WEBINAR SUMMARY

« THE RISE OF LIMITED-LIFE FOUNDATIONS: INSIGHTS FROM THE IVEY FOUNDATION EXPERIENCE »

PhiLab Event (virtual room)
April 16 2026, 11h - 12h30 (EST)

Moderator

IRYNA KHOVRENKOV

Iryna Khovrenkov is a quantitative researcher with wide-ranging empirical interests. Iryna's scholarly work focuses on two distinct research streams. The first examines philanthropy and grantmaking, nonprofit finance, and government policies that shape Canada's third sector. As part of the second research stream, Iryna explores how governments integrate the well-being framework into their decision-making processes. Iryna has received and collaborated on multiple research grants from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) to support her work in both research streams.

Panelists

DAVID GRANT-POITRAS

David is a PhD candidate in sociology at the Université du Québec à Montréal. His thesis focuses on the roles and impacts of Quebec grantmaking foundations in the social and ecological transition. He has been working for several years as a research agent at PhiLab. There, he conducts various research activities focusing on the initiatives and innovations deployed by philanthropic players to reduce social inequalities and combat climate change.

SACHA-EMMANUEL MOSSU

Sacha-Emmanuel is a PhD candidate in Philosophy at Université Laval, jointly supervised by Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. His research focuses on the role of philanthropy in achieving social justice and the democratic issues associated with it. He is a student member of the Canadian Partnership Research Network on Philanthropy (PhiLab), the Institute of Applied Ethics at Laval University (IDÉA), the Institute of Legal and Philosophical Sciences at the Sorbonne (ISJPS), and the Political Philosophy Laboratory (LPP) at Laval University.

BRUCE LOURIE

Dr. Lourie is one of Canada's most influential experts on climate change and sustainability. Best known for his ability to rethink complex problems and develop solutions that benefit both the economy and the environment, he has been instrumental in creating more than a dozen organizations that play a critical role in Canada's transition to a net-zero economy, including Canadian Climate Institute, the Institute for Sustainable Finance, Farmers for Climate Solutions, Efficiency Canada and The Transition Accelerator. His focus at Ivey Foundation is the Economy and Environment program, which provides funding to net-zero focused organizations.

Important information

To protect the anonymity of participants, the Q&A session is not included in the webinar summary. This decision is intended to ensure a safe and respectful space for dialogue for everyone who took part in the event.

Introduction

Iryna Khovrenkov, Associate Professor at Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Regina

In her opening remarks, Iryna welcomed participants to the webinar and thanked the presenters for leading the discussion. She briefly reviewed housekeeping details, including resources shared in the chat and the recording process, noting that only the presentation portion would be recorded.

Iryna then introduced the topic of limited-life or "sunsetting" foundations, describing them as a growing but still relatively unfamiliar segment of organized philanthropy. While perpetual foundations remain the dominant model, more foundations in North America and Europe are choosing to spend down their assets and conclude operations intentionally.

She explained that the webinar emerged from a research partnership launched in fall 2024 between PhiLab researchers and the Ivey Foundation. The project unfolded in two phases: first, a literature review examining the broader limited-life foundation model; and second, a collaborative case study focused on the Ivey Foundation's closure process.

Finally, Iryna outlined the structure of the webinar: the first part would present the research findings and introduce the case study, while the second part would take a more conversational format exploring how the Ivey Foundation is approaching the end of its operations.

First intervention

Sacha-Emmanuel Mossu, PhD Candidate in philosophy at Université de Montréal

Sacha-Emmanuel began by explaining that perpetuity has long been a defining feature of philanthropy in Canada and other liberal democracies. Foundations are legally allowed to exist indefinitely, and tax incentives, combined with relatively low disbursement requirements, often enable them to preserve or even grow their endowments over time. As a result, perpetual philanthropy has become the dominant and normalized model shaping the philanthropic ecosystem.

