



# How to fund digital equity in Canada

**A GUIDE FOR FUNDERS**

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# I. Why fund digital equity?

With many seeing online connectivity as an essential human right, digital equity is crucial to our society, economy and democracy. However, **digital inequity has become a serious problem in communities across the country**, as millions of Canadians lack even the basics required to connect. Markets and governments have especially failed Northern, rural and Indigenous communities, as well as numerous underserved populations where infrastructure and investment has not materialized in a meaningful way.

**Digital equity** is the condition where everyone has enough information technology capacity—connectivity, skills and policy influence—for full, meaningful participation in our society, economy and democracy, including access to affordable, high-quality internet wherever they are.

The benefits of digital equity are broad and deep, and can be transformative at many levels. Here are a few examples of how it can affect the everyday lives of Canadians:



**Poverty alleviation** and higher standards of living that result from access to education, employment and other opportunities.



Online access to health services, leading to **improved physical and mental health**.



**More participation** by rural and remote households in our society, economy and democracy.



**Decreased exploitation** and predatory behaviour, and increased safety for children, youth and at-risk adults.



Opportunity for **deeper connections** among Canadians across vast geographies.

While funders may see addressing digital equity gaps as largely the responsibility of government or industry, **there are roles for philanthropy** to advance the social impacts they seek—and more funders are seeing these roles.

This guide is for funders who are new to digital equity and for anyone who wants to gain an understanding of why and how to fund in this space.

For us at the Laidlaw Foundation, where we are concerned with racism, systemic exclusion and access and equity, increasingly the digital divide is a huge enabler of further discrimination and disadvantage. It needs to be addressed. The digital divide is holding back communities and slowing their progress. As funders, we need to make sure that we are conscious of digital equity and pay close attention to it. It must become a lens by which we assess everything.”

—Jehad Aliweiwi, Executive Director, Laidlaw Foundation

There’s a need for philanthropy to recognize that if we’re not attentive to digital inequity, it will undermine our ability to achieve many of our collective goals for equity, justice and shared prosperity. If digital inequity continues to go unaddressed, gaps will widen and we will miss out on the innovation, wisdom and perspectives of many.”

—Justin Wiebe, Lead of Innovation and Strategic Growth, Mastercard Foundation

## II. What are digital equity funding priorities and opportunities?

Digital equity is a vast concept and the opportunities for funding are equally vast. In this guide, CIRA has chosen to emphasize the areas that have emerged as priorities in our recent research with communities and funders.

There are three priorities:

- A. Community connectivity
- B. Community capacity
- C. Community policy advocacy

## A. Community connectivity

Imagine a world without consistent access to digital resources. For many this decreases their ability to fully engage with the world around them. That's why focusing on accelerating digital solutions reach, impact and transformation is paramount for greater inclusion and participation. With respect to our RBC programs, this focus allows for greater access to what we're delivering to those who need it most."

—Mark Beckles, Vice President of Social Impact and Innovation, RBC

Digital equity starts with infrastructure and connectivity support at a community level, so that everyone can access the same opportunities. In turn, social impact programming, including e-platforms and virtual services, relies on decent internet access. Rural and northern regions, Indigenous communities and low-income communities in urban areas are underserved or unconnected because of the cost for telecommunication companies—and government funding hasn't filled the gaps. **Many communities have been left to figure out their own solutions.** To their credit, communities are coming up with options. **The role of philanthropy includes supporting such efforts.**

Half of rural households in Canada don't have access to "basic" speed targets of 50 Mbps download and 10 Mbps upload set by the CRTC, Canada's communications regulator. On top of that, residents in Canada's north pay up to \$1,000 a month for the slowest internet in the country.

### COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES

#### YOU CAN FUND



Community and regional **consultations** to understand connectivity options, especially when they're part of social programs, land claim groups, etc.



Network planning grants and support for communities to write **proposals** for government funding.



