

Project Insights Report

Lighting Up the North



PARTNERS

Yukonstruct



LOCATIONS

Yukon



INVESTMENT

\$545,000



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Executive Summary

Entrepreneurship and innovation are key pillars to addressing economic needs in the Yukon and are pivotal for fostering a resilient and sustainable economy. The allure of entrepreneurship is particularly strong in Northern communities because residents desire self-sufficiency and community empowerment.

Recognizing the critical role that entrepreneurs and innovators play, governments and other organizations have developed initiatives to support their needs. However, existing programs fall short in aiding business growth, securing supportive funding and fostering cross-organizational collaboration. This gap has hindered the creation of a sustainable and resilient entrepreneurial environment.

The Lighting Up the North project from Yukonstruct aimed to strengthen the entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystem by supporting initiatives that build skills, tools and resources. The project funded seven unique initiatives with community partners to support the needs of entrepreneurs and innovators in the region. These initiatives aimed to enhance networks, access to capital, and engagement in the innovation ecosystem. The goal of the project was to generate ideas and solutions to address complex challenges using a collaborative, locally focused, community-driven approach—in the North by the North.

Through the projects, Yukonstruct documented successes in implementing diverse strategies to strengthen the entrepreneur and innovation environment. Lessons from these initiatives highlight the importance of inclusive, community-led innovation strategies. Many of the projects utilized community experts to identify key challenges and drive forward solutions. By amplifying community expertise and leveraging intermediary partners, like Yukonstruct, diverse stakeholders can come together to help foster innovation. This model offers a road map for organizations across Canada to create inclusive, sustainable and resilient entrepreneurial ecosystems.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1** Yukonstruct developed the Roadmap to Regional Innovation to help guide cities, communities and ecosystems in fostering innovation and addressing complex social challenges.
- 2** The Social Lab's unique collaborative and community-centric approach harnessed local insights from community members to craft eight possible solutions to address the drug crisis in the Yukon.
- 3** Yukonstruct ran Innovation Week, a week-long event aimed at creating engagement and networking opportunities centred around innovation in the Yukon, including in First Nations and rural communities.

The Issue

Entrepreneurship and innovation are key pillars to addressing economic needs within the Yukon and creating a resilient and sustainable economy. Entrepreneurship and innovation have supported the diversification of traditional sectors, creating new jobs and attracting new investments and talent in the Yukon. Individuals in the North continue to be attracted to entrepreneurship, as it both supports livelihoods and strengthens communities. Additionally, Indigenous entrepreneurship is gaining momentum, with Indigenous-led businesses making significant contributions to the local economy.

Recognizing the important role of entrepreneurship and innovation in the Yukon, organizations and the government have begun to develop initiatives to support entrepreneurs and innovators. For instance, they have offered funding and grants to encourage business growth and innovation; they've also provided business advisory and mentorship services to provide guidance on business and financial planning, and educational and training resources. However, entrepreneurs have expressed that there are gaps in the current programming available. The current resources do not fully support entrepreneurs with business growth, supportive funding and cross-organizational collaboration. This has limited the ability to build a sustainable environment for entrepreneurs and innovators in the North.

As a result, further work needs to be done to foster an environment that supports entrepreneurs and innovators across the Yukon. To build a sustainable environment, organizations need to focus on creating collaborative, locally focused, community-driven solutions that leverage the skills and talents of entrepreneurs and innovators across the Yukon. This will help create an inclusive ecosystem for entrepreneurship and innovation that allows every individual to contribute and thrive.



What We Investigated

The Lighting Up the North project from Yukonstruct focused on funding seven unique initiatives across the Yukon to build capacity for entrepreneurs and innovators by providing skills, tools and resources. Yukonstruct is a nonprofit organization focused on supporting entrepreneurs and innovation in the North. They manage Canada's first innovation hub north of the 60th parallel.

The goal of the project was to strengthen the entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem in the Yukon through the initiatives and by leveraging current capacity, increasing collaboration and building new resources. The project aimed to better understand the challenges and barriers to engagement in entrepreneurship in rural Yukon communities.

