Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon et la Fondation Mirella et Lino Saputo. Le Réseau pancanadien constitue un lieu de recherche partenarial, de partage d'information, de mobilisation des connaissances sur la philanthropie subventionnaire et de formation à la recherche. Les activités de recherche conduites en partenariat valorisent les connaissances auprès d'une diversité d'acteurs sociaux, d'agences gouvernementales, milieux universitaires et petits et grands médias. La valorisation des connaissances, via des outils de communication novateurs et accessibles, permet une diffusion élargie des connaissances produites ou déjà existantes. Le Réseau regroupe des chercheurs, des décideurs et des membres de la communauté philanthropique à travers le monde afin de partager des informations, des ressources et des idées.

The Canadian network of partnership-oriented research on philanthropy (PhiLab) was created in 2014 as part of a “partnership development” funding application obtained from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This funding was renewed in 2018 for six years by obtaining a “partnership” grant from SSHRC. Since 2024, PhiLab has benefited from funding granted by various foundations, including the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon and the Mirella and Lino Saputo Foundation. The Pan-Canadian Network is a hub for partnership research, information sharing, knowledge mobilization on grantmaking philanthropy and research training. Research activities carried out in partnership promote knowledge among a wide range of social players, government agencies, academics and small and large media. The valorization of knowledge, via innovative and accessible communication tools, enables a wider dissemination of the knowledge produced or already existing.



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À propos de L'Année PhiLanthropique



Par : **Elisabeth Robinot et Adam Saifer**
Codirecteurs du PhiLab
Codirecteurs de publication



L'Année PhiLanthropique est une publication spécialisée dans la diffusion de connaissances scientifiques et professionnelles dans le domaine de la philanthropie et plus précisément de la philanthropie subventionnaire. La revue répond au besoin de rendre disponible, en français et en anglais, des connaissances principalement produites ou mises en valeur par des activités scientifiques réalisées au sein du Réseau canadien de recherche partenariale sur la philanthropie (PhiLab).

L'Année PhiLanthropique publie des travaux de nature scientifique ou professionnelle répondant aux exigences de base de l'édition scientifique. La revue dispose d'un comité de lecture et de politiques éditoriales qui assurent un niveau de qualité certain aux textes qui y sont publiés. Ces derniers prennent différentes formes – articles, chroniques, comptes rendus critiques – et s'inscrivent dans un créneau qui se situe entre les publications scientifiques formelles et informelles. Il s'agit donc de textes qui, tout en respectant les normes éthiques de la production scientifique et professionnelle, se veulent plus courts – une dizaine de pages – et plus légers (moins grande emphase sur les dimensions méthodologiques et plus sur les résultats ou l'analyse) que la moyenne des productions scientifiques.

Produite une fois par année (hors éditions spéciales), chaque numéro de la revue est pris en charge par une équipe éditoriale différente rattachée au PhiLab. L'équipe, en mode direction, est chargée de la conception, de la production et de la gestion d'un appel à contribution.

En publiant L'Année PhiLanthropique nous nous assurons d'agir en complémentarité avec une offre de publications scientifiques, ou visant le grand public, déjà existante. En se voulant accessible en ligne et offerte gratuitement, la revue ouvre la voie à la diffusion de contenus générés par ou découlant d'activités de recherche majoritairement conduites en partenariat avec des acteurs de l'écosystème philanthropique.

L'Année PhiLanthropique s'inscrit dans la stratégie globale mise en place par PhiLab afin de mieux faire connaître les réalisations et enjeux de l'écosystème philanthropique canadien tout en ouvrant la voie à sa mise en comparaison avec des pratiques existantes ailleurs dans le monde. Enfin, rappelons que la création de notre revue n'aurait pas été possible sans l'appui du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada (CRSH).

Elisabeth Robinot, de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, et Adam Saifer, de la University of British Columbia (Okanagan Campus), sont les codirecteurs du PhiLab. À titre de codirecteurs, ils veillent à la réalisation et à la coordination des activités de recherche et de valorisation des connaissances inscrites dans les programmes de recherche menés en partenariat et soutenus financièrement par le CRSH et les partenaires du projet. Elisabeth Robinot est aussi la cofondatrice de l'Observatoire de la Philanthropie, une cellule d'études et de veille stratégique en philanthropie qui associe des chercheur-e-s de l'ESG UQAM, de l'UQTR et d'autres universités internationales.

About The PhiLanthropic Year

By: Elisabeth Robinot & Adam Saifer
Co-directors of the PhiLab Network
Publication Co-directors

The PhiLanthropic Year is a journal that specializes in the transmission of scientific and professional knowledge within the philanthropic sector, and more specifically, grantmaking philanthropy. The journal meets the need of rendering available, in French and English, knowledge mainly produced by or highlighted by the scientific activities that take place within the Canadian Philanthropy Partnership Research Network (PhiLab).

