definity.
FOUNDATION



Photo courtesy
of Ecotrust Canada

Our Impact and Learning Report, 2022-2026

A summary version of our full report



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At a glance

$100M seed funding from the 2021 demutualization of Economical Mutual Insurance

More than **90** initiatives funded, **$34M** in grants

91% of grant dollars went to initiatives addressing systemic inequities experienced by Black, Indigenous and racialized communities

71.7% of grant dollars went to organizations led by or working in partnership with these communities

Every province and territory reached; **23%** of grants supported work in Northern communities



Message from our President & CEO

In 2022, we had the rare opportunity to shape a new foundation from the beginning. We entered a sector with much to learn from those who came before us, at a time when the pandemic, economic insecurity, climate crisis and a reckoning with systemic racism were exposing deep inequities.

We started with a question: how could a new foundation support community-led solutions that address the roots of inequity, not only its symptoms?

We did not assume we had the answer. After research and consultation with philanthropic and nonprofit leaders, we set out seven hypotheses about how we could contribute. We tested those ideas in practice and our greatest source of learning became our relationships with community partners, networks, funders and investors. Some lessons affirmed where we started. Others took us further.

We learned that philanthropy can bring much more than grants. We learned that single initiatives do not change systems. And as we followed the root causes of health, social, economic, and climate inequities, we came to understand how deeply interconnected they are. Finally, we learned that serious systems change requires a willingness to keep changing ourselves.

This is the story of our first phase, and of the partners who made it possible.

— Arti Freeman, President & CEO

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“Radical - in the true sense of the word, coming from the Latin radix, meaning root. In other words, trying to address root causes.”

Partner, 2026 anonymous survey,
when asked to choose one word
that describes the foundation

Where we started

When we began granting in 2022, our **Community Investment Framework** set out to support solutions that address systemic barriers, especially those faced by Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities. This guided our focus toward working with partners seeking to change the underlying systems that produce inequity.

Three priorities

Healthy People

Health & Wellbeing for Underserved Populations, Affordable & Healthy Food ⇢ **$6.3M | 14 grants**

Thriving Communities

Inclusive Economic Opportunities, Civic & Social Inclusion ⇢ **$14.7M in grants | 36 grants, 9 impact investments**

Liveable Planet

Climate Justice ⇢ **$6.5M | 17 grants, 2 impact investments**

Across all three priorities, we committed to applying a racial equity lens to our work, prioritized community-led solutions, and tested seven hypotheses about how philanthropy could advance justice. We also provided additional “sector strengthening” grants to strengthen the entire nonprofit sector **($6.7 million | 11 grants).**

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Our approach to philanthropy

We set ourselves up to learn and adapt in an ongoing way. Seven initial hypotheses guided our approach. We used them to question our assumptions, learn through practice and refine how we worked with partners.

Original Hypothesis	We learned
Take a racial equity lens to our work, enabling us to target our efforts to the needs of particular groups that systems are most failing and for whom the impacts are most inequitable	Applying a racial equity lens requires more than directing funding toward particular populations; it also requires examining the barriers that determine who can access capital, who makes decisions about it, and on what terms.
Choose areas of concern and let the community tell you what is needed and where good work is happening	Trusting community requires paying attention to who defines priorities, who shapes solutions, who makes decisions and who controls resources. The distinctions between community-serving, community-informed, community-driven and community-owned (as seen in a 2025-26 internal review) helped us see more clearly where power actually sits.
Prioritize opportunities that drive at multiple areas of concern/funding priorities	Health, socio-economic and climate inequities are not simply intersecting funding areas; they are interconnected in people's lives in ways that reveal deeper systems and conditions shaping inequity.
Offer long-term and flexible funding to allow organizations to allocate resources where they are most needed, making room for innovation, emergence, and impact	Flexibility gives partners room to adapt how they work, while longer-term funding can give greater confidence about the time and resources to do the work. Both matter and provide different forms of support.
Take a relational approach to philanthropy to gain a deeper understanding of the work, to reduce power imbalance and to take up less time	Being relational is not the same as shifting power. A reciprocal relationship goes beyond warmth and depends on transparency, respect for autonomy and a willingness to examine our own practices.
Fund sector strengthening organizations, approaches and infrastructure	Organizations need relationships and spaces for shared learning, coordinated action, collective influence, and shared infrastructure.
Experiment with different funding models to facilitate learning, build trust and ultimately lead to greater impact	Grants, loans, community bonds and pooled funds each open different possibilities; the more diverse the toolbox, the more barriers that can be overcome.

