

# FOCUS shifting

Canadian community foundations aim to change systems, institutions and attitudes through social justice grantmaking.

Depending on their political persuasions, Americans tend to see Canada as either an ultimate blue state with universal healthcare, a robust social safety net and progressive laws on marijuana possession and gay marriage or as the epitome of what's wrong with the modern welfare state—including socialized medicine, excessive taxes and moral decay.

Neither, of course, is accurate. Canada is often heralded internationally as a leader in social and economic wellbeing, and in some ways it is. But when it comes to some of the most challenging social and economic problems, Canada looks an awful lot like its southern neighbor. As many as 14 percent of Canadian adults are poor, and the gap between the rich and poor is steadily widening. There is a growing correlation between poverty and race in Canada. More than 1 million children live in poverty, and our child poverty rate has remained virtually unchanged for 30 years. The numbers are even more shameful for aboriginal children living off-reserve (41 percent) and immigrant children (42.4 percent).

Like their counterparts in the United States and around the world, Canada's 150 community foundations have always directed a good part of their grantmaking dollars toward those challenges and other intractable problems. But in the past few years, they have begun to do so in a much more strategic and concerted way, with the support of Community Foundations of Canada (CFC), their national association. Community foundations in Canada are beginning to mobilize around a social justice agenda.

Several factors have led to this. First, after decades of rising public spending, economic forces in the 1990s led federal and provincial governments in Canada to dramatically cut budgets. Services were transferred to cities and towns, or cut altogether, and community and charitable organizations tried to step in. Foundations were flooded with grant requests for services that governments had funded in the past.

At the same time, changes to tax policies helped stimulate charitable giving and new donors emerged from the booming technology sector and other growing sectors. Community foundations in Canada grew rapidly, with combined assets doubling from \$1 billion (\$800 million US) to nearly \$2 billion (\$1.6 billion US) between 1998 and 2005.



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In the midst of this dramatic growth, CFC and its member community foundations in Canada faced a disturbing dichotomy. Although community foundation assets and grants were at record levels, so were poverty rates, environmental decay and the struggles of immigrants trying to get a foothold in their new land. Community foundations felt an obligation to use their growing assets to tackle the root causes of some of the toughest challenges facing their communities, and were exploring how to do so.

#### Getting Started

As a few of Canada's leading community foundations were rethinking their roles, CFC organized a symposium in January 2002—Moving Beyond the Traditional Charitable Roles. We invited speakers from the United States and Northern Ireland, as well as Canada. At the end of the discussions, the conclusion was unanimous—Canada's community foundations needed to focus on social justice. By this we mean investing a

community foundation's resources (financial and other) to address underlying causes, rather than simply to treat symptoms. Through our social justice focus, we want to change systems, institutions and attitudes that act as barriers to the full social and economic participation of all Canadians.

With support from the Ford Foundation and the Atkinson Charitable Foundation in Toronto, we set out to increase the commitment and capacity of community foundations to do more of their work from a social justice perspective. We focused on three things:

1. Increasing foundation awareness of social justice issues to encourage more foundations to see them as a legitimate focus. To launch this, we co-hosted with The Winnipeg Foundation a social justice forum that brought community foundation representatives together with social justice leaders. They explored issues, potential roles and the implications of adopting a social justice perspective. For example, would it turn

## The Case Studies

### Toronto Innovation Creates Affordable Housing

A distinguishing feature of social justice philanthropy is that it works at systemic and institutional levels to advance positive change. One of Canada's most successful examples involves an innovative public/private/nonprofit partnership convened by the Toronto Community Foundation (TCF) to help address the city's need for affordable housing.

Each year, TCF publishes Toronto's Vital Signs® ([www.tcf.ca](http://www.tcf.ca)), a report card tracking Toronto's quality of life in ten areas, including housing. The 2004 report showed almost 70,000 households were on the city's waiting list for subsidized housing. The foundation also found that Toronto's apartment vacancy rate had reached an all-time high—at least 10,000 apartments were sitting vacant.

Government funding was restricted to new con-

struction projects and budget constraints at the municipal and provincial levels meant new housing projects were slow to develop. Existing rental units clearly represented an untapped resource.

In March 2004, TCF began talking with housing advocates, private landlords, the public housing authority and governments. The Greater Toronto Apartment Association (representing local landlords), the Toronto Community Housing Corporation and the mayor's housing advisor sat down with the foundation to explore ways the current housing stock could be better used to meet community needs. Working together, they came up with a potential tool for change—a \$300 (\$240 US) monthly housing allowance, cost-shared by landlords and government, that would bridge the gap between market rents and tenants' ability to pay.