Community engagement on how to develop **service-delivery opportunities** related to environmental campaigns, healthcare networks, business hubs, etc.



Planning and support for citizens in communities to develop **skills to maintain infrastructure** and related services over the long term.



**Match funding contributions** required as a part of many provincial and federal infrastructure funding programs, such as the [Government of Canada's Universal Broadband Fund](#).



New, **community-led models** and approaches to programs involving digital equity.



**Peer networks** of local connectivity providers to share lessons learned and exchange skills and expertise on approaches.

One example is a CIRA-funded project called **Connected Coastal Nations: Leveraging our Collective Impact for Indigenous Economies & Community Wellbeing**. The project leverages federal and provincial funding to support community-owned internet service providers (ISPs) to deliver high-speed internet and increase network performance among Coastal Nations to reach a basic, universal standard of 50/10 Mbps. CIRA's funds were used for community-network sustainability planning and to match-fund provincial contributions for technical upgrades.

## OTHER EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

As part of its [Healthy Communities Initiative \(a federally funded program\)](#), **Community Foundations of Canada** (CFC), an organization for Canada's nearly 200 local community foundations, includes specific funding for **digital solutions in small communities**, such as:

- Supporting local economic development by funding **free WiFi** in a museum in Gananoque, ON, for tourists, youth and others who benefit from internet access. It's easy to envision similar digital equity projects in a community, business or arts hub where residents, small businesses, non-profit groups, youth and others benefit.
- Lending **WiFi-enabled tablets** in internet hotspots in Mackenzie, a town of 3,000 people in central BC that doesn't have reliable internet access. Similar projects in other remote communities would increase access to education, employment, health services and a whole lot more.

**Connect Humanity**, a new non-profit group that invests in connectivity providers globally, has been building on the work of the [Indigenous Connectivity Summit](#). It supports skills-building in Indigenous communities by funding **Tribal Wireless Bootcamps**, in which people learn to build,

maintain and troubleshoot wireless networks. The bootcamps are organized by leaders with a long history of supporting nontraditional broadband networks.

## B. Community capacity

We learned a lot from providing digital resources in the early days of the pandemic, and it has now become embedded as part of our longer-term strategy... The big insight was that this wasn't a short-term solution to the pandemic. So, creating a digital presence in the philanthropic space for both funders and also the community organizations that we serve, seems to be emerging as a long-term play."

—Marco DiBuono, Assistant Vice President of Programs & Operations, Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities

Digital equity includes supporting community capacity to assess needs for infrastructure, skills and digital policies within your specific sector or program. Furthermore, while offering essential social supports, this funding addresses new, online social problems: harassment, misinformation, voting manipulation, online scams and social media violence.

### COMMUNITY CAPACITY INITIATIVES YOU CAN FUND



Develop skills and **amplify voices** of youth, racialized and Indigenous Canadians, older adults, low-income people and at-risk communities.



**Combat misinformation** and stigma in specific sectors or internet-wide.



Raise awareness about cybersecurity threats, privacy, digital policy, data governance and algorithms related to how they shape **access to information, rights and equality**.



Develop digital skills **curriculums** in schools and for life-long learning.



Create or **support a group** devoted to digital skills and literacy in your sector or program.

CIRA funded an intergenerational, **digital literacy training program** for Elders in Nunavut, delivered by Indigenous youth in seven Kivalliq communities, using a learning framework specific to northern and Inuit culture. The program will simultaneously employ Inuit youth, strengthen community relations and preserve culture and language.

#### OTHER EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY CAPACITY

- **Digital upskilling training** at a community employment centre in Jasper, AB, supported by [CFC's Healthy Communities Initiative](#).
- **Workshops to address PEI youth cybersafety concerns**, with auxiliary sessions for parents and teachers to support their children online.
- **Curriculum to educate and empower young people with sight loss** to access the internet and participate in online community spaces safely and equitably.
- **Digital skills training to empower** entrepreneurs, youth and seniors in rural communities within S'ólh Téméxw and Chilliwack, BC.