The hypotheses provided a way to learn through practice. In several cases, we saw evidence of implementing the intended approach; in other cases, evidence is still emerging and outcomes will take more time. Sometimes, the learning changed our understanding of the hypothesis itself. Over time, these hypotheses led us into a deeper and more nuanced understanding of obstacles that stand in the way of philanthropy that advances justice.

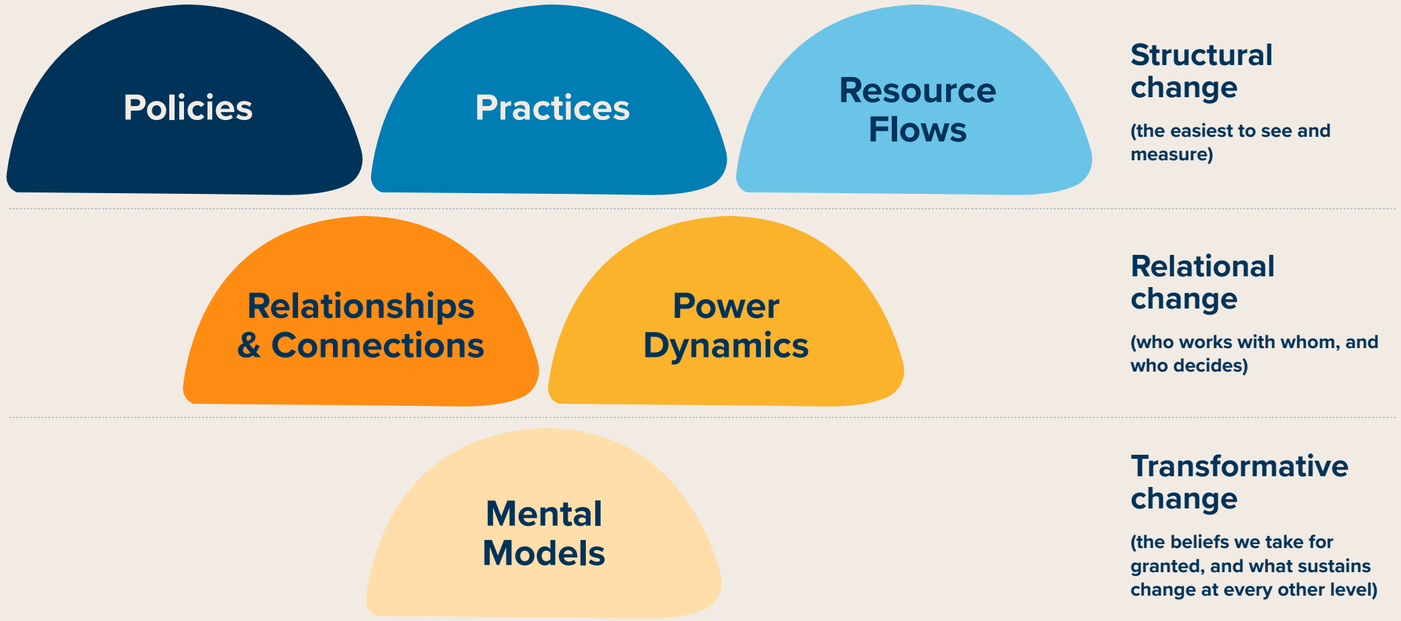
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Applying a systems change lens

Definity Foundation grounded its philosophy in a distinction between charity and justice: a charity model looks at people and places that have suffered injustices as things to be solved; a justice framework acknowledges the realities that forced communities into oppressive situations.

The Foundation set out to fund work that could change the conditions holding inequities in place. No single grant can change a system on its own, but a systems-change framework helps us look across our initial portfolio of partners. The same forces that hold a system in place are the levers for changing it.

Six conditions of systems change
adapted from the work of Kania, Kramer & Senge



What we observed across our partners

When we first started, we assessed each initiative individually to understand how it could contribute to systems change. Over time, we recognized that no single organization can change a system on its own. This led us to take a portfolio-wide view, mapping how different partners contributed to the conditions of systems change and identifying the connections and complementary roles across their work.

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Partners' contributions to systems change

Based on the model from the previous page, our team mapped 54 partners against the three levels, knowing all levels are important. Few partners worked at all three, but together, the portfolio has begun to reach all six conditions.