Yukonstruct acted as an intermediary partner and provided funding to seven different partner organizations (Yukon University, IRP Consulting, Outfort Inc., Connected North, Sustainable Impact Foundation, Spring Activator, and The Pivotal Point) to develop and run unique initiatives over the course of one year (August 2022 to September 2023). The initiatives focused on providing locally focused, community-driven solutions to key areas including building networks, receiving training and mentorship, accessing capital, and improving engagement of Yukoners in the innovative ecosystem.

These initiatives included:

- an Indigenous-led social lab for the North that examined pressing issues and explored how to activate local capacity to solve them and connect Yukoners in the innovation ecosystem;
- [Connectivity/Digital Equity Project](#), which supported the development of a First Nations community-owned internet service provider through a feasibility study with the Mayo community;
- [Yukonstruct Innovation Week](#), which was launched with ecosystem partners to share learnings and collaborate on pressing local issues;
- [Yukon Investor Summit](#), a two-day, in-person event that connected entrepreneurs with investment opportunities and enhanced investment readiness, financial skills and processes, and investor education.
- Yukonstruct Alumni Program, which hosted its [Startup Bootcamp](#) to [develop a framework for an alumni program that would maintain advisory support for and networking among graduates.](#)
- [Connected North](#), a project to expand access to immersive and interactive innovation and [entrepreneurship programming](#) to K–12 schools in the North.
- [Roadmap to Regional Innovation](#), a guide to a holistic, system-based approach with actionable steps for enhancing innovation in the Yukon.

What We're Learning

To showcase the lessons learned, Yukonstruct documented their process of developing and implementing the seven different initiatives and produced a road map for how these initiatives could be replicated by other communities across the North and Canada.

Social Lab:

The Social Lab used a collaborative and community-centric approach, prioritizing trust-building and sharing of personal experience to guide priorities. The lab focused on empowering community members, particularly First Nations, to lead in crafting solutions to address the drug crisis in the Yukon. Over the course of three sessions, the lab generated eight prototype solutions, including establishing a support line, streamlining support and resources in one application, and increasing training for community safety officers. It proved challenging to find champions for different prototypes who could move the work forward while upholding the principles of the lab. However, the methods and objectives of the Social Lab were recognized by the Yukon government, which provided further funding to continue and expand this work.

Connectivity/Digital Equity:

The Connectivity/Digital Equity project aimed to increase digital equity and employment through the piloting of a First Nations–owned internet service provider for the Na-Cho Nyäk Dun community in Mayo. Through the pilot it became clear that improving digital equity in First Nations communities would require changes in many other connected systems, including education, mental and physical health care, career pathways and employment. As a result, other types of culturally sensitive support are needed for Indigenous communities to build and sustain infrastructure in pursuit of digital equity. In response to this, the project expanded to develop the Nalukataq: Developing an Indigenous Workforce to Bridge the Digital Divide program, a multi-year workforce development strategy to increase the number of Indigenous network technicians, engineers and operators. The program is being led by the [Indigenous Connectivity Institute](#) and offers training and programs that equip participants with skills, knowledge and support to become community-based internet connectivity leaders.

Yukonstruct Innovation Week:

Yukonstruct ran a week-long, innovation focused event called [Innovation Week](#). The theme of the event, “inspiring transformation,” highlighted how innovators and entrepreneurs are driving transformative change to solve complex problems across all sectors of society, including agriculture, tourism, technology, health care and more. The event aimed to create engagement and networking opportunities around innovation in the Yukon, including in First Nations and rural communities. The event was successful in bringing together entrepreneurs and innovators from across the territory and included talks, panels and workshops. Event organizers recognized that more effort was required to engage with First Nations community members and ensure they felt welcomed at the event. Going forward, event organizers intend to explore different strategies to attract more diverse attendees to the event. Since launching Yukon Innovation Week, there has been [another event in 2023 focused on the theme “connecting innovators”](#) to emphasize the important connection between collaboration, creativity and community engagement.

