



International Funders
IFIP
for Indigenous Peoples

ROOTED IN TRUST: A FUNDERS' TOOLKIT FOR STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS-LED FUNDS

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Purpose of Report

Rooted in Trust: A Funders' Toolkit for Strengthening Indigenous-Led Funds builds on the insights of the Governance Scan developed by the International Funders for Indigenous Peoples (IFIP) in partnership with Indigenous Collaboration. The scan examines the governance structures, values, and practices of 23 Indigenous-Led Funds (ILFs) worldwide—revealing a shared commitment to Indigenous self-determination, cultural integrity, and community-rooted systems of care and accountability.

This toolkit is designed to translate those learnings into practice. It offers funders tangible strategies for aligning with Indigenous-led governance, deepening trust-based partnerships, and transforming philanthropic systems. Grounded in the 5Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy—Respect, Relationships, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Redistribution—*Rooted in Trust* invites funders to walk alongside Indigenous-Led Funds as allies in systems change, accountability, and reparative action.

Message to Readers:

We ask readers to please cite this report and acknowledge the collective wisdom of the knowledge holders who contributed to this research. Please use the following full citation:

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Reframing Philanthropy: Indigenous-Led Funds Governance Models



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This report contains insights shared by 23 Indigenous-Led Funds who participated in the 2024 Governance Scan, as well as recommendations of participants in the 4th Global Gathering of Indigenous-Led Funds just prior to the 2025 IFIP Global Indigenous Conference in Kenya. There are six sections to this report.



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Indigenous-Led Funds participating in the 2024 IFIP Governance Scan interviews and the 4th Global Gathering of Indigenous-Led Funds just prior to the 2025 IFIP Global Indigenous Conference 2025 IFIP Global Conference in Naivasha, Kenya.



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Indigenous Led Funds (ILFs) are guided by Indigenous worldviews and led-by and for Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous-Led Funds strengthen self-determination and support a process that empowers the communities, at the local to the global level, to be able to change paradigms and shift power relations addressing the asymmetry of powers and resources to recognition and reciprocity.

They offer a powerful model of community-rooted resource distribution grounded in Indigenous governance, accountability, and care. As ILFs grow in number and influence globally, philanthropy has a critical opportunity—and responsibility—to support this transformation not just through funding, but through deeper shifts in values, relationships, and structures.

This toolkit, informed by the ILF Governance Scan and aligned with the 5Rs of Indigenous Philanthropy—Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Relationships, and Redistribution—offers a roadmap for funders to support Indigenous-Led Funds in meaningful and lasting ways. The Indigenous Led Funds movement is reshaping philanthropy by modelling values-based, rooted in Indigenous wisdom and community-driven approaches.

Applying the 5Rs is a pathway to meaningful partnership. This toolkit is a guide—not a checklist—to shifting from transactional funding to sacred, accountable relationship. Ultimately, trust-based philanthropy means releasing control while deepening accountability. Indigenous-led Funds already operate from these principles—philanthropy must follow with humility, commitment, and shared responsibility.



Recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples rights and worldviews. Seek to uphold the principles articulated in the UN Declaration of Rights for Indigenous People (UNDRIP). Respect and recognize Indigenous Women's rights by upholding CEDAW General recommendation No.39 on the rights of Indigenous Women and Girls. Work directly with Indigenous Women's Organizations to advance their rights and to gain understanding of their aspirations, solutions, and initiatives.

Honoring Indigenous Knowledge, Governance, and Self-Determination

Respect in philanthropy begins with recognizing that Indigenous Peoples are the experts on their own lives, lands, and communities. Indigenous-led funds often operate within systems of governance rooted in cultural values, ancestral protocols, and collective accountability. These may not resemble standard nonprofit frameworks, but they are legitimate, robust, and effective.

1. Funders can demonstrate respect by adapting due diligence practices to accommodate Indigenous governance systems, such as community councils, elder advisory groups, and customary law. These systems are often deeply tied to community life and spiritual values, and recognizing them as valid is a fundamental act of respect.