The PhiLanthropic Year publishes scientific and professional articles that meet the basic requirements of scientific publication. The journal has a peer-reviewed committee as well as basic editorial guidelines that ensure a quality standard for the texts it publishes. These latter take on different forms - articles, chronicles, critical book reviews- and find themselves somewhere between formal and informal scientific articles. These texts, while respecting the ethical norms of scientific and professional publications, are shorter - a dozen pages or less - and lighter (less emphasis on the methodological aspects and more on the results or analysis) than your average scientific publication.

Published annually, each issue is taken in charge by a different editorial team that is connected to PhiLab. The team, from a management point of view, is responsible for the design as well as the creation and management of a call for contributions. By publishing The PhiLanthropic Year, we make sure to act as a complement to the existing offer of scientific literature and publications directed to the general public. By being available online and offered free of charge, the journal paves the way to the dissemination of content generated by or stemming from research mainly conducted in partnership with actors of the philanthropic ecosystem.

The PhiLanthropic Year is part of a global strategy implemented by PhiLab to spread awareness of the successes as much as of the issues of the Canadian philanthropic ecosystem while paving the way for comparisons with existing practices from around the world. Finally, let us recognize that the creation of our journal could not have been possible without the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).



Elisabeth Robinot, from the Université du Québec à Montréal, and Adam Saifer, from the University of British Columbia (Okanagan Campus), are the co-directors of PhiLab. As co-directors, they oversee the implementation and coordination of research and knowledge dissemination activities included in the research programs led in partnership with and financially supported by the SSHRC and the project's partners. Elisabeth Robinot is also co-founder of the *Observatoire de la Philanthropie*, a philanthropy research and strategic monitoring unit that brings together researchers from ESG UQAM, UQTR and other international universities.

Démocratie : quand la crise force le renouveau | Democracy: When Crisis Drives Renewal





Crisis as Catalyst: How Philanthropy's funding changes during the pandemic can help grantees now

By **Ebony Davitt**, *Public Policy Advisor and Researcher, Ontario Nonprofit Network*



Ebony Davitt is a policy professional based in Toronto with a background in History and Gender studies. She has worked in both municipal government and in the nonprofit sector, currently working as a Policy Advisor for the Ontario Nonprofit Network (ONN). Her work focuses on Decent Work including nonprofit funding reform and anti-privatization research and policy advocacy. She is passionate about developing just and equitable public policy as well as supporting grassroots community advocacy.

Introduction

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic offers an important opportunity to reflect on the crisis as a period of necessary and welcomed change. The Canadian philanthropic sector was at a juncture: either continue with funding practices that were out of touch with the reality of grantees on the ground or forge ahead with trust-based philanthropic practices. Fortunately, some chose the latter.

The willingness of some in Canada's philanthropic sector to adapt funding practices during the pandemic was a significant difference-maker for the survival of many nonprofit grantees. COVID became a catalyst for an influx of necessary funding changes that the

nonprofit sector had needed for decades. Still, once the pandemic had ended, not all of these bold changes were maintained; for some in the philanthropic sector these changes were viewed as too costly and/or the desire to "return to normal" was strong. For the many that we interviewed, crisis became an accelerator for the adoption of funding practices rooted in trust-based philanthropy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout have forged the perfect storm of intersecting challenges for nonprofits. They are facing the following megatrends: an uncertain economy (i.e. tariffs and global trade war)¹, a weakening social safety net, rapid evolution of AI, new public policy landscapes, deepening polarization, backlash to equity, the global rise in fascism, and most importantly shorter time between crises like climate disasters, public health emergencies, and social unrest.

For this reason it's a critical time to reflect on the wins in better funding practices that were adopted during the pandemic. How can the philanthropic sector learn from the pivots and evolutions made during the pandemic and reinstitute or continue those practices? How does the philanthropic sector join forces with nonprofits to weather these current and incoming storms together once again?

The current moment also calls for the philanthropic sector to step up again, and for good. Decades of underfunding², unequal disbursement across communities³, and funding cuts have left the nonprofit sector vulnerable and ill-prepared for crises, including general, but expected difficult economic times.⁴ Reconnecting with the nonprofit sector and building trust-based and transformative relationships not only supports the sector now, but paves the way for a future where the sector and philanthropy can grow and adapt together. In essence, learning from a crisis and adapting to confront it, instead of simply surviving it, can lead to better outcomes for the whole nonprofit ecosystem. When nonprofits thrive in supporting their communities, so does philanthropy.

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Methodology

Our outreach process began with asking approximately ten funders for virtual thirty minute interviews on the changes in their funding practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the timing of this project we were able to interview approximately five well-known and established Canadian philanthropic funders (of which seventy five percent were public and twenty five percent private). We spent thirty minutes asking questions on why they changed their funding practices, what were the lessons they learned and impact of those changes, and what funding practices they had taken forward with them over the past five years.