Led by TCF, the group proposed a pilot program to the Ontario government that enabled it to create housing allowances at a 50 percent discount. Nine months

## institutions and attitudes that act as barriers to full social

off donors—as some feared—or would it attract those who really want to make a difference? (The experience to date indicates that the perspective attracts donors.) However, because influencing public policy is one of the goals of social justice work, we had to ask ourselves, do we know how to engage in advocacy? Generally, this is not a community foundation strong suit.

2. We aimed specifically to support our leading edge foundations and build the capacity to effectively engage in social justice grantmaking, community leadership, advocacy and other activities. Because community foundations excel at peer learning, we knew that the experiences of those foundations would help spread the concept throughout Canada, so we have focused on telling their stories (see sidebars). CFC's Social Justice Learning Group now regularly brings together a group of seven community foundation representatives who are actively engaged in social justice work. They are supporting and learning from one another, and beginning to identify opportunities

for Canadian community foundations to work together on issues such as poverty.

3. We wanted to add to the currently limited body of research on foundations and social justice, and to develop practical tools for foundations. We started with two background papers to help our members think about the meaning—and ramifications—of social justice grantmaking. We also published a primer on the legislative and regulatory environment as it relates to advocacy on the part of foundations and their grantees. And CFC's *Social Justice Spectrum* ([www.communityfdn.ca/link\\_docs/SpectrumNov2004%2Epdf](http://www.communityfdn.ca/link_docs/SpectrumNov2004%2Epdf)) helps foundations understand the potential range of social justice work.

### Going Deeper

We are keenly aware that our social justice efforts are in their infancy and that we have much to learn from other networks in Canada and around the world. However, during his speech at the 2004 Symposium on a Global Movement in Berlin,

after its first exploratory meeting, TCF and its partners announced a \$7.2 million (\$5.76 million US), five-year housing allowance pilot program in Toronto.

Because of this initiative, 400 individuals and families moved into affordable homes this summer. Recognizing the benefits of using existing housing stock, the federal and provincial governments have now amended their housing funding policies to enable additional housing allowances. A 5,000-unit expansion of the Toronto model is now expected across the province and may extend across the country.

## Hamilton Commits to Poverty Reduction

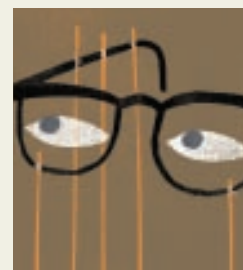
Located less than an hour's drive from Toronto, the city of Hamilton, population 500,000, has the highest poverty rate in Ontario. One in five (100,000) of its residents live in low-income households. The numbers

are even higher among children under 12 (25 percent), seniors over 75 (29 percent) and recent immigrants (52 percent).

In the past decade, the wealthiest 40 percent of Hamilton's citizens have experienced increasing incomes, while the poorest 60 percent have watched their incomes drop even further. At the same time, some of the city's biggest and best-known employers have either filed for bankruptcy protection or closed up shop.

The Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF) knew the situation demanded bold action. After extensive consultation, the foundation responded by becoming the first community foundation in Canada to commit its entire unrestricted community fund to a single cause—poverty reduction.

In February 2004, HCF launched Tackling Poverty Together. The four-year initiative will provide at least \$3 million (\$2.4 million US) to charitable organizations focusing on innovative poverty prevention and reduction.



## Engaging in advocacy is not generally a community foundation

Emmett D. Carson, president and CEO of The Minneapolis Foundation, recognized one of the strengths we bring to our social justice work—our clear intention to encourage and focus our members on social justice grantmaking. (For more, see “Standing at the Crossroads,” *Foundation News & Commentary*, January/February 2005, [www.foundationnews.org/CME/article.cfm?ID=3166](http://www.foundationnews.org/CME/article.cfm?ID=3166).)

It is essential that this work be undertaken not just within a few foundations, but also as an endeavour of the entire national network. Obviously, our members are independent and will make their own decisions about if, when and how to integrate a social justice perspective into their work. But, by actively working with foundations on the leading edge of this work and bringing it to the attention of every CFC member, we hope to move forward on key national initiatives.

For example, Canada has a population of approximately 30 million, or one-tenth the size of the United States. Immigration now accounts

for more than half of our population growth and has dramatically increased Canada’s ethnic and racial diversity. In the last decade, three-quarters of immigrants to Canada were people of color. This diversity has added a rich texture to Canadian life—and new challenges for cities such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, where most immigrants settle.