2. Respect also means supporting Indigenous-led initiatives in ways that reflect Indigenous worldviews. Rather than requiring Indigenous-Led Funds to conform to Western nonprofit models, funders should create space for diverse leadership and flexible application formats that are accessible and culturally appropriate.

3. Extractive reporting requirements should be replaced with relational accountability. Funders must acknowledge that Indigenous communities may define impact and success through community healing, language revitalization, restoration of cultural practices, or youth engagement. Such outcomes, though often intangible, represent the true impact of ILFs.

4. It is important for funders to understand and respect the cultural protocols that underpin governance, such as the use of ceremony, consensus decision-making, or long deliberation processes grounded in intergenerational dialogue. Respecting these protocols requires patience and a willingness to move at the pace of the community, not the pace of institutional urgency. This includes ensuring that funders educate their teams and boards about the principles and practices of Indigenous governance before entering partnerships.

5. Funders should also examine internal policies and procedures that may unintentionally undermine Indigenous governance. This includes questioning who sets the criteria for legitimacy, exploring how these criteria may be rooted in colonial norms, and listening deeply and being willing to shift internal assumptions to honor Indigenous sovereignty.



Engage directly with Indigenous communities by understanding the nature of their relationships with Mother Earth, their culture, traditions and spirituality. Build and nurture relationships based on mutual respect and trust that eliminate the tendency to exert power over another.

Investing in Long-Term, Trust-Based Partnerships

Trust is built over time, through mutual presence, shared experiences, and consistent engagement. Indigenous communities prioritize long-term relationships that are built on care, patience, and integrity. Yet too often, philanthropy operates on short-term cycles that fail to honor this principle.

1. Investing in Indigenous-Led Funds requires funders to commit to multi-year general support, which enables ILFs to plan effectively, invest in leadership development, and build internal capacity for the long haul. General operating support reflects a vote of confidence in the vision and structure of the fund, allowing it to operate with the flexibility needed to respond to evolving community needs.

2. Funders should go beyond transactional grantmaking by engaging with Indigenous communities outside of formal reporting cycles. When invited, attending community gatherings, listening circles, ceremonies, or invitation-only spaces fosters a deeper understanding of the context and lived realities of the communities served. These relational moments are essential to trust-building.

3. Funders should remain in open dialogue, offering support rather than withdrawing funds or trust during moments of challenge, such as leadership transitions, administrative delays, or programmatic shifts. Many ILFs are engaged in design processes that reflect shifting realities in their communities. Funders must be willing to embrace change alongside them.

4. Relationships require consistency. Foundations should avoid sudden exits, erratic communication, or last-minute shifts in expectations. Building trust means showing up and staying engaged even when it's difficult or inconvenient. Philanthropy should evolve into a role of partner, ally, and co-learner, grounded in reciprocity and respect.

5. Relationships are further strengthened when funders provide solidarity, mentorship, skills building, and peer learning networks—not as a top-down intervention, but as co-created opportunities that support the aspirations of ILF leaders. Creating safe spaces for reflection, conflict resolution, and collective learning and unlearning.



RESPONSIBILITY

Be accountable and transparent in ensuring the effective, meaningful and intersectional representation and participation of Indigenous Peoples where critical decisions that affect them are made. Use funding processes and approaches that are accessible, adaptable, flexible, transparent, and accountable.

Centering Indigenous Priorities and Practicing Ethical Accountability

Philanthropy must take responsibility for its historic and ongoing role in reinforcing systemic inequities. Responsible funding means actively working to dismantle these structures by aligning resources with Indigenous priorities, acknowledging harm, and ensuring funders are accountable to the communities they serve—not just to their boards or donors.

1. Taking responsibility starts with acknowledging the extractive nature of past philanthropic practices, and committing to co-creating grantmaking processes that eliminate unnecessary burdens. This includes removing rigid eligibility criteria that don't fit Indigenous governance models, offering technical support during application processes, and simplifying reporting.

2. Respecting Indigenous Peoples' intellectual property means recognizing and protecting the ownership of Indigenous knowledge, cultural expressions, and community-generated data or products that may be as a result of funding. Funders must seek free, prior, and informed consent before using or sharing

any information and uphold principles of data sovereignty and cultural integrity.