Background

For decades, Canada's nonprofit sector has encouraged philanthropic funders to provide trust-based, flexible, and equitable disbursements across equity-denied communities.⁵ Trust-based philanthropy aims to uproot power dynamics between funders and grantees so funders are collaborators working alongside nonprofits.⁶ This allows for resources to be used more efficiently and enables nonprofit leaders to use their discretion to pivot when circumstances change.⁷ Equitable funding practices can also create space for introspection amongst funders. When new approaches to funding are tested, like with the changes to funding non-qualified donees (NQD) in 2023⁸, opportunities for traditionally overlooked grantees can increase.⁹

Historically philanthropy has kept grantees accountable, protected their money, and achieved real results by sticking to traditional notions of grant-making that favours oversight and hierarchical funding models.¹⁰ However, the pandemic effectively challenged these notions. If the nonprofit sector was to not only meet exponential demand but also be able to rapidly pivot and innovate to meet said demand, more funding, and better funding, needed to flow to organizations quickly.

Nonprofits were vocal about their needs to the public and to existing philanthropic partners. Many shared their struggles with the hope that these stories would encourage philanthropy to mobilize rapidly.¹¹ While much of the changes in funding practices have now become the norm (and have even catalyzed different funding models) some practices were scaled back as

the urgency from the pandemic waned.

Getting money out the door faster

While always important, but more critical during the pandemic, getting money out the door faster was one of the first funding issues that changed for many in philanthropy.

The Canadian Women's Foundation moved funding agreements and reporting online allowing funds to flow much quicker and ensuring that people were served as efficiently as possible in the process. Oral applications were introduced enabling organisations that were overburdened or dealing with crisis to continue to engage with the foundation. During the pandemic, the foundation also launched an Emerging and Urgent Granting Area which enabled them to give grantees rapid turnaround timelines for funding and flexible reporting requirements.

Similarly, London Community Foundation chose to leverage their relationships with community and government and applied to be a distributor of the federal Emergency Community Support Fund, a highly responsive fund that sought to use trust-based philanthropy principles to support small grassroots organisations on a rolling basis throughout the pandemic. Because of this money was able to more effectively move from the federal level down to local organisations that were doing on-the-ground work.

In their June 2020 report, Philanthropic Foundations of Canada (PFC) stated that 41 % of funders advanced payments on existing grants and 44 % modified payment schedules and other banking procedures.¹² These changes enabled necessary pivots and scaling up of vital programming across the nonprofit sector.

Giving money for emerging and urgent needs, collectively

It was clear early on in the pandemic that not only would moving money faster be necessary, but injecting more money into the areas of the nonprofit ecosystem that were experiencing urgent and emerging need, would be necessary. As a result, many in the philanthropic sector collectively pooled their resources (e.g. money, connections, data, etc.) to better support their grantees' work.

The London Community Foundation made the decision to pool extra funding and invited other

funders to join them in developing a fund that would eventually be called the COVID-19 Response Fund.¹³ This 1.4 million dollar fund included response, recovery, and rebuild grants that allowed grantees to address pressing matters, re-organize when ready, and transform operations once stabilized.

At Lawson Foundation, past visions of developing a funding envelope specifically for Indigenous communities were able to become a reality during the pandemic. In collaboration with the Community Foundations Canada Network, Lawson Foundation became a supporter of what would eventually be the [Indigenous People's Resilience Fund](#) (IPRF); Lawson Foundation, along with other philanthropic organizations, took the bold step of placing money into a donor advised fund where they had no right to fundee reporting, only a tax receipt. The goal was to make the process "brilliantly simple", enabling Indigenous communities to use the money as needed and to report through various methods that suited their needs and capacity. By bundling recipients, IPRF was able to give sixty per cent of the funding to non-qualified donees. Due to its success during the pandemic, the fund developed into its own charitable organization maintaining many of those same values around keeping reporting simple and trusting donees.

Lawson Foundation saw in real time the value in funding more non-qualified donees recognizing that not all charitable work, especially work done within equity-denied communities, was going to be conducted within the more colonial, bureaucratic bounds of legal charitable status in Canada.

The decision to pool funds presented an opportunity to target specific emerging needs amongst grantees and was one of the more common tactics amongst philanthropy during the pandemic. PFC's reported that 16 % of funders at one point or another contributed to pooled funds during the pandemic.¹⁴

The most important lesson from the interviewees emphasized was that when crisis necessitated change, they were all willing and capable of mobilizing and collaborating to support the nonprofit sector. Building out funder networks was a feasible task that could mobilize more money and function as a learning and collaboration opportunity for both funders and grantees. Through these interviews we saw that despite changing funding practices traditionally being considered difficult endeavors, funders could have

positive experiences with these changes. We also saw that these changes could also receive positive feedback from their grantees.