### C. Community policy advocacy

There is a lot of policy and advocacy and mandate work that has to happen with the investors themselves, to get them to realize that digital is not only a nice-to-have thing. We live in a digital age, and the people who we support are decades behind. There's a big-picture advocacy piece that has to happen within the philanthropic world... We can't do it one organization at a time, it's not going to work. We have to do both. We have to invest in the individual organizations, and we have to invest in the broader ecosystem of support.”

—Doug Gore, Partnership Development Lead, Ontario Trillium Foundation

Digital equity involves addressing systemic issues and supporting communities that are trying to **influence policy-making processes**. Affordability, online harms, regulation of telecom operators, national broadband strategy and many other issues are tipped in favour of industry



influence over communities. For example, the government has offered billions of dollars to ISPs to expand rural broadband access. Even though the expansion hasn't happened quickly enough, these same ISPs regularly influence government policy, while communities and not-for-profits have relatively little representation.<sup>1</sup> The Government doesn't fund advocacy efforts that demonstrate how inconsistent and inequitable internet access is in Canada, so this sort of policy advocacy support needs to come from elsewhere.

## COMMUNITY POLICY ADVOCACY INITIATIVES YOU CAN FUND



Develop or support a **coalition** or ecosystem of groups working on issues like access and affordability.



Fund **civil society participation** in government hearings and consultations related to legislative reform.



**Package and present existing research** and **raise awareness** among decision makers.



**Counter concentrations of power**, monopoly issues and data trusts.



Support **spectrum sovereignty**. As with natural resources, such as trees and minerals, "spectrum" is a critical resource for Indigenous communities, and "spectrum sovereignty" means that Indigenous communities have first rights to the digital spectrum over their lands.

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CIRA supported a research report, created by [ACORN Institute Canada](#), a grassroots advocacy organization. *Barriers to Digital Equity in Canada* is about the lack of affordable internet access in low-income communities. The report connected policymakers with the lived experience of low-income communities, provided excellent leadership-development training and amplified the voices of marginalized community members.

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<sup>1</sup>For details, please refer to CIRA's "Unconnected: Funding Shortfalls, Policy Imbalances and How They Are Contributing to Canada's Digital Underdevelopment" and "Getting Connected: Funders and Digital Equity in Canada."

## OTHER EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY POLICY ADVOCACY

- The [Canadian Internet Governance Forum](#) (CIGF) is Canada's leading multi-stakeholder forum on digital and internet policy issues, bringing together voices from government, academia, civil society and the private sector. CIGF is the space for Canadians to discuss issues like connectivity, competition, privacy, cybersecurity and mis- and disinformation.
- [The Ottawa Neighbourhood Equity Index](#) is a tool to help identify disparities, including digital inequity, between neighbourhoods and to tackle them in an organized way. In addition, Ottawa's National Capital Freenet and other partners developed digital equity mapping and an advocacy strategy.
- The [First Nations Technology Council](#) is co-creating a Digital Equity Roadmap for all First Nations in BC to mobilize communities to achieve digital equity in six areas: connectivity and infrastructure; policy and legislation; skills development; employment and business development; tech and innovation leadership; and governance and self-determination.
- Established in 2017, the [Indigenous Connectivity Summit](#) (ICS) is an annual forum for discussing the unique connectivity challenges faced by Indigenous communities in Canada and the US. Topics discussed at the ICS include trends in technology, applications and policy, as well as community success stories.

## III. Barriers to funding digital equity and how to get past them

The biggest barrier I've seen is fear. Digital equity and community connectivity is an area most established funders view as opaque, technical and difficult. We need to lift that curtain, to show that it's not technical and difficult."

—Mark Buell, Director of Indigenous Programs Development, Connect Humanity

After more than two years of digital ups and downs during the pandemic, funders see the connection between the digital world and social infrastructure. They realize that digital equity is essential to the communities they support, yet these funders perceive challenges and barriers. We've interviewed many of them and learned that there are essentially three things holding them back from funding digital equity.