96% of partners worked on structural change

63% on relational change

20% on mental models

17% addressed all three levels

Policies, practices, and resource flows

= 52 out of 54 partners contributed
(12 Healthy People, 28 Thriving Communities, 13 Liveable Planet)*

Relationships & Connections and Power Dynamics

= 34 out of 54 partners contributed
(9 Healthy People, 17 Thriving Communities, 9 Liveable Planet)*

Mental Models

= 11 out of 54 partners contributed
(4 Healthy People, 2 Thriving Communities, 5 Liveable Planet)

*Partners may work across multiple systems change categories, so category counts may exceed the total number of partners.

A small selection of examples where partners contributed

Policies
SEED Winnipeg helped change a policy that made it easier for low-income folks to access replacement birth certificates; Employee Ownership Canada saw the federal government recommit to an employee ownership tax incentive.

Practices
Prosper Canada worked with Black-led organizations to adapt financial empowerment services to the needs of people they serve.

Resource flows
Gaagige Zaagibigaa and Northern Manitoba Food, Culture and Community Collaborative distributed grants to community-led initiatives.

Relationships & Connections
The Depot Community Food Centre built on its relationships to launch Quebec's first food security coalition, which now has more than 30 urban and rural members.

Power dynamics
Tamarack Institute and the Environmental Justice Research Alliance addressed power dynamics to set up working/advisory groups of people from equity-deserving communities.

Mental models
Reconnection Vision uses a mental model developed by 13 Yukon First Nations youth that treats disconnection from ourselves, one another, and the land as a root cause of the climate crisis.

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Community-led solutions across our priorities

Across our three priorities, an independent evaluation found that we supported solutions that were highly diverse, deeply grounded in local communities, often experimental, and informed by the hypotheses mentioned earlier.

Here we present two pages of solutions that found traction, with examples of what the solutions looked liked in practice and the level of financial support we provided.



Healthy People

Health & Wellbeing for Underserved Populations, Affordable & Healthy Food

Solution
Public policy, advocacy, civic engagement, and/or grassroots mobilization
$2.2M | 4 grants

Solution
Community food strategies
$4.1M | 10 grants

Conditions shaping food insecurity include: income, access to land, how food is produced and distributed, and who makes decisions about these systems.

Solutions related to food sovereignty emphasize communities' ability to shape food systems grounded in their cultures, knowledge, and priorities (Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund).

Engagement with food systems leaders further expanded this understanding.

Institutional procurement (Nourish Leadership), Indigenous-led food systems (Sîhtoskâtowin), and community leadership (Indigenous Food Sovereignty Association) emerged as examples of ways to connect healthier food systems with climate resilience and stronger local economies.

Thriving Communities

Inclusive Economic Opportunities, Civic & Social Inclusion

Solution
Communities equipped with the tools and resources to solve social challenges and implement change
$1.4M in grants | 9 grants

Solution
Increase access to financial tools and services
$2M in grants | 8 grants
$4M in impact investments, 5 impact investments

Solution
Mobilization of private capital for social good
$3M in grants | 11 grants
$4.8M in impact investments, 8 impact investments

Solution
Other solutions, including supporting entrepreneurs, advancement of decent work, creation of green jobs, and more representative community leadership
$8.4M in grants | 8 grants
$500K in impact investments, 1 impact investment

We saw a need to support ideas before the path to scale is established

(Relèven, EntrepreNorth's Sinew Impact Fund). That sometimes meant moving beyond grants to help partners study, launch, resource, and manage a range of financial instruments, including social finance options like community bonds, impact investments, repayable grants, and redeemable equity.

Solutions are often more effective when complemented by another;

we learned to look across our work for opportunities to connect complementary initiatives (Social Innovation Canada, SETSI).

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Liveable Planet

Climate Justice

Solution
Grassroots environmental advocacy
$2.5M in grants | 8 grants

Solution
Indigenous-led climate action
$1.7M in grants | 4 grants
$250K in impact investments, 1 impact investment

Solution
Just transitions to a low-carbon economy
$1.6M in grants | 4 grants

Solution
Innovations at the intersection of climate and health
$725K in grants| 1 grant
$500K in impact investments, 1 impact investment

Those who are least responsible but most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change often have the knowledge, relationships, and leadership to respond, but are constrained by unequal access to funding, infrastructure, and institutional support.