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Two steps forward, one step backward

Given these positive experiences, you may ask why did some in the philanthropic sector revert back to traditional funding practices? Anecdotal evidence from ONN's network points to some funders feeling the need to revert back once the urgency of the pandemic was over. However, it is of course difficult to find organizations who will go on record to talk in depth about this reversion.

Interviewees expressed similar sentiments when asked about why some in philanthropy may have rolled back on new funding practices, in essence stating, “old habits die hard.” As the urgency of the pandemic ended, the notion that funding practices had to return to status quo as they were pre-COVID was brewing. Some in philanthropy felt that large amounts of funding injections were simply not sustainable in the

long-term, others that the risk presented by increased flexibility was not justifiable when not in crisis. Some saw the pandemic as just a moment in time and once it was over, it was time to return to traditional funding practices. In order to quell inflation there needed to be less spending and more saving, this looked like the rolling back of funding at the government level and a slowing in granting as philanthropy confronted oversubscription.¹⁵

According to Ontario Nonprofit Network's 2025 State of the Sector survey, a quarter of nonprofits saw a decrease in funding from foundation grants.¹⁶ In a 2025 survey from Carleton University, 30 per cent of respondents said their funding from donors had decreased.¹⁷ As inflation transitioned into recession, waitlists continued to increase¹⁸ and discussions around nonprofit duplication and downsizing began to replace the recently more innovative conversations centering trust and collaboration. Nonprofits had to become more creative about seeking funding and concerns about mission drift increased as funding opportunities began to dwindle.¹⁹

Fortunately, the end of the pandemic didn't signal a return to normalcy for all of philanthropy. A positive is that there is evidence that some of these COVID-era practices did remain, even if not always in their original form. For some, rigidity set back in as inflation began to skyrocket, but for London Community Foundation, flexibility remains a priority. PFC continues to collaborate with other funding partners making it easier to respond when times of crisis return. The Canadian Women's Foundation still prioritizes intentional and targeted outreach both in-person and virtually in order to better meet organizations where they are at. Lawson Foundation remains a supporter of NQDs, helping set an example for the new guidance from the federal government which made it easier to work with NQDs.²⁰

After the worst of the pandemic, though Canada began to get back on its feet, inflation almost immediately began to impact the economy and the lives of everyday Canadians. This left many of the nonprofits that were labeled “essential” and “heroic” during the height of the pandemic, struggling to keep pace with increased costs due to inflation.

The cost of sliding backwards

While discussing maintaining trust-based philanthropy,

one of the first elements that must be further bolstered is flexibility. Nonprofits may not be facing a public health emergency that has closed everything except essential services, but they are navigating the ongoing fall out from the pandemic and the megatrends around the economy, equity, and more. Ongoing crises over the last five years have led to an increase in demand and less time to go back and forth over moving budget lines. When funding agreements lack flexibility, nonprofits serving vulnerable communities struggle to pivot, and when the population of people facing emergency circumstances rises due to rapidly deteriorating and changing economic and political circumstances, there's little time to negotiate moving budget lines.²¹ Many nonprofits proved themselves more than capable during the pandemic, now is the time to bring back that flexibility and help Canadians quicker.

Similarly less administrative and reporting requirements should remain a priority. Too much time is being wasted proving that the work is, or will be done, instead of working towards a reciprocal relationship that considers philanthropy to be a co-learner with their grantees.²² When grantees are responding to increased waitlists and need, any staff time spent not tackling the issues can often increase wait times further.

Continuing to pool resources is also vital. Vulnerable communities are disproportionately impacted during times of crisis and efforts to collaborate to make sure emerging needs are met and communities don't get left behind must continue and expand.²³

Now is not the time to scale back and save for a rainier day. The rainy days are here once again and it's time for philanthropy to invest not just in the hopes of weathering a crisis once again, but in hopes of encouraging and maintaining organizational sustainability and moving away from sporadic funding cycles.

So What, Now What?

Trust-based philanthropy which advances good funding practices is possible, during crisis and beyond economic and political context.²⁴ The funding practices that evolved during the pandemic demonstrate how trust-based philanthropy can enable efficiency and innovation, and in a time when sustainability is vital, the status quo is no longer a viable funding option.

By thinking deeper about the nonprofit ecosystem, philanthropy can transition from historically transactional relationships with grantees to transformative relationships. This means thinking deeper about sustainability and funding longer-term contracts that can actually enable the process of systems change, working alongside grantees leading with trust and flexibility that enables them to better innovate and grow with their work, and recognizing the value of injecting more funding into the sector. The nonprofit sector doesn't have to struggle to respond if it's always ready. This means philanthropy, as one of the biggest enablers for change in the sector must begin thinking systemically instead of just crisis to crisis.

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