## A funder's perspective

"For many years, many funders and donors looked at digital development as an operations issue. And they didn't really understand technology as a strategic tool to drive scale, to help deliver programming more cost-effectively."

—Will Black, Vice President of Corporate Affairs, CISCO Canada

"Our own policies and systems get in the way in the sector, things like the perception that tech or digital is 'nice to have'."

—Doug Gore, Partnership Development Lead, Ontario Trillium Foundation

"Here's what we found when our communities would apply, whether they were in cities, in rural areas, or in the far north: connectivity was a part of mental health, and a part of food sovereignty, and it supported Elders in the community—and connectivity was a part of everything."

—Wanda Brascoupé, Strategic Advisor with the Indigenous Peoples Resilience Fund

### BARRIER 1

Outdated mindsets and processes that see information technology as an administrative expense, instead of as a strategic priority or enabling infrastructure.

## How to get past it

Familiarize board and staff with this document and digital equity priorities from partners.

Make the case for how digital equity can be an enabler of goals and objectives within your sector.

Pay attention to where digital is showing up in your grantee applications (and even when it isn't), especially digital platforms and amplifiers.

Consult additional resources (and there are many). For example: [Technology Association of Grantmakers' How to Fund Nonprofit Tech: A Guide for Funders and Nonprofits](#).

**Figure 1:** How to get past the outdated mindsets barrier

## A funder's perspective

"Funders shy away from projects that feel like we're trying to boil the ocean... I'm not suggesting that's the case, but I wonder if that might be part of a mindset."

—Chad Lubelsky, Acting Chief Program Officer, McConnell Foundation

"Even infrastructure need not be large-scale projects. For small communities, a community network can easily cost less than (often much less than) \$100,000."

—Mark Buell, Director of Indigenous Programs Development, Connect Humanity

**BARRIER 2**  
Perception that this is about huge infrastructure needs (such as broadband as hardware or satellites), or the perception that this is all the purview of the government and/or industry.

## How to get past it

Understand the gaps and priorities. Review research reports; e.g., [CIRA's Unconnected](#) and [Getting Connected reports](#), and the [2021 Indigenous Connectivity Summit Policy Recommendations](#).

Consider digital equity related to your programming (racial justice, climate change, Indigenous sovereignty, mental health, poverty reduction, etc.)

Look at opportunities for policy advocacy and expanding citizen, consumer and community engagement—anything to tip the balance away from industry capture.

**Figure 2:** How to get past the huge infrastructure perception barrier

## A funder's perspective

"It can often be nerve-racking to fund into a space if you aren't confident about your knowledge of who else is in there and how the ecosystem works,"

—Chad Lubelsky, Acting Chief Program Officer, McConnell Foundation

"Bring together funders who are not all tech funders, and talk about moving issues ahead. Educate them to see ways to drive their own agendas... Build a funder consortium, learn together, and build a field together over time."

—Mark Surman, Executive Director, Mozilla Foundation

### BARRIER 3

Limited knowledge about how and where to "show up" in spite of a willingness and capacity to know more.

## How to get past it

Connect with funding leaders working in the space to ask questions and get advice; e.g., Mastercard Foundation, Connect Humanity, the Technovate, CIRA and others.

Attend networking events and learn about the issues. For example, in 2022, CIRA will convene digital equity funding conversations at: (1) Philanthropic Foundations Canada; (2) the Indigenous Connectivity Summit; and (3) Future of Good digital summit.

Join a community of practice, build a funder knowledge base about the main themes, and build relationships among peers. For instance, the Canadian Centre for Nonprofit Digital Resilience is convening working groups about a digitally-enabled nonprofit sector, including one for grantmakers.