He then introduced the emerging phenomenon of limited-life or "sunsetting" foundations, which voluntarily choose to spend all of their assets and eventually cease operations after a defined period or once a specific objective has been achieved. He outlined two main approaches: gradually increasing annual spending until assets are depleted, or making significant capital transfers at the time of closure to other organizations.

He also clarified the distinction between "spend down" and "spend out" strategies. A spend-down approach involves spending more than is generated, which may be temporary and does not necessarily imply closure. A spend-out strategy, by contrast, reflects a deliberate plan to fully disburse assets and end operations within a set timeframe. While these concepts often overlap, they are not identical.

Sunsetting foundations are not a separate legal category but a strategic choice within the same regulatory framework as other charities. The presentation concluded by setting up a historical overview of limited-life foundations and their significance, including cases such as the Ivey Foundation. the lifespan of philanthropic foundations has long been a subject of debate. Since the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and John Stuart Mill have criticized perpetual foundations, arguing that they can make philanthropy overly donor-driven, less oriented toward the common good, and too influential long after donors' deaths.

These debates have persisted over time, including during the rise of major U.S. foundations such as Rockefeller, Ford, and Carnegie. While there have been political efforts to limit perpetual foundations, most have not succeeded. A key compromise emerged in 1969 in the United States with the introduction of a 5% minimum payout requirement, balancing critics of perpetuity with supporters of long-term foundations.

Critiques of perpetuity have come from within philanthropy itself. Andrew Carnegie, for instance, argued that wealth should be distributed during a philanthropist's lifetime to ensure its effective use, an idea that influenced Julius Rosenwald. Rosenwald went further by planning the closure of his foundation 25 years after his death, creating what is considered one of the earliest examples of a limited-life foundation in the United States.

Although such cases have historically been rare, the speaker noted that limited-life foundations are becoming more common, particularly in the United States. Surveys suggest that younger foundations are significantly more likely to consider sunsetting, and recent high-profile announcements, including plans by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to eventually close, reflect this growing trend.

Sacha-Emmanuel concluded by noting that while still uncommon in Canada, limited-life foundations are emerging, with the Ivey Foundation serving as a particularly significant case study. Its ongoing closure process offers a rare opportunity to observe sunsetting philanthropy in real time and better understand how this model unfolds in practice.

Second intervention

David Grant-Poitras, PhD Candidate in sociology at Université du Québec à Montréal

David introduced a typology aimed at making sense of the diversity of closure pathways within the limited-life or sunsetting foundation movement. He explained that, given the heterogeneity of the philanthropic sector, foundations adopt very different approaches to ending their operations, influenced by factors such as legal status, asset size, mission, ideology, and generational dynamics.

He proposed an analytical framework structured around multiple dimensions of closure.

Typology of limited-life foundation scenarios

<table>
<tr><td>According to the motivations given</td><td>Donor preferences</td><td>Family situations</td><td>Search for results</td><td>Decline in relevance</td><td>Unsustainable business model</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">According to the time horizon</td><td colspan="3">Total duration of the process</td><td colspan="2">End of process</td></tr>
<tr><td>Short-term (less than 10 years)</td><td>Medium-term (between 10 and 20 years)</td><td>Long-term (over 20 years)</td><td>Determined</td><td>Undetermined</td></tr>
<tr><td>According to expected outcomes</td><td>No specific impact intention</td><td>Responding to urgent needs</td><td>Increasing efficiency</td><td colspan="2">Fostering systemic change
Deployed through 6 strategies:
1. Investing in future leaders
2. Strengthening the capacities of powerful institutions and networks
3. Influencing other philanthropic players
4. Finance proven programs that generate lasting results
5. Support innovative research that develops solutions
6. Influencing public policy</td></tr>
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The first concerns the motivations for sunsetting, identifying five recurring rationales. These include: respecting the founder's wishes and concerns about mission drift; the desire to maximize philanthropic impact through accelerated spending; family dynamics and succession challenges in family foundations; the perception that the foundation's mission has been accomplished or has lost relevance; and, more rarely, financial decline or an unsustainable business model leading to involuntary closure.