Progress therefore depends not only on technical solutions, but also on strengthening the leadership, relationships, and civic infrastructure needed for equitable environmental action (Indigenous Climate Action, Environment Funders Canada).

Regenerative ocean farming (Ecotrust Canada), community-led climate adaptation (The Resilience Institute), and worker engagement (Iron & Earth) demonstrated the clear connections between climate responses, food sovereignty, culturally-grounded livelihoods, and locally-determined economic opportunities.

The initiatives on these pages highlight interconnections between environmental crisis, economic precarity, and community wellbeing. Strengthening a community's food system, for example, can involve restoring relationships with the land, sustaining cultural knowledge, and creating viable livelihoods alongside improving access to healthy food. Partners' work made these connections tangible, showing how solutions grounded in community priorities can advance health, environmental and economic goals together.

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Connecting the learning, shaping our next chapter

Across the testing of our hypotheses and partners' solutions, five practices stood out for us.

Our philanthropic practices

Invest in the infrastructure that supports the sector

Organizations need capacity to carry out their missions, alongside relationships and spaces for shared learning, coordinated action, and collective influence. Investing in intermediaries, institutions and networks can strengthen collective capacity and support leadership and decision-making rooted in communities. Pooling resources can enable funders to support shared infrastructure that may be difficult for any one institution to resource alone.

Engage in relational and flexible philanthropy

After removing the letter of expression and formal application from our process, partnerships now begin with conversations, followed by staff working with organizations to develop a case for support. Annual check-ins and options for oral reporting create space for shared learning, and partners can adapt implementation plans to changing circumstances.

Use different forms of capital, including blended finance

Grants, impact investments, community bonds, pooled funds and guarantees open different possibilities. Our relationship with Ulnooweg began with a grant and deepened to a $1.5 million, 15-year, 0% mortgage to help secure a permanent place for Indigenous ceremony, learning and community development, and enabling Ulnooweg to redirect its resources to youth entrepreneurship.

Use our knowledge, voice and influence

We have commissioned and supported research to better understand where resources are missing and where opportunities for impact exist; we amplify partners' efforts and share knowledge and perspectives through participation in relevant discussions; we convene people and organizations around shared interests; and we support collective policy-related efforts. These activities deepen our learning, strengthen connections and enable us to contribute to broader efforts to advance systems change.

Adjusting our own structures and practices

Over time, we broadened Board representation. We amended our charitable objects to enable direct granting to non-qualified donees and to advance social finance. We tested an External Advisors Table that brought additional perspectives, though their formal decision-making authority remained more limited. We've noticed and grapple with a tension between the depth of relationship we seek and the number and diversity of partnerships we can sustain.

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Photo courtesy of Annauma Community Foundation

Three insights that changed our understanding

Addressing complex challenges requires more than grantmaking.

The question shifted from “What can we fund?” to “What does this work need to succeed, and what role can we play?” Sometimes it’s a grant. Sometimes it’s a policy change. Sometimes it’s research.

Systems change requires multiple, complementary efforts.

No single initiative, organization or foundation changes a system. Lasting change depends on many actors, and on the relationships and infrastructure that connect them and are often under-resourced.

The issues we fund are interconnected, and it has become increasingly difficult to treat climate, health, and socio-economic justice as separate issues.

A family affected by wildfire faces a health, housing, food and affordability crisis all at once. Following those connections brought us to deeper questions about how resources flow, who owns them, who decides and who benefits.

Our next chapter: Economies for people and planet

Again and again, that inquiry brought us back to how economies are organized. We began to see more clearly that many of the outcomes we care about are shaped by underlying economic choices and assumptions, including what we value and recognize as wealth, what economic activity is intended to produce, and how we understand the relationship between the economy, communities and the living world.

Around the world, including in Canada, communities are already experimenting with different ways of organizing economic life that reflect different values, relationships and priorities.

This learning helped shape our long-term strategic direction, launching in 2027. We are going further upstream to explore how the ways we organize our economies shape outcomes across climate, health and socio-economic justice, and how different approaches could contribute to economies that work for people and planet.

Thank you

To our partners doing the work in community: we would not be here without you. While we were only able to mention a few examples here, thank you to all partners for your values, your vision, and for what you’ve taught us.

Thank you to our Board of Directors for learning alongside us, and to Taylor Newberry Consulting for an evaluation that helps us see our work more clearly.

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