3. Funding core operations—not just projects—and supporting long-term strategic development. ILFs need infrastructure, leadership development, communications, and administrative support to function well. Without this core support, funds are forced to divert limited energy away from their missions to fulfill compliance requirements.

4. Model accountability by reporting back to grantees, sharing how their feedback is being used, and offering transparency around decision-making processes. Funders need to defer to Indigenous leadership and expertise, allowing communities to define their own measures of success and frameworks of evaluation and providing capacity-building when invited, without assuming authority. This affirms the agency of Indigenous partners while offering genuine support.

5. Building internal accountability mechanisms that monitor how well they are upholding commitments to Indigenous partners. This can include community advisory boards and participatory evaluation approaches led by Indigenous experts. Responsibility is not a one-time action, but a continuous practice.



RECIPROCITY

Practice the essence of Indigenous ways of living, giving, and sharing that connect people and their beliefs and actions. Be open to learning, unlearning, and receiving. Giving and receiving from a place of mutual benefit and solidarity is also part of a virtuous circle of healing principles.

Building Mutual Value and Two-Way Learning

Reciprocity is a central principle in Indigenous lifeways, emphasizes mutual giving and shared benefit. In philanthropy, reciprocity challenges the traditional one-way flow of resources from donor to recipient, encouraging a more balanced and respectful relationship where learning, care, and insight are exchanged.

1. Funders should engage in co-designed learning exchanges with Indigenous Led Funds, creating space for mutual education and the deepening of understanding. These can include storytelling sessions, community-based learning, and shared problem-solving to explore how ILFs navigate challenges and opportunities. Funders should not only fund these exchanges, but participate in them as observers or fully when invited, and humbly.

2. Elevating Indigenous voices by supporting Indigenous storytelling, research, and thought leadership funders help to correct misrepresentations and foster visibility of Indigenous knowledge systems within philanthropic spaces.

3. Supporting ILFs to contribute to donor education and philanthropy-wide strategy design, ensures that Indigenous perspectives are embedded in the system from within.

4. Funders to invest in supportive systems that meet ILFs where they are, being responsive to their needs, and creating channels for ongoing dialogue.

5. Recognizing the emotional and cultural labor involved in community leadership because ILFs are part of their communities and Creating funding models that honor care work, traditional knowledge keepers, and intergenerational exchange.

6. Transforming philanthropy into a space of shared growth, where all parties benefit, evolve, and deepen their practice.



Practice redistribution based on Indigenous values and ways of living, sharing, and giving to shift towards a just and equitable world. Do this through building trust, ensuring Indigenous Peoples are at the decision-making table and directly funding Indigenous-led solutions, initiatives, and organizations worldwide

Shifting Power and Resources to Indigenous Hands

Redistribution demands a fundamental restructuring of how resources and decision-making power flow. In Indigenous worldviews, wealth is not hoarded—it is shared and circulated for the wellbeing of the collective. For philanthropy to support Indigenous-led change, it must move beyond the transfer of funds toward the transfer of control to address the asymmetry of power in philanthropy.

1. This includes funding Indigenous Led Funds that offer community-rooted alternatives to top-down models and increase local ownership of decision-making.
2. Funders should also support ILFs to develop endowments or capital reserves that allow for long-term sustainability, not dependency and advocating within philanthropic institutions for larger allocations to Indigenous Led Funds and Indigenous communities.

3. Indigenous Led Funds need timely and direct access to grants that are unrestricted, long-term, and disbursed in ways that respect community systems and reduce administrative burden.

4. Funders to advocate for institutional change. This includes educating their boards about the role of ILFs, influencing peer funders, and participating in sector-wide campaigns to shift more resources to Indigenous leadership. It also includes inviting Indigenous leaders into foundation governance, ensuring they shape decisions about resource flow and allocation.

5. Funders must also consider redistributing not only money, but also voice, visibility, and influence. This includes creating space and platforms for Indigenous leaders to shape policy and influence decision making. Redistribution is ultimately about justice, and requires political will, bold action and sustained commitment.

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