Our labor market growth depends on immigrants, but they face significant barriers once they arrive. Despite the fact that immigrants come with generally higher degrees of education, greater professional credentials and more financial resources than in the past, we continue to discount their experience, education and training. This results in a \$4 billion (\$3.2 billion US) loss to the economy, not to mention untold losses to the immigrants themselves.

To help community foundations effectively address such immigration issues, CFC has launched a research project with the Law Commission of Canada funded by the Walter and

## The Case Studies

Soon after HCF announced its poverty initiative, Hamilton’s city government offered to co-convene a citywide roundtable to build on the foundation’s efforts. Less than one year later, HCF and the city are leading the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, which brings together 25 community leaders to mobilize a communitywide focus on poverty reduction.

Together with individuals living in poverty, the business community, voluntary organizations and three levels of government, roundtable members are developing a multiyear poverty reduction plan and establishing a framework to implement, evaluate and finance the plan over the next four years.

Financing will come from all sectors and key institutions are contributing in other ways as well. For example, *The Hamilton Spectator* ([www.hamiltonspectator.com](http://www.hamiltonspectator.com)) will focus its reporting, editorial and community relations efforts on poverty reduction and 30 member businesses of the chamber of commerce have formed a

community development committee to help.

As the first initiative of its kind co-led by a Canadian community foundation and a local government, it has the potential to demonstrate how two key institutions and their partners can focus the community’s energy and resources on a critical issue.

## Winnipeg Focuses on One Neighborhood School

The Centennial Neighbourhood Project was started by The Winnipeg Foundation in 2003 with \$2.5 million (\$2 million US) in foundation funding and a five-year commitment to test the theory that education is the ticket out of poverty. The foundation, neighborhood residents and agencies and other partners developed an innovative initiative that seeks to demonstrate that appropriate school and community supports can significantly improve the prospects of students and their fami-

strong suit, but it is one that needs to be worked on.

Duncan Gordon Foundation. The Community Scholar in Law Reform initiative will document how Canadian law and social policy impede immigrant settlement and propose policy and program changes to help new Canadians thrive.


As described in “The Case Studies,” beginning on page 36, several member foundations are leading significant poverty reduction initiatives. CFC hopes to access a new federal program to build on their work and frame an antipoverty agenda for Canadian community foundations.

Many of our community foundations are also interested in replicating the Toronto Community Foundation’s (TCF) approach to tracking trends and mobilizing community response to social justice issues, such as the gap between rich and poor, access to work and affordable housing. CFC is working with TCF and other foundations on a nationally coordinated approach to this work.

Finally, CFC is collecting baseline information from members to determine the level of

social justice grantmaking. We’re also trying to gauge board and staff attitudes toward a “social justice lens” for their work, a tool we recently introduced. We will have some initial results for the Council on Foundations’ Community Foundation Conference in Seattle, where we will be coordinating a panel discussion with representatives from Canada, the United States and Mexico. (For more on the September 19–21 conference and this session, “Mobilizing Community Foundations for Social Justice,” visit [www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org).)

#### **Additional Resources**

Community Foundations of Canada has created and compiled a series of resources around the issue of social justice that can be found at [www.community-fdn.ca/socialjustice](http://www.community-fdn.ca/socialjustice). 

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lies in one of the city’s most disadvantaged areas.

To put those supports in place, the foundation worked on three levels: first, the creation of a residents’ committee to lead change from the ground up; second, an interagency committee to support the residents’ efforts; and finally, a funders’ committee to bring funders together from the volunteer, public and private sectors.

Two years later, improvements are being seen at every level. A new residents’ group is working on an overall neighborhood plan focusing on safety and housing. The interagency committee has identified and filled a number of critical gaps at Dufferin School, such as the lack of aboriginal agencies working in the neighborhood. Approximately 90 percent of Dufferin’s students are aboriginal, but the school had no aboriginal teachers. Local agencies brought five aboriginal teaching assistants—hired from within the Centennial neighborhood—to Dufferin. The assistants have brought native knowledge into the classroom and curriculum.

The committee also worked closely with provincial and federal native housing associations to push for more off-reserve housing in Centennial. The community recently received ten new rent-geared-to-income units—among the first built in Canada in more than a decade.

The multiple funders involved in the Centennial program are collaborating in innovative ways. The school division agreed to upgrade the community’s support staff person to full-time. The province is staffing a new family resource center and has given Centennial a “Neighbourhoods Alive” designation, which makes it eligible for other resources. The federal government agreed to set up what may be its first school-based early years education program. The early results from Centennial look promising, with tremendous potential for best practices to be shared and replicated in other inner city communities.



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