See how funders are pooling resources on digital issues:

- [NetGain Partnership](#)
- [European Artificial Intelligence Fund](#)
- [Technovate](#)

**Figure 3:** How to get past the unfamiliar space barrier

## IV. Ways to start funding digital equity

You're familiar with the main issues now and want to explore ways to fund. You already know that digital inequity disproportionately affects certain communities—and that funders need to invest in organizations with deep relationships to those communities, especially where “impact” is understood as more than just the number of individuals who participate in a program. Where to start? Here are options:

- 1. Fund through [CIRA's Community Investment Program Grants](#)**, which is helping to build a trusted internet for all Canadians. CIRA is interested in exploring opportunities to put our 10-year-old tried and tested granting process at the disposal of funders who want to fund digital equity but don't have the subject matter expertise.
- 2. Co-fund with leaders in the space**, such as CIRA, Connect Humanity, Mastercard Foundation and Technovate, using a variety of funding mechanisms. For example, every year CIRA receives more applications from communities than we can fund, and on average, we fund approximately 15% of submitted projects, which means there are more we'd be keen to fund if others could contribute.
- 3. Establish a pooled fund** with other funders who have similar aims. You can start by working with CIRA to develop a pooled, co-managed, digital equity fund, or consider engaging in the work of [Technovate](#), a consortium of donors working to mobilize a funding response to the digital divide in the not-for-profit sector in Canada.
- 4. Do it yourself:** Fund digital equity within your existing priorities. Support community-based initiatives (within current programs) that advocate for access to affordable, faster internet services and systems. Another option is to fund communities to plan digital networks and related infrastructure, training and content—or fund communities to write proposals for government funding or other types of funds and grants related to digital equity. You can also consider adding digital equity as a component in core programming pillars and funding requirements.

Some kind of collaborative or pooled funding could go a long way because it could actually streamline the amount of resources you need in terms of identifying and funding the impactful programs.”

—Justin Wiebe, Lead of Innovation and Strategic Growth, Mastercard Foundation

## V. Resources

The following is a curated list of reports and initiatives that provide more context on priorities and approaches to funding digital equity.

**CanadaHelps** released [“Are Canada’s Charities Ready for Digital Transformation?”](#) based on a survey of 1,400 charities in Canada that provides baseline data on charities’ unreadiness for digital tools and the barriers they face in digital adoption. Highlighting the profound implications for the sustainability and impact of the sector, the report calls for urgent investment by funders and governments.

The **Canadian Centre for Nonprofit Digital Resilience** is working to achieve a digitally-enabled nonprofit sector, where Canada’s diverse nonprofits use data and tech to advance their mission and multiply their impact, and is convening working groups on relevant topics, including grantmaker practices.

**CIRA’s** [“Unconnected: Funding Shortfalls, Policy Imbalances and How They Are Contributing to Canada’s Digital Underdevelopment”](#), released in 2020, presents the funding landscape for digital development projects and the systemic barriers preventing progress towards Canada’s digital development goals.

**CIRA’s** [“Getting Connected: Funders and Digital Equity in Canada”](#), released in 2022, is based on in-depth interviews with leaders in Canada’s philanthropic community and finds that while funders haven’t historically prioritized bridging Canada’s digital divide, they now agree it’s a priority. The report lays out concrete recommendations to bring new funders into the fold and increase the resources available for digital development projects.

**Community Foundations of Canada** is the national leadership organization for Canada’s nearly 200 local community foundations and has programs that offer funding for digital solutions in small communities.

**Connect Humanity Fund** is a US-based non-profit organization that works with partner organizations around the world, mainly through grants and impact investments, to empower communities to build internet infrastructure, skills and digital equity.

**European Artificial Intelligence Fund** is a philanthropic initiative to shape the direction of Artificial Intelligence.

