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An Invitation to Explore Indigenous Innovation
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An Invitation to Explore Indigenous Innovation

BY KRIS ARCHIE & JESSICA BOLDOC

As the year that marks Canada's 150th anniversary of confederation winds to a close, the country is experiencing a wake-up call about its past, present, and future. While the sesquicentennial has represented a time to celebrate and look forward for some, others, including many Indigenous peoples, have seen an opportunity to reflect back on a fraught history that includes the displacement of Indigenous peoples, forced assimilation, and the widespread destruction of languages and culture.

These timely reflections emphasize the value of the land's original social innovators. Indigenous communities that continue to occupy Turtle Island (today more commonly known as North America) have drawn for millennia on deep pools of knowledge characterized by a profound relationship with land, community, and spirit. And many of the leadership tenets that we consider most progressive today are rooted in this ancestral knowledge. In fact, collaborative leadership models, cocreation, appreciative inquiry, and mindfulness as tools for social innovation and transformation are inherent in Indigenous ways of knowing.

If Canada is to become a social innovator on the world stage, we need to recognize Indigenous peoples' contributions more explicitly, and reconcile these insights with the truth about our country's past. Canada's history of colonization, assimilation, and cultural genocide needs to be understood and acknowledged, because colonial legacies are anything but bygones. The ills of a shared history continue to create problems that in some Indigenous communities have led to states of outright emergency, including suicide epidemics, a growing risk of extinction for Indigenous language and cultural practices, and the need for countless "boil water" advisories in Indigenous areas without access to clean drinking water or proper infrastructure.

The realities of extreme wealth disparity, racism, and the resulting intergenerational trauma

call for restorative action between Indigenous peoples and settlers. Only after this happens can the potential of social innovation at scale be fully realized in Canada.

At the 2015 Indigenous Innovation Summit in Winnipeg, the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), recognized this need. The TRC is an independent body created to document the stories of survivors, families, and communities affected by the Indian Residential Schools, which through much of the 20th century forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families with the goal of assimilating them. Sinclair noted, "Innovation isn't always about creating new things or creating new ways of doing." Rather, it "sometimes involves looking back at our old ways and bringing them forward to this new situation."

The 4Rs Youth Movement (4Rs) and The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (The Circle) are two organizations taking this idea to heart as they work to build relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The idea of relationship-building may not appear especially innovative in and of itself. What is new is the growing investment in intercultural, interpersonal, and intergenerational relationship-building for the purposes of social change. In many cases, the kinds of conversations that lead to positive relationships also display the hallmarks of Indigenous oral tradition, including intergenerational mentorship, participatory leadership, and holistic problem solving.

For the 4Rs Youth Movement (led by one of this piece's authors), building relationships is a first step toward larger systemic change. The organization hosts intimate face-to-face gatherings with Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in community spaces, university campuses, and outdoor settings. The dialogues facilitate connections centered around the "4Rs" values of respect, reciprocity, reconciliation, and relevance. Through experiential training, gatherings, and workshops, the 4Rs brings together young people from different backgrounds to navigate the complexities of history and identity. These safe environments allow for and support even

the most uncomfortable conversations, help young people share their experiences, build understanding, and seed the kinds of respectful relationships that will hopefully lead to productive collaboration, trust, and friendship.

The Circle on Philanthropy and Aboriginal Peoples (The Circle) provides another example of a social sector organization promoting communication and relationships between different groups. The Circle (also led by a coauthor of this article) works to create space for relationship building, co-leadership, and innovation that enables positive change within Indigenous communities. The Circle emerged a decade ago through conversation between First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities interested in what reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people could mean for Canada's philanthropic sector, and for the country at large.

Since that time, The Circle has cocreated a number of programs through reciprocal learning and innovative approaches, from a decolonizing method of grantmaking known as the Ontario Indigenous Youth Partnership Project (OIYPP) to the {Re}conciliation Initiative, aimed at promoting collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists. The Circle is also the humble producer of the webinar series *The Journey to Reconciliation*, dedicated to increasing dialogue, awareness, and cultural fluency throughout the philanthropic sector. Recently, as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada closing events, The Circle and 20 other philanthropic organizations succeeded in cocreating a "Declaration of Action" that gives philanthropic organizations a platform to state their openness and willingness to strive toward understanding, dignity, respect, and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

In an age of rapidly advancing technologies and accelerating communication, the 4Rs and The Circle are investing in the slow, time-honored tradition of face-to-face conversation as a way to foster empathy and leadership across cultures and generations. Our hope is that through this work, the people of Canada will be able to sit in difficult spaces and find strength and direction in the beauty of the relationships that we build with one another. It's an innovation that is at once old and new.

This is a moment of possibility for Canada. These organizations and others have extended an open invitation to consider how the deep evolution and innovations of Indigenous cultures can inform our ability to learn. Through growth, shared experiences, and cocreation, we have an opportunity to discover a new direction and move closer to equity, inclusion, and justice. ✕

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