These motivations are often not isolated, but combined in practice, shaping complex and multifactorial decisions about closure.

David then introduced a second dimension of the typology based on the time horizon of closure, distinguishing between short-term (under 10 years), medium-term (10–20 years), and long-term (over 20 years) sunsetting trajectories. This framework helps situate different foundations along a spectrum of closure strategies and better understand the variety of pathways within the movement.

He illustrated this distinction with examples, including large foundations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which is planning a multi-decade wind-down due to the scale of its assets. Fixed timelines provide clarity, while conditional approaches allow adaptability depending on evolving circumstances.

He then presented a third dimension of the typology, focusing on the intended outcomes of closure. He outlined several possibilities: some foundations do not explicitly define impact-related outcomes; others see closure as a way to increase impact by accelerating spending and scaling programs; some orient their closure toward responding to urgent needs such as crises or disasters (including examples from the COVID-19 pandemic and contingency planning for extreme scenarios); and others view sunsetting as a strategy for systemic change or broader political influence.

He noted that these strategies can vary widely, from social and environmental impact goals to more ideologically driven approaches. Researchers have identified multiple distinct strategies within this space, highlighting the diversity of motivations and intended effects.

Finally, David explained that this typology was applied to the case of the Ivey Foundation to map its specific sunsetting trajectory across motivations, time horizon, and intended outcomes. He concluded by handing over to the next speaker to discuss the foundation's lived experience of the closure process.

Third intervention

Bruce Lourie, President of the Ivey Foundation

Bruce explained that the Ivey Foundation was not originally established as a limited-life foundation, making its decision to sunset particularly significant given its long history—approaching 80 years of operation.

He emphasized that this decision followed extensive reflection within the family and the foundation, grounded in a careful assessment of what would generate the greatest long-term impact. While each foundation is unique and shaped by its own history, values, and governance, the Ivey Foundation ultimately focused its mission on supporting Canada's transition to a low-carbon economy and advancing systemic solutions to climate and sustainability challenges.

The Ivey Foundation's position within the limited-life foundations movement

Motivations to sunset	Donor preferences	Family situations	Pursuit of specific results	Loss in relevance	Deficit business model
Time frame of the process	Total duration of the process			End of the process	
	Short (less than 10 years)	Medium (between 10 and 20 years)	Long (more than 20 years)	Determined	Undetermined
Expected outcomes	No specific outcome intended	Responding to urgent needs	Increasing effectiveness	Supporting systemic change: Deployed through six strategies : 1. Investing in future leaders; 2. Strengthen the capacities of powerful institutions and networks; 3. Influence other philanthropic actors; 4. Funding evidence-based programs that yield sustainable results; 5. Supporting innovative research that develops solutions; 6. Shaping public policy.	

This strategic focus made the decision to wind down more coherent, as the foundation had already spent years building and strengthening institutions capable of carrying this work forward. The presence of strong partner organizations able to absorb additional resources was also a key consideration in accelerating impact through a planned closure.

He situated the foundation's timeline on the shorter end of the sunsetting spectrum, linking this choice to the urgency of climate action and the need for timely investments to support Canada's transition away from fossil fuels toward electrification and a more sustainable economic system. The decision reflects both the family's long-term commitment to improving the country and a belief that deploying resources more intensively in the present would generate greater systemic impact than perpetuity.

Bruce described how the Ivey Foundation evolved over time, noting that like many long-standing foundations, it went through several phases of focus. Early in its history, it was more locally oriented, supporting the community in London, Ontario. Over time, it gradually shifted toward environmental issues, becoming one of the early Canadian foundations to support environmental organizations as early as the late 1960s.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, the foundation has become fully dedicated to environmental causes, which reinforced its orientation toward achieving impact over a shorter time horizon. This long-standing evolution helped shape the decision to concentrate resources and ultimately adopt a sunsetting approach.