The **Internet Society's** “2021 Indigenous Connectivity Summit Policy Recommendations” calls for bold action to reach digital equity. It makes recommendations for: (1) inclusivity, community consultation, and engagement; (2) spectrum rights and sovereignty; (3) engaging local capacity in Indigenous communities; (4) infrastructure and ownership; (5) beyond infrastructure: digital literacy, data sovereignty, and sustainability; (6) affordability; and (7) effective and accurate mapping. A PDF of the eight-page document is available here: [bit.ly/3CK9B81](https://bit.ly/3CK9B81)

**NetGain Partnership** is a US-based digital funding partnership that brings together program staff and leaders from eight foundations. Media Democracy Fund is its strategic and operational partner. Each year, NetGain selects a theme, commits to learning about a complex topic at a systemic level, and supports, through direct and pooled giving, a range of activities and organizations aligned with the annual theme.

**Observatoire québécois des inégalités** published a report in 2019, called “Virage numérique : Portrait des opportunités et des enjeux pour les OSBL,” about challenges and opportunities of digital transformation of Quebec’s nonprofits. A PDF of the report is here: [bit.ly/3CGPVIH](https://bit.ly/3CGPVIH)

**Ottawa Neighbourhood Equity Index** is a tool to help identify disparities between neighbourhoods and tackle them in a systematic and organized way including disparities in digital access.

**Philanthropic Foundations Canada** is a network of grantmakers that aims to strengthen Canadian philanthropy, and has hosted [events on digital equity](#). CIRA will attend PFC’s 2022 conference with an interest in convening an affinity group on digital equity.

**Philanthropy Northwest** is a network for philanthropists in seven US states that convenes peer network learning communities related to digital equity, such as convenings with the Tribal Broadband Learning Community.



**Ryerson Leadership Lab's** "[Towards a Digital Equity Policy for the City of Toronto](#)" is a research report from 2022 that offers five policy recommendations to inform the City of Toronto's digital equity policy and advance the right to internet access.

**Statistics Canada's** "[Canadian Internet Use Survey, 2020](#)" offers data about gaps in internet use, online shopping, phone use, and cybersecurity issues in 2020, during the pandemic.

**Technology Association of Grantmakers'** "[How to Fund Nonprofit Tech: A Guide for Funders and Nonprofits](#)" (2022) provides resources for funders and nonprofits who want to focus on digital development.

## **HERE'S A SAMPLING OF EVENTS AND MEDIA COVERAGE OF DIGITAL EQUITY:**

**Future of Good** is Canada's leading digital publication covering the world of social impact. [CIRA and Future of Good](#) have collaborated extensively on digital equity issues, through events and reporting, including:

- [The Digital Divide Has Reached Emergency Status](#)
- [Fixing the Digital Disparity](#)
- [Bridging the Digital Divide](#)
- [Dismantling Digital Barriers Summit 2021](#)

**Philanthropic Foundations of Canada:** [How Can Philanthropy Close the Digital Divide in Canada and How Canada's Digital Divide is Holding Back Philanthropy](#)

### **Newspaper coverage:**

- [The Toronto Star: Digital Development is the most important funding need you've never heard of.](#)
- [The Hamilton Spectator: It's time to tackle digital inequity](#)

# About CIRA

CIRA is a member-based, not-for-profit organization best known for managing the .CA internet domain on behalf of all Canadians, with more than three million registered .CA domain names. CIRA builds programs, products and services that leverage all the internet has to offer to help build a trusted internet for Canadians.

At CIRA, we do everything we can to help Canadians thrive online. Our team works hard to ensure that the internet is a force for innovation, connection and trust. But we recognize that the benefits of the web haven't been shared universally. That's why we contribute our expertise, resources, and convening power to help solve the internet's problems through our Community Investment Program, including:

- Grants for community-led internet projects, such as Indigenous-led internet service providers.
- Free tools to protect Canadians online, like our Canadian Shield service.
- Projects that promote fast, resilient internet access, like our Internet Performance Test.
- Events to engage Canadians in important internet policy debates, like our CIGF Talks series.

**You can learn more about our Community Investment Program at [cira.ca/improving-canadas-internet](https://cira.ca/improving-canadas-internet).**



**cira**

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