

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND PHILANTHROPY

# Colonialism by other means?

Rebecca Adamson

The donor-indigenous peoples landscape is a jumble of different types of organization that support indigenous causes, but they all have one thing in common: they do not understand how indigenous people think, how they make their decisions, how they run their daily lives. Nor do they understand the simple fact that imposing alien Western ideas is the antithesis of effective philanthropy. This article suggests two radical points of departure for philanthropy if it is to become an authentic vehicle for promoting cultural diversity – something that is sorely needed in the 21st century, and not just by indigenous peoples.



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There is a high level of distrust between donors and indigenous organizations, which has developed over time. In the early years of the relationship, donors were generally very permissive. They were not strict on matters of reporting or finance, taking a rather paternalist view of their grantees. Sadly this fostered abuses on both sides, but as time passed demands for detailed information to justify donor expenditures began to emanate from Europe and the US. The use of 'log frame' indicators, evaluations, impact measurements, outputs, complex systems and procedural regulations has become widespread in the name of accountability and performance. But the question is accountability for whom and for what?

## The clash of two world views

Indigenous people will tell you time and again that they do not think in sectors – economic development, health, education, conservation. When indigenous organizations are funded under narrow programme guidelines, they often divert funds to meet other needs, and the donors object. Sometimes charges of corruption occur. These misunderstandings come from donors encountering a world view that sees the interrelatedness of problems and solutions. Indigenous peoples are inherently brilliant systems thinkers, seeing, analysing and constructing interrelated problem-solving strategies. At First Peoples Worldwide, for example, grants focus on indigenous assets. This allows the community to identify the primary asset – be it water, fish, forests, traditional knowledge, youth, etc – and to decide how they will build their capacity to

increase their control and derive tangible benefits for the community from that asset.

The globalization of outside interests such as corporations, governments, conservationists and academics has made asset-stripping the number one issue confronting indigenous peoples, but our approach is not just a direct response to these attacks. It is a conceptual framework for fitting within the cultural and contextual circumstances of each indigenous community. For example, we funded a project to reintroduce the buffalo for the Standing Rock Sioux. It was an environmental project because the buffalo eat the natural grasses and the black-footed ferret returned for the first time in 15 years. It was also an income project as participating families received a calf worth \$650; a nutritional project as herd culls fed the elderly and supplied school food programmes; an art project as by-products were used by artists; and finally a youth project where juvenile delinquents were sentenced to 'study the buffalo nations as the model for the Lakota Nations'.

## Redefining 'one size fits all'

Philanthropy has a penchant for a 'one size fits all' approach to grantmaking, with funders often favouring a single intervention strategy that must work for every project or community they fund. I would like to suggest an entirely different definition for the 'one size' approach, perhaps more suitably termed holistic grantmaking. Holistic or culturally appropriate grantmaking does not have to sacrifice focus, accountability or performance. On the contrary, with relevant benchmarks and culturally appropriate indicators, it will bring accountability and performance along with higher success rates and improve both sides of the donor-indigenous relationship. The first donor fund I created, the Eagle Staff Fund, has a grant portfolio of approximately 320 grantees. On average the grantees fully complete 83 per cent of the total deliverables proposed, with another 13 per cent partially completed. The reason: they have identified the problem and defined the solution. The third key element is accountability, and when all three factors are combined, genuine capacity gets built.

As a way of avoiding the issue altogether or, better yet, calling it 'a problem of capacity', many donors fund through intermediaries. Here's how it works. Recently, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation made a \$1.5 million grant to a group called EcoCien-cia, an NGO based in Ecuador with very close ties to Conservation International. The purpose of the grant

was to carry out activities in the Achuar territory, including land titling. According to sources on the ground, less than \$150,000 will end up in Achuar hands. In addition, CI is seen by the majority of indigenous people as an aggressive proponent of evicting indigenous communities to make way for parks and protected areas.<sup>1</sup>

It is extremely unlikely that the Moore grant will build the capacity of the Achuar communities, but if this is their intent, then why go with a non-indigenous intermediary when right there in Ecuador is a Kichwa community of 1,600 people called Sarayaku? It has been successful in attracting assistance from a range of donors, including Oxfam, IBIS, the Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Pachamama Foundation. To manage the substantial amount of money that comes in, the Sarayaku have devised their own system of accounts and controls. None of it was imposed by donor agencies. They have achieved an excellent track record and sound financial management and could potentially be better intermediaries for the Achuar. The Sarayaku would certainly be more likely to understand their thoughts, decisions and daily lives. Yet herein lies one final problem caused by what I term 'philanthropology'.

### The devil's bargain of authenticity

Philanthropologists are part philanthropists and part anthropologists, forever looking for authentic indigenous peoples. In a book by Paige Raibon, *Authentic Indians*, he states: 'For Aboriginal people, modernity was cast as a process of distancing from their own culture. Move too far from that culture, as survival has so often dictated, and presto – indigenous people become something less than authentic. Prevailing conventions make it impossible for indigenous people to be accepted as both contemporary and authentic. If we want our Indians authentic, we must find ways to remind ourselves that they are not altogether contemporary.'

Let me be very clear here that I am not talking about assimilation, but about full control and self-actualization as a people. Instead, from the Anglo-European arrivals in the Americas to corporate resource seizures, conservationist invasions of indigenous homelands, and now the arrival of the philantropol-

ogists, racist assumptions of authenticity have set up a no-win situation for indigenous peoples. (I say 'racist' because as a people we had absolutely no control over the discourse by which we were defined and are still being defined by the Anglo-Europeans.) The vagaries of existence and the slender margins for survival under colonial intervention mean that indigenous peoples cannot forgo economic opportunities based on 'the devil's bargain of authenticity'. At the same time these colonial opportunities force on them a colonial perception of 'authenticity'. Indigenous peoples have gone beyond such arrogance to arrive at 'complicated and hard-won blends of indigenous and colonial practices' that both put food on the table and preserve indigenous identity.

**Adapting their culture, not sacrificing it**

The Makah Nation at Neah Bay, Washington, for example, revived their traditional whale hunts, which led to 14 phone calls to my office from concerned environmental donors who wanted to stop the Makah from hunting. The essence of the Makah culture and their identity as a people lies in their relationship with the whale. This does not necessarily mean that their culture requires the whale hunt itself, but rather the spiritual relationship with the whale. So I proposed that the group of environmental donors endow a state-of-the-art whale research facility for the Makah to respect and honour their sacred relationship in a new way. It is hard to say what the outcome would have been. The donors said no. So the Makah continue to make their culture live in a way that is objectionable to those who consider it a culture of the past. And certain foundations continue to work from a framework of ideas that have gained a fetishistic staying power.

### Adapting their culture, not sacrificing it

But philanthropy cannot continue to operate under a self-image that sees too many others as exotic Others. Holistic philanthropy offers tremendous insight and hope for the kind of diverse grantmaking we need in today's complex world, if only donors and indigenous people can craft a non-categorical programme focus and grantmaking process in which holistic systems thinking is allowed and the envisaged solutions leave room for the unexpected adaptations that tribes have always survived by. As Raibon said (with my parenthesis added): 'Despite colonial claims to the contrary, the authenticity of Aboriginal life lay not (solely) in the mindless, mechanical reproduction of age-old rituals but in the fresh generation of meaningful ways to identify as [indigenous] within a changing and increasingly modern age.' @

1 Mac Chapin (2006) *Donors and Indigenous People in South America* (unfinished report).