Bruce also highlighted the foundation's evidence-based approach to philanthropy. A strategic reassessment conducted about a decade ago led the foundation to recognize a broader systemic challenge: despite progress on specific environmental issues, global outcomes such as biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions were continuing to worsen. This led the foundation to focus on the intersection between economic systems and environmental outcomes, giving rise to its "Economy and Environment Program."

From there, the foundation increasingly focused on issues central to Canada's energy transition, including carbon pricing, energy efficiency, and sustainable finance. Over time, this work converged on a core insight: addressing climate change requires rapidly transitioning away from fossil fuels toward full electrification of energy systems.

Finally, Bruce emphasized the foundation's grantmaking philosophy, which prioritizes providing larger, more strategic grants to a smaller number of highly effective organizations, rather than dispersing smaller grants across many recipients. This approach reflects both its impact-oriented strategy and its overall philosophy of concentrating resources where they can drive systemic change most effectively.

Discussion

Together, the three speakers illustrated how deliberate planning, strategic clarity, and thoughtful communication are central to successfully managing the closure of a philanthropic foundation.

Sasha-Emmanuel Mossu

He opened the discussion by focusing on the preparation phase of sunsetting foundations. He emphasized that closing a foundation is a rare and complex process that requires extensive reflection, planning, and coordination. Rather than acting as a simple "spending down" exercise, sunsetting involves developing a structured closure strategy that defines timelines, stages, partner engagement, and intended outcomes.

He highlighted that this process typically engages boards, families, and staff in deep deliberation before any public announcement is made, underscoring how central planning is to a successful transition.

Bruce Lourie

Bruce then explained how the Ivey Foundation approached its own closure strategy in practice. He described it as a "reverse business plan," moving deliberately from a defined endowment toward zero over a five-year period in a way designed to maximize impact. This included detailed planning across staffing, communications, investment of funds, and grantmaking.

He stressed that the decision reflected both strategic reflection and continuity of the foundation's long-standing commitment to environmental and climate-related work, with a strong belief that concentrated, time-bound spending would generate greater impact than perpetuity.

David Grant-Poitras

He then highlighted the importance of communication in the sunsetting process. He explained that announcing closure can create uncertainty internally among staff and externally among partners and funded organizations. To manage this, the foundation adopted a carefully crafted communication strategy, including a clear public announcement and proactive engagement with core partners before the news was released. Bruce Laurie added that the foundation's message was intentionally focused: it reaffirmed its commitment to existing partners and its established areas of work, helping prevent misinterpretation while still allowing for transparent dialogue with stakeholders.

Conclusion

Iryna Khovrenkov

Across the discussion, the speakers collectively showed that sunsetting a foundation is not a simple endpoint but a highly structured and strategic process that touches every dimension of organizational life—from planning and governance to grantmaking and external relations.

Taken together, the discussion highlights that limited-life philanthropy is not simply about spending down resources, but about aligning mission, timing, and relationships in a way that seeks to amplify impact while preparing for organizational exit.

The session concluded with Iryna thanking the panelists and participants for their contributions, engagement, and thoughtful questions throughout the webinar.

For further reading

- David Grant-Poitras, Sacha-Emmanuel Mossu. (2026). The Sunset of the Ivey Foundation: Study of a Philanthropic Supernova, [Research paper], PhiLab. Link
- Sacha-Emmanuel Mossu. (2026) Sunsetting Foundations for Climate Action: New Pathways for Environmental Philanthropy, *The PhiLanthropic Year*, Volume 7, PhiLab. Link
- Sacha-Emmanuel Mossu, David Grant-Poitras. (2025). Limited-life foundations: anatomy of a philanthropic movement, [Research paper], PhiLab. Link
- Sacha-Emmanuel Mossu, David Grant-Poitras. (2025). Limited-Life Foundations, [Infographic], PhiLab. Link
- PhiLab Podcast episode (2025). « Fermer pour mieux donner | David Grant-Poitras et Sacha-Emmanuel Mossu » Link

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