

New Data Confronts Canada's Belonging Narrative

Image



Community Foundations of Canada to make belonging a major focus of its work for next 3 years

Based on the findings of a report about belonging in Canada, the national network of Canada's 191 community foundations, [Community Foundations of Canada](#) (CFC), has stated it will make belonging a major focus of its work for the next three years.

[The report, called Vital Signs](#), challenges how connected people feel to their communities and Canada.

Vital Signs reports are released today by both CFC and 26 community foundations across the country. The reports are intended to build and share local knowledge so

communities are better prepared to mobilize around what matters most to them.

Axiom News' Michelle Strutzenberger spoke with Ian Bird, president of Community Foundations of Canada, on the reports' findings as well as the place of data in building community.

This is an edited and condensed version of their conversation.

AN: We understand that each Vital Signs check-up focuses on significant social and economic trends. What can you tell us about how the focus of this year's Vital Signs emerged?

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Ian Bird

Ian: We're often looking for the narrative thread, what are we observing, not just in the rollup of Vital Signs at the local level year over year but also in some of the actions that community foundations and our communities are engaged in or the conversations that are underway.

This was really brought to bear in a few different ways.

One was that our colleagues in Vancouver took a deep dive to understand what was present in their community. When they did that — mostly through dialogue, but also some Appreciative Inquiry — they came away with something they didn't expect; they discovered that what most was present for people was a desire for connection and engagement. In some cases, there was an absence of it, and so a desire; in others, just an appreciation for what was there. So we learned from there.

We also had colleagues in Kitchener-Waterloo who, in a different way, arrived at a similar outlook.

Then we've been involved quite extensively in the process of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission and we were trying to better understand a way into reconciliation as an important goal for many communities now — and yet it's a terrain we're not very used to working on.

So when we thought about it, we realized there's this thread line of belonging and the prospects for belonging but also the challenges and then the benefits that derive from that sense of connection to each other and knowing that by sending welcoming signals to each other, we can give ourselves a chance to really build community together.

AN: What energizes you about what you're seeing coming out of this year's Vital Signs?

Ian: We're drawn to a few things. For instance, we have findings about the effects of mobility and migration on belonging; and then, of course, we're seeing this global dynamic of migration playing out and the potential in that for Canada to be very much engaged.

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*A representation of Canada's
philanthropic community committing to
ensuring that positive action on
reconciliation will continue earlier this
year. (Photo: James Parker)*

Or we see the interdependencies between an experience of belonging and what that will mean for reconciliation between and amongst indigenous and non-indigenous people.

There has been very good work of late, including John Ralston Saul's most recent book, *The Comeback*, or the writings of Sheila Watt-Cloutier that remind us of a time when we did belong to one another, aboriginal and non-aboriginal, and depended on each other.

So reconciliation in some ways is a requirement for our most recent times, not from

the original moments of connection between Aboriginal Peoples and Canadians.

We've also discovered how belonging is such a two-way street. It is not just the signal that a community needs to send to promote inclusion or acceptance, and we've seen the importance of that. Policy debates centre around that; the work of community foundations is often about sending those signals; certainly the non-profits and charities that we collaborate with are almost always in some ways sending out those signals.

But we also know it's about individuals stepping forward and engaging in community.

That's actually where we see in the report a number of signs that the narrative we hold up — that we are an inclusive people in Canada — may actually be a bit of a rickety story. Some of the data behind the narrative reveals that we have more work to do for individuals to step forward in a way that really promotes inclusion.

These are some of the interesting features of this year's Vital Signs report.

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— *Ian Bird*

AN: The question of data versus narrative and the place of each in creating change is an interesting one. Peter Block has said that all transformation is a shift in narrative. What's your response to that? What's the place of data in enlivening the narrative?

Ian: In the first instance, what Vital Signs is, is a story. Each community takes a moment to talk to one another and to draw out experiences and what they think they know and to package it.

We talk about wanting to pull it together in a way that you could read it on the bus or share the story around your dinner table or invite your friends over and pose the questions, “This is our community and what do we think?”

Peter in particular has reminded us how narratives have a repeatable — the stories are retold and they promote the retelling and through that we come to have a deeper appreciation for each other; community can form around story.

But there are times when our story is challenged, the narrative is challenged and that sometimes happens through the kind of work we do at Vital Signs.

Sometimes there is a story that we’re telling each other and then we do the hard work of going deeper and (realize) that story is rickety, that story may include parts that are almost a false narrative.

So then we’re confronted with what would we do with that.

For instance, I know of a community that in previous years anyone looking into it would have told a story that would be quite affirming, that would say look at all these strengths, that would be held up as a good example for others. But when we went deeper we discovered there was real hidden poverty at play in this community — and it was not part of that story. It took some courage to actually confront the community with those findings. But the community needed to confront them in order to move ahead and use their strengths to respond to them.

[The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.](#)

Click the image to view the full Vital Signs report.

So we might say there is something similar in this. And by and large Canada’s story is one of supporting one another in a rather harsh climate and with a relatively

young history of enabling each other to build successful communities. We have really put a premium on being open and inclusive and allowing all the different kinds of backgrounds, perspectives and languages to come together and fit with each other — not fit someone else's mold, but just to be there and to be together.

The findings of this report suggest we have to be diligent on the one hand because yes, in a lot of ways that's true and we need to protect those qualities that we've crafted over the years. But certainly the report suggests we still have some past wrongs to remedy, not by necessarily meeting them head on, but by creating a new future together. This would be the case in terms of reconciliation. Pockets of the country are struggling with creating or holding on to that inclusive, welcoming environment.

So it's important that we sustain a narrative, but I also think it's important that we learn, and that the narrative can be confronted by what we do learn and not accepted with blind faith.

You can access the Vital Signs reports [here](#).

To share your feedback on this interview, feel free to comment below or email [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.com](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.com).