Yukon Investment Challenge:

Yukonstruct and Yukon University hosted a two-day, in-person event that brought investors and startups in the Yukon together to network, share insights and explore investment opportunities. The event provided training on investment readiness, financial skills and processes, and investor education, providing connections between early-stage companies and investors through tailored workshops and speaking engagements by experts for impact entrepreneurs, individuals or teams who leverage innovation and business strategies to achieve positive social, environmental and economic outcomes alongside financial sustainability. Participants who attended felt the event was successful in creating a safe space to ask questions and had an atmosphere of mutual learning across participants. They also commented on how beneficial the networking aspect was in connecting both with investors and participants with diverse backgrounds. Based on feedback from the event, there is a gap in entrepreneurs’ financial literacy and the investment readiness of those entrepreneurs’ ideas, while many investors require guidance to effectively nurture and support entrepreneurs. In response to this gap, Yukon Venture Angels launched a week-long course to accelerate the investment readiness of local entrepreneurs and provide education to both entrepreneurs and investors.

Yukonstruct Alumni Program:

The partner, Outfront, conducted a needs assessment in February 2023 of Yukonstruct's entrepreneurial programming. The report aimed to better understand the needs of businesses participating in programming and the perception of stakeholders connected to programming. It also explored best practices for similar programming across Canada. This information was used to identify and develop alumni programming for graduates of Yukonstruct and Yukon University's entrepreneur-focused programming. Recommendations included 1) continuing to engage past program participants by expanding access to existing workshops and events, 2) offering discounted rates on educational series, and 3) helping graduates host their own events. As well, the report revealed that tailored business supports were highly desired and that program alumni should be able to work with a business coach, have access to a network of mentors, and receive alumni perks, such as discounts for business services.

Connected North:

Connected North provided live, interactive virtual learning experiences and access to educational resources for those in remote communities. During the 2022–2023 school year, 22 schools participated in more than five different Connected North experiences. To expand Connected North's reach, Yukonstruct invested in STEM workshops and added new content focused on entrepreneurship:

- entrepreneurship in general (Grades 5–12)
- how to pitch an idea (Grades 8–12)
- tour of the NorthLight Innovation building and the workshop in the makerspace (Grades 5–12)

The program helped create connections between youth-oriented programs in the Yukon so that they could share region-specific knowledge more effectively.

Roadmap to Regional Innovation:

Yukonstruct developed a road map to help guide other Canadian cities, communities and ecosystems in fostering innovation and addressing complex social challenges. In the Yukon, the road map has been used to guide collaborative action on the drug crisis, the child welfare system and the housing crisis. The Yukon will participate in a pilot with 506 other communities that focus on utilizing the road map to adopt a systems approach to community innovation.

Why It Matters

The Lighting Up the North project shows the value of using a diversity of strategies to build a resilient and sustainable environment that supports innovation and entrepreneurship. Employing a diversity of strategies also allows for the innovation ecosystem to more easily adapt to rapid and continuous changes.



This project supported entrepreneurs and continues to champion innovation by tapping into community members as key experts and allowing them to lead much of the work. This approach was very successful to many of the projects and allowed community members, including First Nations, to have ownership over the initiatives. This model facilitates the support for entrepreneurs by using community resources and in turn helps strengthen and grow innovation within communities. Other organizations looking to support entrepreneurs and foster innovation can use this model as a template in their own communities.

State of Skills:

Sustainable Jobs for Economic Growth

Green-related skills and knowledge are growing in significance and are becoming widespread across many sectors and occupations, requiring more workers to upskill by building upon their existing competencies.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

The model of having an intermediary partner to spread funding across a variety of partners and initiatives is very successful in strengthening an innovation ecosystem. Intermediary partners are able to act as coordinators that build and maintain relationships with key partners while leveraging organizations to deliver critical actions. Funders and organizations should look to leverage the intermediary model when trying to address widespread labour market challenges. This approach allows for partners to build strong connections with stakeholders, leverage work currently underway and proceed with a coordinated approach to address challenges, which in turn strengthens the overall environment and develops more sustainable solutions.

► What's Next

Yukonstruct will continue to work with the established partners on the project components to advance the work, build pathways for community outreach and advocate for the needs of Yukon communities. The ultimate goal for this work is to create a template for how to amplify entrepreneurs, innovators and investment in many other communities in the North. Another [Yukon Innovation Week](#) event is being planned for 2025.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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